

EVALUATE YOUR STRESS SYMPTOMS

For each list, rate how often you experience each symptom. Use the following scale: never 1, seldom 2, often 3, daily 4. Then total your score for each symptom list.

Physical Symptoms

- _____ Indigestion
- _____ Shoulder tension
- _____ Headaches
- _____ Jaw clenching
- _____ Racing heartbeat
- _____ Changes in appetite
- _____ Cold, sweaty palms
- _____ Constipation or diarrhea

Total: _____

Psychological or Emotional Symptoms

- _____ Difficulty concentrating
- _____ Insomnia
- _____ Feeling nervous
- _____ Increased alcohol use
- _____ Feeling rushed
- _____ Feeling sad or hopeless
- _____ Forgetting important things
- _____ Increased use of TV or computer

Total: _____

Social Symptoms

- _____ Decreased interest in sex
- _____ Frequent arguments with partner
- _____ Feelings of hostility
- _____ Impatience with others
- _____ Lack of interest in socializing
- _____ Avoiding friends
- _____ Feeling jealousy
- _____ Withholding affection

Total: _____

For each group of symptoms, use the following score ranges as a general guide:

8–14: Stress is creating few problems for you in this area. That doesn't mean you don't perceive stress or need to learn to manage it. You may simply be in a relatively stable, comfortable time in your life. Use your results from the first exercise in this chapter to guide you to solutions that will help maintain your current low-stress state.

15–19: Stress is starting to show up in your body, mind, or relationships. It might not be serious now, but it will be helpful to learn some solutions to stress so you can get these symptoms, in their early stages, under control. This will help you avoid the health consequences of stress over time and add to your enjoyment of life.

20–25: Stress is becoming a problem for you. If you scored any group of symptoms in this range, you could be at risk for illness or relationship problems. Now is the time to start managing your stress. If you feel overwhelmed by the thought of doing this on your own, you might benefit from a visit to your primary care physician for a referral. It's time to start taking better care of yourself.

26–32: You are likely very aware that stress is a problem for you. You may be having health problems already. It's important that you make a new commitment to caring for your health and your relationships. A visit to your physician for a physical exam may be in order.

TRACK YOUR PRIMARY APPRAISALS

For this exercise, you'll need to carry your notebook with you for an entire day. Ideally, this would be a typical day in which you take care of your usual responsibilities. Begin the day by setting the intention to be aware of everything that bothers you for the whole day and to write it down in your notebook. Set this intention before you get out of bed—in fact, it's best to have the notebook on your nightstand so you can start recording as soon as something comes up.

You may discover that the parade of stressors begins in your mind as soon as you wake up in the morning, before your feet even hit the floor. If so, just go with it, and make a list of your worries or concerns on a blank page. Continue listing stressors as they arise throughout the day. Remember, they can be things that are actually happening or simply thoughts that cause you to feel uncomfortable, worried, or anxious. These are all potential stressors. It may surprise you to see how many of them you encounter in an average day.

Here's an example of what your entries may look like:

6:30 A.M. It's raining, and traffic is going to be slow.

6:32 A.M. I have a big presentation to make today, and I feel unprepared.

6:45 A.M. I feel fat and I don't have anything I like to wear.

7:30 A.M. I was right, the traffic is really bad this morning.

9:25 A.M. My computer has lost my presentation file! Disaster!

10:40 A.M. I found the file, but I was so frazzled I blew the presentation.

1:00 P.M. I wanted to have lunch with my husband, but he couldn't make it.

1:05 P.M. He's always too busy to eat lunch with me.

3:30 P.M. My boss told me that my presentation seemed choppy and disorganized.

5:00 P.M. There's heavy traffic on the way home, and I still need to grocery shop.

6:30 P.M. I had an argument with my husband about missing lunch with me.

8:00 P.M. Looking over the mail, the gas bill is twice what I expected.

Now, find some time as soon as possible after your observation day to sit down with your list. For each item on the list, answer two questions in your notebook:

1. What is at stake here? What can I lose or how can this harm me?
2. How likely is it that something bad will happen as a result of this event?

Chances are, for many of the potential stressors you encounter each day the actual threat to your well-being is not as great as it may have felt at the time.

With practice, you will learn to ask these two questions in the moment, as the stress is occurring. This way, you can stop your automatic stress responses before they happen.

WHAT KIND OF EATER ARE YOU?

This exercise will reveal how stress and eating are related for you. Rate how often each of these things happens in your life. Use the following scale:

never 1, seldom 2, sometimes 3, usually 4, all the time 5

- _____ 1. I tend to eat more when I feel anxious
- _____ 2. I try to avoid foods that are high in fat
- _____ 3. I never eat meat or poultry
- _____ 4. I eat very little during the day but find myself making up for it at night
- _____ 5. I eat more when I'm alone than when I'm with other people
- _____ 6. I tend to eat when I feel sad
- _____ 7. If I've had a bad day at work, I tend to eat more for dinner
- _____ 8. There are certain foods that I love but won't eat because they're fattening or unhealthy
- _____ 9. When I get frustrated, I eat more
- _____ 10. I have trouble eating only one cookie
- _____ 11. I feel embarrassed after I eat certain foods
- _____ 12. When I'm anxious, I eat a lot of food without even realizing it
- _____ 13. I am on a diet
- _____ 14. When I'm upset, certain foods make me feel better

Add up your scores for items 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 11, and 13. This is your *restrictive eating score*.

Now, add up your scores for items 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12, and 14. This is your *emotional eating score*.

If your **emotional eating score** is 24 or higher, you may be using food to soothe yourself when you're feeling stressed. This type of eating can be part of a dangerous cycle, because emotional eaters tend to eat unhealthy comfort foods during times of stress, increasing the body's stress level.

If your **restrictive eating score** is 24 or higher, you may be creating more stress in your life by placing difficult restrictions on your eating behavior. You may be someone who diets frequently and avoids entire food groups, thus depriving yourself of vital nutrients. The psychological impact of rigid or restrictive eating patterns is big—it sets you up for bingeing, stress-related eating, and weight fluctuations. These things only make your life more stressful.

DOES LIFE HAVE MEANING?

In their study of college undergraduates, Nathan Mascaró and David Rosen sought links between spirituality, stress, and depression. The questionnaire they used is reproduced here, with the authors' permission, so you can assess your sense of spiritual meaning. For each item, circle the number that corresponds with the degree to which you agree with the statement.

There is no particular reason why I exist.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

We are meant to make our own special contribution to the world.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

I was meant to actualize my potentials.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

Life is inherently meaningful.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

I will never have a spiritual bond with anyone.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

When I look deep within my heart, I see a life I am compelled to pursue.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

My life is meaningful.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

In performing certain tasks, I can feel something higher or transcendent working through me.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

Our flawed and often horrific behavior indicates that there is little or no meaning inherent in our existence.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

I find meaning even in my mistakes and sins.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

I see a special purpose for myself in this world.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

There are certain activities, jobs, or services to which I feel called.

I totally disagree				I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1

There is no reason or meaning underlying human existence.

I totally disagree					I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1	

Something purposeful is at the heart of this world.

I totally disagree					I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1	

We are all participating in something larger and greater than any of us.

I totally disagree					I totally agree
5	4	3	2	1	

Now, add up the number values of your responses to get your score. The average score in the study by Mascaro and Rosen was 63. When people scored above 63, they showed more resiliency in the face of stress in that they had fewer symptoms of depression in response to daily stressors. People who scored at 52 or less tended to develop depressive symptoms more easily as the stress in their lives increased.