



# Stress, physical health, and the benefits of becoming more aware

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“Feeling stressed”. What does it really mean? We live in times where technology is making our lives easier and more comfortable, with a wealth of knowledge at our fingertips, and scientific discoveries and changes happening at a rapid pace. An exciting period of development, on one hand, yet there is increasing pressure and growing discontent, unhappiness, conflict, and suffering in our inner lives.

## What is stress and how does it affect our physical health?

Hans Selye [1], who has studied stress for several decades, defines it as “a nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it”. Any distress is experienced in the body and each body is unique, therefore the response of a body to stress is also unique. The experience of stress has two dimensions: subjective feeling and an objective physiological event in the body.

A study in the USA, published in 1981 [2], reported a high prevalence of stress among people attending primary care, with 60%–90% of visits having a stress-related component. Irrespective of the source of stress, it is important to recognise that body and mind are part of one, intimately connected system. Thoughts and emotions have profound effects on the body, and when the body is unwell it deeply impacts us emotionally.

We feel all emotions as sensations in our bodies: from a tight chest when we are angry, to butterflies in the stomach when we are scared, or a warm feeling that breaks out as a smile when we feel love or experience something beautiful. The survival and safety mechanism – the ‘fight or flight’ response – that we share with animals is triggered whenever we experience acute stress or danger. However, when we live in this state of stress for an extended period, it has no survival advantage. Instead, we develop myriad unconscious ways to suppress, ignore, and dissociate from our

emotions, which can lead to a chronic state of unease in our bodies. A state of persistent stress means a state of internal imbalance, which makes us vulnerable to a long list of diseases: several studies have demonstrated

a close link between long-term stress and autoimmune, cardiovascular, and neurological disorders. [3] It is perhaps common sense, to think that if the body is under prolonged pressure, its functioning will be compromised. Therefore, a lack of ‘ease’ in the body potentially leads to ‘dis-ease’.

## Protecting your physical health from the impact of everyday stress/distress

### Step 1: Becoming aware

Hippocrates considered health to be a “natural state” that we could lose through forsaking a balanced lifestyle. Developing our emotional well-being, resilience, and competence helps protect us from the risk of prolonged stress and maintain the all-important balance that promotes our natural ability to deal with everyday stress. Awareness and understanding of this dynamic is essential if we are to take responsibility for our health and well-being.

**Emotions:** Humans live primarily by feeling; emotional reactions are central to how we process information, make decisions, and create meaning from our experiences. We can dramatically improve our emotional health and resilience, and therefore our physical and psychological health, if we can listen to and regulate our emotions, and see them as important as brushing our teeth.

**Thoughts:** We have habitual thoughts and beliefs, which are like software programmes, running in the background. They are often products of our experiences: our childhood, culture, and society; we are often unaware of them, and they can be inaccurate and potentially harmful to ourselves and others. Taking time to become aware, we can declutter our minds, develop more clarity, and think consciously rather than habitually.

### Step 2: Taking action through simple exercises for everyday life

**1. Spending regular quiet time alone to reflect:** Sit quietly and pay attention. Listen

to your emotions, thoughts, and your body in a non-judgemental and compassionate way. Thoughts and emotions come and go like clouds, changing shape and colour – they always pass, even if they are painful. There is no such thing as a good or bad emotion, they are our unique reactions.

- 2. Doing ‘nothing’:** Stop whatever you are doing for five minutes, at least three times a day. Sit down and take three full, deep, conscious breaths in and out through your nose; the breaths out should be slower and more deliberate. Sit still and observe the flow of your breath – it happens effortlessly – without analysing, judging, or altering it. Notice the details, rhythm, body movements, and sensations created by the steady flow of breath in and out of your body. Notice your marvellous ability to observe and do nothing.
- 3. Mindfulness exercise:** Thich Nhat Hanh, the poet and Zen master, recommends reciting this poem from time to time [4]:

Breathing in, I calm my body.  
Breathing out, I smile.  
Dwelling in the present moment.  
I know this is a wonderful moment.

We know that every cell in the body is connected to every other cell and to the mind. Listening mindfully to our inner world, we release toxicity that interferes with our natural healing ability and nourish ourselves. Investing in our well-being involves consciously cultivating and nurturing attitudes such as gratitude, compassion, acceptance, and kindness towards ourselves first, which enables us to extend these to others and the world around us.

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