



# heretohelp

Mental health and substance use  
information you can trust



CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE  
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE  
BC DIVISION

## *learn about* stress

primer fact sheets 2009 [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)



*When we don't have  
a healthy way to  
deal with stress, it  
can harm us more  
than help.*

You have a major deadline coming up tomorrow and you still have a ton of work to do. Your child's principal called; your child is being disruptive ... again. You have 12 people coming over for dinner this weekend and you still have no idea what you're going to make. On top of everything else, your mother isn't feeling well but refuses to go to the doctor. Your muscles are feeling tense, you find yourself nervously tapping your feet as you sit at your desk. Your thoughts keep racing around in your head and the people around you are starting to avoid you because you keep snapping at them. This is stress. And most of us have been there.

### What is it?

Stress is the response of your body and mind to demands being placed on you. When you feel threatened, your brain releases chemicals called hormones that send alarm signals throughout your body. These hormones prepare your body to take action. The hormones make your skin sweat, your breathing quicken, your heart rate go up, your muscles tense, and your senses come alive. It's this "fight or flight" stress response that allowed our human ancestors to survive when face to face

with a threat. Unfortunately, most of our modern "threats" like workloads or family conflict are not situations we can easily fight with our fists or run away from. When we don't have a healthy way to deal with stress, it can harm us more than help.

Some common sources of stress, known as stressors, include the following:

- **Physical environments**—around you can raise your stress level. Traffic, noise (sirens keeping you up at

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## could I be over stressed?

Signals of stress may include changes in your body, actions, emotions and thinking. Being able to identify these changes may help you better manage your stress:

### Changes in your BODY

- ☐ My muscles feel tense
- ☐ My breathing and heart rate feel quicker
- ☐ I'm having headaches or stomach aches
- ☐ I'm seeing changes in my sleep or appetite
- ☐ I've had diarrhea
- ☐ I'm feeling tired

### Changes in your ACTIONS

- ☐ I'm using more alcohol
- ☐ I find myself withdrawing from others
- ☐ I'm smoking more
- ☐ I'm drinking more coffee
- ☐ I'm using other drugs
- ☐ I lose patience with people
- ☐ I've been avoiding situations that are stressful
- ☐ I keep fidgeting

### Changes in your EMOTIONS

- ☐ My emotions are different than they used to be
- ☐ I feel worried and confused
- ☐ I'm angry and irritable
- ☐ I feel like I can't cope

### Changes in your THINKING

- ☐ I'm having trouble concentrating, remembering and making decisions
- ☐ My thoughts are racing
- ☐ I've lost my self-confidence
- ☐ I have a negative attitude towards myself and my life

Of course things other than stress can cause some of these symptoms. And having some of these symptoms doesn't necessarily mean that you're over stressed. But if you are experiencing a lot of these symptoms along with some of the stressors listed at the beginning of this sheet, you should talk to someone about it.

night, a barking dog next door), and uncomfortable or unsafe living conditions can also cause stress. People who have lived through wars or natural disasters know too well the devastating impact that their environment can have on their well-being.

- **Family and relationships**—are common daily stressors. Marital disagreements, unhealthy relationships, rebellious teens, or caring for an ill family member or a child with special needs can all send stress levels skyrocketing.
- **Work**—can be an ever-present source of stress. Work stress is caused by things such as job dissatisfaction, an exhausting workload, insufficient pay, office politics, and conflicts with your boss or co-workers.
- **Life situations**—can cause stress. For example, poverty, financial pressures, discrimination or harassment, unemployment, isolation, and/or a lack of social support all take a toll on your daily quality of life.
- **Major life changes**—such as the birth of a baby, a divorce, a career change or move can also place a lot of stress on you even if the event itself is positive.

In small amounts stress is actually good for us. Stress can motivate us and push us to reach our potential. It's stress that helps you get through that presentation to your clients or forces us to do homework when we'd rather take a nap. Stress is very individual. What you find stressful may not be stressful for someone else.

