

## Chapter 1

# Stressed Out? Welcome to the Club!

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Figuring out why you feel more stressed
  - ▶ Determining where your stress comes from
  - ▶ Understanding how stress affects you
  - ▶ Looking at the good kinds of stress
- 

**A**re you feeling more tired lately than you used to? Is your fuse a little shorter than normal? Are you worrying more? Enjoying life less? If you feel more stress in your life these days, you aren't alone. Count yourself among the ranks of the overstressed. Most people feel that their lives have too much stress. Your stress may come from your job or lack thereof, your money worries, your personal life, or simply not having enough time to do everything you have to do — or want to do. You could use some help. Thankfully, you can eliminate or at least minimize much of the stress in your life and better manage the stress that remains. This chapter helps you get started.

## *Experiencing a Stress Epidemic?*

You probably can't make it through a single day without seeing or hearing the word stress someplace. Just glance at any magazine stand and you'll find numerous cover stories all about stress. In most larger bookstores, an entire section is devoted to books on stress. TV and radio talk shows regularly feature stories documenting the negative effects of stress in our lives. Why all the fuss? Hasn't stress been around forever? Wasn't it stress that Adam felt when he was caught red-handed with little bits of apple stuck between his teeth? Is all of this just media hype, or are people really experiencing more stress today?



## Less leisure time?

In her insightful book *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, economist Juliet Schor points out that, in spite of all the new innovations and contraptions that could make our lives easier, we still need about the same amount of time to do what has to be done at home. In the 1910s, a full-time housewife spent about 52 hours a week on housework. Sixty years later, in the 1970s, the

figure was about the same. Yes, some activities did become less time consuming. Food preparation fell almost 10 hours a week, but this was offset by an increase in the time spent shopping and taking care of the home and kids. Contrary to everyone's predicted expectations, we have less leisure time now than we did 50 years ago.

One good way of finding out how much stress people are experiencing is to ask them about the stress in their lives. Here are some findings from recent polls and surveys that did just that:

- ✔ A 2010 study published by the American Psychological Association found that 44 percent of Americans said that their stress levels had increased over the past five years.
- ✔ That same study reported that one in five American adults (22 percent) believe themselves to be in fair or poor health, and this group reports higher levels of stress than those in better health.
- ✔ A Harris Interactive survey of more than 1,550 Americans found that 46 percent reported that their stress level is higher than it was five years ago. Eighty percent said they experienced medium or high stress levels at work. Sixty percent said they experienced these same levels at home.

Our lives, it seems, have indeed become far more stressful. But why? The next section provides some reasons.

## Understanding Where All This Stress Is Coming From

In his prophetic book *Future Shock* (originally published in 1984), Alvin Toffler observed that people experience more stress whenever they are subjected to a lot of change in a short span of time. If anything characterizes our lives these days, it's an excess of change. We're in a continual state of flux. We have less control over our lives, we live with more uncertainty, and

we often feel threatened and, at times, overwhelmed. The following sections explain some of the more common sources of stress in our lives.

## *Struggling in a struggling economy*

A 2010 study published by the American Psychological Association shows an America still recovering from the recession. Americans report that money (76 percent) and the economy (65 percent) are their most common sources of stress. A difficult and uncertain economy has become *the* major source of stress in our lives. The recession and its aftermath have resulted in prolonged financial and emotional distress for too many of us.

Money may or may not be the root of all evil, but worrying about it certainly is a major source of stress. Balancing your checkbook at the end of the month (if you bother) reminds you that living is expensive. You remember that your parents bought their house for a pittance and now realize that today you couldn't afford to buy that same house if you wanted to. The mortgage, college tuition, braces for the kids' teeth, camp, travel, taxes, savings for retirement — it all adds up. And so does the stress.

## *Getting frazzled at work*

Having a job may mean avoiding the stress that comes with unemployment, but it certainly doesn't guarantee a stress-free existence. For many people, jobs and careers are the biggest source of stress. Concerns about job security, killer hours, long commutes, unrealistic deadlines, bosses from hell, office politics, toxic coworkers, and testy clients are just a few of the many job-related stresses people experience. Workloads are heavier today than they were in the past, leaving less and less time for family and the rest of your life.

