

# What Happens When You Feel Under Stress?

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What happens when you feel under stress?

## Overview

This resource will help you to:

- Recognise the physical responses to stress from which you suffer.
- Appreciate the benefits of stress
- Appreciate the importance of understanding our responses

### If you want to know more:

Kelly McGonigal: The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It

[https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly\\_mcgonigal\\_how\\_to\\_make\\_stress\\_your\\_friend?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend?language=en)

What happens when you feel under stress?

## Introduction

It essential to fully understand the responses our bodies have to stress. Studies have shown that the more we understand about the way our body reacts to stress, the less stressed we become.

People often find the physical responses themselves create further stress. Heart palpitations, for example, become a lot worse - people believe they may be having a heart attack, and sometimes reactions like this lead to hyper ventilation. The individual cannot seem to take in enough oxygen, and eventually takes in too much, causing a gasping for air, and the feeling of suffocation. A simple and immediate cure is to breathe into a paper bag, and thus increase the amount of carbon dioxide taken in until the fit subsides.

It is helpful to understand why we have these stress responses at all - which brings us to the fight or flight response.

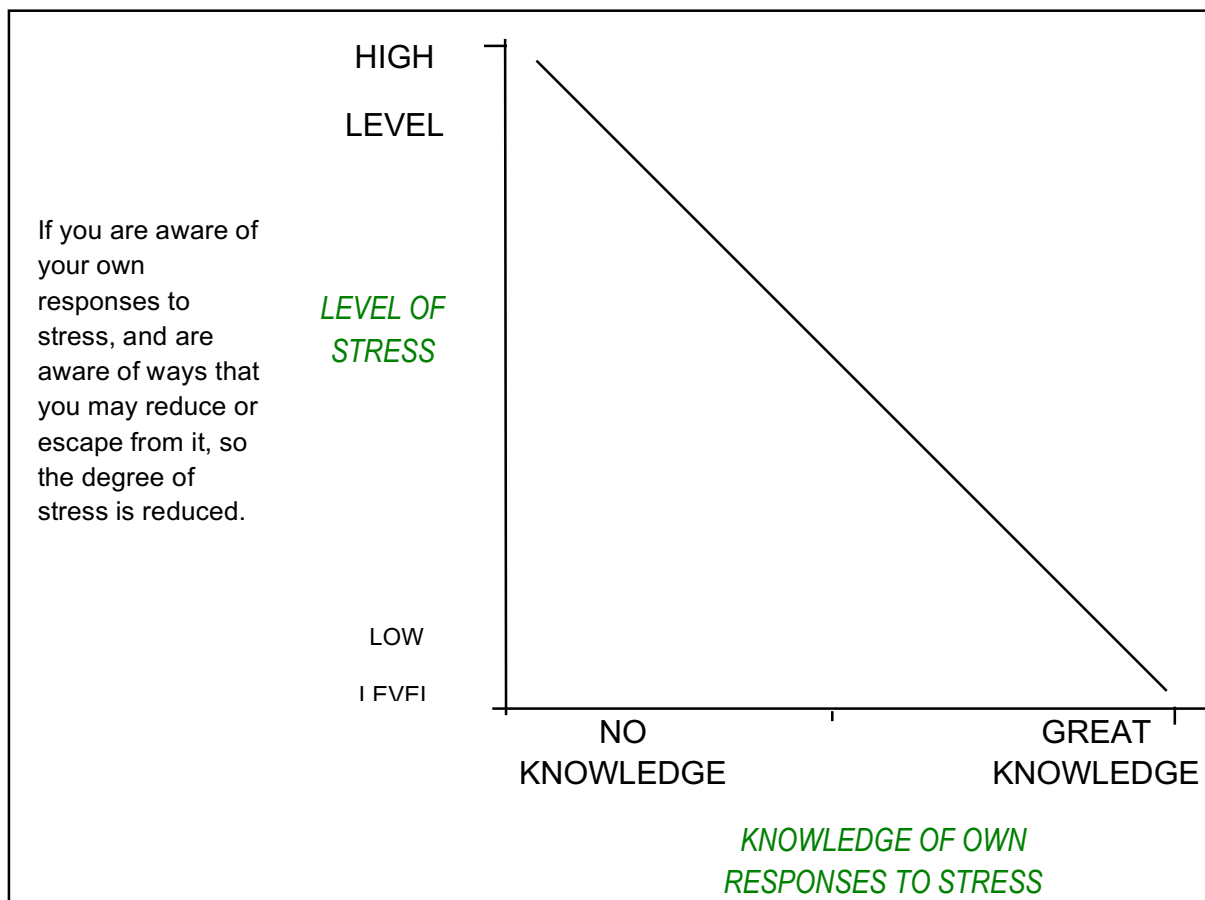
Throughout this booklet we aim to demonstrate that stress is not harmful itself, it can be useful. For example, health workers in a casualty department rely on stress to enable them to perform effectively, and react promptly to emergencies. However, when they have finished work they *need* to lower their levels of stress in order to allow their bodies to recover.

