



Is it Stress or Anxiety?

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Am I stressed? Or am I experiencing anxiety? There is a fine line between stress and anxiety, with similar symptoms experienced. Both can lead to irritability, a lack of focus, increased heart rate, fatigue, headaches, loss of sleep, and excessive worry. Stress and anxiety are your body's natural 'flight or fight' response to danger, ensuring we are alert, focused, and ready to respond to the perceived threat.

Despite the similarities, they have different origins; determining which one you're experiencing is important to ensure effective management.

Differences Between Stress and Anxiety

Stress is generally in response to an external cause or recognised threat, such as a work deadline or an argument with a loved one. It is generally a short-term experience, and the release of the stress hormone could lead to positive outcomes, such as pushing you to completing the work deadline on time. However, it can also lead to negative outcomes, such as poor concentration, insomnia, and an inability to perform tasks.

As stress is a response to a threat or external event, it typically subsides once the situation has been resolved. Stress can continue long-term with prolonged and ongoing stressors, such as discrimination in the workplace, chronic illness, or hardships such as debt.

Anxiety is persistent and doesn't go away, even in the absence of a stressor. Anxiety's origin is internal and can be triggered by stress. Anxiety can continue for a long time and cause significant impairment in our social and occupational areas of functioning, as well as others. Anxiety is often out of proportion to the actual likelihood or impact of the event/s and can be accompanied by intense uncontrollable worry, panic attacks, restlessness, exaggerated startle responses, and avoidance of real or perceived anxiety-provoking situations.

Numerous factors may increase the risk of the development of an anxiety condition, such as a genetic predisposition, personality, stress, trauma, substance abuse, mental health conditions, or medical problems.

Coping with Stress

There are several strategies to treat or manage stress; however, not all will work all the time. It is important to have multiple stress reduction strategies to implement when stress kicks in.

- **Relaxation Strategies:** including breathing exercises, meditation, yoga, visualisation, and muscle relaxation techniques
- **Exercise:** physical activity can help manage stressful situations as well as improve sleep
- **Journal Writing and Creative Activities:** writing down your thoughts and daily events can help you navigate obstacles and overcome challenges. Creative activities such as colouring, drawing, or painting can give your mind a chance to relax.

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Coping with Anxiety

Psychological treatment has been found to be very effective in the treatment of anxiety, often in combination with other treatments, such as medication and lifestyle changes, including diet, exercise, and sleep.

Other ways that may help you cope with anxiety include:

- **Thought Management:** thought management exercises are useful when you are troubled by ongoing or recurring distressing thoughts. This could include distraction or imagery
- **Identify Trigger Factors:** identifying trigger situations can be helpful to identify any worrying thoughts, symptoms of anxiety, and your typical responses
- **Lifestyle Changes:** daily exercise, good sleep hygiene, eating a healthy balanced diet, and reducing caffeine and alcohol intake can all help decrease symptoms of anxiety.

Final Words

Everyone experiences periods of increased stress, and anxiety conditions are common; however, chronic stress can have a negative impact on both our mental and physical health.

Stress is a common trigger for anxiety, so it's important to manage your stress and anxiety symptoms early. When the stress no longer feels manageable, is interfering with your daily living, and is persistent over a long period of time, it is important to seek help from a professional to gain additional coping tools.



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