

## How to: Understanding stress and its factors

Stress is a normal and natural reaction present in human beings, particularly in the context of the survival of the species. This reaction has been present since prehistoric times, and is also found in vertebrates and other organisms. It differs from anxiety because stress is a response mechanism, whereas anxiety is an emotion. Stress can lead to a variety of emotions, including anxiety.

From birth, the baby is devoted in creating bonds with those around him. Beyond a real affective value, the attachment that the child creates with the people that take care of him is due to a vital need. Thus, stress is a protective biological reaction, operational from the very first moment of life.

Stress can be perceived as “positive” or “negative”, but above all, it allows the individual who finds himself in a threatening situation to mobilize a certain amount of energy to for his protection, and to trigger an escape or attack mechanism (“*fight or flee* response”). Indeed, when faced with a situation experienced as threatening, the sympathetic nervous system is activated (cortisol is released by the adrenal glands) in order to respond to the situation. This activation is out of the person’s control.

### Physiology of stress

The activation of the sympathetic nervous system, activated by stress, generates **immediate physical reactions** as well as an important **muscular action**.

### Physiological signs

Acceleration of breathing and heart rate	Constriction of blood vessels in several parts of the body	Dilation of blood vessels in the muscles Alternating paleness and/or reddening	Slowed or stopped digestion
Alternating paleness and/or reddening	Inhibition of the lacrimal gland and salivation	Tremors	Release of fat and glucose for muscle action
Dilation of pupils	Loss of peripheral vision ("tunnel vision")	Increase in reflexes	Pilo-motor reflex ("goose bumps")
Effect on body sphincters			

## How is stress born?

Stress comes from **external triggers** (or external stressors). By stressors we mean all situations, tasks, loads and demands that can generate stress. For example, interpersonal conflicts, excessive workload, lack of recognition, personal and professional imbalance, preparation for wedding, pregnancy, divorce, etc.

Description: “I’m confronted with stress when...”

Faced with these external stressors we make a **judgment** and opt for a **personal attitude** that will determine whether the situation is experienced as stressful or not, if it is overwhelming our resources and threatening our well-being, or not. The same situation can be stressful for one person and not at all for another.

Description: “I put myself in a stressful situation because...”

Finally, the **stress reaction** that corresponds to our response occurs. It can be physical (e.g. increased heart rate), behavioural (e.g. aggressive behavior, taking toxins), cognitive (e.g. lack of concentration, attention) or emotional (e.g. nervousness, sadness).

Description: “When I’m stressed, I...”

**Uni – Mental Health Support**  
Confidential and free service  
Online / In-person

**Book an appointment**  
[Registration for new visitors](#)  
[Login for returning visitors](#)

## Can stress make you sick?

Although stress is a natural and protective reaction, our health can be affected. In fact, when stress reactions persist over time and become chronic, our state of health becomes critical, and our body is no longer able to recover and regenerate itself.

The more intense and widespread the situation is, the less time we have to recover between situations, the fewer resources we have to deal with these situations, the greater the risk of developing chronic stress.

### Prevention

In order to prevent a possible impact on health, it's important to be vigilant of the signals emitted by our body:

- Disturbance of concentration Trouble sleeping
- Digestive disorders
- Headaches
- Back pain
- Irritability, lack of energy
- Increased consumption of toxic substances (alcohol, tobacco, drugs)

You can also try to modify or avoid certain stressors (e. g., clarify your points of view when you are in conflict with a person), but also act on your judgments and attitudes (by identifying your thought patterns and modifying them if necessary) and finally work on your reactions to stress, by learning how to identify them, and then modify them. Relaxation techniques, regular physical activity, a healthy and balanced diet, meeting with friends, taking regular breaks, are all strategies that can help you cope better with stressors.

**Ways to manage anxiety**

**Situation**

Describe your situation: Where you were, who you were with, and what was happening  
 Eg. I was at a work event with a group of people I didn't know very well

**Your thoughts:**  
 eg. 'I will have no-one to talk to'

**How your body felt:**  
 Eg. Sweaty, shaky, dizzy

**Your feelings:**  
 Eg. Alone, scared, embarrassed

**What you did:**  
 Eg. Stayed at the back of room

**!**  
 If in doubt, talk to a close family member, friend, or colleague. For professional support you can email the [University Psychological Support team](#) or refer to the external psychologist directory available at [SLP.lu](http://SLP.lu)

**Uni – Mental Health Support**  
 Confidential and Free service  
 Online / In-person

Book an appointment  
[Registration for new visitors](#)  
[Login for returning visitors](#)