People in highly stressful jobs often try to quiet their minds and bodies with alcohol or tranquillisers, they may alternatively seek out stimulating pastimes (pubs and clubs etc). The keynote is balance. The body cannot go on forever at high levels of stress without something "giving".



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## Finding out about stress



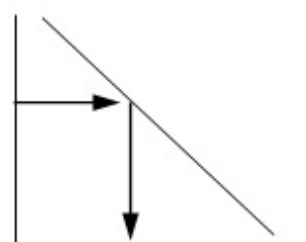
**How much do you need to find out about stress?**

**Where would you gauge yourself on the vertical axis? Under a high or low level of stress?**

Does this reflect your current knowledge of stress? Check where this would rate you on the horizontal axis (see example). Is this accurate or useful? Do you think that increasing your knowledge will help reduce *your* stress?

**Example**

My assessment of my current level of stress - "middle to high"



How my assessment of my level of stress relates to my knowledge of stress - "some knowledge".

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## Positives and negatives

**Stress is not, in itself a harmful event. Without the ability to create stress hormones we would not be able to perform as effectively.**

Doctors and nurses who work on an Accident and Emergency ward will know all about the importance of stress.

Have you ever felt really tired, but then been in a position where you have to do something well, something important?

- Did you find you were suddenly wide awake?
- Have you ever played a competitive sport?
- Have you performed on the stage?
- Have you ever competed at work?
- Have you ever sold anything?

**All these experiences are related to the positive effects of stress. We perform better for short periods when we are under stress.**

Have you ever been made redundant / unemployed and at home all day?

Have you been at home with children, looking after a sick relative?

**How did you find this experience?**

**Was it a 'pleasant change' from your usual stresses, or did it bring its own problems?**

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## Visualisation Exercise

You are laying in bed, it is 2.30 a.m. and you hear a strange noise downstairs.

**Imagine - note your feelings (both emotional and physical).**

*Example: You may start, or your stomach "turn over".*

You decide to investigate, you get up, put on a wrap, and descend very very slowly. Each footstep placed gently on the stairs to avoid squeaking.

**Imagine - note your feelings.**

*Example: Nervous, tingling fingers, butterfly stomach, breathing a bit shallow*

Trying to stop your breathing for making too much noise, you slowly turn the door handle to the lounge. Inside you can hear some noises, something is being knocked, the window is being tapped and then you hear something glass fall and break.

**Imagine - note your feelings below.**

*Example: Heart beating fast, cold clammy hands*

You open the door. The room is dark, then suddenly, something scratches your face, you struggle for a moment, almost falling over.

**Imagine - note your feelings.**

*Example: Fast reaction, find the light switch, dodge whatever has hit you etc. Breathing fast.*

You quickly recover yourself and switch on the light. There is a blackbird flying desperately around the room. It must have fallen down the chimney.

**Imagine - note your feelings.**

*Example: Sigh to resume normal breathing, shakiness, a "late reaction".*

**How did you feel at the end of the exercise? Could you really imagine the situation? Did you actually feel**

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the feelings rather than just imagining them?

