

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Stress Effects: Avoiding the Strain Drain

A 60-hour work week, your three kids whining at the same time, rushing to the dry cleaner and arriving as it closes; all of these situations can cause stress to increase.

And when it continues for long periods of time, it can have a huge impact on your physical and emotional health. Learn to recognize the warning signs of stress and understand how they can influence your well-being. This will help you to cope and stay calm when faced with everyday challenges.

Warning signs. Research shows that 43 per cent of adults suffer harmful health effects related to stress. “Fight or flight” is the body’s reaction to a threat or stress. To prepare, your body releases chemicals that signal increases in blood pressure and heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating and a sudden rush of strength.

Behavioral warning signs of stress include anxiety, overreacting and difficulty concentrating. Physical indicators of stress include fatigue, trouble sleeping, weight gain or loss, and sweaty palms. And if you’re having arguments with friends, family or co-workers, don’t feel like being social, or begin using alcohol or drugs to cope; prolonged stress may be the culprit.

The stress circuit. Your body releases hormones that respond to stress—the “fight or flight” reaction. When your baby is colicky or your manager keeps piling up the work, these stress-fighting hormones go into overdrive and can wreak havoc on your heart rate, blood pressure, digestion, mood, memory and appetite. Over time, your body’s stressed-out response can lead to migraines, arthritis, depression and even cardiovascular disease.

Raging hormones. Known as the stress hormone, cortisol, which goes into overdrive when you’re under duress, takes its toll on the body if it’s continuously present at high levels. Over time, it’ll burn out the body’s coping devices, causing fatigue and depression. Cortisol also interferes with serotonin production, which boosts mood, sleep and sexual responsiveness—when serotonin is low, it can trigger depression and sleep disorders.

Battle of the bulge. Did you know that fat and cholesterol are released to energize and equip the body for stress? Your brain also tells the body to store fat. Imagine the health repercussions when you’re stressed for a long period of time: weight gain, high cholesterol and constricted arteries.

System down. Your immune system is another victim of stress, leading to more colds and flu. And if you’ve moved to a new city or changed jobs, you have a greater chance of contracting an illness. The fight against inflammation, infection and white blood cell production are also weakened by continued stress, meaning uncontrolled stress can lead to sniffles, a sore throat and bad allergies.

Stomach grumbling. Who hasn’t had a nervous stomach before a presentation? Well there’s actually a medical reason for why the tension you feel is throwing your digestive system for a loop. The hormones that fight stress prevent stomach acid from being released and the stomach from getting emptied. At the same time, these hormones speed up the emptying of the colon, which leads to frequent trips to the bathroom, causing internal mayhem. If that wasn’t enough to stomach, weight gain and increased appetite are common, which is why many people turn to a tub of ice cream after a nasty argument.

How to De-Stress

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If you are experiencing some of the above challenges, here are some tips on how you can beat stress and strengthen your health:

- **Exercising.** Thirty minutes a day will improve your mental and physical health.
- **Laughing.** It releases feel-good chemicals more powerful than morphine.
- **Taking time for yourself.** Whether it's a long bath, a yoga class or reading a book, it's important to incorporate alone time into your daily schedule.
- **Setting boundaries.** Leave the laundry until another day and learn to say "No" to unessential requests at work and at home.
- **Getting help.** Reach out to loved ones or a professional for added support when you just can't go through it on your own.

Not being able to get out of bed after finishing something you were working on or getting a migraine after an intense meeting is your body's way of fighting back. But when one stressful event follows another, your body doesn't get to stop the "fight or flight" reaction. That's when you get into trouble. Get to know your body's warning signs of too much stress. Then, find ways to cope relax and resolve issues to protect your most important possession — your health.