

How to Identify Stress and What to do about it

By Cecile Tucker

We've all heard of stress before, but in my experience, people are pretty bad at realizing when they're stressed, and even worse at doing something about it! We all like to think that we are super (wo)man and that we can handle anything thrown at us, without taking the time to take care of ourselves, but this just isn't the case. The reality is, when we set time aside to take care of ourselves, we are far better able to actually do-it-all!

The first step to being the person who can do-it-all is realizing when you're stressed so that you can change it. Stress shows up differently for every person and we all have different triggers. What this means is that what stresses me out may not stress you out and the way I act when I'm stressed may be very different than the way you act when you're stressed! Because of this, we all have to take the time to be really aware of what it is that causes us stress and how we display our stress.

Common causes of stress are related to change and increased workloads. Whenever there is change in a person's life, even if that change is a positive one, like getting a new job, or having a baby, this creates stress because you now have to learn to live in a different way. And of course, negative changes will increase stress too! An added expense to your budget, less time with more to do or negative health concerns in your life or a family member's, all add stress onto life. If you've undergone any change or increase in workload lately, you may be experiencing some added stress!

Remember what we discussed before though: we all have different triggers to stress, so these things may not stress you out at all. Become a detective in your own life to find out what causes you stress!

If you're struggling to know what causes you stress, a good place to start is understanding symptoms of stress then keeping note of when you tend to experience these symptoms most. This can be a really good clue to help you understand what your triggers are.

All symptoms of stress relate to something called the "fight or flight system". Thousands and thousands of years ago, when our ancestors lived in caves and were chased by lions and dinosaurs all the time, when they identified a dangerous situation, their body would kick into "fight or flight mode". This means that our ancestors would either "fly" (run) away from the danger or they would stand their ground and "fight" the danger. This was an awesome ability for our ancestors to have because it helped them survive many lion attacks! Today though, we don't get attacked by lions too often, but our body still has this system that gets triggered when we get stressed. So, when we get stressed, our body prepares to "fly" away from danger or "fight" it. Therefore, symptoms of stress are things that would help us in fight or flight mode. These symptoms include:

- Increased heart rate, blood flow and faster breathing (allows you to run from the danger faster)
- Anger, grumpiness and irritability (helps you get ready to fight that lion!)
- Thoughts that get stuck in a loop (when there's a lion standing in front of you, your brain doesn't want you thinking about much other than getting away safely)
- Isolating from others (when we're stressed, all our brain power goes to keeping us safe and there isn't much left to think of other people!)

- Mood swings (when stress last more than a few moments, our body doesn't know what to do to remove the danger and we end up switching between different emotional states)

If you notice any of these symptoms in yourself (and especially if you notice a few of them!) you may be experiencing some stress. The difference between us and our caveman ancestors is that our stress lasts a lot longer than our ancestors! When a lion approached a caveman, the stress would last a little while then either go away, or the caveman would get eaten. These days though, our stress can last days, weeks or even years! A job can have us feeling stress from Monday to Friday. A sick parent can leave us feeling stressed for months. Financial troubles can create stress that lasts years on end.

So, since our stress can last so long, we need to find ways to manage it and reduce it, rather than hoping it would go away like it did for our ancestors.

While not always possible, the best way to manage stress is to get rid of the thing causing stress! Seems logical, right? If you know the direct cause of your stress and you can get rid of it (or lessen it), do that! Ask for more help (no, you DON'T have to do it alone), cross things off the Day-Timer that don't need to be there and schedule your day in a way that puts YOU in charge, not others.

These environmental changes, as I like to call them, work for stresses such as having too much to do and not enough time, but they don't usually work for stresses such as a new job, a sick partner or new life roles. For these types of stress, it usually works better to do relaxation work. Now, I know that most people roll their eyes when they hear this: "how could breathing for a bit and having a bubble bath really help me feel less crazy stressed than I feel?!!". I get it! When we're super stressed, something as easy as a relaxation practice just doesn't seem like it will be enough. There's lots of evidence to show it does work though! In a nutshell, a relaxation practice can actually help us turn off the "fight and flight" mode our body has and actually turn on another system called the "rest and digest" system.

So how do we turn on this rest and digest system? It's all about learning to become an observer and not a manipulator. What does that mean?? It means that we need to learn how to observe what is going on in the world around us without trying to change it. And the easiest place to start with this is with ourselves. Remember the common symptoms of stress we talked about before? Remember how you can have faster breathing, heart rate and blood flow when you're stressed? Learning to tune into these symptoms *without* trying to change them, is the best way to manage stress. Specifically, we're going to focus on noticing the breath to manage stress.

To learn to manage your stress, you need to begin to **passively concentrate** on your breathe. This means that you focus on your breath without trying to change anything about it. Notice how fast or slow it is and how deep or shallow it is. Do you notice your chest moving when you breathe? What about your stomach? How long does it take you to inhale? What about exhaling? Don't try to change what's happening, just notice it! By concentrating on your breath without changing it, you begin to turn off your fight or flight system and turn on your rest and digest system.

Next step is to notice when your mind wanders to intruding thoughts and **gently redirect** it back to your breath. Whenever your mind wanders (and it will- a lot), just bring it back to your breath gently. Do this over and over again, and you've got a relaxation practice! And Obviously it sounds easier on paper than it can be in practice, but learning to focus on our breath for short periods of time, then increasing it slowly helps us manage our stress!

To recap everything we've talked about so far, to manage your stress you need to learn what stresses you out, what symptoms *you* display when you're stressed, then you need to become accountable for your

stress and take steps to change it, either through environmental changes or through a relaxation practice.

Of course, it's important to remember that sometimes stress is so big and so great that the techniques listed above just may not be enough! You may need more support and if that's you, good job recognizing it! Next step for you is to reach out to a professional or someone you trust to get the help you need to manage your stress!