

Script – Print – What’s with all this stress and anxiety?

The difficult conversation is over. The big presentation is behind you. But hours later, you’re still replaying what you said, wondering what others thought and worrying about what might happen next. Stress is a normal part of life, but when the mind and body struggle to switch off, it can be harder to move forward. Understanding the difference between stress and anxiety — and learning how to manage both — can make a difference to your overall wellbeing according to behavioral health experts.

“Stress is commonly more like a temporary reaction to an event, a change, a new experience or a difficult conversation,” says Jennifer Worden, LMSW-C, a psychotherapist with OSF HealthCare. “It’s something new, and we’re not quite sure how it’s going to work out. But once we get through it, we often feel that sense of relief.”

Anxiety, on the other hand, can last long after the stressful event has passed. Worden compares the body’s stress response to a smoke alarm. When something stressful happens, the alarm goes off. Once the threat passes, it eventually quiets down. “But someone with chronic anxiety may feel that smoke alarm going off all the time,” she says. “They continue thinking about what happened, asking themselves, ‘Did I look stupid? Did I embarrass myself? What if they’re mad at me?’”

Worden adds that stress and anxiety can both activate the body’s fight-or-flight response and the release of stress hormones like adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol. When that response doesn’t settle down, the body can remain on high alert, making it harder to relax and move forward.

Stress depends on the person. But major changes in life are usually the common causes for the stress. “Getting married, going through a divorce, having a child, losing someone, moving or starting a new job, anything that’s new and unknown can cause stress,” Worden says. Even positive changes can mess up our routines.

Singer Donny Osmond has talked publicly about his struggles with anxiety. Throughout his successful career, Osmond has felt perfectly at ease performing in front of 20,000 people but becomes anxious doing simple tasks. “We all have that one activity or thing that helps us calm down,” Worden says. “For some people, it might be making jewelry or coloring. For others, it might be calling a friend who helps them feel grounded.” Finding that safe space can be an important part of managing stress.

People experiencing stress are often told to calm down or take a deep breath. That advice may sound simple, but Worden says there is science behind techniques that help settle the body’s stress response. “These are what we call somatic techniques, which are things that actually calm the body,” she says. “That can involve engaging our muscles, focusing on our breathing and being more in touch with our bodies.”

Deep breathing is one option. Grounding techniques that engage the five senses can also help redirect attention to the present moment. For example, identify five things you can see, four things you can feel and three things you can hear. These exercises can help the body settle down.

Self-care is another important coping mechanism. After getting through a tough conversation, a stressful event or something you’ve been dreading, Worden says give yourself time to recover rather than immediately moving on to the next worry. Sometimes self-care means taking a break, adjusting your schedule or canceling a commitment. It isn’t always about treating yourself to a bubble bath or a favorite piece of candy.

Some stress is a normal response to challenges in your life. But when stress or anxiety lasts for a long period of time or disrupts your daily activities, it might be time to ask for help. The National Institutes of Health says chronic stress and unmanaged anxiety lead to depression through a combination of biological brain changes, hormonal exhaustion and behavioral cycles.

Everybody has stress, and that’s normal, Worden adds. But if it’s affecting the simple things, like getting ready for the day or going to work, that’s when we need to seek professional help. For more information on behavioral health issues, visit the [OSF HealthCare](#) website.