



Listening to the Warning Signs of Stress

Your boss dumps a last-minute presentation on you. You feel annoyed, but confident that you can handle it. An hour later the phone rings—it's day care. Your daughter is sick and you need to pick her up. The day continues as more bad news continues to interrupt your day, one that you thought would be problem-free. That crankiness you feel, that headache, that tension in your neck and that desire to devour a box of chocolates—that's you feeling stressed. It's also your body sending out a call for help.

Stress is your body's natural reaction to any kind of demand that disrupts life as usual. In small doses, stress is good—such as when it helps you conquer a fear or gives extra endurance and motivation to get something done. But there's also bad stress, which is often caused by worries such as our money, jobs, relationships or health, whether it be sudden and short or long-lasting. Feeling stress for too long, whether for several hours, days or months, sets off your body's warning system of physical and emotional alarms.

Your body's stress warning signs tell you that something isn't right. Much like the glowing orange, "check engine" light on your car's dashboard, if you neglect the alerts sent out by your body, you could have a major engine malfunction. Stress that is left unchecked or poorly managed is known to contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, diabetes and suicide.

So when things aren't going your way, or you feel like you are losing control or are overwhelmed, pay attention to the warning signs listed below. They are just some of the ways that your body is telling you it needs maintenance and extra care.

- Headaches, muscle tension, neck or back pain
- Upset stomach
- Dry mouth
- Chest pains, rapid heartbeat
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite or overeating "comfort foods"
- Increased frequency of colds
- Lack of concentration or focus
- Memory problems or forgetfulness
- Jitters
- Irritability
- Short temper
- Anxiety

Everyone reacts to stress differently, and each body sends out its different set of red flags. Some people may

not even feel the physical or emotional warning signs until hours or days of stressful activities. But when you do notice a stiff back or that you are snapping at your friends, pay attention to the signs and listen to what your body is telling you. While the adrenaline rush after acing that presentation to the board is something to enjoy, the warning signs of stress are not anything to take lightly or ignore. By noticing how you respond to stress, you can manage it better and in healthy ways, which will help your body correct itself, reducing the high cost and care of chronic, long-term health problems.

(c) Copyright 2004 American Psychological Association

Documents from apahelpcenter.org may be reprinted in their entirety with credit given to the American Psychological Association. Any exceptions to this, including requests to excerpt or paraphrase documents from apahelpcenter.org, must be presented in writing to helping@apa.org and will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Permission for exceptions will be given on a one-time-only basis and must be sought for each additional use of the document.