



# EAP Educates: Stressed Out (What Stress Looks Like)

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Stress, the way we experience it, what causes it within each of us, and our individual response to stress is unique for everyone. There are many things that can cause us to feel stressed, and depending on our situation in life at the time, our response to that stress can vary quite radically. The stress response is the body's way of coping with emotional, mental and physical strain, and the way it manifests depends on factors such as age, health status, type of stressor, duration of exposure, genetics, early childhood experience, nutritional status, alcohol, drugs, medication, social support and our beliefs and belief structure.

It is important to note that if your mind and body are under excessive stress all of the time, you may face serious health problems. Some people are very underweight, others very overweight; some are vigilant and anxious, others lethargic and subdued. Some physical illnesses develop because excessive stress can compromise the immune system opening each of us up to attack at a physical level. Some physical symptoms of stress occur repeatedly with people who experience long term chronic stress.

## **Stress and your skin**

Stress can cause skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis. A correlation has been found between stress and acne too. A field of study known as psychodermatology has come about with the realisation that there is a very close correlation between your brain and your skin. Stress disrupts the balance in our lives. Stress can cause imbalances in our hormones which will often negatively affect the rejuvenation of our skin. Emotional stress retards cell renewal, destroys collagen fibres in the skin and breaks down elastin which is why stress can make you look older. There is also evidence that suggests that the barrier protection of the skin breaks down which is part of the reason why we often get sick when we are stressed.

## **Stress and your hair**

If we experience stress on an on-going and unrelenting basis, thinning and dulling of the hair is often observed. Many people who are under severe stress complain of hair loss. Fortunately, this is not usually a permanent problem. If you can learn to manage your stress or resolve the issues that caused the stress in the first place, that thinning will often stop. In extreme cases, stress can cause hair to stop growing altogether. In this case hair falls out a couple of months later with patches of hair falling out over the entire scalp.

## **Stress makes you older**

The ageing process can sometimes be accelerated by stress because it can harm our DNA. When we are stressed for prolonged periods of time, we produce less telomerase, an enzyme which is instrumental in determining the health and lifespan of cells. As more cells die off, the visible effects of ageing become more apparent (diminished eyesight and hearing, wrinkled skin and loss of muscle) Where a person can learn to manage their stress, the damage to the telomeres is not as severe.



The external signs of stress can manifest differently from person to person. For some people, it creeps up on them and they make adjustments in their lives bit by bit to cater for the stress without realising that they have a problem that needs to be dealt with or managed. You stop going to gym as often because of deadline, you start drinking more coffee during the day, drink a couple of glasses of wine in the evening because you can't sleep, grab fast food more often because you are always on the go. Steadily, the stress will build and eventually, it can take a profound toll on your body if left unchecked.

### **Warning signs and symptoms of high stress:**

- Nervousness or anxiety
- Sadness or depression
- Anger
- Fatigue
- Sleep disorders
- Lack of interest, motivation or energy
- Inability to concentrate
- Headaches
- Muscle tension, especially in the neck and shoulders
- Upset stomach, bloating, appetite changes
- Dizziness or faintness
- Tightness in the chest
- Reduced sexual desire
- Skin problems such as rashes, acne or hives
- Aches and pain
- Menstrual irregularity
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Hair loss or dullness

If you are experiencing a combination of these symptoms, it may be worth considering starting a journal. A journal will make you more aware and take note of what is going on around you, and how you are responding to those elements. Go and talk to someone about your stress or experience. Talking to someone professional goes a long way to releasing negative emotions and beginning to address the underlying cause of the stress.

Keep an eye open for the second instalment on stress.....

Contact the EAP for more information or confidential assistance.

Information sources: So stressed, McClellan and Hamilton; Mayo Clinic; Farlex dictionary.