Script – Broadcast – What's with all this stress and anxiety?

INTRO

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.

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Jennifer Worden, psychotherapist, OSF HealthCare

"Stress is commonly more like a temporary reaction to an event, a change, a new experience or a difficult conversation. 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." (:24)

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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.

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 adds. Even positive changes can mess up our routines.

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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.

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 professional help.