A new lexicon of work-related stresses also exists: downsizing, organizational redeployment, forced early retirement. Whatever the word, the effect is the same: insecurity, uncertainty, and fear. People are experiencing more stress at work than ever before, as these findings illustrate:

- ✓ A 2012 workplace survey carried out by Harris Interactive for the American Psychological Association found that two in five employed adults (41 percent) typically feel stressed out during the workday.
- ✓ In that same study, fewer than six in ten (58 percent) reported that they had the resources to manage stress effectively.
- ✓ About two-thirds (62 percent) of Americans cite work as one of their main sources of stress.
- ✓ The overall cost of job stress at work is estimated at \$300 billion.

- ✔ One in four workers has taken a “mental health” day off from work to relieve stress.
- ✔ About a quarter (26 percent) of workers say they are “often” or “very often” burned out by their work.

## *Feeling frazzled at home*

After you leave work, you may start to realize that the rest of your life is not exactly stress-free. These days, life at home, our relationships, and the pressure of juggling everything else that has to be done only add to our stress level.

Life at home has become more pressured and demanding. True, we now have microwaves, robotic vacuums, and take-out menus, but the effort and stress involved seem to be growing rather than lessening. Meals have to be prepared, the house tidied, the clothing cleaned, the bills paid, the chores completed, the shopping done, the lawn and garden tended, the car maintained and repaired, the phone calls and e-mails returned, the homework supervised, and the kids chauffeured. And that’s for starters. Did I mention the dog?

## **Acting like a woman, thinking like a man, and working like a dog**

If you’re a woman, you may experience even more stress on the job. Despite all the hoopla about women’s rights and sexual equality, women still face added pressures and limitations in the workplace. Women are paid less and promoted less frequently than their male counterparts, even though they may be more qualified. If a woman has children, her career may be shunted onto the “Mommy Track,” a glass ceiling that limits career advancement.

More subtle pressures come from the prevailing notions of the roles and behaviors expected from men and women. Men and women can act in similar ways that may advance their careers — competitive, aggressive, and assertive — but a double standard is common. When such behavior comes from a woman,

people often view the behavior negatively as unfeminine and inappropriate. But when that same behavior comes from a man, people see him as strong and in control.

Sexual harassment for women on the job is no small source of stress. A woman may find herself in the no-win situation of either openly complaining or silently enduring the abuse. Both options can be highly stressful. Women who belong to a racial or ethnic minority may experience even more stress. Hiring and promotional practices may act in subtle and not-so-subtle discriminatory ways. Even where affirmative action policies are in place, women may experience the stress of feeling that others see any hiring or advancement as unfairly legislated rather than legitimately deserved.

***"I need two more hours in the day!"***

This plea is a commonly heard lament. The stress of not having enough time to do everything that has to be done is enormous. We overwork at home and at our jobs. The result? We just don't have enough time.

***Ozzie and Harriet we ain't***

Some of this stress comes from the ways in which families have changed over the years. In two-parent families, it's now common for both parents to work. One-parent families have even more stressors. These days, more women are the main earners in the home (almost 40 percent) or are bringing in essential income needed to maintain the family. Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. The number of single-parent households is multiplying. Families tend to be more fragmented, with relatives often living great distances away. Although in certain cases this situation can be stress-reducing (your annoying Aunt Agnes is moving to Dubuque?), more often it promotes a greater sense of disconnectedness and alienation.

***A woman's work is never done***

Forty years ago, one-third of all workers were women; now nearly half are. Add on the additional stress of being a mother with a family to manage at home, and you compound the level of stress. Women may find themselves in the not-so-unusual position of having to cope with the problems of aging and ailing parents in addition to the problems of their own children. Caught in this generational divide, this "stress sandwich" can be incredibly draining, both physically and emotionally. Although men give lip service to helping with the kids and the elderly (and they do, in fact, help more than their fathers or grandfathers did), women are still the ones who most often take primary responsibility for these care-giving roles.

