

The Five Forms of Stress: Here is Your Personal Stress Assessment

The key to empowerment and self-healing is self-awareness. To take control of your stressors, you must first become aware of what they are. As we remind you throughout the book, “you can’t change it if you don’t see it or know about it.”

As the first step in empowering you to change your stress, we ask you to do a self-assessment. Review and consider the following inventory of questions. Observe and notice what kinds of stress exist for you in each of the five different domains.

The goal of this assessment is not to score in a particular range. Rather, the goal is for you to expand your awareness of possible areas of stress in your life. These are prompts for your self-assessment. Through observation and awareness, you are then well prepared to take steps to reduce these stresses.

With your new or deeper awareness of the five types of stresses that may affect you, then please refer to the second half of this document (“Solutions”) for useful suggestions on how to modify, reduce, or eliminate these stresses.

Please note that the best answers or solutions are often found rather than given. Our role here is to support your search. Don’t let us or anyone hand you answers. **Trust Your Gut** on the answers that fit you best.

1) Environmental Stress Assessment

Do you feel comfortable in your home environment?

Do you feel comfortable in your work environment?

Is your home, school or workplace excessively hot or cold?

Do you live or work in very stressful or abusive conditions? How much time do you spend in stressful or abusive environments?

Are you in environments where you feel safe?

Do you take on too much at home or work?

Do you work frequently with excessively aggressive deadlines?

Are there frequent, unexpected crises at work or home?

Are your important home, work and personal relationships going well?

Do you suffer from “nature deficit disorder? In other words, do you get enough sunlight? Do you get enough exposure to greenery/plant life? Do you get enough time outside every day?

Do you reside in excessively cramped living space?

Do you live in a cluttered space?

Are you living in a new or foreign environment?

Are you able to find a time and place of silence every day? If not, what disturbs your time of silence? (e.g., car alarms, crying babies, ringing phones, dripping faucets, fire engine sirens, etc.)

Have you lived through a traumatic earthquake? Hurricane? Tornado? Fire? Flood? Do you feel at high risk for any of these?

Have you had your water quality tested, and were there any problems found? Have you had them corrected?

Are you ever exposed to aerosolized sprays (spray paint, hairspray, etc)?

Are you ever exposed to dry cleaning fumes?

Do you live near electrical transformers or power lines?

2) Physical Stress Assessment:

Does your physical health limit your capacity to live life as you would like?

Do you feel chronically depleted of energy or “oomph” power?

Do you have a chronic, potentially-disabling illness?

Do you experience chronic abdominal pain?

Do you experience other, additional forms of chronic pain?

Are you preparing to have surgery?

Have you fully recovered from recent surgery?

Do you get enough physical movement or exercise daily? If not, how often do you go for a walk longer than 5 minutes? 30 minutes?

Has anyone (your spouse, your physician, a close friend) told you that they thought your amount or intensity of exercise is too excessive? Do you find yourself feeling chronically fatigued rather than rejuvenated after exercise?

Does your work schedule leave you excessively fatigued?

Are you able to take sit down lunch breaks with colleagues during your workday?

Are you pregnant?

Are you either overweight or obese?

Are you undergoing radiation therapy as part of a cancer treatment regimen, or have you done so in the last 3 years?

Do you have a consistent time for going to bed and waking in the morning?

- a) If not, do you work on rotating shifts?
- b) If not, do you work night shifts?
- c) If not, are you on late night conference calls?
- d) If not, are you required to travel out of town frequently?
- e) If not, do you work or live in multiple different time zones?

Do you require an alarm to wake up? Multiple alarms?

Do you stay up late even though you are tired?

Do you wake up refreshed?

Do you require caffeine in order to function?

Do you drink less than 9 cups of water or other non-alcoholic liquids per day?

Do you regularly sit for more than one hour without standing and stretching throughout the day?

3) Emotional/Spiritual Stress Assessment

Do you feel that you have too many difficulties to overcome?

Do you feel that you are able to do only enough to get by?

Do you feel anxious, tense, strained, restless or worried more often than not?

Do you worry frequently about possible misfortunes? Over things that don't really matter?

Do you take disappointments well?

Do you try to be "perfect" all the time?

