

Managing Stress and building Resilience

Stress can be defined as the coupled action of the body and mind involved in appraisal of a threat... the triggering action is the individual's perception of the threat and not the event (Dr. Daniel Friedman in Deepak Chopra 1991).

Our society is very competitive today and demands much from us. Constant deadlines, clock watching, and everyday aggravations make us short-tempered and cause us to build up tensions.

Traffic jams, confrontational behaviour, work loads at work and at home, competing forces for our limited leisure time all add to the stress people find themselves under. If one perceives these as stressful and becomes stressed-out then it is important that one learns to recognise the early signals of over-load.

We all tend to have an unique pattern of symptoms of stress, and need to learn methods to calm and reverse the negative results of too much stress.

A certain amount of stress -eustress/good stress - is necessary for effective human functioning. It is often defined as healthy stress or the amount of stress necessary for you to feel a sense of challenge and fulfilment from your endeavours. It mobilizes the body's resources, increases concentration and 'sharpen your wits'.

Eustress allows you to reach your optimal potential, to perform at your peak and to feel 'in the flow'. As long as you feels in control of all aspects of life, are able to function optimally and are resilient and happy then you are functioning within the eustress curve. But once stress levels go beyond an optimal level there may be harmful effects on your level of functioning.

Feelings of being 'out of control' may occur and many early signs and symptoms of being stressed may become evident. Some of the early visual physical signs of tension include hair twirling, ankle bending or tapping, coiled legs, nail biting, tightly folded arms, abdomen drawn in, breath holding, jutting jaw, frown on forehead, tight hunched shoulders, clenched teeth, clenched fists with white knuckles, leg shaking, finger tapping etc. Can you identify your early warning signs and can you act on them straight away?

If you learn to identify the first warning signs and take steps to reduce your stress immediately by using effective coping skills then you can continue to live within optimal levels of stress and flourish.

Fight or Flight

Hans Selye researched the physiology of stress in the 1930's and believed that stress was 'the rate of wear and tear of the body'. He also believed that every individual had a certain amount of adaptive energy. Once it was used up it could not be replaced and burnout occurred.

He described the physiology of stress in his 'General Adaptive Syndrome' as moving through a predictable series of responses from alarm through resistance to exhaustion. Alarm is set off by the fight or flight response.

The "fight or flight response" is our body's primitive, automatic, inborn response that prepares the body to "fight" or "flee" from perceived attack, harm or threat to our survival.

<http://www.thebodysoulconnection.com/EducationCenter/fight.html>

However, in today's world it will not be the tiger or bear that confronts but challenges and pressures of work and home relationships, situations and environment.

Walter Cannon identified the fight or flight response during his time at Harvard Medical School in the 1920's. The hypothalamus releases a chemical reaction that sends adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol into the bloodstream. Exposure to these chemicals in the system results in depletion of the immune system and inhibition of the manufacture of T-lymphocytes and Macrophages that are known as the killer T cells. This lowers our resistance to disease.

If the stressor persists for more than a brief time the body adapts to it and becomes resistant. The body systems return to normal but remain alert for the stressor. If the stressor is intense or long lasting then the body becomes exhausted and can no longer resist it. When the body is exhausted it becomes vulnerable to dysfunction and disease.

Hans Selye believed that almost any disease could be caused by chronic excessive emotional stress. Having a body primed for action but unable to act to use the hormones and chemicals circulating in readiness for action is detrimental to health. High blood pressure, high cholesterol, arteriosclerosis, heart attack and stroke may all be consequences of excessive and prolonged stress.

Physical Response and Consequences

Our body reacts to a stressor by accelerating the heart rate, dilating the bronchial tubes and coronary arteries, dilating the eyes, increasing the basal metabolic rate, contracting the muscles, increasing blood sugar, raising blood pressure, increasing the secretion of gastric juices and increasing mental activity. This puts us on hyper alert. If there is action to be taken or the stressor is short lived then the chemicals are used up or dissipate in a short space of time.

However, over a longer time it can have major physical and psychological effects. Subjective effects may include anxiety, aggression, frustration, guilt, shame, depression, irritability, bad temper, alienation, isolation, boredom, fatigue, poor self-worth and apathy.

