



HAVE YOU BEEN FEELING MORE STRESSED THIS YEAR

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It's not just you. In July 2022, a new survey showed that the world is feeling more stressed and unhappy than ever before. The survey, which collected more than 120,000 interviews across 122 countries in 2021, revealed that more people experienced more stress, more worry, more sadness, and less joy in 2021 than any previous year.

Stress is often the word we use to describe the cumulative effect of pressure, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. We know that stress isn't always bad. In small doses, it can help you perform under pressure and motivate you to do your best. But when you're constantly running in emergency mode, your mind and body pay the price.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. When you sense danger – real, perceived, or imagined - the body's defences kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the stress response.

When working efficiently, it helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, the stress response can save your life like jamming on the brakes to avoid an accident or avoiding a flying object.

The stress response also helps you rise to meet challenges – it keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpens your concentration when you're attempting the game-winning putt, or drives you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching Netflix. But beyond a certain point, stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships, and your quality of life.



IS ALL STRESS THE SAME?

It's important to understand the difference between acute and chronic stress and the duration of stress. Not all stress is bad for you, but there is general agreement in the medical and scientific communities that long-term, or chronic, stress is very bad for your health.

	Short-term (Acute)	Medium-term	Long-term (Chronic)
Timescale	A few minutes to a few hours	A few days to a several weeks	Anywhere from months to years, constant and persistent
Example	Receiving feedback or presenting to an audience	Simultaneously juggling multiple priorities, writing exams	Dealing with financial debt, the effects of trauma, illness
Can it be helpful?	Yes, activates focus	Yes, helps raise stress threshold	No

1. It's important to learn how to recognise when your stress levels are out of control. The most dangerous thing about stress is how easily it can creep up on you. You get used to it. It starts to feel familiar, even normal. You don't notice how much it's affecting you, even as it takes a heavy toll.

2. The signs and symptoms of stress overload can be almost anything. Stress affects the mind, body, and behaviour in many ways, and everyone experiences stress differently. Not only can overwhelming stress lead to serious mental and physical health problems, but it can also take a toll on your relationships at home, work, and school.

If you're concerned about your stress levels, you may find this **free survey** tool helpful: <https://www.stress.org.uk/individual-stress-test/>



TOOLS TO MANAGE YOUR STRESS RESPONSE

In addition to getting the basics right – good sleep, regular exercise, healthy nutrition. The best tools to manage stress are:

1 THE PHYSIOLOGICAL SIGH

One of the quickest ways to manage acute stress in real time (without disengaging from the stressor itself) is a breathing protocol known as the Physiological Sigh. It's two inhaled (one long, one little) followed immediately by an extended exhale; repeated 2 or 3 times.

It's something that all humans do spontaneously as they are about to fall asleep, or in claustrophobic environments, or after crying, so the great news is that your body already knows how to do it. Now you can learn to use it at will.

HOW TO DEMO

Check out Dr Andrew Huberman on <https://youtu.be/rBdhqBGqiMc> for the science and 'how to' demo.



2 DELIBERATE STRESS EXPOSURE

Managing medium-term stress has a lot to do with raising our stress threshold or capacity. Placing yourself in a situation where adrenaline is increased a bit (definitely not to the extreme!), can help build stress tolerance. Examples of this could be deliberate cold exposure (cold showers, ice baths) or public speaking or going to the dentist or physical exercise. The goal, during whatever mildly stressful activity you choose, is to change your gaze from tunnel vision (which happens when we're stressed) to panoramic vision. Without moving your head, see more of your environment all at once. It creates a calming effect on the mind, while the body is fully activated. Do this once a week to help you navigate medium-term stress.



3 SOCIAL CONNECTION

Neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman in his book *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, says that our brains were wired for: “reaching out to and interacting with others”.

Social connection is referred to as the feeling that you belong to a group and generally feel close to other people. Social connection has been scientifically shown to improve physical health as well as mental and emotional wellbeing.

To help combat stress, invest time in building your social network. Surround yourself with a few good friends and people you trust. You may also consider volunteering, joining a gym or fitness group, or taking a local class.

4 GET PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

If you've tried self-help techniques and they aren't working, you should chat to your GP or call the Employee Assistance Programme. If your stress is causing serious health problems, such as high blood pressure, you may need to take medication or further tests. Mental health issues, including stress, anxiety, and depression, are the reason for one-in-five visits to a GP.

SOURCES:

Gallup.com

Hubermanlab.com

Stress.org.uk