

Stress vs. something more

Easy · 10 min to read · Free

Stress usually comes from something outside you, like a test or a fight, and fades once it's handled.

Anxiety and depression are different: they stick around, show up without a clear cause, and get in the way of sleep, work, school or relationships. NIMH's line: if severe or distressing symptoms last two weeks or more, talk to a professional. Here's how to tell the difference and what to do either way.

YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ A few quiet minutes to be honest with yourself ☐ The checklist below

WHAT TO KNOW

- 1 **Name the source.** Stress is a response to something outside you, like a big test, an illness or an argument, and it generally goes away once the situation is resolved. It can even help, like pushing you to meet a deadline.
- 2 **Notice if it's sticking.** Anxiety is your body's reaction to stress, and it can happen even when there's no current threat. It usually involves a persistent sense of dread that doesn't go away and interferes with your life.
- 3 **Check for warning signs.** You may be at risk for an anxiety disorder if stress symptoms interfere with everyday life, make you avoid things, or seem to be always there.
- 4 **Check for depression.** Common signs include a persistent sad, anxious or "empty" mood, hopelessness, losing interest in things you used to enjoy, fatigue, trouble concentrating, sleeping too little or too much, appetite changes, and thoughts of death or suicide. It can also look like irritability, pulling away from people or drinking more.
- 5 **Use the two-week rule.** Seek professional help if severe or distressing symptoms have lasted 2 weeks or more, like trouble sleeping, trouble getting out of bed because of your mood, losing interest in things you enjoy, or not being able to do your usual tasks.
- 6 **Either way, take care of the basics.** Just 30 minutes of walking a day can boost your mood, and small amounts add up. Eat regular meals, drink water, watch caffeine and alcohol, keep a sleep schedule and cut screens before bed.
- 7 **Tell someone.** Reach out to friends or family who help you cope in a positive way. If you're worried, start with a primary care provider, who can refer you to a mental health professional.

Watch out If you're thinking about suicide or in emotional distress, call or text 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org. It's free, confidential and available 24/7. In a life-threatening situation, call 911.

DAD NOTE *Feeling stressed means you're human. Feeling stuck means it's time to tell someone.*

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/body/mental-health-basics/stress-vs-something-more/

Checked October 2, 2026. Sources: National Institute of Mental Health.