

# Stress in Your Life

Stress is an unavoidable part of life. When it is positive, stress can make life fun, exciting, enjoyable, and challenging. When it is negative, it can severely impact your mental and physical health. Research suggests that both your brain chemistry and your personality type play a role in how you respond to stress.

## HEALTH TERMS

**stress tolerance**

**Type A personality**

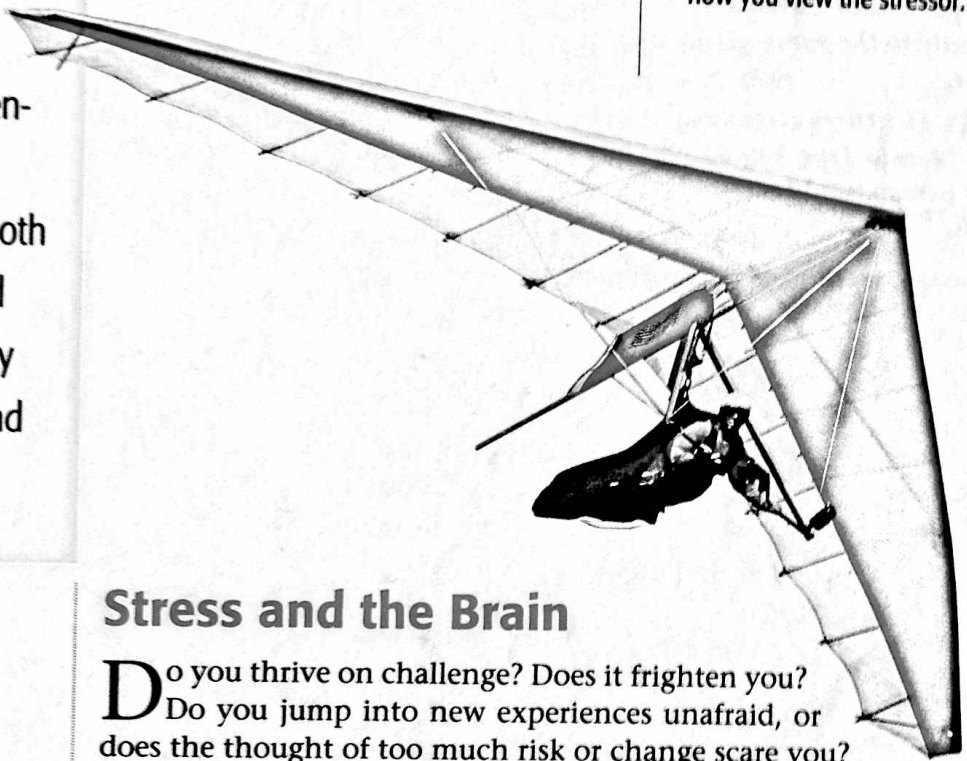
**Type B personality**

**hardy personality**

**psychosomatic response**

## HEALTH CONCEPTS

- Several factors affect a person's level of stress.
- Stress can negatively impact an individual's health.
- You can learn to recognize the signs of stress in your own body and life.
- Stress can often be controlled by how you view the stressor.



## Stress and the Brain

Do you thrive on challenge? Does it frighten you? Do you jump into new experiences unafraid, or does the thought of too much risk or change scare you?

Your answers to these and similar questions may be partly related to conditions in your brain that were present at birth. Scientists have determined that in some people, stress upsets a delicate balance among brain chemicals called *neurotransmitters*. This imbalance may cause sleep disturbances, panic attacks, and low enjoyment of life. The first signs of such an imbalance can include trouble falling asleep, waking up often during the night, and very vivid dreams followed by lack of energy, aches and pains, and later, depression.

**Stress tolerance** is the amount of stress that you can handle before you reach a state of too much stress. Though most people have lived

through some period of overstress, it is estimated that one in ten Americans experience low stress tolerance.

## Stress and Your Personality Type

Personality is another factor in how you handle stress. Some psychologists have grouped people into Type A and Type B personalities. The **Type A personality** is described as a *competitive, high-achieving personality type most likely to develop heart disease or other significant health problem*. The **Type B personality** is seen as a *“laid back,” non-competitive personality type less likely to suffer from heart disease*. Research indicates, however, that the Type A personality may actually relieve stress by working, whereas the Type B is more likely to hold on to the stress, thereby becoming more open to other stress-related disorders.

► **People with Type A and Type B personalities react differently to the same stressor.**

**ACTIVITY** List three stressors, and tell how a Type A and Type B person would respond to each.



The fact is that different personality types and even different individuals respond to the same stressors in different ways. Some people hold up well during certain kinds of stress while others break down more quickly. Some people seem able to remain healthy even under the most severe kinds of distress. According to psychologist Suzanne Kobasa, such people have “hardy personalities.” The **hardy personality** is a personality type that seems able to stay healthy despite major or even traumatic stressors. In

general, people with hardy personalities have a higher degree of **resilience**. Kobasa also notes that such people share three other very important characteristics:

- **Change.** The hardy personality likes and welcomes change, viewing it as an opportunity for growth.
- **Commitment.** The hardy personality has a strong sense of purpose and is committed to people, activities, and principles that bring meaning to her or his life.
- **Control.** The hardy personality has a sense of power about his or her own life and feels some influence over what happens, taking action when possible. This person also recognizes that some things cannot be controlled.

## Stress During Adolescence

Certain periods of life seem to have their own characteristic stressors and stress responses. Adolescence is one of these. Learning what stressors are common among teens can help you to cope. So can sharing feelings of stress with your peers. Doing so will remind you that you're not alone, and that what you are feeling is probably perfectly normal for people your age.

