

managing your stress

June L. Sears

Stress is any change in an individual's life that he/she is unable to modify or adjust to satisfactorily. Under mild stress, a number of signs of emotional or bodily discomfort may exist: headaches, backaches, tension. Under prolonged or intense stress, there's disorganization of either physiological or emotional functioning or both.

Stress can result from many causes—frustration of basic needs, inability to express basic drives, injury to one's self-esteem, fright or threat of various kinds from the world, or the need to perform beyond one's capacities over an extended period of time. Some of the earliest signs of stress are: anxiety, guilt feelings, fatigue, loss of self-esteem, and trauma.

The latter signs of stress may be psychosis, serious psychosomatic illness, or persistent anxiety or depression that keeps a person from responding adequately on a job or to friends and family.

Stress may be a direct reaction to existing events, a reaction to the anticipation of forthcoming occurrences, or a persistent symptom long after a prior traumatic experience. It's self-destructive not to protect yourself.

Certainly not all forms of stress can be avoided. You should be able to acknowledge that parts of your life are stressful and then make constructive changes.

Ego Damagers

Some emotional discomforts communicate to you that your ego is being damaged or destroyed and you must take some action on your own behalf:

Anxiety

Anxiety is a belief in an impending danger that can't be dismissed. Danger is vague or complex. It's reminiscent of a prior expectation or punishment.

Guilt Feelings

Guilt feelings are neurotic beliefs that one has violated a moral principle. This is accompanied by lowered self-esteem.

Fatigue

Fatigue can precipitate a psychosis, aggravate medical conditions, create serious automobile and industrial accidents,

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interfere with personal relationships, and generally result in poor decision making.

It's urgent that when you find yourself in a constant state of fatigue, you reevaluate your lifestyle and make suitable changes.

Common causes of fatigue are: excessive strain of employment (overtime, two jobs), heavy domestic responsibility, a position too physically or mentally exhausting, concurrent study and employment, excessive travel time to your job, or dissipation.

*Loss of
Self-Esteem*

Many people depend on others for praise. It's easy for one to fall into the trap of depending on an employer, teacher, spouse, minister, or friend for eulogies you think you're entitled to.

It must be recognized that many emotionally incompetent and immature individuals hold positions of power, people who are unable to be positive and warm to those who rely on them.

If recognition is important to you, first obtain an objective evaluation of your performance. Then, if you believe that you're unjustly treated, you should consider making a move, accept the situation philosophically in return for other advantages, or remain there due to circumstances beyond your control.

Events that often create a blow to self-esteem include: losing a job, unfair criticism, not receiving an expected prize or praise, falling behind professionally because standards of performance have been raised or one's training is dated, or being denied employment because of age.

It's vital that you not rely on a single person or activity to provide satisfaction in your life.

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Illness

Illness contributes to fatigue, along with the inability to function economically, inability to provide for emotional support to one's family, and loss of valued friends and activities.

*Inconsistent
Lifestyle*

A lifestyle inconsistent with temperament is stressful, such as a shy person who must prove himself assertive by economic necessity (solemn person) or an extroverted person

induced by parental pressure to go into a white collar job when he/she might be more suited to an outgoing active job.

A person who tries to live beyond his/her strength, intellect, and capacity to respond emotionally is likely to collapse or become disorganized due to stress.

Trauma Frightening circumstances often haunt us for days, months, and years after they ought to be forgotten, such as an accident, or near accident, being mugged, assaulted, or raped.

These may be so damaging to the ego, may so overload the nervous system, that the memories obsess us. Some individuals radically change their lifestyle after a traumatic experience to avoid recurrence. Others continue their usual activities, but are distraught and anxious.

Dealing with Stress

Constructive Stress

How can you avoid or combat the danger of stress?

First, you must understand what happens when you are under stress. You may have experienced normal stress, the kind that comes on a wedding day or when you face a crucial meeting with someone important to you. You get keyed up, tight as a bow string. This tension is the body's reaction to stress. Stress, in the words of Dr. Hans Selye, the eminent Canadian authority on stress, is "essentially the rate of all the wear and tear caused by life."