Do you qualify for an acting award?

Are you easily drawn into emotional tornadoes at work or home? Are you easily trapped in emotional tornadoes?

Do you have problems sleeping due to a restless mind?

How loud is the volume of your internal critic?

Do you ever have problems thinking of yourself as a good person?

Do you go for extended periods without feeling appreciated by somebody?

Do you go for extended periods without feeling or expressing gratitude for anyone or anything?

Do you feel insecure about whether your relationship with your boss, work colleagues or significant other is stable and healthy?

Do you feel that there are important situations in your life (regarding your health, your job, or important relationships) over which you have no control?

Have you recovered from the loss of a significant family member, friend, or relationship partner?

Do you anticipate losing any important friendships or connections in the coming year?

Do you fear a demotion in pay or perhaps even losing your job?

Have you suffered from physical or sexual abuse at any time in your life?

Have you been diagnosed as having posttraumatic stress disorder? (Symptoms can include nightmares, flashbacks, quick startle response, intrusive negative memories, and a feeling of constant arousal and tension)

How often do you engage in activities or experiences where you feel connected to something larger than yourself?

Do you consider yourself to be either religious or spiritual? What does that look like for you?

How is your faith or spirituality a source of strength for you? Is this a source of conflict for you?

Do any of these spiritual afflictions affect you?

- a) **Spiritual Alienation** such as “Where is God now when I need Him most?”
- b) **Spiritual Anxiety** such as “Will I ever be forgiven?”
- c) **Spiritual Guilt** such as “I am being punished by God.” Or “I didn’t pray hard enough.”
- d) **Spiritual Anger** such as “I’m mad at God.” Or “I blame God for this.”
- e) **Spiritual Loss** such as “I feel empty.” Or “I don’t care anymore.”
- f) **Spiritual Despair** such as “There’s no way God could ever care for me.”

4) Pharmaceutical Stress Assessment

Are you undergoing chemotherapy as part of cancer treatment, or have you done so in recent years?

Have you been on any antibiotic medications in the past year? How many in the past 5 years?

Have you been taking prednisone or other steroid medications within the past year?

Are you at risk for any potential drug induced nutrient deficiencies? (link to <http://www.minnesotamedicine.com/Portals/mnmed/October2011/Plotnikoff-table3.pdf>)

Have you been taking medications for reducing reflux disease or gastritis (such as Prilosec or Prevacid) for more than 12 weeks?

Are you taking medications that cause side effects that are uncomfortable for you?

Do you take any medications to reduce the side effects of another medication you're taking? (For example, taking a medication for calming and reducing anxiety and then simultaneously taking a medication to reduce drowsiness and increase alertness?)

5) Dietary Stress Assessment

Do you eat at least three times per day? If not, how often do you skip meals?

Do you eat meals at your desk, while walking or in the car while driving?

Do you eat quickly? How quickly?

Do you eat alone? How often?

Do you eat out of boredom? Anxiousness? Peer pressure?

Do you crave foods? Do you binge eat? Do you eat compulsively?

Do you self-medicate emotional bruises with ice cream, sweets or "comfort" foods?

Does your daily diet include a mix of protein, complex carbohydrates, and healthy fats?

Does your daily diet include at least five servings of fruits and vegetables?

Do you eat processed foods or foods that contain partially hydrogenated oils?

Have you ever been told by a healthcare professional that you are consuming excessive calories in your daily diet?

Do you consume caffeine during the day?

Do you use any artificial sweeteners such as saccharin or aspartame (NutraSweet)?

How much alcohol do you consume in a week? (focus on the volume of your drinks, not the number of drinks)

Do you have any known food allergies?

Are there any foods that you find don't digest well or otherwise "disagree with you" but that you eat anyway?

If you are vegan or vegetarian, can you answer these questions? (Note: they are progressively more difficult)

- a) What is a complete protein? What are good examples of a complete protein?
- b) What is your preferred source of vitamin B12?
- c) For pre-menopausal women, what is your preferred source of iron?
- d) What is your preferred source of long-chain omega-3 fatty acids?
- e) What is your preferred source of iodine?
- f) If you are dairy free, what are your preferred sources of calcium?