Behavioural effects may include excessive drinking, smoking, eating, exercising or working, drug abuse, emotional outbursts, impulsivity, speech impediments, nervous laughter, inability to relax and trembling.

Cognitive effects may include difficulties in decision-making, inability to concentrate, memory problems, hypersensitivity to criticism, and mental blocks.

Physiological effects may include increased blood glucose levels which may lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, low blood pressure, increased heart rate, dryness of the mouth, excessive perspiration, dilation of the pupils, breathlessness, hot and cold sensations, muscular cramps, 'a knot in the stomach', 'a lump in the throat', 'pins and needles' and tics.

Health consequences may include coronary heart attack, chest and back pain, diarrhoea, frequent urination, tension headaches, migraine, rheumatoid arthritis, colitis, constipation, hay fever and allergies, peptic ulcers, menstrual difficulties, overactive thyroid gland, diabetes mellitus, skin disorders, depression, loss of libido and low energy.

Organizational consequences may include absenteeism, poor staff morale, poor productivity, high accident rate, frequent labour turnover rates, industrial conflicts and job dissatisfaction.

Major Life events or Daily Hassles?

In the 1960's Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe of the University of Washington's School of Medicine identified major life events as a major source of stress in peoples' lives.

Life events were concentrated phases of significance in peoples' lives like getting married, moving house, holidays, separation, marriage breakdown, divorce, new baby, moving away from home. Life events could be positive or negative but the fact that change was happening in a life meant that it was stressful.

Yet, while there major life events can cause major stress in peoples' lives, Richard Lazarus of the University of California at Berkley indicated that external daily hassles had an even greater impact on well-being than the major events. By daily external hassles Lazarus meant noise, getting caught in traffic jams, clock-watching, constant deadlines, misplacing keys - what one might think of as the 'small stuff'. His hypothesis was that the effect of these hassles was cumulative, constant hassles were everyday stressors that meant it was difficult to avoid them and the effects became chronic and had a long-term effect. Knowing that one had to face the same hassles every day add to the stress. In many respects it may be easier to recover from a major event as it is more likely not to re-occur.

What are your daily hassles?

How can you change your life about to avoid them?

What are the causes of stress in your life? Identify your own stressors?

Are they psychological? Do you have excessive wants needs and desires, excessive drive and ambition, expectations of perfection in yourself and others, poor self-image?

Are they environmental or situational? Is life in a muddle with a lack of routine? Are the causes dietary, caffeine, sugary foods or destructive habits such as drugs, alcohol or smoking? Remember that a stressed individual is at high risk of becoming addicted.

Are they life events such as moving away from home, baby, marriage, break-up in relationship, lack of support structure?

What do you do and how do you feel and act when stressed?

Do you have poor or little sense of control over your life?

Do you have few or no close personal relationships and support structure?

Rigid and inflexible attitudes?

Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism about oneself, the present and the future?

Inability to express feelings?

Poor sense of self-worth?

Distorted communication patterns?

Poor problem solving skills?

How can you gain control over your life?

Decide to get control into the area from which it has been lost.

Discover how much stress keeps you motivated and stimulated but you still feel in control.

Develop support systems.

Find someone to talk with to express fears and concerns.

Say what you feel, your views may be taken on board or at least acknowledged.

Communication is very important.

How can people know what is wrong if you do not communicate your problems, views, hopes and fears.

Be open to compromise and change.

You may not always be right.

There may be more than one way to achieve a result.

Manage your time efficiently.

Prioritise and allow time according to the priority list.

Make out your 'have to do' list and get it done each day while still keeping an eye on the 'want to do' and 'nice to do' lists but not procrastinating over the 'have to's'.

How can you cope with those stressors you cannot avoid?

Build resilience.

Eat properly, exercise, take time for yourself, invest in those people around you that support you and 'feed your soul', meditate, change your perceptions of stressors by distancing them from yourself, lessening your emotions about them and clarifying the reasons these have become stressors in the first place.

Can you delegate, say no, walk away?

To look after you, whether or not you are in the eustress or stressed category, it seems only right to put some time aside each day for relaxation as stressors are met every day. The next section will deal with some ways of coping with your stress and developing resilience.