

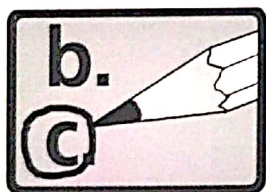
Will Your Stress Make You Sick?

Tom ran out of gas on a drive with his family. His reaction was to fume and berate his wife for not filling up the day before. This is not an atypical reaction to stress. Some people might curse the car or be self-critical for not checking the gas gauge beforehand. Still others might view it all philosophically as an oversight that's nobody's fault.

The style we adopt in handling frustration depends on two things: our basic, inborn temperament, and the reaction patterns we learn from others. We can't alter the former, but as far as social learning goes, we do have some degree of control. The significant people we grow up with profoundly influence how we handle stress. Thus, the self-defeating coping pattern used by a parent can be assimilated by a child and eventually result in that child's breakdown of mind and/or body.

Since we all face stress, it wouldn't reveal much about a person to ask, "Are you ever (or how often are you) under stress?" The more telling question is: "How do you deal with stress?" Do people who use a stress-coping style like Tom's have a tendency to develop illness prematurely?

The answer may come from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. In an ongoing study, Dr. Caroline Thomas and her associates have followed the lives of 1,337 students who attended the university between 1948 and 1964. The graduates have been given yearly questionnaires that ask about their lifestyles, and include questions about their eating, drinking, and sleeping patterns. Thus far the main finding, as subjects approach their senior years, is that their present state of health is related to how they reacted to stress during their earlier days. Dr. Thomas published a list of stress-coping behaviors in the *Journal of Chronic Diseases* that identified those headed for early illness.



TEST

If you've ever wondered whether your way of dealing with stress could harm your health, take the following quiz. It's based on Dr. Thomas's list.

1. I am a light sleeper.

True False

2. I tend to be a forceful personality.

True False

3. I believe that I am moodier than the average person.

True False

4. I often become exhausted.

True False

5. I often react with anger.

True False

6. I tend to increase the number of my activities when I am under pressure.

True False

7. I am more of a perfectionist than most of my friends are.

True False

8. I usually don't pay much attention to my health.

True False

9. When stress hits, I eat more or less than usual.

True False

10. I sometimes feel nauseous.

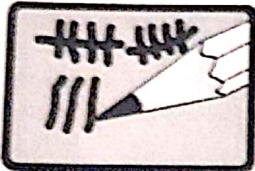
True False

11. I often get a strong urge to eat, drink alcohol, or smoke.

True False

12. I generally feel moderate to strong bodily tension.

True False



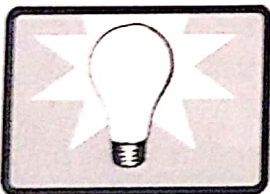
SCORING

To tally your score, give yourself 1 point for each "True" response.

A score of 10–12 points: You have a self-defeating manner of handling pressure and are among those most susceptible to physical or mental breakdowns. You overreact to frustration and wrongly place equal importance upon the outcome of large or small events in your life. You would definitely benefit from modifying your outlook on life. Perhaps a talk with your doctor or a counselor might help you accomplish this.

A score of 7–9 points: Your style of coping with stress and frustration is adequate, though there is room for improvement. You'll do about as well as the average person in managing tough situations. If your stress is prolonged and severe enough, however, you might suffer some bodily reactions that could make you ill. You could probably improve your health by adopting a more relaxed attitude toward life and its demands.

A score of 0–6 points: You react to stress in an efficient manner. You are not likely to break down prematurely, compared with high scorers on this quiz. In a crisis, you would probably maintain enough stamina and be able to call on your resourcefulness to see your way out of the dilemma.



EXPLANATION

Dr. Thomas has been involved with more than 100 studies of stress-coping styles and has found a strong link between stress and various ailments such as heart dysfunction, high blood pressure, and emotional disturbance. She also determined that the way in which one manages stress seems to influence the type of ailment that can develop. For example, those subjects who became very angry under stress were most likely to develop coronary problems, while perfectionists were susceptible to cancer. Those who were hard-driving, ambitious, and independent tended to develop stomach, heart, and digestive tract disorders. People with a rigid conscience and an unusually strong sense of duty became insomniacs and got migraine headaches, while insecure and sensitive types wound up with skin problems and asthma. On the brighter side, subjects with good health habits (those who were non-smokers, exercised regularly, and maintained adequate diets) tended to handle stress better—and were healthier as well.