Solutions

I. Solutions for Environmental Stresses

Factors in the Work and Home Environment

If you're uncomfortable in your home, school or work environment, observation and awareness is the first step for creating a more healing environment.

Many of the key factors in environmental stressors relate to important relationships at home, school or work. Relationship issues beyond what friends can help with are deserving of time with a professional (such as a counselor, coach or psychologist) or with a specialized support organization (such as ALANON).

An incredible number of excellent books and articles exist on relationship topics. For the workplace, we have found these to be helpful:

For the anxiety created by electronic miscommunication, this is a classic:

<http://hbr.org/1999/01/the-human-moment-at-work/ar/1>

For the need to give and receive feedback, this "Crucial Conversations" books and video series is great as is this slide show:

<http://hbr.org/web/slideshows/difficult-conversations-nine-common-mistakes/1-slide>

In traditional East Asian thought, healthy environments require attention to all of the senses as well as to sacred geometry. We invite you to read and consider the art of feng shui in your life.

From a more classic Western perspective, we affirm that room temperature should be in a comfortable range for you. Lighting should be appropriate for your needs, neither too bright nor too dim, Ventilation is important for control of dust, fumes and aerosols, as well as for climate and temperature comfort. Notice also whether the humidity level feels comfortable and appropriate.

In the home environment, choose wall colors that you find pleasing. Bring aspects of nature into your home. For example, when possible, bring in natural materials such as wood, stone, and living plants. Art work, whether painting or sculpture, can also bring a sense of comfort and wellbeing. Be aware also of sound factors in the home.

Be aware that exposure to aerosolized sprays (such as spray paint or hairspray) is very stressful to your system. Dry cleaning fumes can be toxic as well. Be vigilant for these environmental toxins. If you do encounter chemical fumes in your home, open all the windows and leave your house for at least a few hours if possible.

Water quality has been shown in many studies to have significant effects on your health. Ask your city for the latest water testing data, or hire someone privately to test the water quality in your home. Don't hesitate to consider water filtration systems that filter out chemicals, unwanted minerals, and other contaminants.

One very reasonably priced source is found here: http://www.doctorsdata.com/water_test.asp

Noise pollution is real. Constant exposure to street noise, car alarms or horns, etc. can be very stressful. Control the volume of your television, stereo, and other sources of noise. Make sure that you allow at least 20 minutes per day (more if possible) when you sit in silence. Meditation or relaxation techniques can also be helpful. Refer to Chapter 10 for much more information on these techniques.

In the work environment, make sure that the working conditions at your desk are comfortable. Pay close attention to ergonomic factors (in other words, make sure that your desk, chair, computer and other equipment are set up in a way that fits your body comfortably and without undue strain.

Every employee should be conscious of their health in their work environment and record any pain, discomfort, injury or illness that they believe is work-related. This information should be reported to supervisors as soon as possible to allow appropriate corrective action to reduce the risk to health and safety to be taken.

Exposure to Nature

Make sure that you allocate at least 20 minutes of time outdoors every day, with exposure to sunlight, trees and plants. If indoors, seek out "window time."

Dealing With a New Environment

If you are living in a new environment, recognize that there is a period of adjustment required for this, and that you will encounter more stress initially due to the unfamiliarity of the new setting. Bring in familiar objects (such as art, photographs of family and friends), and familiar music. Also, spend some time using relaxation techniques in your new environment. Consider gathering some friends or family for a “moving in” ceremony, to help feel that you are claiming your new space as your own. Over time, all of these strategies will help you to feel settled and less stressed.

Natural Disasters

If you recently lived through a natural disaster such as an earthquake, hurricane or tornado, be aware that you have undergone significant stress on several levels. In fact, you may have even developed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). You must allow time (from a few weeks to several months, depending on the severity of the disaster and your proximity to it) to recover. Make sure that you seek out extra support from family and friends. Professional help from a mental health professional may be called for and can be extremely helpful. Be mindful of proper nutrition, sufficient rest, and maintaining social support.

II. Solutions for Physical Stress

First of all, recognize that by virtue of suffering from chronic digestive distress, you are encountering physical stress and therefore stress management techniques are necessary. Proper nutrition, sufficient rest, relaxation techniques, and social support are just some of the modalities that can be helpful. Check Chapter 10 for additional centering, balancing, and relaxation techniques.

