

What is stress?

For you who want
less stress and more
well-being in your
everyday life.



*Danica Prevention & Health,
knowledge and tools*

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What is stress?

“What is stress” was among the ten most googled questions in Denmark in 2012, and there is generally a lack of certainty when it comes to understanding, preventing and treating stress.

There isn't consensus among scientists about an official definition of stress, and the condition is not recognised as a separate diagnosis in the official diagnosis systems. What we can conclude, however, is that stress is a reaction to excess strain, and the type of stress that makes you ill is usually caused by a combination of several factors at home and at work.

Stress is a widely used concept and is often confused with work pressure or illness. It is important to distinguish between short-term stress, which is normal and useful, and long-term stress, which is unhealthy.

Short-term stress

Is quite normal when we face major challenges, for instance at work or in our private life. This condition causes a range of physical, mental and behavioural reactions that enhance our ability to perform. Short-term stress is not dangerous.

Acute short-term stress activates the autonomic nervous system and the release of adrenaline and cortisol, bringing the body into a state of alertness. Short-term stress serves a purpose, sharpening our senses and enabling us to act quickly. While it may feel unpleasant, the discomfort is only temporary and the body can relax again when it is over.

Long-term stress

LONG-TERM STRESS, on the other hand, is when the body is in a constant state of alert lasting for weeks, months or years. Long-term stress is a state of tension and weariness that affects both our physical and our mental health.

Long-term stress causes excess levels of fat and sugar in the blood and puts strain on the system, including the heart, cardiovascular system and control of blood sugar. Long-term stress can cause hypertension and affect the immune system.



WHO expects stress to be one of the principal sources of illness by 2020.



Symptoms of stress and how to detect your own signs of stress

- Low energy
- Tiredness
- Insomnia
- Impaired cognitive function
(memory, concentration, learning, perspective, etc.)
- Increased sensitivity to noise
- Slowness
- Reduced energy level
- Frequent crying spells
- Increased anger
- Sadness
- Reduced self-esteem
- Significant reduction of recreational and social activities

It is important to distinguish between work pressure, brief episodes of strain, longer periods of strain and serious stress.



Causes of work-related stress:

- Uncertainty about job
(how do I succeed?)
- Great demands and feeling of lack of influence
(I can't do anything about it)
- Conflicts
(they drain resources from my performance)
- Inadequate management
(I don't know what I am supposed to do)
- Lack of recognition
(I can't go on when nobody sees/ recognises my efforts)
- Job insecurity
(even though I am doing well, I might lose my job)
- Work-life balance
(my job is invading my private life)
- Pressure to adapt
(constant and inevitable changes)
- Work conflicting with own core values
(am I wrong to do this?)
- Own ambition
(am I able to achieve what I want in my career?)



One in five sufferers
of stress risk losing
their job



Prevention of long-term stress starts with you

We are all different, and the factors that make us ill with stress are not the same for everyone.

If you want to check your own state of well-being, try a simple “balance wheel” exercise.

Exercise 1:

Tick off the things that occupy most of your everyday life

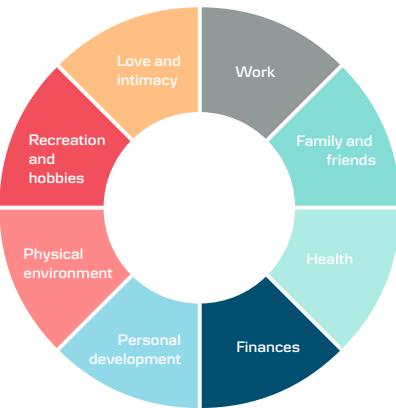
Exercise 2:

Tick off how you would like your everyday life to be

The exercise will provide a compass of what is most important to you. If there is an imbalance between your life as it actually is and how you perceive a satisfying life to be, this is an opportunity to stop, reflect, make adjustments and prioritise the things that give you energy and make you happy and cut down on things that drain your energy.

