

What Is Stress?

Depends On Who You Ask

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Think you know what stress is? You probably have your own sense of it, but that may be very different from what others think. This can make it difficult to communicate what you're experiencing to someone else.

Most people's definitions fall into one of two categories: situations or reactions. When people focus on situations, they say they're "stressed" when they're experiencing events that cause them discomfort. These can range from daily hassles to major life events. "Hassles" are those things that are irritating and frequently chronic: noisy neighbors, misplaced books, difficulty finding a parking space, etc. Major life events are those situations that disrupt our lives in some way: death of a loved one, moving, divorce, etc. These "stressors" (both hassles and major life events) frequently come from one of four sources*:

1. Environmental – noise, pollution, traffic, crowding, the weather, etc.
2. Physiological – illness, injuries, hormonal fluctuations, inadequate sleep, drug or alcohol misuse, etc.
3. Social stressors – financial problems, school demands, social events, etc.
4. Disruptive thoughts – negative self-talk, believing the worst will happen, perfectionism, etc.

While "disruptive thoughts" are not situations per se, they can frequently be experienced as such. If someone believes he or she is going to flunk a test, it can feel like it's already happened. Part of coping with stressors is to figure out how to reduce them to a minimum in both frequency and intensity, then adapt to them in a healthy way.

When people believe they are "stressed" based on their reactions, they are usually referring to physical, emotional or cognitive difficulties. These can include a wide range of symptoms*:

Physical Symptoms

muscular tension
 colds or other illness
 high blood pressure
 indigestion
 headaches
 sleep problems
 backaches

Emotional Symptoms

irritability
 depression
 anger
 fear or anxiety
 feeling overwhelmed
 mood swings
 low self-esteem

Cognitive Symptoms

forgetfulness
 unwanted or repetitive thoughts
 difficulty concentrating
 no motivation
 doubt
 procrastination
 escaping (TV, drugs, alcohol, etc.)

These symptoms are usually a result of the body's response to stressors. Animals (including humans) developed what's called the "flight or fight" response, which is a series of hormonal changes that prepares them to fight off a predator or run away from it. In current human society, the perceived "predator" can be a fellow student, bank statement, dead car battery, etc. If the perceived threat goes on long enough or there are too many at once, the body does not relax. The hormone levels remain high, producing the symptoms listed above.

When you talk about being stressed with others, it can be helpful if you can identify *both* types of definitions, situations and reactions. That way, the people you're talking with will know the causes and effects of your stress, no matter how different your original definitions might be.

*from James Archer, Ph.D. & Christina Carroll, Ph.D.; University of Florida Counseling Center, Stress and College Students
<http://www.counsel.ufl.edu/selfHelp/studentStress.asp>