## Stress and the Body-Mind Connection

The body-mind connection is not entirely understood by science. Nevertheless, there is a clear connection between the health of the mind and the health of the body. Too much stress can raise blood pressure, weaken the immune system, and cause other health risks. It can even lead to premature, or early, death.

## Stress and High Blood Pressure

Mental and emotional stress can cause an increase in your levels of cholesterol, the fatty substance that can block arteries. When these levels are high, high blood pressure—a condition that contributes to heart disease and stroke—can result.

## Stress and Headache

It is estimated that most adults and about half of all teens get headaches. For some people, these headaches are mild and brief; for others, they can be severe and get in the way of normal functioning. Many headaches are related to tension. When stressed, the muscles in the head and neck contract.

A migraine headache can also be triggered by stress, although this more severe form of headache can also be triggered by hormone changes, food additives, fluorescent lights, changes in air pressure, and more. When the arteries leading to the brain narrow, blood flow to the brain decreases. When the arteries open up again, the nerve

## hot link

**resilience** For more information on resilience and other protective factors that increase a person's likelihood for a healthy life, see Chapter 8, page 207.



## Stress and Your "Mindset"

How you view the world, other people, and your relationship to both can strongly impact the kinds of stress you experience and, in turn, your level of mental and emotional health. Ask yourself:

- Do I constantly compare myself with others?
- Do I believe that other people need to think and act as I do?
- Do I think that the world owes me something?
- Do I see myself as incapable?
- Do I feel less lucky or more punished by life than everyone else?
- Do I have to win at everything?
- Do I try to live only according to someone else's standards or expectations?
- Do I feel that I constantly have to prove myself?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you might want to make some "attitude adjustments."

# Making Responsible

## Decisions

### Problem-Solving and Perfectionism

**J**ake excels in math and is a good hockey player. Still, his best friend, Luke, always seems to outdo him at everything. Because of his desire to do as well as Luke, Jake puts undue pressure on himself. He feels anxiety before every contest,



seeing everything as a “win or lose” event.

Now Jake has a chance to compete with Luke for

a position on the school hockey team. Jake knows he puts too much pressure on himself and that his perfectionism is a problem, but he feels like he’d love to beat Luke just once at something this important.

### What Would You Do?

Apply the six steps of the decision-making process to Jake’s problem.

1. **State the situation.**
2. **List the options.**
3. **Weigh the possible outcomes.**
4. **Consider your values.**
5. **Make a decision and act.**
6. **Evaluate the decision.**

### hot link

**asthma** For more information on other triggers of asthma, see Chapter 17, page 404.

### Did You Know?

- Migraine headaches often begin with an “aura,” a series of warning signs that can include seeing flickering lights, spots, or lines, ringing in the ears, strange smells, or even numbness in the limbs. These signs usually develop 10 to 30 minutes before the migraine hits, then disappear as the headache pain begins.
- Most migraines last 4 to 6 hours, but some have been known to last for days.

endings press into the artery walls, causing severe throbbing, possibly a loss of balance or coordination, and changes in mood.

### Stress and Asthma

Though **asthma** may have many causes and triggers, stress can help to trigger an asthma attack. During an asthma attack, breathing becomes difficult as the bronchioles—or air-carrying tubes of the lungs—constrict. The person may cough, wheeze, or fight to get air. In some cases, if untreated, asthma can be life-threatening. If you have asthma, it is important to try to discover what triggers your attacks and to avoid those triggers. It is, therefore, important that you try to keep your stress levels low.

### Stress and Immune Response

Prolonged exposure to stress can compromise your immune response. This means that your body cannot fight disease as well as it might if you had not undergone so much stress. When your immune system is not working at full capacity, you may be more prone to colds, flu, or even more severe infections or cancers. The additional stress of tobacco or alcohol use puts your immune system at a very high risk for serious problems.

### Psychosomatic Response to Stress

Sometimes stress can lead to a **psychosomatic response**. This is a *physical disorder that results from stress rather than from an injury or*

illness. *Psycho-* means “of the mind,” and *somatic* means “of the body.” These physical disorders may be minor or severe, but they are not imaginary. Some sleep disorders may be psychosomatic in origin, as are some skin disorders, stomachaches, digestive problems, and headaches.

## Recognizing Signs of Stress

When stress occurs, it is important to recognize its source and then figure out how to deal with it. Train your body and mind to recognize what stressors cause distress and how your body, mind, and behaviors are affected by each. If you know that you are likely to have a large reaction to an event, consider whether or not it is worth making your body and mind “pay” in such a big way. In the next lesson, you will learn many strategies for managing stress and preventing it from getting out of hand.

### Signs of Stress

- **Physical Signs:** headaches, trembling or twitching, upset stomach, migraines, sweating, rash, constipation, diarrhea, pounding heart, muscle aches and tightness, trouble sleeping, grinding teeth, dry mouth, nervous twitches or tics, dizziness, back pain, ringing in ears.
- **Emotional Signs:** frustration, nervousness, boredom, edginess, feeling powerless, being quick to anger, impatience, mood swings, worrying, loneliness, confusion, crying, low self-esteem, becoming easily upset without cause.
- **Mental Signs:** trouble reading or thinking clearly, lack of creativity, constant worry, obsessive thoughts, inability to make decisions, forgetting, losing sense of humor and perspective.
- **Behavioral Signs:** not eating, overeating, compulsive talking, verbal or physical outbursts, fidgeting, using alcohol, caffeine, or other drugs, smoking, gambling, tapping feet, drumming fingers, hurrying, forgetting one’s values, withdrawing, reckless and high-risk behaviors like driving too fast.