Exercise

Your body needs to move to feel well. We know that even mild aerobic exercise on a regular basis can help support not only your physical wellbeing but emotional wellbeing as well. Biking, walking, jogging, use of an elliptical machine, and swimming are some examples. Experiment with different modalities and find one that you enjoy and are willing to pursue regularly. Research tells us that when you start an exercise plan, doing it with a friend will help you stay motivated to continue it more consistently.

Gerald is a 58-year-old accountant with ongoing problems with diarrhea, cramping, sharp right-sided abdominal pain and indigestion over the past 10 years.. When we first talked about getting some kind of exercise, he scrunched up his face and said “I hate exercise. I just cant get myself to do it. I guess I’d rather just live with this gut pain rather than have to bother with exercising.” A few months later, Gerald came back into the office, saying “A good buddy of mine who also has IBS told me that he started swimming 3 days a week and it helped his gut feel better. Maybe I’m ready to try some kind of exercise now.” Gerald eventually started riding an exercise bike 3 days a week at a local YMCA. When he came back in for follow-up he said, “I hate to admit it, but I like biking! It helps my body feel looser, more at ease. Plus, the cramping is a lot better now.”

However, recognize that there can be “too much of a good thing”. If you find that you are using exercise as the primary mode of coping with stress, be careful not to overdo it. If you feel chronically fatigued rather than rejuvenated after exercise, consider taking a day off in between workout days. Be sure to drink plenty of fluids before, during, and after exercise.

And speaking of fluids, lack of proper hydration is a major contributor to physical stress. Make sure that you drink at least 9 - 12 cups of fresh water daily. Alcohol and caffeine deplete fluids, and should not be counted toward this total.

Surgery and Other Medical Procedures

The physical demands of going through anesthesia and surgery are profound. If you have recently had surgery, your body is undergoing significant exertion just to heal, even if surgery went well and without complications. Be sure to recognize you need to return slowly to your daily routines, and get plenty of extra rest. Make sure that you maintain good nutrition. Take advantage of numerous relaxation, balancing, and breathing techniques such as those discussed in Chapter 10.

If you are preparing to have surgery in the near future, you are also encountering significant physical as well as emotional stress. Rest, nutrition and social support are all very important. Also consider going to a health professional to learn self-hypnosis to help you prepare for the surgery. This can reduce pre-operative anxiety, reduce pain during surgery, reduce the amount of pain medications needed, and accelerate recovery time after surgery. Learn more about hypnosis and visualization techniques in Chapter 10.

If you are undergoing radiation therapy as part of cancer treatment, you are encountering significant physical and emotional stress. Sufficient rest, lowered expectations for productivity, good social support, proper nutrition, and use of hypnosis and visualization skills are all very important and helpful here.

Time Management

Lack of time management during the workday can lead to increased physical and emotional stress. Working longer than 40 hours per week can lead to increased manifestations of physical stress. Try to keep the extra work hours to a minimum. If there are constant demands for you to work additional hours, it may be time to consider other employment if at all possible. Meanwhile, make sure you utilize several of the stress management techniques we have been discussing here.

Utilize mini-breaks: make sure that at least once per hour you stand up, take 2 or 3 slow deep breaths, and stretch. Scan your body for any areas of tension, and breathe through those areas slowly and deeply.

Also, take your lunch break every day, which means leaving your desk or cubicle, go and eat lunch, and take the full time allotted for your lunch break. Your body will thank you, and you will return to work a little more refreshed and alert.

Michelle worked as a senior manager for a large corporation in the Twin Cities. She had over 20 employees working for her. She regularly put in 55 – 60 hour weeks at her job, and would regularly work nights and weekend days. She almost always skipped lunch or ate at her desk

while she kept working. She experienced severe constipation and bloating that had lasted over 7 years. When we talked about her pacing and work schedule, she commented, “You don’t understand – I don’t have a choice. The culture at my company is to keep working regardless of how long it takes, until the job gets done.” I said to her, “I guess it’s a matter of how badly the bloating and pain bothers you.” Two months later, her symptoms had increased so much that the pain started to interfere with her ability to get work tasks done. She finally went to her supervisor and got permission to cut back to working a maximum of 35 hours per week, including no nights or weekend work. After she had been on this new schedule for about one month, she came back to clinic and exclaimed, “I can’t believe it. Having a schedule that’s less hectic, where I can catch my breath and work at a more rational pace has made a huge difference! My constipation is much improved, and the bloating is so much less intense now that there are days where I hardly even notice it!”

