Assess your stress

Did you know not all stress is created equal? That’s because your nervous system isn’t very good at distinguishing between emotional and physical threats. If you’re super stressed over an argument with a friend, a work deadline or a mountain of bills, your body can react just as strongly as if you’re facing a true life-or-death situation. The more your emergency stress system is activated, the easier it becomes to trigger and the harder it becomes to shut off.

This can lead to serious health problems, affect your immune system, upset your digestive and reproductive systems, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, and speed up the aging process. It can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety, depression and other mental health problems.

To help you see how vulnerable you are to stress, compare the following coping techniques:

Positive coping techniques
- Treat yourself to something you enjoy
- Listen to music, watch TV or go to a movie
- Read a newspaper, magazine or book
- Exercise, get outdoors, enjoy nature
- Write in a journal
- Practice deep breathing or meditate
- Do physical labor (gardening, yardwork, paint)
- Discuss situations with a spouse or close friend

Negative coping techniques
- Become aggressive
- Use negative self-talk, anticipate the worst
- Yell at spouse, kids, co-workers or friends
- Drink a lot of coffee
- Avoid social contact with others
- Smoke tobacco, drink alcohol or take a tranquilizing drug
- Become irritable or short-tempered

Now ask yourself these questions:
- Do you use more positive than negative strategies or the reverse?
- Do you recognize a need to change some of the techniques you are now using? If so, which ones?
- Are there any positive coping behaviors you’re doing that you’d like to do more often?

By being aware of how you cope with stress, you can recognize if you are on the right path or need to start making changes to manage it better. As always, speak with your primary care physician if you have concerns about stress or your mental health.