

THE STRESS RESPONSE

What you need to know

What is 'stress'?

It is not uncommon to hear someone say 'I'm so stressed'! But what do they actually mean? Perhaps they have tight deadlines at work, or started a new job and feel out of their depth? Or perhaps they have small children, and are trying to balance their needs with working and running a household? They may be in a toxic relationship and feel overwhelmed? Whatever the reason, the outcome is still the same – they 'feel stressed'.



Dictionaries define stress as *a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances*. Stress can be beneficial as it motivates us to accomplish tasks or perform at our best however, when the demands upon a person are more than they can cope with, they experience harmful stress – or *distress*.

What is the stress response?

When we experience a stressful event, our body goes through physiological changes in an attempt to cope. This combination of reactions is often referred to as the 'fight-flight-freeze' response, and is understood to be our survival mechanism. When this response happens over and over, such as in chronic stress, it can have negative effects on the body such as contributing to high blood pressure, and it may also have an effect on anxiety, depression and addiction. These long term changes can also include increased blood sugar, a breakdown of muscle and the body's protein stores, and a weakened immune system.

So how does this survival mechanism work? When a stressful event occurs, a part of our brain (amygdala) interprets the images and sounds of the event. If it perceives danger, then an alarm is sent to another part of the brain – hypothalamus. It is this part of the brain that communicates with the rest of the body through our autonomic nervous system (ANS) to tell us whether to 'fight, freeze, or flee'. This process includes the release of hormones such as adrenalin which cause physical changes in our bodies. The sympathetic nervous system, part of the ANS, is activated and enables us to respond to the dangerous event. Once the dangerous event has passed, the other part of our ANS, called the parasympathetic nervous system, activates by calming our body down.

