

A Look at Stress

Written by Liz Anderson-Peacock, D.C.

Friday, 01 September 2006 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 March 2014 12:58

Dr. Hans Selye believed that stress is necessary for adaptation. As Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest or the smartest of the species that survive, but the one most able to adapt to change." Stress is a requirement for adaptation. Many times we think of stress as a negative or an overtaxing drain mentally, physically, or emotionally. Negatively interpreted stress has been shown to initiate and contribute to many disease processes and can aggravate current diseases.

MIND — BODY

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How two people perceive an event or situation may dictate vastly different responses by the body if one interprets stress negatively and the other positively. Selye's research showed that stress has two opposing counters: "no-stress," which is a negative interpretation, and "yo-stress," which is the positive. Simplified, one is processed as bad stress the other as good stress. The body needs both.

To interpret our world, we use our senses: smell, taste, touch, sight, hearing, and joint and body perception. To interpret an experience, we require a catalyst or gradient — opposing information. To see light, we need to understand dark. To understand hot, we need to have the experience of cold. To experience hunger, we need to know satiety.

Likewise, to build and have a strong muscle, we must load, or "stress," it. By loading the muscle, we cause its elements to break down and reorganize into stronger and larger components. The muscle doesn't become strong at the time of stressing, but once repaired, its strength has increased.

Even our blood vessels are under stress, as the pumping of blood through arteries meets the resistance of the vessel wall. Our lungs inflate and deflate against a resistance of the tissues.

Can there be life without stress? Our simple answer is "no." Being able requires a balance of stressors in the body. This balance is called homeostasis. Our body is in a constant state of creation and destruction, with formation of new cells and removal of dead cells. We need stress to live. How we interpret our life within our body and our environment is important. Have you noticed that stress may lead to one person's demise while another may thrive? Is this attributed to training, preparation, and interpretation by the individual? Or, is it happenstance?

We affect how our body interprets stress through training. This is why someone training for a marathon has to train over many months to physically stress the body's tissues and give them time to respond by strengthening and adapting to the strain of the extended, prolonged running. If one were to run a prolonged distance without training, trauma to the body would probably result, but if one takes a number of months to slowly allow the body to adapt to increasing amounts of stress (yes, a form of trauma), the body can interpret the event with much less damage and have a positive experience.

The same goes for certain careers. For example, a firefighter who has undergone basic training then prepares both the body and the mind for further scenarios they may encounter. For an untrained person, running into a burning building without training could lead to his demise; fear and lack of preparation could leave him unable to think rationally and clearly. A firefighter, however, has learned through experience and training what limits can and cannot be breached. He'll experience stress, but the body will demonstrate a controlled, effective response.

Selye says the general adaptive stress (GAS) response is when we initially experience an event, interpret it as stress, and go into an alarm phase. In this phase, the body prepares itself with physiological changes intended to deal with the stress. Remember the fight-or-flight response? Our body prepares to fight an invader or "run" to save ourselves. With this reaction come chemical and hormonal changes in the body, an elevated heart rate, faster breathing, greater muscular tension, and more mental acuity. If the stressor recedes, our physiology returns to normal. Over time, if we continue to confront the same stressor, the stress response enters the resistance phase, which keeps us in an elevated state of preparedness. However, our resources eventually become fatigued or something breaks down and we hit a wall—the exhaustion phase. This is often when we see symptoms.

It becomes important to recognize how we each deal with our stress, how we take it on, and how we release it.

First, note what you experience when under stress:

- Is there a pattern you can observe regarding when, where, or how you have this experience?
- What triggers it?
- With whom do you have it?
- What do you feel when you become stressful?
- How does your breathing change?
- How do you hold stress in your face? And in your jaw, shoulders, neck, and upper and lower back?
- How are you holding your posture?
- Is there tension in your stomach?
- Is your heart pounding?
- How are you communicating to others?
- What is your role and how do you speak?
- What kind of decisions are you making with family, friends, or workers?
- How are you communicating with your family, friends, and colleagues?
- Are you planning your life, or is life happening to you?
- How are you sleeping?



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- How are you communicating to others?
- What is your rate and tone of speech?

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- What kind of decisions are you making with family, friends, co-workers?
- How are you communicating with your family, friends, and colleagues?
- Are you planning your life, or is life happening to you?
- How are you sleeping?

What can be interpreted as negative stress? Perceived negatives may be:

- Crowds of people
- Unproductive meetings
- Financial concerns
- Negative emotions
- Anxiety for others
- Cold or hot weather conditions
- Lack of sleep
- Diet
- Violence
- Chemicals
- Loud noise
- Overwork
- Poor fitness
- Arguments
- Lack of job satisfaction
- Worry
- Lack of time, over commitments
- Not following your dreams

How can you reset from daily sources of stress? You might wish to investigate the following:

- Mindful-based meditation
- Deep balanced abdominal breathing
- Exercises—research shows even a half hour of walking daily can relieve mild to moderate depression
- Yoga
- Music—chants, classical, ambient music

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- Nature walks
- Journaling your thoughts
- Movies that make you laugh
- Safe exposure to sunlight
- Healthy sleep patterns
- A well-balanced diet of minimally processed foods
- Being in control of your innermost dominant thoughts and outward actions

Consider these questions:

- How can you be thankful for your stress?
- What is the stressor telling you about your life?
- Is change needed in your priorities?

Assignments

Identify your stressors and journal them. These stressors can also be labeled things that you resent. For instance, you may resent not feeling well, or a close person's illness in your life making your life feel difficult; or a stressor could be that you resent your partner coming home late at night; or that someone is selfish, mean, greedy...remember that there are 4600 human traits and we all demonstrate every trait...only we demonstrate them in different forms (one may be greedy with money, and another may be greedy with their time).

Identify your response for each item.

Now identify 5 other responses you could choose for each item. Note what changes could occur by changing your response.

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What would be the benefit in choosing a different response? What are the benefits to you in your spirituality, your knowledge, your career time, your profitability, your fitness level, your socialization? Finding the benefits of an emotional charge causing the perception of stress, will allow you to be grateful for the so called “stressors” that exist.

What lessons have you learned from each stressor? This might include increased awareness of how or where you hold stress in your body or it might include new strategies in dealing with situations or people.

- Is there a benefit in staying with the present response you are choosing and is there a benefit in changing your response?
- What are the benefits for both?
- If your behavior stays the same and does not change, how will the response change?
- If your behavior, actions, or response changes will a different outcome occur?
- Who controls how you respond to stress?
- Who controls your ability to change your perception, your action, and your response?

