



New Trends  
in Psychology

## The Impact of Stress on the Body and Mind Psychosomatic Approach and Methods to Combat Stress

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**Abstract:** Stress affects both the body and mind, as well as the behavior. For this reason it is important to know what are the causes of stress, what are the effects, symptoms and psychosomatic manifestations, as well as the solutions, the ways to combat stress and methods of self-regulation. The way we ensure our personal resilience regarding daily challenges and high-impact events in our lives is critical. Thus, it will increase tolerance to difficult bodily sensations and suppressed emotions to reduce uncontrolled reactions in relationships with others and will increase our quality of life. By exploring the somatic dimension in psychology, we can expand our ability to connect with our body and emotions, to regulate our nervous system, and increase our capacity to connect with others. These therapeutic methods centered on the body and the emotions have an important role in managing stress, preventing burnout, various diseases and conditions, and recovering from trauma. The psychosomatic approach provides useful tools for regulating the nervous system, increasing resilience, reducing symptoms and improving our lives by promoting well-being and health.

**Keywords:** system regulation; somatic approach; emotion integration; causes and effects; symptoms; stress management; self-regulation; emotions; health; mind-body connection; methods; self-regulation

### 1. Concepts and Definitions

*Stress* is defined as an environmental factor (trauma, emotions, cold, heat, etc.) capable of causing a state of tension and an alarm reaction in the body, sometimes causing serious illnesses (Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language).

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According to the World Health Organization, being stressed means feeling worried or feeling that your life is threatened. There are numerous stress factors, from real or perceived aggression from those around us, to domestic violence, illness, significant events and changes that take us out of our comfort zone.

Every person sometimes feels stress, but a very high level of stress produces unwanted physical and mental effects. In stressful situations, people can no longer concentrate, often have feelings of guilt and sadness, they worry about the future, feel powerless, and drift away from their own values.

### ***Traumatic stress***

According to the EU-OSHA definition, post-traumatic stress disorder is “a disorder associated with trauma and stressors, also considered an anxiety disorder, that occurs as a delayed and prolonged reaction to experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event involving death or threat of death, serious injury or sexual violence to the person concerned or to another person”.

### ***Traumas***

*“Trauma is born as a reaction in the nervous system and is not born from an event. Trauma symptoms are not caused by the event itself. They occur when the residual energy resulting from the experience is not discharged from the body. This energy remains trapped in the nervous system, where it can wreak havoc on the body and psyche.”* — Dr. Peter A. Levine Ph.D.

Reactions to trauma are different from person to person, depending on age, experiences, emotional balance and ability to process the situation, emotions and shock.

The importance of mind-body-spirit alignment has been discussed in many studies and papers over the years. Although it is a relatively new approach, somatic experiencing is based on several disciplines, such as psychology, ethology, biology, ignorance, etc.

The *psychosomatic approach* in psychology refers to the relationship between the mind and the body. The mind allows us to be aware of our experiences, to think and to feel, and we perceive the reality in the body.

Through our sensations, we observe what is happening in the body and thus perceive emotions and including environmental influences on us.

Emotions are chemical discharges of the nervous system and influence how we feel in our own body. When we bring attention into the body, we reconnect to ourselves and we connect to the present moment. Once we become aware of our body and its sensations, we have the ability to self-regulate our nervous system.

In order to understand the causes of stress, we consider a set of factors that refer to the professional environment (job satisfaction, stress level, work schedule, etc.), lifestyle as well as the psycho-individual characteristics of the person: the type of temperament, personality characteristics.

According to WHO, *“there are many sources of stress, including personal difficulties (e.g. conflicts with loved ones, loneliness, lack of income, fears about the future), problems at work (e.g. conflicts with colleagues, a extremely demanding or insecure work) or major threats in your community (eg violence, epidemics, lack of economic opportunity). [...] Stress can be due to major threats, such as domestic violence, illness, financial difficulties, uncertainty about the future, violence, family quarrels. Everyone feels stressed sometimes. A little stress is not a problem. But often a high level of stress affects the body. Many of us can experience unpleasant bodily sensations”* (Source: *Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide*).

