

# Understanding **Stress**

Professor Greg Wilkinson

Published by Family Doctor Publications Limited  
in association with the British Medical Association

### IMPORTANT

This book is intended not as a substitute for personal medical advice but as a supplement to that advice for the patient who wishes to understand more about his or her condition.

Before taking any form of treatment  
**YOU SHOULD ALWAYS CONSULT YOUR MEDICAL  
PRACTITIONER.**

In particular (without limit) you should note that advances in medical science occur rapidly and some information about drugs and treatment contained in this booklet may very soon be out of date.

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Updated 1997, 1999–2002, 2004, 2005

Family Doctor Publications, PO Box 4664, Poole, Dorset BH15 1NN

Many thanks to Dr Stephen Gallagher for his contribution to the update of the text.

**ISBN: 1 903474 16 7**

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# About the author

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# Coping with stress

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## **What causes stress?**

What does cause stress? Anything that makes you tense, angry, frustrated or unhappy. It may be thinking about next week's driving test or a visit from a difficult relative; the choices you have to make when moving house or getting married; the seemingly unrelenting



pressures of work; or the unavoidable burden of coping with a death in the family.

Factors that stress some people give others excitement. Racing drivers and mountaineers seem to thrive on physical challenges. Some people enjoy the excitement of going to sea in bad weather and join the lifeboat crew. Others choose to work on high buildings and rooftops. So, one person's stress may be another person's pleasure.

In fact, a certain amount of stress is good for us. When we have to face up to a challenge or we are made to get on with some job that we don't want to do, we often find that we can achieve the targets that we have been set. We then feel a lot better having done it. Facing challenges and overcoming them stops us from getting bored. In fact, many people deliberately create mild stress in their lives to overcome periods of dull routine.

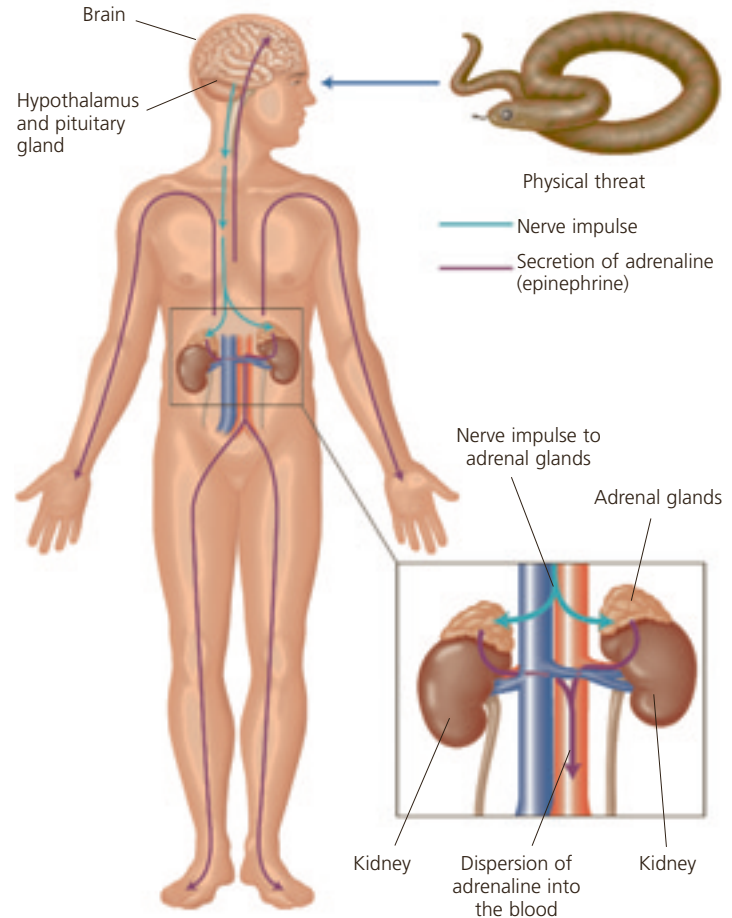
### How does stress affect your body?

Stress sets off wide-ranging changes in the chemical control (neurotransmission) of the body's hormone system called the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical system (known as the 'HPA axis' for short).

