

How to tell stress from anxiety

Stress and anxiety are both a part of the body's natural fight or flight response. When someone feels under threat, their body releases stress hormones.

Stress hormones cause the heart to beat faster, resulting in more blood pumping to the organs and limbs.

This response allows a person to be ready to either fight or run away. They also breathe faster, and their [blood pressure](#) goes up.

At the same time, a person's senses become sharper, and their body releases nutrients into the blood to ensure all parts have the energy they need.

This process happens really quickly, and experts call it stress. Anxiety is the body's response to that stress.

Many people will recognise anxiety as the feeling of distress, unease, or dread that someone has before a significant event. It keeps them alert and aware.

The fight or flight response can kick in when someone faces a physical or emotional, real or perceived threat. While it can be useful, for some people, it can interfere with everyday life.

Symptoms

There are many similarities between the symptoms of stress and anxiety. When someone is stressed, they may experience:

- faster heartbeat
- faster breathing
- anxious thoughts
- moodiness, irritability, or anger
- general unhappiness
- a feeling of being overwhelmed
- loneliness
- nausea
- dizziness
- [diarrhea](#) or [constipation](#)

When someone is anxious, they might experience:

- faster heartbeat

- faster breathing
- a feeling of unease or dread
- sweating
- diarrhoea or constipation
- nervousness
- tenseness
- restlessness

How to tell stress from anxiety

Stress and anxiety are part of the same bodily reaction and have similar symptoms. That means it can be hard to tell them apart.

Stress tends to be short term and in response to a recognised threat. Anxiety can linger and can sometimes seem as if nothing is triggering it

Treatment and management

People can treat or manage stress and anxiety in several ways,

including:

Relaxation strategies

Relaxation strategies can help people to cope with stress and anxiety. They include:

- breathing exercises
- focusing on a soothing word, such as ‘peace’ or ‘calm’
- visualising a tranquil scene, such as a beach or meadow
- practicing [yoga](#)
- practicing ta chi
- slowly counting to 10

Exercise

Physical activity can help people to combat stressful situations. This might be a brisk walk, a cycle, or a run. The fluid movements of activities such as yoga and qi gong can also help people to feel calm.

Talking about it

Talking about their worries, whether face-to-face, over the phone, or via the internet, can help people to ease stress. People might choose to chat with a friend, partner, family

member, or co-worker if it is someone they trust.

The [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#) advise that people look after their mind and body and take action when they can.

People can:

- accept that they cannot control everything
- settle for their best rather than aim for perfection
- learn what triggers their stress and anxiety
- limit caffeine and alcohol
- eat well balanced meals
- get enough sleep
- exercise every day

Can one turn into the other?

Sometimes, stress can develop into anxiety. Stress is the body's reaction to a threat, and anxiety is the body's reaction to stress.

When to see a doctor

Stress and anxiety are not always a bad thing. They are natural, short-term reactions that people need to stay safe.

If someone starts to feel stressed or anxious all or a lot of the time, they should speak to a doctor. They may be suffering from [chronic stress](#) or an anxiety disorder.

Warning signs to look out for include:

- excessive anxiety that interferes with everyday life
- misusing drugs or alcohol to deal with stress or anxiety
- irrational fears
- a significant change in sleeping habits
- a significant change in eating habits
- a significant change in personal hygiene habits
- a prolonged low mood
- self-harming or thinking about self-harming
- [suicidal thoughts](#)
- feeling out of control

Summary

Stress and anxiety are perfectly normal human reactions to

threatening or worrying situations. They are part of the fight or flight response that keeps us safe by preparing the body to deal with danger.

Stress is the body's reaction to a threat, whereas anxiety is the body's reaction to the stress.

People can manage their stress and anxiety with relaxation techniques, such as breathing exercises, physical activity, and talking about their worries.

Sometimes, stress and anxiety can overwhelm people. When this happens, it can lead to chronic stress or an anxiety disorder. Anyone who finds stress or anxiety is interfering with their everyday life may wish to speak to a doctor.