A 2009 study reported in *Time* magazine found that 55 percent of women strongly agree that in households where both partners have jobs, women take on more responsibilities for the home and family than their male partners do. The men in the study saw it differently: Only 28 percent agreed. Sixty-nine percent of women say that they are primarily responsible for taking care of their children; only 13 percent of men say this of themselves. As an old adage reminds us, "Father works from sun to sun, but Mother's work is never done."

***Piling on new stresses with technology***

People's lives have become stressful in ways they never would have imagined even a decade ago. Whoever said there is nothing new under the sun probably never Googled the name of a restaurant or texted a friend. Changes in technology have brought with them new pressures and new demands —

in short, new sources of stress. For example, one study of more than 1,300 people found that those who regularly used their cell phones or portable devices for communication experienced an increase in psychological distress and a decrease in family satisfaction, compared with those who used these devices less often. Imagine this implausible scenario:

You've been in a coma for the last 15 years or so. One day, out of the blue, you wake up and take the bus home from the hospital. You quickly notice that life has changed. Technology rules. On the bus you notice that everyone is pushing buttons on small plastic devices. You ask the person next to you what's going on, and he looks at you strangely and explains what a smartphone is, what downloading means, and what e-mail does. You reach your home and discover that your old television and computer have become relics. Everything is digital. Everything is portable. People are magically "downloading" movies and television shows on their telephones. Your cassette player is a joke, not to mention your record player. Just as quickly, you realize that you have no idea how to operate any of these digital tools. You have no idea what the words Skype, Netflix, Kindle, GPS, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, podcast, iPad, and eBay even mean. All this technology is beginning to drive you a bit crazy. Your next-door neighbor, who was never in a coma and yet is just as stressed as you are, is also trying to keep up with all this technological change.

## *Dealing with daily hassles (the little things add up)*

When you think of stress, you usually think of the major stresses you may face: death, divorce, financial ruin, or a serious illness. And then of course there are those so-called moderate stresses: losing your wallet, denting the car, or catching a cold. Finally, you face the even smaller stresses: the mini-stresses and micro-stresses. These stresses are what are known as hassles.

Here is just a sample of the kinds of hassles you face every day (a complete list would be endless):

- ✓ Noisy traffic
- ✓ Loud neighbors
- ✓ Rude salesclerks
- ✓ Crowds
- ✓ Long waits for telephone customer-service representatives

- ✓ Deliveries promised “sometime between 9 and 5”
- ✓ Computers that crash
- ✓ Airport delays
- ✓ Cell phones that go off in theaters and restaurants

Yes, I realize these things are relatively small. But the small things can add up. You can deal with one, maybe two, or even three of these at once. But when the number begins to rise, so does your stress level. When you reach a high enough level of stress, you overreact to the next hassle that comes along. And that results in even more stress. Alas, life is loaded with hassle. The funny part is, people usually deal fairly well with the bigger problems. Life’s major stresses — the deaths, illnesses, divorces, and financial setbacks — somehow trigger hidden resources within us. We rise to each demand, summoning up some unrecognized inner strength, and we somehow manage to cope. What gets to us are the little things. It’s the small stuff — the little annoyances, petty frustrations, and minor irritations — that ultimately lead to a continuing sense of stress.

## *Looking at the Signs and Symptoms of Stress*

The signs and symptoms of stress range from the benign to the dramatic — from simply feeling tired at the end of the day to having a heart attack. The more serious stress-related problems come with intense and prolonged periods of stress. These disorders and diseases I save for later in this chapter. Here are some of the more benign, commonly experienced stress signs and symptoms. Many will be all too familiar to you.

### ***Physical signs of stress:***

- ✓ Tiredness, fatigue, lethargy
- ✓ Heart palpitations; racing pulse; rapid, shallow breathing
- ✓ Muscle tension and aches
- ✓ Shakiness, tremors, tics, twitches
- ✓ Heartburn, indigestion, diarrhea, constipation
- ✓ Nervousness
- ✓ Dry mouth and throat

- ✓ Excessive sweating, clammy hands, cold hands and/or feet
- ✓ Rashes, hives, itching
- ✓ Nail-biting, fidgeting, hair-twirling, hair-pulling
- ✓ Frequent urination
- ✓ Lowered libido
- ✓ Overeating, loss of appetite
- ✓ Sleep difficulties
- ✓ Increased use of alcohol and/or drugs and medications