Sleep

Consistent, good quality sleep is essential for reducing physical stress and maintaining high levels of resilience. See Chapter 3 for extensive tips for ensuring good sleep patterns. Also refer to Chapter 10 for learning calming and balancing skills that will help you relax and sleep better.

Obesity and Physical Stress

If you are overweight or obese, you are automatically undergoing significant physical stress. You are also at risk for a number of chronic illnesses including cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, and diabetes. Work with your health professional to start a program of proper nutrition (see Chapter 4), exercise and stress management to lose weight. Be sure to get emotional support and consider a group program like Weight Watchers. This will provide structure, support, and will help you lose weight and maintain your progress more successfully.

III. Solutions for Emotional Stress

Everyone has occasional times when they feel blue, sad, sluggish, or disinterested. That’s normal. But if you find that you feel sad or blue on most days, and that you have generally decreased interest in daily activities, lowered sex drive, ongoing sleep and appetite disturbance, it may be more than situational stress. It may be depression, which can cause significant emotional and physical stress.

The solution: start by talking to a health professional, either your primary care physician or a mental health professional such as a clinical psychologist to get this assessed. Depression is very treatable, often with a combination of treatments including psychotherapy, exercise, nutritional changes, and occasionally antidepressant medication. Stress management techniques are crucial here, including proper rest, social support, and reduced expectations for work productivity. See Chapter 10 for important relaxation, centering, and balancing techniques. Also, depression often stems from difficulty recognizing and expressing difficult emotions such as anger, shame, or sadness. See Chapter 11 for useful skills to handle emotions more constructively.

We highly recommend two books by our colleague Henry Emmons, MD: *The Chemistry of Joy* and the *Chemistry of Calm*. <http://www.partnersinresilience.com/who-we-are/henry-emmons/>

Dealing with current or anticipated loss can cause significant emotional stress. The death of a loved one, loss of a significant other or close friend, and even friends or family relocating out of state can create these feelings of loss and stress. Additionally, uncertainty regarding the future of your job or an important friendship or love relationship causes heightened emotional stress. What to do? Learn to allow for expression of your grief through journal writing and talking to friends. Write an “unsent letter” to the person you might be losing, in order to express and clarify your difficult and confused feelings. Allow tears to arise when they come up. Don’t suppress them, as suppression of sadness or anger can turn temporary grief into longer-term depression. Consider seeking a mental health professional for psychotherapy or a support group. Be sure to maintain proper rest, nutrition, and exercise.

Katie, a 37-year-old office manager at a dental office, had struggled with anxiety for most of her adult life. She had generalized anxiety and occasional panic attacks. But what bothered her most was her daily struggle with severe abdominal cramps, indigestion, and diarrhea that forced her to go to the bathroom up to 8 times per day. As we reviewed her health inventory, I asked her about any previous history of depression and anxiety. At first she said, “I don’t see why that’s relevant. I’ve been to so many doctors who told me there’s nothing wrong with my digestive tract, and that all my problems were in my head. Don’t worry about whether I have a history of depression or anxiety – let’s just treat the real physical problem here, OK?” At the next appointment, I discussed with her how the brain and nervous system respond to emotional stress and cause changes in the communication channels between the brain and gut. Katie was curious. She said, “So you understand that I could have anxiety but that this isn’t the only thing causing my gut symptoms?” “Absolutely,” I replied. After that, Katie started to talk about how exhausting her daily anxiety and panic symptoms were. She admitted that the diarrhea and cramps increased in intensity on days when her anxiety was particularly bad. Together, we formulated a plan for her to treat her anxiety, with psychotherapy, journal writing, relaxation techniques, and nutritional changes. Two months later she came back in for follow up. ‘I didn’t want to admit that the anxiety bothered me because I was afraid that I would be written off as a ‘head case.’ Now I know anxiety is just one of several factors that affect my gut, and treating my anxiety has really helped reduce the overall stress on my body. The diarrhea and cramping is finally getting better!’

