

- What are Mental Disorders?
- What is Addiction?
- Depression
- Bipolar Disorder
- Postpartum Depression
- Seasonal Affective Disorder
- Anxiety Disorders
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Eating Disorders and Body Image
- Alzheimer's Disease and Other Forms of Dementia
- Concurrent Disorders: Mental Disorders and Substance Use Problems
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- Tobacco
- Suicide: Following the Warning Signs
- Treatments for Mental Disorders
- Alternative Treatments for Mental Disorders
- Treatments for Addictions
- Recovery from Mental Disorders
- Addictions and Relapse Prevention
- Harm Reduction
- Preventing Addictions
- Achieving Positive Mental Health
- ▶ Stress
- Mental Disorders and Addictions in the Workplace
- Seniors' Mental Health and Addictions Issues
- Children, Youth and Mental Disorders
- Youth and Substance Use
- Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Mental Health Issue
- Stigma and Discrimination Around Mental Disorders and Addictions
- Cross Cultural Mental Health and Addictions Issues
- Unemployment, Mental Health and Substance Use
- Housing
- Economic Costs of Mental Disorders and Addictions
- Personal Costs of Mental Disorders and Addictions
- The Question of Violence
- Coping with Mental Health Crises and Emergencies
- What Families and Friends Can Do to Help
- Getting Help for Mental Disorders
- Getting Help for Substance Use Problems

# Stress

**S**tress: we all know what it can feel like. In 2005, close to a quarter of British Columbians indicated that they had “quite a lot” of life stress; around two-thirds had “some stress.” It’s an everyday part of life and part of what makes us human. But what exactly *is* stress, and what can we do about it?

Stress is a physiological response of the body to any demand being placed upon it at any given time. These demands can come from inside the body (feelings, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs) or from somewhere in the environment (exposure to heat/cold, noise, someone yelling at you). When you deem a situation to be threatening, your brain releases hormones and chemicals that send alarm signals throughout your body so that it can prepare to take action. This adrenaline-pumping response results in increased perspiration, rapid breathing, increased heart rate, muscle tension, and sensory alertness. It’s this “fight or flight” stress response that enabled our human ancestors to survive when face to face with a sabre-toothed tiger. Unfortunately, most of our modern “dangers” like workloads or family conflict are not situations we can easily fight with our fists or run away from.

It’s actually quite important for us to have some stress in our lives; in healthy doses, stress can make us feel challenged, motivated and invigorated. When people are routinely understressed, they feel bored, and this can lead to depression. However, if what is supposed to be a short-term bodily coping mechanism continues over a long period of time, the reaction does more harm than good and can compromise a person’s physical and mental well-being.

Statistics Canada has found that women are more likely to report stress than men. They also found that men and women report reacting to different kinds of stress. Women tend to react more to chronic stressors like time constraints, meeting others’ expectations, marital relationships, children, and family health. Men, on the other hand, are more affected by work-related stressors like a change in job, demotion, pay cut, and financial difficulties.

Disturbingly, adults aren’t the only ones stress can impact. The Toronto-based Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health argues that parents pass their stress on to their young children like “second-hand smoke.”

The consequences of stress on the body are wide-reaching. Signs of stress can include digestive upsets or ulcers, migraines, lower sex drive, restlessness or fatigue, frequent colds, or muscle aches. One study monitored 10,000 participants over the course of 14 years, and found that increased work stress was linked to



higher chances of developing symptoms of poor metabolic health—including obesity, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol—leading to heart disease or type 2 diabetes. Men who are highly stressed are twice as likely to suffer symptoms than men who are not; stressed-out women, alarmingly, are five times as likely.

In fact, stress can be deadly for older women, studies show—it has been found to be a predic-

## Workplace Stress: Top 10

1. Too much or too little to do. The feeling of not contributing and lacking control.
2. Lack of two-way communication up and down.
3. Being unappreciated.
4. Inconsistent performance management processes. Employees get raises but no reviews, or get positive evaluation but are laid off afterward.
5. Career and job ambiguity. Things happen without the employee knowing why.
6. Unclear company direction and policies.
7. Mistrust. Vicious office politics disrupt positive behaviour.
8. Doubt. Employees are not sure what is happening, where things are headed.
9. Random interruptions.
10. The treadmill syndrome: Too much to do at once, requiring the 24-hour work day.



tor of death among women 65 and older. Both psychological distress and financial stress play a role.

Sleeplessness is another problem for stressed-out individuals. Insomnia is reported by nearly one in four Canadians who experience high levels of life stress. In someone who is already vulnerable, stress can also be a trigger for most mental disorders, depression and anxiety being the most common.

If a person continues to be stressed for a long period of time, signs of this can often be seen in their lifestyle as well. For example, they may develop unhealthy coping strategies, like an increase in drug, alcohol or tobacco use; dependence on caffeine to get through the day; or preoccupation with food. They may also feel isolated from others, feel angry and irritable all the time, worry constantly, become apathetic or unenergetic, and develop depression. Stress can be serious; one in six Canadians admit there's been a time in their life when they've been under so much stress they've wanted to

people, and frustrating office machines heighten the general atmosphere of stress.

A national Ipsos-Reid survey found that four in 10 British Columbians listed work and finances as their primary sources of stress. Another national poll found that around one in three late work as "quite a bit" or "extremely" stressful. Although stress is a normal part of the workplace environment and can provide us with energy, motivation and challenges to make our jobs fulfilling, the danger of a chronically overstressed workplace is a very real one.