***Psychological signs of stress:***

- ✓ Irritability, impatience, anger, hostility
- ✓ Worry, anxiety, panic
- ✓ Moodiness, sadness, feeling upset
- ✓ Intrusive and/or racing thoughts
- ✓ Memory lapses, difficulties in concentrating, indecision
- ✓ Frequent absences from work, lowered productivity
- ✓ Feeling overwhelmed
- ✓ Loss of sense of humor

That's just for starters. Prolonged and/or intense stress can have more serious effects: It can make you sick.

## ***Understanding How Stress Can Make You Sick***

Researchers estimate that 75 to 90 percent of all visits to primary-care physicians are for complaints and conditions that are, in some way, stress-related. About 50 percent of those surveyed said that stress was affecting their health. Every week, 112 million people take some form of medication for stress-related symptoms. This statistic isn't surprising given the wide-ranging physiological changes that accompany a stress response. Just about every bodily system or body part is affected by stress. Stress can exacerbate the symptoms of a wide variety of other disorders and illnesses, as well. Stress is linked to the five leading causes of death: heart disease,



cancer, lung disease, accidents, and suicide. The following sections illustrate some of the more important ways stress can negatively affect your health and well being.



All of the symptoms, illnesses, and conditions I mention in this section can result from a number of medical conditions, not just stress. And for many of the disorders and diseases mentioned, stress may not be the direct cause of the condition, but stress may make these conditions worse. If you're concerned about one or more of these symptoms, be sure to consult your physician. He or she is the best person to give you advice and guidance.

## *Understanding how stress can be a pain in the neck (and other places)*

Your muscles are a prime target for stress. When you're under stress, your muscles contract and become tense. This muscle tension can affect your nerves, blood vessels, organs, skin, and bones. Chronically tense muscles can result in a variety of conditions and disorders, including muscle spasms, cramping, facial or jaw pain, bruxism (grinding your teeth), tremors, and shakiness. Many forms of headache, chest pain, and back pain are among the more common conditions that result from stress-induced muscle tension.

## *Taking stress to heart*

Stress can play a role in circulatory diseases such as coronary heart disease, sudden cardiac death, and strokes. This fact is not surprising because stress can increase your blood pressure, constrict your blood vessels, raise your cholesterol level, trigger arrhythmias, and speed up the rate at which your blood clots. We know that psychosocial stress induces a physiological inflammatory response in blood vessels. When vessel walls are damaged, inflammatory cells come into the vessel walls. Among other things, they release chemicals that may cause further damage. If the stress is chronic, the result can be chronic inflammation. A growing number of studies show that individuals with higher amounts of psychosocial stress and depression display elevated C-reactive protein and IL-6 levels, both markers of inflammation. Many researchers believe that stress, inflammation and heart disease are all linked. Stress is now considered a major risk factor in heart disease, right up there with smoking, being overweight, and not exercising. All of this becomes very important when you consider that heart disease kills more men over the age of 50 and more women over the age of 65 than any other disease.

## A broken heart?

A study reported by the Mayo Clinic in 2010 found that extreme or sudden stress that may accompany a relationship breakup or the death of a loved one can lead to “Broken Heart Syndrome” (BHS), or stress cardiomyopathy

(severe heart muscle weakness). The study notes that this condition happens rapidly, and usually in women. In Japan, BHS is called “octopus trap cardiomyopathy” because the left ventricle balloons out in a peculiar shape.

## *Hitting below the belt*

Ever notice how your stress seems to find its way to your stomach? Your gastrointestinal system can be a ready target for much of the stress in your life. Stress can affect the secretion of acid in your stomach and can speed up or slow down the process of peristalsis (the rhythmic contraction of the muscles in your intestines). Constipation, diarrhea, gas, bloating, and weight loss all can be stress-related. Stress can contribute to gastroesophageal reflux disease and can also play a role in exacerbating irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, and Crohn’s disease.

