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Where stress hides in your body

Learn to wrestle out of fear's grasp and regain control of your life



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Want to relieve stress at work? Find a way to be more in control.

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Men'sHealth

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The best explanation of stress we've ever heard comes from Stanford neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky, Ph.D., the author of *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*.

"If you are a normal mammal," he says, "stress is the 3 minutes of screaming terror on the savanna after which either it's over with or you're over with."

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If you're a human mammal, however, stress comes from something more insidious than a

toothy predator: anxiety triggered by the passive-aggressive boss, the 30-year mortgage, and the job of caring for children as well as the ill parent who believes General MacArthur wants him to lead a division into Pyongyang Province.

No wildebeest would understand these fears, but the perceived threats spark the same physiological survival responses that crocodile attacks do. Here's where modern stress bites your body and how to fight back.

[Ease your anxiety with these 52 tips to help you banish stress from your life.](#)

Stress Spot: Your Brain

Chronic secretion of the stress hormone cortisol can trigger memory loss, depression, and three-bourbon lunches.

The Fix: Don't be so damned conscientious at work.

A Canadian study of 2,737 employees found that when people thought their poor job performance could seriously impact their coworkers, company, or environment, their job stress increased. Workers who didn't see their jobs as *careers* were less likely to report stress. The lesson: Take a day off. The company won't go under if you're AWOL for 9 hours. (Note: This does not apply to air-traffic controllers.)

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Stress Spot: Your Hair

Researchers at the University of Western Ontario may have found a new way to measure chronic stress: Pluck a few hairs. They took follicle samples from more than 100 men, half of whom were hospitalized for heart attacks, and found that hair cortisol was higher in the heart patients. Since hair grows about 1 centimeter a month, researchers used 3-centimeter samples as a record of stress levels over the previous 3 months. Scientists say the findings bolster the theory that chronic stress contributes to heart attack just as acute stress does.

The Fix: [Earn](#) a promotion.

With power comes control, suggests research from the Columbia University business school. Study participants were designated as either leaders or subordinates, with the leaders given duties that granted them a sense of power. Meanwhile, half the people in both groups were asked to steal \$100 and lie about it. Subordinates who had to lie showed physical stress reactions and high cortisol levels. But lying bosses displayed no such markers of stress, suggesting that even in stressful situations (forced to lie), people feel little or no anxiety if they have power and control.

[Dealing with job stress? Tips to help you manage stressful situations with your difficult manager.](#)

Stress Spot: Your Nervous System

When you're stressed, hormones flood your body, helping you focus your attention, sharpening your vision, and preparing your muscles to take action.

The Fix: Tap the power.

For short periods, facing adversity can energize you to handle challenges. Recently,

University at Buffalo researchers monitoring 2,398 people found that those who'd experienced some adversity scored higher on measures of mental [health](#) and life satisfaction than those who'd seen either high levels of adversity or none at all.

"In moderation, whatever doesn't kill us may indeed make us stronger," says study author Mark Seery, Ph.D.

Stress Spot: Your Muscles

Neck and back tension caused by mental stress, plus long days spent hunched over a computer keyboard, can trigger pain.

The Fix: Try the corner stretch.

Stand facing the corner of a room. Raise your elbows to shoulder height, and place your forearms, elbows, and palms against each wall. Lean in to flex your chest and back muscles. Hold for 15 seconds, breathing deeply. Do this every 2 hours or whenever you feel tight.

[Exercise helps reduce stress levels. Build a stronger upper back and improve your overall posture with this shoulder workout.](#)

Stress Spot: Your Gut

Increased stomach acid from stress can churn your gut and loosen your bowels. Stress can even alter the way your body processes fat, causing you to store more of it in your abdomen.

The Fix: Twist yourself into a pretzel and laugh, laugh, laugh.

"Laughter [yoga](#)" practitioners swear that combining yogic breathing and stretching techniques with forced laughter helps them cope better with life's stresses. Studies have already demonstrated the ability of yoga to



ease stress and lower blood pressure. And laughing appears to do the same. For example: Two reports presented at the 2009 American College of Sports Medicine's annual meeting showed that people who watched comedies had more-pliable blood vessels and improved bloodflow for up to 24 hours after the chuckling commenced.

Stress Spot: Your DNA

Not only can stress make you flatulent, but it can screw with your DNA too. A 24-7 bath of stress hormones can cause telomeres to shorten. Telomeres are genetic structures that protect the ends of chromosomes; if they shorten too much, cells can no longer multiply. The

Fix: Meditate.

A recent Harvard study found that the physiological response from meditation, tai chi, and breathing exercises can counteract cellular damage from stress.

[Just breathe: How to meditate.](#)

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