

# Understanding Your Stress

## Objective

To help you identify the chronic stress in your life and determine if it is having an impact on your physical and mental health.

## You Should Know

The stress you experience in your life plays a major role in your physical health and mental health. A little stress can be a good thing, even though it might not feel like this is true. Any kind of danger will trigger your stress “flight or fight” system. For example, if you encounter a large dog that is growling at you, an alarm system will go off in your brain, telling your body to produce a surge of hormones including adrenaline and cortisol. Your heart rate will increase and your blood pressure will go up. Sugar (glucose) will enter your bloodstream and you will have a surge of energy. Your stress response system is trying to protect you from the perceived danger that this dog could hurt you, and your body is put on high alert to do whatever is necessary to stay safe.

A similar stress response system is triggered when you are anxious, say about giving a presentation or a performance. Although there is no real danger involved, your stress hormones still put you on “alert,” giving you extra energy and focus so that you can do your best. Once the perceived danger or the anxiety of performing is over, your body goes back to its normal state.

However, chronic stress or acute episodes of stress can cause serious problems because your body does not go back to a normal state. Constant high stress levels keep your stress hormones elevated, which can cause you to have both physical and psychological symptoms. Physical symptoms range from high blood pressure, to aches and pains, to digestive problems, and a lowered immune symptom. Psychological symptoms of prolonged stress can include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, irritability, and moodiness.

Fortunately, once you identify the chronic stress in your life, you can take steps to reduce your stress and adopt healthy practices like meditation, exercise, and a healthy diet – all known to be antidotes to stress.

## What to Do

Use this worksheet to help you identify the stress in your life and calculate your stress level. In column one, put a check mark by events or situations that have affected you over the last 90 days. You will notice that even good things, like having a birthday or going on a vacation, can contribute to your overall stress.

Then, circle the numbers in the second column which indicate the level of stress commonly associated with each event or situation that you have checked. In the third column, note any immediate effects that the stress is having on your life, such as loss of sleep, increased appetite, or a change in your mood.

At the bottom of the chart, you can add other things in your life that are causing you stress. You can put in your own rating for each additional stressor, with 1 = low stress, 2 = moderate stress, and 3 = high stress. Circle these number too.

Finally, add up all the numbers you have circled to determine your overall Life Stress Level.

There is no absolute level that is considered low or high. People handle stress in different ways, and a number that might be problematic for one person might not be a concern for another. However, a number over 10 should be a cause for concern, particularly if you are having physical problems like headaches, stomachaches, digestive problems, sleep problems, or weight gain. High stress levels also need to be considered if you are having psychological problems like anxiety, depression, irritability, or difficulty concentrating.

High Life Stress levels should not be ignored. You should consult a physician and/or a mental health professional if you have a high Life Stress Level and are unsure what to do to decrease the stress in your life. Bring this worksheet with you when seeing a professional so he or she can get a clear picture of things that are causing you stress.

<b>Check if Appropriate</b>	<b>Situation or Event</b>	<b>Stress Rating</b>	<b>Immediate Effects</b>
	Death of family member or close friend	3	
	Change in work situation	2	
	Serious health problem or injury	3	
	Your birthday	1	
	Separation or divorce	3	
	Child having serious educational problems	2	
	Child having serious health problems	3	
	Loss of job or other income	2	
	Problems with your extended family	x	
	Major vacation	1	
	Beginning or ending school	1	
	Change in residence	3	
	Major holiday	1	
	Legal problems	3	
	Infidelity in the marriage	3	
	Isolation and loneliness	3	
	Natural disasters that affect your family or community	3	

	Other events that affect your community (i.e., crimes, shootings, economic problems, etc.)	2	
	Extreme weather conditions	2	
	Car accident	2	
	Pregnancy	2	
	Work- or school-related problems	2	
	Sleeping difficulties	2	
	Other		
	Other		
	Other		

**Life Stress Level Total** \_\_\_\_\_

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?

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