

## The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

### Too Much Stress Can Mean Major Health Issues

from the American Counseling Association

In today's busy world, stress is something we all face to some extent, yet most of us have little understanding of what stress is or of the problems it can cause.

Stress is actually a combination of two separate things. The first is the "stressor," the situation that triggers the physical and emotional reactions that we feel. It might be a family problem, a money issue or just that traffic jam on our way to work.

The second part of stress is our "stress response." This is our body and mind's natural response to a stressor, including increases in our breathing, heart rate, alertness and muscle response. It's a reaction inherited from our ancient ancestors. For them, survival meant reacting quickly to threats they encountered, what we call the "fight or flight" response.

Back then, if the stress source was a wild animal or other life-threatening situation, that was a good reaction. But today's problems are seldom so immediate or quickly resolved. Instead, we often face prolonged or repeated stress over which we have little or no control.

For many of us, repeatedly facing stressful situations can leave us feeling constantly nervous or exhausted, and can result in very real physical and emotional ailments.

It shouldn't be hard to recognize when stress is negatively affecting your life. The warning signs can include changes in both behavior and physical well-being.

Stress-related behavioral changes might include sudden anger or impatience over relatively minor things. You might find yourself unable to relax, anxious almost all the time, sleeping poorly and experiencing sexual problems. Major changes in eating, whether no appetite or constantly overeating, are also common reactions. Excessive stress can make it difficult to make decisions or set priorities. You may make more mistakes or become accident-prone.

Physical ailments, such as frequent headaches and neck or back pain, can also be stress-related symptoms. You might find yourself suffering from frequent indigestion, diarrhea or constipation. Shortness of breath, heart palpitations, or skin problems like acne or psoriasis can also occur.

Excessive stress is not a problem to be ignored. It has been linked to a variety of serious health and emotional issues. If you find yourself facing high levels of stress that are affecting your health or overall quality of life, seek help. Your family physician or a professional counselor can offer assistance to help reduce or cope with unhealthy stress in your life.

*"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to [ACAcorner@counseling.org](mailto:ACAcorner@counseling.org) or visit the ACA website at [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org)*

###