When you have finished the exercise, try asking yourself these questions:

1. What are my symptoms? What is my barometer (how does stress manifest itself when I am not thriving)?
2. What stress factors do I have in my life?
3. What can I do to change it?



4. Am I being strained by minor things?
Are they worth it?
5. Do I often worry about things that
might not happen?
6. Find out what you can and cannot
control.
7. Act! Try to change the things that
you can.
8. Am I being realistic in the goals I set
for myself? – do I even have a goal?
Stick to the agreements you make
with yourself.
9. Can I regain control of my life?
10. Am I focused on maintaining
positive relations?
11. Am I taking care of my general well-
being?

When you have reflected on these questions, you will know more about what parameters are important to your well-being, and what you need to deal with and change in your everyday life to make YOUR life better.

Well-being and work satisfactions are the antithesis of stress!

It is important to stock up on the things that give you energy, so that you have a reserve to draw on! Find out what it is that gives you energy in your everyday life, and what drains you of energy.

If we deplete our energy account, we end up paying for it – with interest. We become completely drained of energy for days or weeks.

It can be helpful to look at your energy level as a bank account in which you can deposit new energy or from which you can draw energy.



If we deplete our
energy account, we
end up paying for it
– with interest.

When you look at it that way, it becomes clear that you need to make deposits in order to withdraw from it without constantly being in deficit.



*Get an overview of
your activities*



Make a log of your daily or weekly activities. When you have done so, look at each individual activity and note whether it recharges or drains your batteries.

This will make you aware of the things that should perhaps feature more or less in your everyday life in order to stock up your energy level, or if you need to introduce something new, such as breaks, exercise or anything else that would recharge your batteries.

For some, the exercise may be about how to get from a state of pure survival to an energised state. For others, what is needed is a complete overhaul of everything from thoughts to friends, and for others again, minor adjustments will do.

You may choose to spend your energy on something you really want to do, a social event for example, even though you know it will deplete your energy account. Yet, it may feel like a really good investment for other reasons.

Often, you don't really become aware of the extent of your stress until your body starts to protest.



Up to one in four cases of sickness absence in Denmark is due to stress.



What can you do to avoid stress?

1. Get 7-9 hours' sleep per night.
2. Exercise, ride your bike to work or take a walk.
3. Eat a healthy, balanced diet.
4. Practice meditation (possibly including mindfulness). Just 5-10 minutes per day is enough.
5. Use your friends and family – for relaxation and fun and for help when you have too much on your plate.
6. Prioritise doing things that make you happy.



Do good things for yourself that show you that you are good enough as you are.





Five tips for greater well-being in your everyday life

1. Breathe

It sounds simplistic, but it can help you avoid becoming ill with stress. When you are stressed, your body is in a constant state of alert and adrenalin rushes through your system. By breathing deeply into the stomach you can reduce the release of adrenalin, and thus reduce your stress level. Set an alarm to go off a few times a day and take three to six deep breaths into your stomach.

2. Meditate

Meditation is one of the most effective measures against stress because it helps you be grounded in your body and aware of how you are. This is an effective way of preventing stress, but if you have already been caught in the stress trap, meditation is also beneficial. When you meditate, your body releases endorphins, making you feel happy.



3. Exercise

All forms of exercise are useful in preventing stress. If you are already suffering from stress, you should steer clear of the most vigorous sports. Long walks/bicycle rides and yoga are the best choices as they also help you find peace of mind. It is important to note whether exercise helps you relax, however, of whether it is just one more thing you feel you have to do.

4. Live a conscious life

Focus on being mindful of yourself and your body instead of living your life on autopilot. Regularly ask yourself “how am I really feeling”, and act accordingly.

5. Treat yourself and your body with care

This is the key to treating yourself with kindness. Do good things for yourself that show you that you are good enough the way you are. Be aware of any negative thought patterns. If you constantly have a little devil on your shoulder nagging you if you say something embarrassing or do something stupid, then whisk it away and rid yourself of your judgmental superego – it only adds to your level of stress.

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