

El Estrés: What is Stress and Cortisol?

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Stress is your body's reaction to change. That is the simplest definition. All change is stressful. Any kind of change that requires you or causes your body or mind to react is stress. All of us have stress. We can experience stress from any change in our everyday life, our surroundings, our bodies, thoughts and feelings. You could say that stress is inevitable. Happy changes cause stress and sad and tragic changes cause stress.

Although stress is a normal part of life, it's important we understand the different kinds and levels of stress.

Long-term exposure to stress, or chronic stress, can be harmful to your health, not to mention your ability to achieve a healthy weight.

There is new research on chronic stress. Scientists are beginning to call chronic stress or long-term exposure to stress, Toxic Stress. Dr. Thornburg, Director of The Moore Institute at

Oregon Health Sciences University has this to say about Toxic Stress: “Toxic stress, also referred to as chronic stress, is frequent or prolonged exposure to adversity. This can take the form of abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, or extreme economic hardship.”

Dr. Thornburg explains that any type of stress causes a number of hormones to be released directly into the bloodstream. In the short-term these hormones help a person cope in response to a perceived threat. One of those hormones that can help a person cope with stress is cortisol. However, he goes on to explain, when a person experiences chronic stress or long term stress, the body produces too much cortisol and for a longer period of time. He compares it to the “body’s alarm button getting stuck in the ‘on’ position.”

Other studies suggest that when levels of cortisol stay high throughout the day, the body has a hard time adjusting. This long-term release of cortisol in the body is linked to accumulating weight around the middle of our bodies, aka Las Lonjitas. Having extra weight or fat around our middles puts us at higher risk for chronic conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease. Another reaction that cortisol may cause is an increase in appetite and cravings. It is not a myth that stress can cause you to want more Cheetos, papitas y chicharrones. (That can actually be true!)

So, that is the bad news, Comadres! But the good news is that the better you are at coping with stress, the better your chances are at protecting yourself from its negative effects.

As with anything else in our lives, the first step in solving our problem or making a positive change is becoming aware of it and then coming up with a plan to tackle it!

Here are some stress management basics that all of us can use on a daily basis:

1. Learn to recognize the warning signs of stress. Pay attention to yourself. Ask yourself: “Have there been lots of changes in my life lately?” Are you feeling moody, angry or irritable? Are your muscles tight? Are you clenching your jaw at night when you sleep?
2. Are you eating for emotional reasons? Are you physically hungry or emotionally hungry?
3. Eat a healthy diet. Eat more vegetables, lean protein and whole grains. Check out the [De Las Mías 9 Step Eating Plan](#). And the Daily Checklist in the [De Las Mias Android app](#)! Follow it and you’ll be taking good care of yourself.
4. Are you craving salty, crunchy, fatty, or sugary foods? Do yourself a favor and take these foods out of your house, desk, car, and/or mattress.
5. Keep a food diary or use one of our De Las Mías tools in the app to track your food and moods. Look for patterns. Do you eat more junk food when you’re stressed?
6. Get support. Talk to your comadres, friends, sisters or mom about problem solving.
7. Make a plan. (If this happens... I will do this...) It helps to be prepared, especially if you are dealing with a chronic problem.
8. Move your body, Muchacha! Go for a walk. Dance up a storm. Have sex.
9. Get some shut-eye! Sleep is super important. If you aren’t getting good sleep, figure out how you can. Ask for professional help if you need it.
10. Keep a journal and write your feelings down. Some people get tremendous relief from keeping a diary just like when you were a little girl. Remember? How about keeping a worry box. I have one! If I am worried about something and the worry won’t go away, I

- write it down and put it into my worry box. It's easier for me to let it go that way. Try it!
11. Learn to practice [deep relaxation](#). Deep breathing, yoga, stretching, praying the rosary, knitting.

And, Comadres, please, if you feel helpless or hopeless and all your ganas are gone, or if you have been crying or thinking sad thoughts for more than two weeks, please ask for professional help. Go to your comadre, a priest, a pastor or a nun. Seek the help of a counselor, social worker, doctor or nurse. Tell someone, but please don't suffer alone. If you ever think of harming yourself or others, call: 1-800-273-8255. En español: 1-800-628-9454

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