

TOP TIP #5

Stress: See the signs, know the symptoms.

Stress is a natural part of being a human and can be associated with both positive and negative experiences. By nature, sport has a paradoxical relationship with stress. Sport creates an environment that amplifies both physical and psychological stress, as the goal of any competitive sport is to determine winners and losers. At the same time, the unpredictability of sport outcomes is exciting and exhilarating, and part of why sport is appealing and fun.

Sport also places the body purposefully under physiological stress, with a goal to push its boundaries for performance gains. Being an athlete is also stressful cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally, and socially.

While short-term stress is good, long-term stress can lead to mental health problems. An imbalance between stress and recovery can also lead to other negative consequences such as overreaching, overtraining, burnout, illness, or injury. Parents play an important role in recognizing signs and symptoms of stress.

HELPFUL DEFINITION:

Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation. Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives. (World Health Organization, 2022)

SCIENCE FACT:

A meta-analysis has confirmed that an athlete's psychophysiological response to stress and history of stressors are positively associated with injury incidence rates. (Ivarsson et al., 2017)



Typical Signs and Symptoms of Stress:

(adapted from CMHS (Rev. Ed., 2000))

Physical Responses:

- Racing pulse and rapid breathing
- Increased blood pressure
- Upset stomach, nausea, diarrhea, uneasy feeling in your stomach
- Increased or decreased appetite which may be accompanied by weight loss or gain
- Sweating or chills
- Sweaty and cold hands
- Trembling hands, knees, lips, and voice
- Tremors or muscle twitching
- Muffled hearing
- Tunnel vision or other vision changes
- Feeling uncoordinated
- Headaches
- Sore or aching muscles
- Light sensitive vision
- Lower back pain
- Dry mouth and feeling a "lump in the throat"
- Easily startled
- Fatigue that does not improve with sleep
- Menstrual cycle changes
- Decreased resistance to colds, flu, infections
- Flare up of allergies or asthma
- Hair loss

Behavioral Responses:

- Decreased efficiency and effectiveness
- Difficulty communicating
- Increased sense of humor/gallows humor
- Irritability, outbursts of anger, frequent arguments
- Inability to rest, relax, or let down
- Change in eating habits
- Change in sleep patterns
- Change in performance
- Change in school work (missing assignments, getting poor grades)
- Periods of crying
- Increased use of stimulants such as sugar or caffeine
- Hyper-vigilance of the surrounding environment
- Avoidance of activities or places that trigger memories
- Accident prone
- Change in social media use
- Change in shopping habits

Typical Signs and Symptoms of Stress (cont.)

Emotional Responses:

- Denial
- Anxiety or fear
- Worry about safety of self or others
- Irritability or anger
- Restlessness
- Sadness, moodiness, grief, or depression
- Vivid or distressing dreams
- Guilt or "survivor guilt"
- Feeling overwhelmed, helpless or hopeless
- Feeling isolated, lost, lonely or abandoned
- Apathy
- Feeling misunderstood or unappreciated

Cognitive Responses:

- Memory problems/forgetfulness
- Disorientation
- Confusion
- Slowness in thinking, analyzing, or comprehending
- Difficulty calculating, setting priorities or making decisions
- Difficulty Concentrating
- Limited attention span
- Loss of objectivity
- Inability to stop thinking about the stress

Social Responses:

- Withdrawing or isolating from people
- Difficulty listening
- Difficulty sharing ideas
- Difficulty engaging in mutual problem solving
- Blaming
- Criticizing
- Intolerance of group process
- Difficulty in giving or accepting support or help
- Impatient with or disrespectful to others

