



PRIDE

STRESS AND PAIN

The word stress is used all the time, but it is a difficult word to define. Even experts on stress don't always agree on how to define it. One way to define stress is "an increase in nervous system arousal," when things in your body and mind are working harder and faster. Relaxation is the opposite of stress. When you are relaxing, your nervous system is working slower and easier. Things that cause stress (like traffic, bills, and pain) are called stressors.

Think about your body like a car and your nervous system like a car engine. When you drive your car, you have to speed up and slow down with the flow of traffic. Your car engine revs up higher when you get onto the highway, and it rests on idle when you are at a stop light. Just like a car engine, your nervous system naturally speeds up and slows down during the day, depending on what you are doing, thinking, and feeling, and what is going on around you. These changes in the stress level in your body are normal and healthy.

When you have a lot of stressors going on in your life, then the stress level in your body can remain too high for too long. This might be like driving way too fast in first gear! Over time, stress can cause things inside your body to wear down, resulting in physical symptoms (such as headaches, skin rashes, stomach problems, fatigue, elevated blood pressure, and increased pain) and emotional symptoms (such as depression and anxiety). If stress remains too high for long enough, more serious problems, such as heart attacks and strokes, may result.

Again, think about the car engine. The more stress you put on a car engine, the quicker that the engine parts will wear out. The weakest, or more prone parts of the car engine, will wear out first. Just like the car engine, the more prone systems in your body will be more affected by stress than other systems. That's why different people get different physical and emotional symptoms when they are under too much stress. Think about what happens in your body when you are under too much stress, and that will give you some idea of which body systems are more predisposed toward stress-related symptoms. Your injured body parts are probably some of your more prone areas now. Your pain level is probably one of the first things that will be affected when your stress level is too high for too long. So, you will very likely find that stress reduction techniques (like breathing regulation and relaxation exercises) can be effective for managing pain. Remember that stress management techniques are skills that require practice to be effective!