



How Does Stress Affect My Physical Health

We all experience an array of daily emotions, both positive and negative. Each one of these feelings or emotions creates an effect upon our bodies, again both positive and negative. When we engage in positive thoughts and behaviors or encounter pleasant events, our brains release “happy hormones” such as serotonin, endorphins, dopamine and oxytocin or “natural pain killers” such as enkephalins.

Conversely, when we engage in negative thoughts and behaviors or encounter stressful events, both good or bad, our bodies release “stress hormones” such as cortisol which overtime can weaken the body's immune system, making one more likely to get colds, illness, infections or chronic health issues and pain.

During these times of stress or negativity we may also be less inclined to take care of ourselves. We **may not** feel like exercising, eating nutritious foods or taking medicine as prescribed. Abuse of alcohol, tobacco or other illicit and prescription drugs may also be a sign of poor emotional health.

Although we all struggle at times, a cluster of these symptoms which present for a couple of weeks may be a sign that your health is compromised and may require attention. Symptoms to **watch out for** include:

- *significant changes in appetite/ eating / weight or sleeping patterns*
- *loss of interest in pleasurable activities*
- *loss of interest in sex or sexual problems*
- *decrease in motivation / energy / grades / work productivity*
- *extreme tiredness*
- *withdrawal from others and decreased social contacts*
- *feelings of sadness / unhappiness or increased tearfulness*
- *overwhelming feelings of anxiety / fear / rapid heartbeat / shortness of breath / sweating / dry mouth/ lightheadedness / dizziness*
- *physical symptoms such as back pain / muscle pain and tension / chest pains / stiff neck / general aches and pains / headaches / stomach issues / constipation / diarrhea*

- *high blood pressure*
- *feelings of hopelessness / helplessness / despair*
- *thoughts of self harm or suicide*
- *trouble concentrating / slowed thinking and decision making*
- *decreased accomplishments*
- *increased anger / irritability / frustration / guilt feelings*
- *self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, gambling or sex*

If committed to turning this around, it is important that we:

Express Emotions. To hold stress and emotions in our bodies creates what I call the “Pressure Cooker Effect”. If we do not release our emotions in healthy and effective ways, they will find their own way out as the pressure builds, often resulting in a cluster of the above-mentioned symptoms. Learning and using effective interpersonal skills to express ourselves, exercise and other healthy physical outlets, journalizing and writing, talking with a trusted family-friend or therapist can be very effective ways to help us release pent up emotions and stress.

Commit to a Balanced Life. A balanced lifestyle of healthy eating, time with meaningful friends and family, quiet time alone, hobbies, responsibilities and daily accomplishments, tending to our emotional and physical selves, spirituality and gratitude and stimulating our brains daily by learning new things can be very effective in promoting sound emotional and physical health.

Engage in Daily Calming : Activities such as yoga, visual imagery, deep breathing, meditation, tai chi, engaging in rhythmic movements or dance, progressive muscle relaxation involving tensing and relaxing major muscle groups, practicing mindfulness by focusing our attention solely in the moment and massage therapy are an extremely important part of sound emotional and physical health. Most stress experts recommend setting aside at least 10 to 20 and preferably 30 minutes per day for such calming activities.

We can improve our emotional health and its impact upon our physical well-being by a) recognizing those symptoms as a sign to start asking why we are having them, b) learning to release stress and emotions in positive ways, c) being committed to having a balanced lifestyle, and d) engaging in daily calming activities to self-soothe.

Although this may be difficult to do individually, reaching out to a primary care physician and/or a mental health practitioner can be helpful. This may include individual therapy, medication management or both. When symptoms tend to be more intense or chronic in nature, an Intensive Outpatient Program is often indicated to learn coping tools to put us on the path to health and wellness. This level of care typically meets for

approximately three hours per day, three days per week for six to seven weeks. The emphasis is on learning coping skills to manage emotions, be more effective interpersonally, communication skills, distress tolerance, learning how to stay mindful in the moment, changing negative thinking patterns, problem-solving skills, goal setting among others.

In conclusion, know the signs that you or someone you care about is struggling with poor physical health as a result of negative thoughts and related feelings, stressful life events or ineffective behaviors and poor coping skills. Reach out and don't suffer or watch others struggle in silence. Know that there is effective help. Learn to take care of yourself! Know that there is nothing in life that you cannot handle! Learn to be resilient! Learn and Know that there is hope!

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