Speaking of your belt, it’s important to recognize that people under stress usually experience changes in their weight. Stress can affect you in two very different ways. When you’re highly stressed, you may find yourself eating less. You may even find yourself losing weight. This “stress diet” isn’t the best way to lose weight, and if the stress is prolonged it can result in lower overall health. For many others, though, stress, especially moderate stress, can result in overeating. In effect, you’re “feeding your emotions.” The intent, often unconscious, is to feel better — to distract yourself from the emotional distress. The trouble is that “good feeling” lasts for about 12 seconds before you need another fix. And that means putting another notch on your belt. But it’s not just your caloric intake. When you’re stressed, your body releases a hormone called cortisol, which causes fat to accumulate around your abdomen and also enlarges individual fat cells, leading to what researchers term “diseased” fat.

## *Compromising your immune system*

In the last decade or so, growing evidence has supported the theory that stress affects your immune system. In fact, researchers have even coined a name for this new field of study: psychoneuroimmunology. Quite a mouthful! Scientists who choose to go into this field study the relationships between moods, emotional states, hormonal levels, and changes in the nervous

system and immune system. Without drowning you in detail, stress — particularly chronic stress — can compromise your immune system, rendering it less effective in resisting bacteria and viruses. Research has shown that stress may play a role in exacerbating a variety of immune system disorders such as HIV, AIDS, herpes, cancer metastasis, viral infection, rheumatoid arthritis, and certain allergies, as well as other auto-immune conditions. Some recent studies appear to confirm this.

## *The cold facts: Connecting stress and the sniffles*

In that wonderful musical comedy *Guys and Dolls*, a lovelorn Adelaide laments that when your life is filled with stress, “a person can develop a cold.” It looks like she just may be right. Research conducted by Dr. Sheldon Cohen, a psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University, has concluded that stress really does lower your resistance to colds. Cohen and his associates found that the higher a person’s stress score, the more likely he was to come down with a cold when exposed to a cold virus.

Chronic stress, lasting a month or more, was the most likely to result in catching a cold. Experiencing severe stress for more than a month but less than six months doubled a person’s risk of coming down with a cold, compared with those who were experiencing only shorter-term stress. Stress lasting more than two years nearly quadrupled the risk. The study also found that being unemployed or underemployed, or having interpersonal difficulties with family or friends, had the greatest effect. The exact mechanism whereby stress weakens immune functioning is still unclear. Tissues, anyone?



## **What about stress and ulcers?**

Once considered the poster disease for stress, ulcers have lost much of their stress-related status in recent years. Stress is no longer considered the primary cause of ulcers. It now appears that a bacterium called *Helicobacter pylori*, or *H. pylori* for short, is the culprit.

However, the final word on the relationship between stress and ulcers has yet to be written. More recent thinking has begun to question whether stress plays some role after all. We

know that stress can affect secretions in the stomach that may exacerbate ulcers. We also know that a majority of those who do carry the *H. pylori* bacterium do not develop an ulcer, and many who do not carry the bacterium still develop ulcers. And of course, there is that body of research that has linked stress to ulcers. For example, the bombing of London during World War II and the earthquake in Kobe, Japan, both precipitated outbreaks of ulcer disease. Stay tuned.



## Stress can be taxing

A number of studies have shown that when you're under stress, your cholesterol level goes up. In one now-classic study, researchers looked at the stress levels of accountants before and after the month of April, a notoriously busy time for tax accountants. They also looked at cholesterol levels in corporate accountants, who had stressful deadlines in both April and

January. The researchers found that for both groups, cholesterol levels rose significantly before the April deadline and fell after the deadline. They observed a second rise in cholesterol levels for the corporate accountants as their January deadline approached. Again, after the deadline passed, blood lipid levels fell back to normal.

## *"Not tonight, dear. I have a (stress) headache."*

A headache is just one of the many ways stress can interfere with your sex life. For both men and women, stress can reduce and even eliminate the pleasure of physical intimacy. Stress can affect sexual performance and rob you of your libido. When you're feeling stress, feeling sexy may not be at the top of your to-do list. Disturbed sexual performance for men may appear in the form of premature ejaculation, delayed ejaculation, and erectile dysfunction. For women the most common effects of stress are a lowered level of sexual interest and difficulty in achieving orgasm. The irony is that sex can be a way of relieving stress. In fact, for some people, sexual activity increases when they feel stressed.

