

# WHAT IS STRESS?

## Introduction

What “Stress Toolkit” would be complete without a definition of what stress really is? People often consider stress to be a universally ‘bad’ thing. The fact of the matter is that we experience stress every day in some fashion or another, and it is often of a positive, perhaps even motivating sort; this is referred to as “**eustress**.” Who amongst us hasn’t had the experience of sitting down to take an exam and feeling a bit stressed, or ‘jittery?’ In cases like that, where the stress is both managed and manageable, it can serve a positive function, energizing and motivating us in such a way so that our concentration and mental acuity is sharpened. It has been consistently demonstrated that there is a curvilinear relationship between stress and performance: this is referred to as the *Yerkes-Dobson Principle*. As stress goes up, performance improves – but only to a certain point, after which increased (or sustained) levels of stress result in poorer performance, negative appraisal of the situation, and **distress**.

On the other hand, stress can most certainly be experienced as negative; such **distress** occurs when we feel or conclude that life’s demands are beyond our control. Stress results from stressors, which themselves can be either internal or external.



**External sources of stress** can include (but of course are not limited to) demands from the outside (such as work and family); major change (for example, an organizational restructuring); illness of any kind; and environmental factors such as noise.

**Internal stressors**, on the other hand, include negative thoughts; unrealistically high expectations for ourselves (or for others); and perfectionism.

Let’s get back to the definition of stress, given what we now know about eustress, distress, and the sources of stress. Essentially, *stress can be understood as our physical, emotional, and mental reactions (positive or negative) to the demands and challenges of daily living.*

There are many indicators of stress, some of which are listed below. Please note that I didn’t use the words “symptoms” or “signs,” which would suggest that stress is an illness; given what you have just read, we hope that you’ll agree that stress is a state, rather than a disease.

- Irritability and mood swings
- Muscle tension and headaches
- Frequent illnesses (colds, stomach difficulty concentrating or organizing aches)
- Eating too much, or too little
- Increased use of alcohol, sleep
- Feeling a lack of purpose or enjoyment
- Medication, cigarettes, and other drugs
- Persistent fatigue, and difficulty sleeping

Perhaps you are wondering how your perceived stress levels compare to others’. In order to help you make a rough comparison, we have included a link to the **Perceived Stress Scale**:

<http://www.roadtowellbeing.ca/questionnaires/perceived-stress.html>

Once you’re done, return to the toolkit to continue to develop your own plan.

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