Daily life has become more and more chaotic, with increasingly difficult living conditions, very high mental pressure, with multiple activities, demanding work environments and uncertainties about the future.

In these times, more and more people face difficulties in managing stress or manifest states of constant fatigue, insomnia, feel a lack of energy, have symptoms without a medical explanation, have states of continuous agitation, are overwhelmed by thoughts or emotions, and they can not relax. When we develop a level of body awareness, we will be able to recognize the physical signs of stress and take steps to reduce it. The path to mental and physical well-being and health begins when we pay attention to our own body.

From the perspective of somatic psychology, with the accumulation of stress in our lives it is possible that our body has become stuck in physiological states specific to defense reactions – fight, flight or freeze. They are a source of ongoing stress on the body and can cause profound, dissociating disturbances in perception, feeling, and action that disrupt the quality of our relationships, especially with parents, spouses, and children.

## 2. Effects, Symptoms and Psychosomatic Manifestations

Stress affects our lives at all levels. Its effects are felt both on physical and emotional health, as well as on behavior.

*On a physical level*, stress affects all body systems, including the musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal, nervous, and reproductive systems.

In presence of stress, the body often experiences sensations such as: palpitations, tremors, headaches, neck and shoulder pain, back pain, gastrointestinal problems, lack of appetite, lump in the throat, chest pain, muscle tension, etc.

To treat psychosomatic disorders and pathological disorders, medicine collaborates with psychotherapy and psychosomatic therapy to regulate disease manifestations (e.g. ulcers, asthma, skin conditions, autoimmune diseases, endocrine system diseases, high blood pressure, sexual disorders and gynecology).

To better understand the somatic manifestations of stress, an overview of the autonomic nervous system and a distinction between the PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (PNS) and the SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (SNS) is necessary

The PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (PNS) helps us rest, de-stress, reorganize and regenerate after threat or stress has passed.

The SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (SNS) prepares the entire body for action. It regulates the state of nervous excitement. It intensifies activity during times of stress and excitement – either positive or negative. It is active when we are alert, excited, or engaged in physical activity. It prepares us to go out to meet emergencies and threats.

The sympathetic system is like the gas pedal of the nervous system. It energizes us for whatever action we plan and helps us prepare for the threat.

The parasympathetic system is like the brake pedal of the nervous system. It helps us relax, unwind and ultimately discharge the arousal of sympathetic activation.

The dysregulated autonomic nervous system closely resembles a motor vehicle driven with both the brakes and accelerator pressed to the max. It is characterized by strong, random fluctuations and/or fixity of nervous system reactions.

Traumatic stress symptoms occur when the normal mechanisms of re-regulation are disrupted in one way or another.

Symptoms of traumatic stress can include:

SNS hyperactivation, hyperarousal, constriction

- at the physical level: increased heart rate, difficult breathing (rapid, shallow, with a tendency to freeze, based on panting), cold sweats, tingling, muscle tension, exaggerated evolution of the startle reaction, chronic pain, inability to sleep or relaxation.

- on a mental/emotional level: tendency towards anxiety or panic attacks, mania, outbursts of anger, hypervigilance, racing thoughts, worry.

SNP hyperactivation, non-connection, dissociation

- on a physical level: low energy level, exhaustion, numbness, reduced muscle tone, poor biological reactions to digestion, low heart rate or blood pressure, poor functioning of the immune system.

- on a mental/emotional level: depression, dissociation, apathy, lack of connection in relationships, reduced reactivity. Concurrent overactivation Both systems of the ANS are simultaneously overactivated: anxiety masked by depression; muscle stiffness in one area of the body and reduced muscle tone in other areas; diarrhea alternating with constipation.

*On an emotional level*, stress causes strong emotions, which can take you away from the present moment. If these emotions are repressed, the body manifests physical ailments that can be of different degrees of intensity. When the mind is overwhelmed by emotions and lacks mental resilience, the body can produce physical symptoms or disease. Psychosomatic manifestations vary from physical reactions to emotional reactions, to diseases that appear after a long period of intense emotional experiences.

