Understanding Stress

Different kinds of Stress

Stress can be defined as pressure or a force. In psychology it is the arousal of ones mind and body in response to demands made upon it. It causes you to adapt or cope. Depending on who is doing the defining, the definition is different - it can be an event that causes tension or a response to a disturbing event or even a perception of an event.

Stress can be good. Eustress (positive stress) is stress that can increase sharpness and motivation. this generally signifies that you are taking on a challenge.

Negative stres - distress - anxiety that can lead to both psychological and physical harm. It can make your mood worse as well as cause biological issues.

Sources of stress

The stressor - what causes the stress. These are relative to the people - not everyone has the same stressors. However some are common among people such as loud noises.

If the stressers add up than we have a difficult time coping. To help this, you must be able to recognize the stress.

**Frustration** - blocked from obtaining a goal.

Daily hassle - these are more common frustrations that occur daily. There are 8 of them.

* household hassles
* health hassles
* time pressure hassles
* inner concern hassles - low self esteem and loneliness
* environmental hassles - noise, crowding, pollution
* financial hassles
* work hassles
* future-security hassles - concerns about job security, taxes, and investments.

Life changes also causes stress. They differ from the above in two ways

many are positive and desirable

tend to happen less often.

Life changes were ranked by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe. Stressors were ranked from 1-100. The result is the Social Readjustment Rating Scale. Just because they are positive changes does not mean they can’t cause stress. Too many at once can lead to health problems like high blood pressure.

The combination of daily hassles and life changes influence your quality of life. One can worry too much, can cause health problems. Those who experience too many in one year are more likely to develop medical problems than those who don’t.

**Conflict**

This is being pulled in tow or more directions by opposing forces or motives. There are 4 types of conflicts.

* approach-approach conflict - least stressful because the choices are positive. The goals are desirable and within reach.. This is resolved by making a decision. You still may have doubts until you are actually in the new situation.
* Avoidance-avoidance conflict - you are forced to choose the lesser of two evils - (two unsatisfactory alternatives) You tend to be motivated to avoid both negative goals - but you avoiding one causes you to be closer to the other.
* Approach avoidance conflict - one goal. The choice is both good and bad. College has the program you want, but it is far away and really expensive.
* Multiple approach - avoidance conflict - several approaches and they all have pros and cons.

The more conflicting motives the higher levels of stress. They have to make the decision to reduce the stress but sometimes the decision itself causes more stress. Some solutions to this is making a pros/cons list. - think cost/benefit when we were doing problem solving.

**Personality Types**

some people actually create their own stress. There are two personality types according to psychologists.

* Type A - intense - they always are on the go, the put the pressure on themselves. Tend to be highly driven and competitive. They never seem to have enough time, multitaskers, quick to become angry.
* Type B - laid back - relaxed more patient, not easily angered, less driven.

Type A tend to earn more money than Type B but they pay the price with more stress in their lives. If they can’t loosen up they tend to run a higher risk of heart disease.

**Section 2 - Responses and Effects**

**Response to Stress** - depending on your personality you respond to stress differently. Those who more laid back will most likely not respond to prolonged stress physically. As we said before, the stress of an event depends on the meaning of the event to the individual. There can also be a biological factor to stress. Some people inherit the ability to develop certain health problems under stress. either way there are some things you can do to influence the effects of stress.

**Self-Efficacy -** self efficacy expecations are the belief that people have that they can accomplish goals that they set for themselves. You have to believe in yourself. This is related to self confidence. This can reduce the amount of adrenaline in the bloodstream when you are in a frightening situation. They are also less likely to be effected by stress

**Psychological Hardiness -** a personality trait based on research done by Suzanne Kobasa. People with psychological hardiness exhibit there traits -

* Commitment - they believed their work was meaningful and stress was a source of motivation rather than victimizing them.
* Challenge - preferred change to stability. change is interesting and rewarding rather than threatening.
* Control - viewed themselves as being in control of their lives and able to influence and control the rewards and punishments they received.

**Sense of Humor -** laughter is definitely the best medicine. Studies have shown that those who find humor in difficult situations have less stress than those students who don’t see the humor. Some research says that emotions - happiness and anger - have effects on the immune system.

**Predictability -** being able to predict a stressor helps reduce the stress. This stems from being able to plan for the stressor which allows you time to be able to cope with it before it becomes an issue. Those who undergo medical procedures and ask questions about the pain and the outcomes tend to recover better and faster than those that don’t.

**Social Support -** helps insulate people from stress. Those that tend to be alone are more likely to develop infectious diseases when they are under stress. There are several ways tons provide social support.

* express your concern by listening - offering sympathy, understanding, and reassurance
* physical relief - provide material support like doing something for them
* information - this includes advice that might help the person cope
* feedback - this helps them understand or make sense of what they are experiencing
* socialize - just being with them helps.

There are many studies that show the effects of social support. Exercising together, recovering when you have a support system in place.

The General Adaptation Syndrome

Researcher Hans Selye describes the body under stress as like an alarm that doesn’t shut off. Regardless of the type of stress the body responds the same. this is response is the General adaptation syndrome. There are three stages

* The alarm reaction - when the stressor is first received. Also known as the flight or fight reaction. Your sympathetic nervous system is activated so hormones flood your system including adrenaline and noradrenaline and corticosteroid and ACTH which help protect the body form allergic reactions.
* The Resistance Stage - This is activated if the stressor is not removed after the alarm stage. people attempt to find a way to cope. The body tries to repair what has been damaged (this may be loss of energy or balance)
* the exhaustion stage - this happens when the stressor is still not removed The adrenal and other glands can no longer secrete the hormones of the flight or fight stage. The muscles begin to wear out and the heart and breathing rate slow down. Continued stress during this stage may cause people to develop health problems ranging from stress and hives to ulcers and heart disease.