The first part of this system, the hypothalamus, controls the pituitary gland in our brain, which activates the adrenal glands in our abdomens. For example, in acute stress, discharge into the blood of adrenal stress hormones, such as adrenaline (now called epinephrine), leads to the 'fight or flight' response, with increases in startle, anxiety, heart rate, blood pressure and blood glucose, sweating or flushing, decreased appetite, disturbed sleep and decreased sexual activity.

### Adrenaline and the fear response

Adrenaline (epinephrine) is released in the body in response to a physical threat or opportunity. It has a variety of effects within the body to ensure that we are ready to deal with the situation.



The parts of the brain called the hippocampus and amygdala bring together information from our environment and from our memory, allowing us to assess the significance of a stressful situation, and driving the hypothalamus to increase output of the hormone cortisol from the adrenal glands during stress.

In chronic stress, the altered stress hormone release contributes to undermining health (for example, causing depression, stomach ulcers, decreased immune function perhaps with susceptibility to viral infections, heart disease, and disturbing the symptoms or treatment of many other medical conditions).

In particular, repeated stress beginning in early life leads to over-responsiveness of the pituitary and adrenal systems, and eventually to chronically raised hormone secretion at levels that may have consequences for different bodily organs and vulnerable areas within the central nervous system.

### Too much stress

Too much stress, however, affects our health and well-being, and may interfere with our jobs and our social lives. Repeated, continuing, severe stress has a weakening and demoralising effect, which may make it more difficult to do anything about the factors that are causing the stress.

Just how we respond to pressure is determined by our characters, and by our personal disabilities or illnesses. These dictate how we react to difficulties with relationships, both at home and at work, and to practical problems over money, work and housing.

How we respond to pressure is influenced also by our external environment (for example, what individual and group social support is available to us). This in turn



influences how we react to difficulties with relationships: with family at home, colleagues at work and friends in our leisure time. This then plays a part in affecting how we respond to social and community pressures (for example, shaping one way or another our view of our body and ourselves, drinking and drug use, and spiritual and sexual behaviour).

### A question of adjustment

As we grow and mature we become better at knowing what to expect in our everyday life, and what to do about the things that upset us. We become better at dealing with the unexpected. We learn to make adjustments in attitude, and the way that we behave, in order to understand and to cope. Usually this is fairly straightforward and we are hardly aware that we are 'coping with stress'.

When events of major importance take place, however, such as marriage, birth or the death of

someone close, our reactions and the way that we cope are more obvious to us.

In order to live successfully with stress, we need to spend some time considering the sources of stress in our lives and whether our physical and emotional responses to these are sensible and useful, or are preventing us from coping and taking control.

Although studies show that the ability to cope with stress is partly inborn, it is also a question of training, upbringing and practice.

A survey by the Health and Safety Executive has shown that half a million Britons suffer illnesses related to stress at work, and this is probably an underestimate.

### Overcoming stress

There is every reason to be optimistic that you will be able to overcome the stress in your life. There are several simple and effective methods that can be used to reduce and overcome stress and, in most cases, these self-help solutions are very successful.

Although almost everyone is under some form of stress, only a few ever respond by developing a physical or emotional illness that requires specialist help.

### KEY POINTS

- Stress is caused by anything that makes you tense, angry, frustrated or unhappy
- One person's stress may be someone else's enjoyment
- A certain level of stress is good for us
- Too much stress affects our health and well-being
- There is every reason to be optimistic that you will be able to overcome the stress in your life
- Stress sets off wide-ranging changes in the chemical control (neurotransmission) of the body's hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical (HPA) hormone system.

# Balancing coping and stress

I have already said that stress can be both a good thing – a motivator – and a bad thing. Furthermore, what is stressful may not only vary from one person to another, but can change for one individual from year to year.



This is because the way that stress affects us depends on a balance between the demand made by the event(s) causing the stress and our ability to cope (which can vary considerably). Too large an imbalance between demand and ability to cope may result in the sort of stress that is not good for us.

Looked at in a slightly different way, the overall level of stress depends on a complicated balance that takes account of the stressful event, our response to this in terms of physical effects, cognitions (for example, memory, awareness and decision-making), emotions and outward behaviour, and how significant the event is to us (is it something that makes us very happy, deeply sad or is it not too important?).