It's important to know that stress in itself is not a mental illness. But when the stress keeps piling up and it starts to make you feel worse instead of motivating you, it can harm your mental health and well-being. Stress is a risk factor for someone who is already vulnerable to developing a mental illness. Stress can affect us physically too. In high amounts stress can, for example, cause high blood pressure and make it hard for your body to fight off infections.

## Who does it affect?

Stress affects most of us. In a recent international poll, three-quarters of Canadians said they experienced stress in their daily lives either frequently or fairly often. But stress can affect some people differently than others:

- **Women**—are more likely than men to report feeling stressed. Men and women also report reacting to different kinds of stress. Women tend to react more to chronic stressors like time constraints, meeting others' expectations, marital relationships, children, and family health. Men, on the other hand, are more affected by work-related stressors like a change in job, demotion, pay cut, and financial difficulties.
- **Youth**—are doing more today than ever before, balancing school with other activities, friends and jobs. All of these responsibilities can lead to stress. In one survey, one in 10 teens reported regularly feeling very stressed with not having enough time in the day.
- **Older adults**—face stressors like major illness, changes in routine and income related to retirement, physical changes, the death of a spouse and a shrinking circle of friends. All of these stressors can contribute to increased levels of stress in Canada's elderly.
- **People with chronic illnesses**—like diabetes, arthritis or heart disease can experience extreme stress because they worry about their illness, their treatments and the effect that the illness will have on themselves and those around them.

## What can I do about it?

Because stress is so individual, we each need to find our own way to cope. There are some things that you can do to figure out how to best deal with your stress:

**Find out what stresses you the most:** If you need to, make a list of everything that's on your mind. You can't do anything to stop your stress until you know what causes it.

**Problem solve:** Deal with problems effectively. Life problems, like financial issues, family conflicts or problems at work can be a huge cause of stress. Learning to deal with problems properly can make a big difference. There are a number of steps to problem solving:

- Identify the problem
- Set some goals
- Make a list of possible solutions
- Choose a solution from your list
- Put your solution into action
- Track your progress

**Don't procrastinate:** Don't put off the things you need to do. Keeping a daily planner can help keep you organized and on track. Focus on tasks as well as decisions. Putting off making decisions can cause unnecessary stress and worry.

**Talk about it:** Sometimes we just need to vent. Talk to someone you can trust. If your school, workplace or faith community offers counseling, take advantage of it.

**Share your workload:** Delegate your responsibilities. This doesn't mean offload all your work onto those around you but only take on what you need to. This applies at home too: ask family and friends for help.

**Self-care:** Exercise, meditation or prayer, getting a good night's sleep, eating well, petting your dog or cat, going for a walk, laughing and stretching—all of these are great stress relievers. Unfortunately, they are also sometimes the first things we stop doing when we feel under pressure.

**Just say no:** You can't please everybody. If you feel like you can't take on a task, don't be afraid to say so. If you find it hard to say no, read books or attend classes on how to be more assertive. Being assertive will help you communicate your needs firmly but nicely.



stress

# where do I go from here?

*Other helpful resources, available in English only, are:*

## **BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information**

Visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca). See our section on managing stress including our Wellness Modules. The Modules are full of information, tips and worksheets to help you understand stress and ways to take care of your mental health.

## **Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division**

Visit [www.cmha.bc.ca](http://www.cmha.bc.ca) or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on how best to manage stress.

## **Mood Disorders Association of BC**

Visit [www.mdabc.net](http://www.mdabc.net) or call 604-873-0103 for resources and information on mood disorders and support groups, as stress and depression are often linked.

## **Your Local Crisis Line**

Crisis lines aren't only for people in crisis. You can call for information on local services or if you just need someone to talk to. If you are in distress, call 310-6789 (do not add 604, 778 or 250 before the number) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal. The crisis lines linked in through 310-6789 have received advanced training in mental health issues and services by members of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.

*Resources available in many languages:*

\*For each service below, if English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 100 languages are available.

## **HealthLink BC**

Call 811 or visit [www.healthlinkbc.ca](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca) to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you're worried about, or a pharmacist about medication questions.



This fact sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.



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HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addiction Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program, Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.