

Fact sheet

Understanding the stress response

- Stress is normal. Everyone experiences it. It is our bodies' response to help us prepare for challenges
- In today's world we face many situations that can trigger our stress response ^{1,2,3,4,5}, so we need to make sure we turn off and recover
- There is good stress and bad stress and too much bad stress can be harmful
- In small doses, experiencing stress can help us to perform
- If we think about feelings of stress as our bodies' way of helping us to cope, we can minimise the negative health impacts of stress
- Workplace processes and systems can support minimising, managing and recovering from stress

Stress is normal. Everyone experiences it. How intense stress feels and what we find stressful is different for all of us. We all have a hardwired stress response which is switched on by different stressors for different people.

Fight, flight or freeze

Stress is the response our body has to help us prepare for challenges. When we're faced with a challenge, we get a rush of natural chemicals that amplify physical strength and our senses. It is a helpful automatic physical response that can sharpen our senses and physical abilities to deal with immediate challenges.

Too much stress can be harmful. When our stress response is turned on repeatedly for either real or perceived threats, it puts unnecessary strain on our bodies.

If we don't have the opportunity to recover and calm our body down or turn off the stress response, stress can stay for an extended period of time and may build, so your body never completely unwinds.

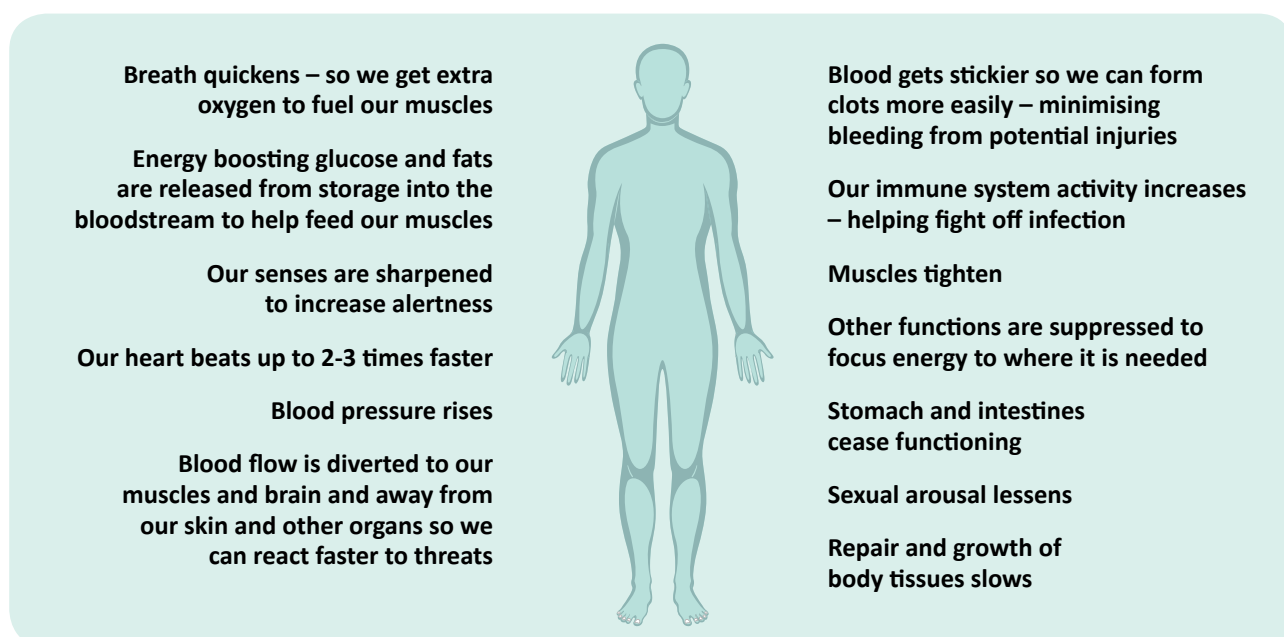
Each of us faces many situations that can trigger our stress responses. It's not just physical dangers that can trigger them. Our bodies do a poor job of recognising the difference between life-threatening events and day-to-day stressors. Anger or anxiety caused by day-to-day events, and even anticipated potential problems, can build up over the day. Without even realising it, we can make assumptions about what these potential problems may mean and set off a series of automatic physiological responses that most of us know as 'feeling stressed'.

Another way of looking at stress ^{6,7}

Stress and anxiety can lift our performance and ability and help us respond to immediate issues, so, in small doses, experiencing stress can help us to perform and respond well to challenges. It's important to keep this in mind because if we view all experiences of stress as harmful, we can worsen the negative effects on our bodies. When we view stressors as a challenge and the response as our bodies' way of helping us cope, we can minimise negative health impacts and recover faster from stress.

What happens when your body perceives danger? The stress response²

When we perceive something as a threat or difficulty, especially if we believe we don't have the resources to cope, our bodies will trigger the stress response. Our bodies prepare us to be ready to take action to protect ourselves – this is often known as a 'fight or flight' response:



These responses are very useful when we are in physical danger that mean we have to move or respond urgently. Once the danger has passed, our relaxation response (the parasympathetic nervous system) can be turned on to calm the body down. However, for most of us today, stress isn't often triggered by physical danger, so we don't get an opportunity to burn up that energy and switch off our stress response. **This means we need to consciously manage our levels of stress.**

The Three Rs

Learning the **Three Rs** and practising them will help you to minimise, manage and recover from stress. Workplace processes and systems can support the Three Rs too.

The Three Rs are:



Refuel | Whakatipu – looking after wellbeing and cultivating energy to refuel.



Resolve | Whakatika – identifying stressors and finding solutions that help resolve the causes of stress.



Relax | Whakatā – switching on the relaxation response to restore and rest.