

Why Stress Affects Sleep, Concentration and Digestion

PSYCHOEDUCATION · STRESS AND THE BODY

How one stress response can show up in three different ways

When we are under pressure, the body's stress response prepares us to deal with a challenge. This is helpful in short bursts. When stress continues for a long time, the same response can make it harder to sleep, think clearly and digest food comfortably.

01 One stress response, three noticeable effects

original illustration



02 What happens, and what can help

tick anything you notice

Sleep

when the mind won't switch off

WHAT HAPPENS

Stress can keep the body and mind more alert, which can make it harder to wind down. People vary in how strongly stress affects their sleep.

YOU MAY NOTICE

- ☐ Hard to fall asleep
- ☐ Waking in the night
- ☐ Racing thoughts in bed
- ☐ Waking unrefreshed

WHAT CAN HELP

- A regular wake time
- A wind-down routine
- Writing worries down earlier
- Getting up if awake a long time

Concentration

when focus feels scattered

WHAT HAPPENS

Under stress, the brain shifts from slow, reflective thinking towards fast, reactive responses. Planning, memory and focus can suffer.

YOU MAY NOTICE

- ☐ Losing your train of thought
- ☐ Forgetting small things
- ☐ Rereading the same line
- ☐ Harder to decide

WHAT CAN HELP

- One task at a time
- Short breaks between tasks
- Writing things down
- Breaking tasks into steps

Digestion

when the stomach feels it

WHAT HAPPENS

The gut and brain are closely connected. Stress can slow the stomach and speed up the bowel, and can make the gut more sensitive.

YOU MAY NOTICE

- ☐ Butterflies or nausea
- ☐ Reduced appetite
- ☐ Stomach ache or cramps
- ☐ Changes in bowel habits

WHAT CAN HELP

- Regular, unhurried meals
- Slower breathing before eating
- Gentle movement
- Noticing stress-gut patterns

New or persistent symptoms are worth checking with a GP.

03 My stress signals this week

0 = not affected · 10 = very affected

Area	Affected	What I noticed	One thing I will try
Sleep	____ /10		
Concentration	____ /10		
Digestion	____ /10		

To bring to my next session: _____

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Stress has been shown to rapidly reduce the functioning of brain networks involved in planning and working memory (Arnsten, 2009). People differ in how much stress disrupts their sleep, and worry and rumination can add to this (Kalmbach et al., 2018). The gut and brain communicate in both directions, which helps explain why stress and digestion so often affect each other (Mayer, 2011).

SOURCES

Arnsten, A. F. T. (2009). Stress signalling pathways that impair prefrontal cortex structure and function. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 10(6), 410–422. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2648>

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Mayer, E. A. (2011). Gut feelings: The emerging biology of gut-brain communication. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 12(8), 453–466. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3071>