Whether the emotional stress manifests in the form of sleep disturbance, depression, prolonged grief, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalized anxiety or panic attacks, or just a sense of malaise or loss of enthusiasm for daily life, the following strategies are helpful:

Get support; be sure to talk to friends and family.

Seek professional advice from a mental health professional or your primary care physician to assess if you are dealing with a more significant emotional difficulty.

Seek out psychotherapy if the emotional stress is continual and does not abate.

Seek out your primary care physician or an integrative physician who may have nutritional and supplement recommendations

Get gentle, moderate, consistent aerobic physical exercise such as walking, jogging, biking, or swimming for at least 20 minutes, 3 times a week.

Get plenty of sleep. If sleep is difficult, learn proper sleep tips (Chapter 3) and relaxation/balancing techniques (Chapter 10)

Express your emotions in a journal. Write down simple statements regarding how you feel and what you need. (See Chapter 11 for tips on how to do this).

Solutions for Spiritual Stress

How you define who you are, and the meaning and purpose of your life is central to the health of your mind, body, and spirit. You experience spiritual stress when these definitions are challenged or unclear. The human spirit asks questions such as “Who am I?”, “What is my life about?” and “What is my purpose?” These questions tend to peak at times of significant life change, illness (such as chronic digestive distress), or loss, including the identity challenges of adolescence, mid-life, or later life. These questions can be triggered by the loss of health, loss of a child, or loss of a spouse or close friend.

Spiritual stress results from loss of connection to your true self, values and purpose. Taking time to reconnect with these aspects of your life reduces stress and supports a feeling of being connected to yourself and others.

Other suggestions for dealing with spiritual stress include:

Practice centering, quieting, and breathing techniques.

Strive to be curious about learning from all experiences, both good and bad.

Set inner intentions, such as the desire to be more peaceful, loving, kind, healthy, and patient.

Commit to a spiritual practice, whether a daily nature walk, meditation, prayer, qigong, or conversations with clergy.

IV. Solutions for Pharmaceutical Stress

As discussed before, many medications can cause stressful effects on the body and mind. Some medications interact with others in ways that are traumatic to the body. Many drugs have side effects that stress your system. Antibiotics, steroid medications, and other classes of drugs can tax your body, creating greater duress.

In these cases, it is important to team up with your primary care physician or find an integrative health professional who can partner with you to do a careful assessment of your current medications and supplements and determine whether pharmaceutical stress is depleting you. You can then work together to find alternatives for supporting your health without these pharmaceutical stressors.

V. Solutions for Dietary Stress

Dietary stress refers to all the ways that your body and mind can be taxed, burdened, or depleted because of nutritional factors. Excessive or insufficient nutrition, processed foods, partially hydrogenated oils, excessive caffeine and/or alcohol can all create dietary stress.

Solutions include:

Start with a food and symptoms diary, to get a good sense of your dietary status and how it relates to current digestive symptoms (See Chapter 4 for more details).

Partner with a nutritionist or an integrative physician who can help you assess whether you have problems with food reactivity or food allergies. They can also help you establish special

corrective diets such as an anti-inflammatory diet or elimination diet. (See Chapter 9 – Ecological Rebalancing for more details on this.)

Ensure that you eat 3 meals per day, (unless more numerous, smaller meals are deemed appropriate by your health professional)

Make sure you don't skip meals.

Strive for every meal to include a mix of protein, complex carbohydrates, and healthy fats.

Avoid or discontinue use of artificial sweeteners such as saccharin or aspartame (NutraSweet). These substances can be harmful and interfere with healthy digestion.

Find out how many calories you need per day for healthy functioning and strive to maintain this caloric total daily.

Plan your daily diet to include a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Avoid eating anything from a fast food restaurant or a vending machine.

If you are vegan or vegetarian and have bothersome symptoms, please read:

<http://www.minnesotamedicine.com/PastIssues/December2012/nutritionalassessment.aspx>