Reflect upon the exercise—what have you learnt about your own response to stress?

## Fight or flight

How do we react to situations like the one described?

It comes from the **arousal system**. In the past, when we lived from one stress to another (yes, I do mean in the past) we needed a life saving reflex which would enable us to either FIGHT or run away (known as FLIGHT).

Either way, we needed to have a quick fire system that would work at a moment's notice.

**This system is a mixture of nervous and hormonal reactions which result in the following physiological responses.** The body's responses to stress are intended to enable the Fight or Flight response

Body Responses	How it enables us to flee or stand and fight
<b>The heart beats faster</b>	<i>Oxygen and energy are moved faster to where they need to be</i>
<b>Blood pressure rises</b>	<i>As above—increased pressure increases the speed—imagine squeezing a toothpaste tube, by applying pressure you push the toothpaste out quicker</i>
<b>Blood clotting increases, the blood thickens.</b>	<i>As above</i>
<b>Breathing rate increases and becomes shallow and panting.</b>	<i>Increase oxygen - ready for action - needed for activity (imagine having had a fast run, you will be short of oxygen.</i>
<b>Oxygen and all nutrients speed to all the muscles and wastes are carried away faster.</b>	<i>Quick supply line established</i>
<b>Release of Endorphin the body's natural pain killer.</b>	<i>Prepare for the worst</i>
<b>The senses become acute</b>	<i>Able to see, sense and deal with danger or avoidance of danger.</i>
<b>Energy reserves are released into the blood as 'sugar' and extra insulin in order to metabolise ('burn up') the sugar.</b>	<i>Energy available</i>
<b>Blood cholesterol increases.</b>	<i>Release of fats for energy release.</i>
<b>The skin becomes cold and clammy and 'hair stands on end'</b>	<i>Standing hair makes you look larger when you are very hairy (dogs!) - warmth to skin is unnecessary, sweating prepares for activity.</i>



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## Danger

**What we need when faced with danger:**

- \* We need to be as strong as possible and run fast.
- \* We need to have energy available to us.
- \* We need to be prepared for the worst (lacerations, pain).
- \* We need to have our awareness heightened, so we can see, hear, smell better, and solve problems quicker.

The **Primary stress response** helps us achieve all of these by:

- \* Increasing the oxygen and releasing energy to vital organs and muscles.
- \* Releasing hormones.

The primary stress response is able to achieve this by shutting down non imperative functions for a short period of time.

## How do you feel after a stressful event?

Body Activity	When in danger you DON'T want to:	Your body's response
Nutrition	Eat	Digestion can be stopped. <i>Can cause digestive problems</i>
Elimination	Eliminate food	Control is released. <i>Need to rush to the loo—lose control of bowels!</i>
Hydration	Drink	Kidneys stop drainage. <i>Build up long term—kidney stones can result. Thirst response may diminish.</i>
Reproduction	Decide to have more children.	The sex impulse stops. <i>Libido can diminish long term</i>

**Do you recognise any of the feelings you have? Do they relate to the effects shown in this unit, of the Fight or Flight response?**

**Why do you think you have these experiences of stress? Do you feel that you are “in danger” when you**

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**feel under stress?**

**Are the effects of stress we feel in proportion to the real danger we are experiencing at the time?**

**How can you use this knowledge of fight or flight to mitigate the effects of stress? How can you alter your thinking to reduce the effects of stress on your body?**

New research has shown that chances of increasing our risk from stress are directly related to how much we consider that it is bad for us. People who think stress is harmful have a higher mortality rate than those who believe that stress is not harmful. Watch the TED Talk by Kelly McGonigal and read her book.

## **Self assessment**

How does the 'fight of flight' response affect you in everyday life? When do you experience it? Is it helpful or unhelpful to you?

## **Summary**

The feeling of stress is due to the “arousal” system which has evolved to keep us from danger.

Stress is not a bad thing, as it can help us to improve our performance when under pressure. It helps us to perform well at a moment's notice.

When under stress the body reacts so that it can be as fast, strong, energetic and alert as possible.