There are many factors that can contribute to workplace stress. A person's relationships with their supervisors, colleagues, and clients matter a lot in determining their comfort level within the organization. Physical workspace, workload, deadlines, decision-making power, degree and clarity of responsibility, organizational climate, and communication methods are some other things to keep in mind when thinking about on-the-job stressors. The conflict many people feel balancing work and home life is another major

take their own life.

Stress can come from both the good and the bad: getting married, moving, changing jobs, getting divorced, having a baby, or coping with the death of a loved one. Things that often cause a person to worry can be major stressors too. For instance, frequently worrying about how to pay the mortgage or the rent, or how to get through a long-term illness can be very stressful. The day-to-day hassles of living, like traffic jams, rude

## Partners:

Anxiety Disorders  
Association of  
British Columbia

British Columbia  
Schizophrenia  
Society

Canadian Mental  
Health Association,  
BC Division

Centre for  
Addictions  
Research of BC

FORCE Society for  
Kids' Mental  
Health Care

Jessie's Hope Society

Mood Disorders  
Association of BC

## Tackling Burnout

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines burnout as "a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by unrealistically high aspirations and illusory and impossible goals." With the increasingly fast-paced and resource-strapped environment of workplaces today, the risk of employee burnout is increasing as well.

### Symptoms can include:

- Physical signs (e.g. fatigue, sleep problems, loss of sexual drive)
- Emotional symptoms (e.g. feeling helpless, hopeless, irritable, depressed)
- Behavioural signs (e.g. aggression, substance abuse, callousness)
- Work-related signs (e.g. absenteeism, mistakes, inefficiency, theft, being late often)
- Interpersonal symptoms (e.g. withdrawal from clients or co-workers, cynicism and inability to focus)

### Here are some tips on recovering from burnout:

- Be realistic
- Talk about your feelings
- Make sure your goals and aspirations are your own, and not someone else's
- Create balance
- Seek the guidance of a professional

**For more  
information call  
the Mental Health  
Information Line  
toll-free in BC at  
1-800-661-2121**

**or email  
bcpartners@  
heretohelp.bc.ca**

**web:  
heretohelp.bc.ca**

## The Evolution of Work-Life Imbalance

- The average work week has increased from 42 to 45 hours per week over the past decade.
- 40% of employees work more than 50 hours per week, compared to 25% in 1990.
- Canadians spend only about 17 hours a week in non-work-related activities.
- 52% of employees take work home with them, up from 31% in 1990.
- 18% of employees now take unpaid 'catch-up' work home with them.
- 59% of employees check their voicemail after hours, 30% accept work-related faxes at home, and 29% keep their cellphones on.
- 81% of white-collar employees accept business calls after hours; 65% check their email from home. 46% consider this work-related contact to be an intrusion on their lives.
- 44% of Canadians working for large companies report negative spillover from work to family.
- An estimated 28% of working Canadians feel that family and friends resent the number of hours they spend working.

Source: Warren Shepell

contributor and has increased markedly over the past decade according to a study by the Canadian Policy Research Networks. The attitude of the organization to its employees, and the kinds of flexible supports it offers—or doesn't offer—can either ease stress, or increase it.

Because stress can be so dangerous and debilitating, it's important for us to learn how to deal effectively with it as it occurs, and ideally, prevent or reduce its occurrence in the first place.

Often, the first thing a person can do is to identify their problems. Once you know what produces stress for you, you can move towards thinking about your options, and finding active solutions that can reduce your stress level. Whether it's your workplace, career or educational path, relationships, finances, health, or home life, thinking about what you can do, what the consequences will be, and which path you want to decide on can be a difficult soul-searching process, but it is probably a better long-term way of reducing stress in your life. Sometimes, even small changes can have a lot of impact, whether it's checking your work email only once a day or delegating meal preparation to different people in your household.

There are also things you can do in the short term to reduce your stress level. The point is

finding the healthy approach that works for you. For many people, talking about their problems with someone they trust is a good way to vent and release tension. Problems often sound more manageable when you speak them aloud, and the listener may even be able to offer you a different perspective and possible solutions. Many workplaces also offer Employee Assistance Programs for employees and their families to access for short-term counselling with trained professionals.

Since we're usually unable to prevent, reduce or even predict all of our stressors, management of our physical and emotional stress response is a crucial skill. Exercise, prayer or other spiritual ritual, eating and sleeping well are all different ways to take care of yourself, gain perspective and help reduce stress. In a Western culture that's a slave to the clock and to being "productive" all the time, it can be difficult but liberating to say 'no' and take a break—whether it's a vacation, a lunch or walk break, or a babysitter watching the kids one night a week. Although twenty-first-century life can be daunting, equipping ourselves with a critical view to the sources of our stress, a positive attitude and healthy stress-relieving techniques that rejuvenate us may be the most useful skill to learn in our lifetimes.

## Stress Stoppers

**Stretch.** Take a minute to gently and slowly move your head from front to back, side to side, and in a full circle. For your jaw, stretch your mouth open and slowly move your lower jaw from side to side and front to back.

**Set a SMART goal.** Unrealistic goals that never seem to be reached add to your stress level. Try setting one goal for yourself this week using the SMART approach: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Rewarded, Time-limited.

**Have a comedy break.** Set aside some time for laughter, your body's natural stress-release mechanism. Rent your favourite comedy video. Tape a TV show that you know makes you laugh and keep it on hand for stress emergencies. Go to the library and borrow a book by an author who can make you laugh. Read the daily comics in the newspaper. Or, phone the funniest person you know!

**Take a walk.** Instead of sitting down for another cup of stress-inducing caffeine on your coffee break, lunch hour or when you're at home... try going for a stress-relieving and energizing walk. If you don't like walking by yourself, try forming a walking club with two or three of your co-workers or friends.

Source: Canadian Mental Health Association



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