

Can stress actually be good for you?

In small doses, yes, but too much leads to all kinds of trouble

As a yoga instructor in New York City, Jennifer Parmelee knows what to do to find her inner calm when hit with daily stresses. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by pressures or annoyances like being stuck in the subway, Parmelee uses them to keep her motivated. "You need stress to a certain degree," she says. "You just try not to let it take control of you," she says. Could stress actually be good for you? In small doses, yes.

We may talk about cutting the stress from our lives, but we need those precious, powerful fight-or-flight hormones our bodies produce when we're about to be hit by a car or when confronted with an unexpected, *needed-it-yesterday deadline* at work. When the brain perceives physical or psychological stress, it starts pumping adrenaline and chemicals into the body. Instantly, the heart beats faster, blood pressure increases, senses sharpen, a rise in blood glucose invigorates us and we're ready to rock. Or leap away from the car. "Stress is a burst of energy," says psychiatrist Dr. Lynne Tan of Montefiore Medical Center in New York City. "It's our body telling us what we need to do."

Moderate amounts of stress can help people perform tasks more efficiently and can improve memory. Good stress is the type of emotional challenge where a person feels in control and provides some sense of accomplishment. It can improve heart function and make the body resistant to infection, experts say. Far from being something we need to eliminate from our lives, good stress stimulates us.

"When you have a deadline, when you have to perform. You want some stress to help you do your best." Says Janet DiPietro, a developmental psychologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

"Those powerful chemicals are there, *first and foremost*, to help you survive," says Monika Fleshner, a neuroimmunophysiologist at the University of Boulder, Colo.. "It's only under the circumstances of chronic stress or extreme, severe stress that we suffer negative effects."

Of course, *there's the rub*. Stress can be positive, but get too much of it — when the flood of hormones bombards your body longer than 24 hours, doctors say — and all kinds of bad things start to happen. Long-term, chronic emotional stress that lasts

weeks or months is blamed for high blood pressure, heart disease, exhaustion and depression.

The problem is, it's difficult to shut off the flow of stress hormones when they become harmful. People can't control how high their hormones go when they experience a difficult situation. The body does give off signals when healthy tension has tipped over into bad stress. *Mental fogginess*, frequent colds, increased sensitivity to aches and pains are all signs of an overwhelmed immune system. Autoimmune diseases like psoriasis, arthritis and inflammatory bowel disease often flare up.

"What we can do is change the way our brains respond to [stress] with coping techniques such as deep breathing, meditation and exercise," says Dr. Bruce Rabin, a professor of pathology and psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

Matter of perception

Indeed, stress is *a doubled-edged sword* that affects everyone differently. It's mostly a matter of perception. A speeding ride on a roller coaster is torture for some, while others race for the next ride.

The goal isn't an absence of stress. It's an unavoidable reality. Besides, without it, life would be a pretty dull existence. The key is *channeling* stress energy into productive action instead of feeling overwhelmed, experts say. "Very successful people, rather than feeling disempowered, take the extra stress energy ... and make it into a high-energy, positive situation." says Tan.

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