## *Stressing Out Your Family*

Being stressed is a little like having a cold. Others can catch it. When you're stressed, your moods change, your behavior changes, and you trigger a downward spiral of negative interactions. You may find yourself more angry, more upset, and more worried. You're not the same you.

## *Your relationships*

In a recent survey, 21 percent of those responding said that stress was negatively affecting their friendships. Nineteen percent said that stress was hurting their marriages. When you're distressed — anxious, upset, worried — your happiness level tanks. Your fuse gets shorter, and you become more irritable. People under stress can withdraw emotionally and communicate less. Friends and family may not understand what's going on and in turn become stressed. The cycle can escalate, leading to even more distress.

## *Your kids*

Most parents don't think their stress affects their children. They're wrong. Just ask the kids. Ninety-one percent of children say they know when their parents are stressed. How do they know? They can see the worrying, yelling, complaining, and arguing. And they in turn become stressed. Children who see their parents stressing out tend to become stressed themselves.

A large survey completed in 2010 found that only 14 percent of children say that their parents' stress doesn't bother them. When children see their parents stressed or worried, they can also feel sad, worried, and frustrated. And it's not just their emotions that are affected. That same study found that nearly one-third reported physical health symptoms that tend to be stress-related. Thirty-eight percent reported trouble falling asleep at night. One-third experienced headaches, and almost one-third reported having an upset stomach in the past month. Chronic stress can also impair children's developmental growth by lowering the production of growth hormone from the pituitary gland. Traumatic, stressful experiences in childhood can cause damage to developing bodies and brains that lasts into adulthood.

## **Stress and infertility**

Even before you have kids, stress can make it hard for you to become pregnant. Stress may account for 30 percent of all infertility problems. Stress changes your body's neurochemistry, which can affect the maturation and release

of the human egg. Stress can also cause the fallopian tubes and uterus to spasm, which can impair implantation. In men, stress can alter the sperm count and cause erectile dysfunction.

## Stress Can Be Good?

Not all the news about stress is bad. As Hans Selye, the pioneer researcher in the field of stress, said, “Stress is the spice of life.” He termed the good kind of stress *eustress*, as opposed to distress, or the nasty kind of stress. (The “eu” part of eustress comes from the Greek, meaning “good.”) Stress can be a positive force in your life. Watching a close playoff game, taking a ride at an amusement park, solving an interesting problem, falling in love — all can be stressful. Yet these are the kinds of stresses that add to the enjoyment and satisfaction of our lives. We want more of this kind of stress, not less.

And even many of the less pleasant uncertainties and surprises of life can be a source of challenge and even excitement and interest. That nervousness you’re experiencing about that presentation you’re making tomorrow can actually improve your performance. The right amount of stress can motivate you, focus you, and get you to perform at your peak. Change and the pressures of modern life don’t necessarily create the bad kind of stress. Rather, how you view the potential stresses in your life and how you cope with them make all the difference.



The good news is that it’s easier than you think to reduce and manage your stress. This book explains *how* to do just that. Each chapter gives you tools and techniques to move you closer to becoming your own stress therapist.

### “But I thrive on stress”

“I’m at my best when I’m under pressure — a tight deadline, a major crisis. That’s when I feel most alive, most vital.” A surprising number of people claim to thrive on stress. They like to be challenged, to have their abilities stretched and tested. For them this is a good kind of stress that can be satisfying and rewarding. Many people who claim to thrive on stress are workaholics. They get stressed when they have nothing to do. Lying on a beach, sitting in the park — now that’s stressful for them!

Interestingly enough, some research suggests that part of the addictive quality that some people feel about stress may be more than just psychological. It may be that people can become hooked on the adrenaline secretions that occur during a stress response. Like other addictions, this adrenaline boost may be experienced by some people as pleasurable. This could explain that feeling of being “truly alive” that some people feel when they are super-stressed. Most of the rest of us, however, could live quite nicely without this boost, thank you very much.