

# What is Stress?

STUDENT HANDOUT: LESSON 3.1

## What Is Stress?

Firstly, let's debunk one myth: stress is not necessarily a 'bad' thing. Without this brilliant ability to feel stress, humankind wouldn't have survived. Our prehistoric ancestors, for example, used the onset of stress to alert them to a potential danger, such as a sabre-toothed tiger.

Stress is primarily a physical response. When stressed, the body thinks it is under attack and switches to 'fight or flight' mode, releasing a complex mix of hormones and chemicals such as adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine to prepare the body for physical action. This causes a number of reactions, from blood being diverted to muscles to shutting down unnecessary bodily functions such as digestion.

Through the release of hormones such as adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine, our prehistoric ancestors gained a rush of energy, which prepared them to either fight the tiger or run away. That heart pounding, fast breathing sensation is the adrenaline; as well as a boost of energy, it enables us to focus our attention so we can quickly respond to the situation.

In the modern world, the 'fight or flight' mode can still help us survive dangerous situations, such as reacting swiftly to a person running in front of our car by slamming on the brakes.

The challenge is when our body goes into a state of stress in inappropriate situations. When blood flow is going only to the most important muscles needed to fight or flee, brain function is minimized. This can lead to an inability to 'think straight'; a state that is a great hindrance in both our work and home lives. If we are kept in a state of stress for long periods, it can be detrimental to our health. The results of having elevated cortisol levels can be an increase in sugar and blood pressure levels.

Modified from: <http://www.stress.org.uk/what-is-stress/>

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ASSESSMENT PAGE: LESSON 3.1

Name:

Date:

1. Why can stress be a problem for your health?
2. What will you do to personally cope with stress in your life?