*“Recent research on emotions has established that the experience of emotion depends not only on the brain, but also on the entire body and its environment. Once we accept the idea that the whole body can be involved in the experience of an emotion, it is easy to imagine how it might be to one’s advantage to use more of the body to process an emotion.” (Dr. Raja Selvam, PhD, Founder of ISP | Integral Somatic Psychology).*

In general, when under the influence of stress, people can't concentrate, feel sad or guilty, easily upset, worry, have changes in appetite, can't sit still, cry, have trouble sleeping, feel exhausted.

*“Anger, for example, contracts and good feelings dilate the heart; every feeling governs an organ; if the soul is simultaneously on fire, it consumes the body” (Hippocrates, 1839).*

### **3. Solutions, Ways to Combat Stress and Self-Regulation**

Every person has important resources available for self-regulation.

There are many ways to combat stress, but all of them require effort, consistency and perseverance. Over time, we can train our resilience, we can pay attention to the sensations in the body, through practices such as mindfulness, meditation, regular physical activity, yoga, massage, or we can adopt other relaxation techniques such as spending time with loved ones, practicing some hobbies that help the mind relax and similar techniques.

All these recommendations require daily practice, patience and should be adopted in small steps. However, when the level of stress is very high, it is advisable to turn to a specialist, a somatic therapist, a psychologist or a psychotherapist to guide the person in question towards a change, with small but sure steps.

How do we know that a person's nervous system is balanced and at rest?

- The person will be relaxed and at ease;
- Their body and senses will be relaxed but alert;
- The person will be anchored in the body, present at all levels of his being (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual);
- The person and their physiology will react appropriately in a variety of circumstances;
- The person's reactions will be fluid and resilient;
- The person will be available for connection and will be emotionally stable;
- The person will perceive the possibility to choose and options;
- The person has the ability to relate healthily.

The “relaxation response” was introduced by Herbert Benson, MD, to describe the body’s natural movement toward a state of rest: “*The relaxation response is a physical state of deep rest that alters physical and emotional responses to stress (e.g. decreased heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, and muscle tension).*”

The ability to track the body, to be with yourself, to know when you are getting overwhelmed (from too much stimulation of any kind) and to know what it takes to get back to center (within the functional range) are important skills to develop.

“Repeated activation of the relaxation response can reverse long-standing problems in the body and repair internal wear and tear caused by stress.” *Herbert Benson, MD, Timeless Healing, 1996* Source [http://www.mbmi.org/basics/whatis\\_rresponse\\_TRR.asp](http://www.mbmi.org/basics/whatis_rresponse_TRR.asp). “Just as we have the «stress reaction» in the body’s repertoire of reactions, we also have an innate relaxation reaction. The relaxation response leads to lower muscle tone, lower heart rate and blood pressure, a deeper breathing pattern, calming the abdomen, and a calm, pleasant mood. The problem we face in managing stress is that the stress response is more easily activated than the relaxation response. The stress reaction occurs on the spot, without any effort on our part. A loud noise at this moment would make you startle, and the stress reaction would spread throughout your body. The stress reaction occurs automatically, while the relaxation reaction must be intentionally sought and brought under conscious control. Although the relaxation response can occur naturally, as when you sit on the beach and look out at the sea, our hectic modern society does not give us many opportunities for this natural activation of it. In order to control our stress, we must intentionally practice creating the relaxation response.” Source: [http://www.lessons4living.com/relaxation\\_response.htm](http://www.lessons4living.com/relaxation_response.htm)

The things that support us physically, emotionally, mentally, relationally, socially, professionally and spiritually are important resilience factors or resources that help us manage stress.

Regarding stressful periods, the recommendations of the WHO are also useful: “when we get involved in life, pay attention to others, focus on what we are doing and live according to our beliefs, we manage stress much better. [...] ANCHOR YOURSELF IN THE PRESENT, DETACH, ACT ACCORDING TO YOUR VALUES, INTERACT, MAKE SPACE, BE GENTLE TO YOURSELF” (*Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020.*)

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