You can't avoid stress. It's an inescapable and basic part of our experience. An argument, fear of missing a scheduled meeting, a thousand and one big and little things chip away at our stores of energy.

Here's what happens to an Extension professional we'll call John Smith. Generally, he's easy-going, soft-voiced, and calm. One morning, he has to make a presentation of a special program accomplishment to his administrators. Before he enters the meeting, John unconsciously gets into a "psychological set."

His pulse and blood pressure rise. The muscles of his lungs, heart, and intestines tighten and this makes his legs, arms, and torso tense. Adrenalin and sugar are released into John's bloodstream by his adrenal glands and liver, to give him extra energy. His body temperature goes up, his digestion slows down.

In this state of tensed readiness, even John's vision and hearing become more acute. His faculties of memory and his judgment become razor-keen. This is his "fight or flight" reaction when faced with a critical situation. However, after he emerges from the meeting, John begins to relax.

John has converted stress into a zest with a purpose. Thus, certain stresses are really healthy for us. Suppose you're

awakened at night by a strange noise downstairs. Something wrong with your furnace? A burglar? Stress is your built-in alarm to alert you as your body mobilizes to overcome a threat. At work, normal stress, if properly channeled, can stimulate a person to superior, creative, and productive effort. Active people thrive on a certain amount of stress; it's the inevitable by-product of holding down an interesting job.

Normal stress can also be enjoyable, like when you bowl a strike, make a hole in one, or watch a spectacular football game. Such stress has been called the "spice of life."

*Destructive
Stress*

On the other hand, excessive and unpleasant stress is damaging when your overmobilized body refuses to go back to normal. Your blood pressure remains too high, your appetite doesn't return, muscles stay cramped, your judgment is impaired, and you may verge on panic. You're all wound up, with no place to go.

Stress is like a powerful medicine: the right dose can be good for you, but too much can be poison. You've got to distinguish between constructive and destructive stress. Stress that's good for you keeps you keyed up at a time when you need extra drive. Harmful stress—arising from anxiety, worry, panic, insecurity, guilt, or other factors—causes wear and tear on your nervous system.

When pressures pile up and you're not equipped to handle them, the toll can be disastrous. In the opinion of Dr. Francis Braceland, chief psychiatrist at the Institute of Living, uncontrolled tension can lead to compulsive eating and overweight. It can drive people to drink, impel them to take their spite out on their family and cause them to end up with such psychosomatic ailments as stomach ulcers, colitis, arthritis, and other common disorders.

Telltale signs let you know you're really in a stew. You get flustered over minor disappointments, find it hard to get along with people, feel trapped, edgy, irritable, and carry a chip on your shoulder. On the job, you take a harmless comment as criticism and start worrying about being fired.

You might look at whatever is triggering your stress. Maybe you're all worked up this morning because you couldn't get your car started.

At work, some people may not be fully qualified for the job they hold, so they're bewildered by their duties. Other individuals may be over-ambitious or resent what they consider lack of recognition, or perhaps they're taken on new responsibility and lack self-confidence.

Controlling Stress

Understand what's causing your stress and you've taken a long step toward controlling it.

On the job you can:

1. Organize your stresses. Take time to "case" your tasks instead of rushing off in a dozen different directions. Approach one thing at a time.
2. Don't panic. Ask yourself: Is the emergency as great as it seems? Would another day, hour really matter? Perpetual impatience by itself creates harmful stress.
3. *Schedule your most demanding work for the time of day when you function best. If you're worn out and facing an important report, it's better to come in earlier the next day.*
4. Roll with the punches. If you have to do some serious thinking at work, trying to force a decision only builds up stress. So sleep on it.
5. Talk it out. If you're worried about a problem, talk it out with your supervisor or any other person whom you respect. Don't waste today's energy stewing about what happened yesterday.

Summary

No matter what strategies and techniques we depend on, we'll have to learn the art of combating stress ourselves by looking at it positively. Make up your mind that you'll never be entirely free of some stressful moments. If you're on top of your job and have confidence in your ability to perform, you should be able to control your stress. You'll know that certain kinds of stress that you put on yourself will be beneficial. You'll also realize that a successful person when troubled has learned how to direct stress into constructive channels.