Effects of Stress on the Immune System - chronic stress can reduce the immune system.

* The Immune System - the way your immune system works is by producing white blood cells that recognize and then destroy foreign bodies in your system. Stress makes your body produce steroids which slows down the immune system. your body can’t produce antibodies and then you are more vulnerable to disease and infections. Studies have been done that show that high stress reduces the immune system, but they have also shown that good social support systems improve the immune system.

Section 3 Psychological Factors and Health

**biological and psychological factors**

Biological factors are important in whether someone may or may not have some kind of physical ailment. some biological factors are inherited others are result of exposure, accidents, and injuries, as well as age.

You have to remember that just because there is a family history does not mean that its a done deal, it just means that you are more susceptible to a problem, but it could potentially be avoided.

Health problems are also related to psychological factors such as attitude and patterns of behavior. As more research has been conducted, there is definitely a link between pscychological factors and health. As a result more medical schools are hiring health psychologists to train their doctors.

Headaches - are one of the most common stress related health problems. Roughly 20% of Americans suffer from stress induced or tension headaches.

Types of headaches

* muscle tension - stress cauess the muscles in your neck, shoulders, forehead, and scalp to tighten. Prolonged muscle contraction can lead to prolonged headaches. These are characterized by pain on both sides of the head and a feeling of tension or tightness of pressure.
* migraine headaches - sudden onset and severe throbbing on one side. 1 in 10 Americans are affected and they can also from hours to days. Some have a warning sign or auras before an attack. This is generally some kind of visual distortion or the perception of unusual odors. When you are suffering from a migraine you may also be sensitive to light, have a loss of appetite, nausea, vomitting, loss of balance, and changes in mood. When a migraine strikes, your neurons fire and the back of the brain and send messages down your brain stem which has several pain cneters. Some triggers include change in barometric pressure, pollen and some types of drugs also hormonal changes with menstruation and even aged cheese.
  + There are also psychological factors that make them worse. People with Type A personalitites/behavior tend to suffer more.

headache pain itself can be a stressor which leads to other issues such as increased muscle tension - so its a vicious cycle.

Treatment for headaches - Many types of OTC and prescription drugs are used to fight the pain. They work in different ways though. Some inhibit the production of the prostaglandins that help initiate transmission of pain messages of the brain.

There are also behavior modification techniques that can be used. - progressive relations focuses on decreased muscle tension, biofeedback is another one.

Heart Disease - not quite sure how stress increases the risk but they know that it does. There is a link between chronic stress and increased blood pressure and cholesterol. It may also lower the immune system.

Risk factors for heart disease include:

* family history - genetics
* physical conditions - obesity, high serum cholesterol and hypertension
* patterns of consumption - drinking, smoking, overeating
* Type A Behavior
* Anger and hostility
* job strain
* lack of exercise

You can make some behavioral changes though that will reduce the risk.

* quitting smoking
* controlling weight
* reducing hypertension
* lowering serum cholesterol levels
* changing Type A behavior patterns
* exercising regularly

Cancer can also be a result of stress. Cancer itself is a disease that involves he rapid and abnormal growth of malignant cells. They can take hold anywhere and if not caught early can spread. People actually develop cancer cells frequently, but the immune system fights them off. When your immune system is weakened by too much stress it is unable to fight the cancer.

Risk factors

* genetics
* behavior
* psychological problems and prolonged anxiety
* More stress less ability to fight

Psychological aspects - along with the physical effects of the cancer, people also have to fight the psychological problems - anxiety, depression, feelings of vulnerability

Cancer is generally treated with chemotherapy, but some times those options are not available. Studies have been shown that the attitude people have about their cancer makes a difference. The survival rate of those with a fighting spirit was much higher than those without one. Social support is also has a higher survival rate.

Section 4 - Ways of Coping with Stress

Defensive Coping - it removes the immediate effects of the stressor but not a great solution in the long run. Some examples of this are substance abuse, running away or withdrawal, or self deception. It just postpones the inevitable -sometimes it allows you to gather your will to fight, but eventually you have to face the stressor or be harmed.

* substance abuse - can cause a psychological dependence which makes the problem worse.
* aggression - use violence to cope, but it rarely provides solutions and again just make things worse
* Withdrawal - sometimes this is emotional or physical. Suicide is the ultimate form of withdrawal.
* defense mechanism - Freud - they protect the individual from dealing from the desires of the id.

Active Coping - changing the environment or situation.

* changing stressful thoughts - you can learn to identify self defeating thoughts. When you are feeling anxious you can concentrate on those thoughts and change them to be more calming.
* relaxation techniques - meditation, biofeedback,and progressive relaxation - this last one teaches people how to relax by having them purposely tense a specific muscle group and then relax it.
* Exercise - fosters good health, and brings about psychological well being
* breathing - practicing controlled breathing -
  + sit with your back straight
  + place your tongue against het back of your teeth
  + keeping your mouth close, slowing inhale through your nose and mentally count to five.
  + hold your breath while you count to seven in your head.
  + exhale making a whooshing sound through tyro opened mouth for a count of eight. You should feel your lungs release the air.
  + Repeat three more times