## How stress adds up

Stress level	=	Potentially stressful event(s)	+	Our response to the event(s) (physical, emotional, cognitive or behavioural)	+	Significance of the event(s) to us (happy, sad, worried or indifferent)
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For example, if John Smith, with a large mortgage, a wife, three children and a job that he enjoys and is important to him, is made redundant, he is put under a great deal of stress. The event is of major significance to him, and he may suffer physical symptoms (increased heart rate and blood pressure, inability to sleep, eat or relax, and emotional bursts of anger and irritation) which affect his outward behaviour.

When driving, John's cognitions may be decreased at the edges of his vision, and he may not be aware of, or

respond quickly enough to, what is happening on the side of the road, leading to an accident or 'near miss'.

Jill Brown, on the other hand, is 23, highly qualified, with no responsibilities and a job that she finds boring. If she is made redundant, she may not be shattered. Instead, she may feel that the event has forced her to make a long overdue change, and she may be relieved and relax, feeling better than she has done in ages. In this case, stress has a positive side and is needed to introduce a necessary element of change in her life.

We can see from this that similar stress events may bring out an entirely different response in different people.



## KEY POINTS

- The way that stress affects us depends on a balance between the demands made and our ability to cope
- Physical symptoms of stress may sometimes result from an individual's inability to deal with it



# Sources of stress

We would all become extremely bored if nothing ever happened in our lives. However, any major change needs to be balanced with our ability to cope with that particular change at the time in question.

Too much change, too quickly, can be a major cause of stress. The demands are far too much for our ability to cope. An indication of how much stress various



typical life events and social changes may cause is given in the table on page 15.

In general, the greater the number of these events that happen to us in a given time, such as a year, and the higher their combined rating, the more likely we are to suffer a stress response, either emotional or physical. Moreover, the severity of the stress response is usually related to the significance of the events and changes.

Remember that stress can be triggered by events that are thought of as pleasant, such as getting married, winning money or having a baby, as well as by unpleasant events such as losing a job, having an accident or the illness of someone in the family.

## Life events

When evaluating the impact of life events and social changes as a cause of stress, we also need to take into account the fact that life events tend to be particularly stressful when they are:

- unpredictable
- unfamiliar
- major
- intense
- unavoidable
- inevitable.

Do be careful, however, not to take the contents of the table on page 15 too literally. It is common for people who feel stressed to search for the reason in past events, but some life events can be the result, rather than the cause, of the stress. For example, a feeling of not being able to cope with new duties or



responsibilities may be the result of unrecognised stress rather than the stress being the result of a failure to cope with the situation.

So sources of stress lie mainly in these events in our lives and in our physical, cognitive and emotional responses to such events. If you are already under stress and not paying attention at work, your performance may well be affected, leading to disciplinary action. The initial stress-induced cognitive inattention leads to another life event. The cause may be obvious to us, in which case the way we need to react may be straightforward and clear cut, and depend on us making practical or emotional adjustments. In these circumstances, it may be easy to see where we should ask for help.

Often, though, the source of stress is not quite so obvious and it may need some careful thought or talking through with others to bring it out into the open.

## Life events and stress

### Event Stress rating

Death of husband or wife Divorce or marital separation Jail term Death of close family member Personal injury or illness Marriage Loss of job Moving house	<b>Very high</b>
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Marital reconciliation Retirement Serious illness of family member Pregnancy Sex difficulties New child Change of job Money problems Death of close friend	<b>High</b>
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Family arguments Big mortgage or loan Legal action over debt Change in responsibilities at work Son or daughter leaving home Trouble with in-laws Outstanding personal achievement Partner begins or stops work Start or finish of school Change in living conditions Revision of personal habits Trouble with boss	<b>Moderate</b>
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Change in work hours or conditions Change in schools Change in recreation Change in church activities Change in social activities Small mortgage or loan Change in sleeping habits Change in contact with family Change in eating habits Holidays Christmas Minor violations of the law	<b>Low</b>
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*Adapted from Holmes and Rahe.*