

WORKING THROUGH COVID-19



Article 2

Recognizing Signs of Stress in Yourself and Others

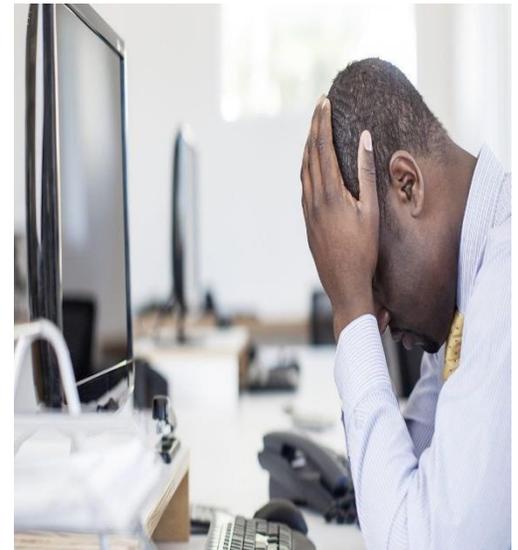
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Stress is a normal reaction in these unpredictable times dealing with COVID-19 and subsequent changes to our daily lives as the pandemic lingers. As we adapt to these changes, the human body is designed to experience and react to the challenges or stressors. Our bodies' autonomic nervous system produces physical and mental responses. Built in "fight-or-flight" stress responses control our heart rate, breathing, vision, muscles, thoughts, and focus preparing us to handle the situation or flee.

Recognizing Signs of Stress in Yourself and Others

Stress responses can be positive helping us adjust to a new situation, keeping us alert, motivating us to work harder, or enabling us to avoid danger. It becomes a problem when stress continues without relief or periods of relaxation. Although the body's stress response quickly escalates, it takes longer to calm down or de-escalate afterwards. This may cause individuals to remain hypervigilant even when the immediate threat is gone.

Because stress is subjective, only the individual experiencing it can determine whether it is present and how severe it feels. Stress can be a short-term or long-term situation depending on what changes in our lives. Individuals may experience a range of stress reactions with accompanying symptoms that can occur at varying levels of severity, such as:



Physical

- Muscle tension, aches, or pains
- Racing heart or chest pains
- Exhaustion or trouble sleeping
- Headaches, dizziness, or shaking
- Stomach or digestive problems
- Sexual difficulties
- High blood pressure
- Weak immune system

Behavioral

- Isolation or social withdrawal
- Over or under eating
- Angry outbursts
- Avoidance or procrastination
- Increased use of tobacco, drugs, or alcohol
- Exercising less often
- Impulsiveness or risk-taking actions
- Seeking reassurance, excessive checking, or hyper-alertness

Emotional

- Anxiety or panic
- Restlessness, irritability, or anger
- Sadness, hopelessness, or depression
- Denial, shock, or numbness
- Grief
- Fear, phobia, or phobic avoidance

Cognitive

- Constant worry
- Rumination or racing thoughts
- Forgetfulness or trouble focusing
- Disorganization
- Bad judgment
- Pessimistic outlook
- Loss of creativity
- Perfectionism



Any of these symptoms or a combination of several can have temporary, short-term, or long-term effects on our health. Remember, experiencing symptoms following a stressful situation is normal. We respond to stress in different ways and move through the situation at our own individual pace.

It's important to realize as the end of the pandemic is undefined, uncertainty and fear from one situation may not be fully resolved before another occurs reactivating the stress response. As a result, Individuals may begin to show warning signs of cumulative stress, such as:

- Early warning signs – boredom, fatigue, anxiety, depression, or poor concentration.
- Mild signs – memory problems or increased illness.
- Extended signs – relationship problems, increased use of alcohol or drugs, performance changes, or fear of leaving home.
- Severe signs – relationship changes, health changes, personality changes, or becoming housebound.

Individuals experiencing signs of cumulative stress should address them as soon as they begin and consider seeking professional help. We all should be aware of our stress levels and monitor the effects they are having on us so we can take the necessary steps to lower them. While we can't avoid stress, we can prevent it from becoming overwhelming by practicing daily stress management techniques. Here are a few suggestions.

- Create a daily routine to help regain a sense of control.
- Eat balanced, healthy meals and stay hydrated.
- Get extra rest to let your body relax and recover.
- Do regular exercise. Let frustration and anger out through safe, exhausting physical activity.
- Try relaxation activities like meditation, yoga, tai chi, or breathing exercises.
- Ask for support from friends, colleagues, loved ones, or professionals.
- Avoid alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. Limit caffeine.
- Don't dwell on the news. Gather needed information then turn off the television, radio, or computer.

Caring for ourselves is an essential first step to taking care of others. Individuals can contact the Office of Employee and Organization Development with concerns they have reacting to stress. We can assess the situation, develop an action plan, provide short-term counseling, make appropriate referrals to community resources, give support, and follow-up care. It's a sign of strength not weakness to ask for help when it's needed.



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