

Stress

WHAT IS STRESS?

According to Hans Selye, the Montreal psychologist and stress "expert," stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it. In short, everything a person has to adjust to in any way is stressful to some degree. Life is a stress class. Body chemistry and electricity respond to the continual stimulus of inner and outer conditions in a holistic way. In other words, the body and mind are affected as a whole. When stress becomes harmful because the body's adaptability is overtaxed, the person technically becomes distressed.

In simplistic terms, imagine that your adaptability is your degree of flexibility. Will you bend or break? The pull exerted on a piece of elastic is stress. Its degree of stretchability is its resilience. Some people can handle a great deal of stress; others reach their breaking point more quickly.

Selye says that we are each born with a limited adaptability; that some people are inherently stronger than others. Other sources say that this ability to adapt depends on heredity, character, temperament, age, sex, state of health, emotional balance, past experience, and environment.

STRESS CAN BE EXTERNAL OR INTERNAL

Some examples of inner stress are:

- hunger, thirst, frustrated sexual drives
- insecurity
- hypersensitivity
- perfectionism
- conflicting choices ("the craziness that comes from too much choice" —Joni Mitchell)
- Any adverse conditioning such as stereotyping sex roles and other impossible ideas. Any expectations that are either too idealistic to live up to or incongruous to your intrinsic personality. (In other words, trying to push yourself into unrealistic models rather than being yourself.) Too many "shoulds."
- symbolic meaning of events, e.g. "If this person leaves me it proves that I am not worth loving."
- a desire to control outside events you have no power over
- emotional sets: fears, worries, phobias, compulsions
- your belief system: What do you accept as truths? How does this affect your stress level?

Some examples of outer stress are:

- heat, cold, the weather
- social relationships: e.g. becoming a middle-aged woman in this society, relationships that are either too limiting or too undefined, blind role-playing, etc.
- job stresses
- diet: e.g. lack of proper nutrients (vitamins, minerals, proteins, etc.)
- pollution: smog, noise, transportation hassles.

Whether or not stress will overwhelm your coping abilities depends on the intensity of the stress, the duration of it, and your susceptibility to it. Very often the stressful event

that damages you is a minor "last straw" event at the end of a series of difficult happenings.

Excessive stress and failure to cope is the major cause of mental illness and many physical illnesses and is a major factor in all disease.

How susceptible to distress are you?

Is your life situation basically happy? i.e., satisfying work, friends to confide in, good physical health. If not, a relatively minor stress can precipitate a crisis.

Do you have to adapt to a number of changes at once? It is usually easier to take change one at a time.

What are your limits? What inner resistance do you have? Experience and heightening of self awareness helps here. Know yourself.

Timing is important. Something that does not ordinarily bother you can explode you at a sensitive time.

If your life is generally solid and secure you will have a better chance of withstanding wear and tear. If you are already on shaky ground, you will be easily overwhelmed.

It also helps to know your normal cyclical rhythms, menstrual and otherwise. When you do not flow with your rhythms and moods you will be more susceptible to distress.

How to know if you are overstressed:

We don't always know whether we are under stress or not. Maybe you have been carrying a load for so long you are no longer aware that you are under tension. (The function of tension is to numb pain.)

It is difficult in this complex distracting world to be tuned into yourself with all the stimuli pushing and pulling you this way and that and knocking you off balance.

It is important to learn to tune into yourself, to relax with yourself and to listen to the messages your body is relaying to you. Body awareness techniques such as focusing your attention on different parts of your body during deep relaxation can be tremendously helpful. Try to be quiet with yourself and "hear" your body at least once a day, for at least 15 minutes. Illness is described in Oriental philosophy as a lack of balance between positive and negative electrical energy in the body. Balancing your body energy through centering develops an awareness of this and can correct disharmony or dis-ease (lack of ease). A healthy body is supple, strong, and energetic.

Learn to be more in touch with yourself, more honest and accepting of yourself as you are. You might need to get through the armoring of your defence system. As you peel off the layers (like getting to the core of an onion) at each layer you will uncover the pain that put it there while you also increase your capacity for joy. Between each layer of release and pleasure there is a layer of resistance and tension. Do you realistically need all those defences now or are they a result of past conditioning or present misperception?

Ask a close friend if you seem more uptight than usual. Pick someone you can trust to be honest with you.

Unresolved tension can develop into depression. If you are depressed try to trace it to its source.

Some danger signals that alert you to the fact that your coping skills are not handling the situation well are:

Are you sick often? Do you need a great deal of sleep? Chronic fatigue, restlessness, irritability, feelings of sadness, insomnia, loss of appetite, compulsive overeating, loss of interest in work, life, or surroundings. Chronic physical illness.

Once you realize that you are overstressed, identify the source of stress. A job? A relationship? Money strains? Etc. When you recognize the source you are well on your way to coping with it.

How do you adapt to stress?

The primitive fight or flight body reaction is still with us. Do I fight the enemy or do I run? Do I try to change the situation or do I leave the scene because the "enemy" is too much for me? And then there is always the choice of putting up with the situation and simply adapting by changing your perception of it. . . .

Some ways of coping with stress are more helpful than others. Some coping methods actually tend to be more stressful than the situation coped with! Examples are:

- alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, coffee tend to deplete the body's resources, especially if used chronically. Tranquilizers used over a period of months or years tend to numb a person rather than to help them to deal with their situation.
- overeating or not eating
- avoidance and denial. This leads to personal deterioration. You might try to get away from an uncomfortable situation by convincing yourself that it doesn't exist. This can sometimes help if you're a magician but could tend to isolate you from reality while the problem goes on disturbing you at unconscious levels, unresolved.
- sitting and stewing—getting tense and doing nothing constructive about it.
- yelling at your kids: creating stress for them.
- escaping into a fantasy world: this can be nice for temporary diversion but is harmful if it is a habitual way of not dealing with the problem.
- giving up: becoming aimless and inactive, "who cares?"
- feeling guilty about feeling inadequate to cope with stress.

Deciding whether a method of coping with stress is helpful or harmful is an individual choice. Some "poor" methods can be good at the right time for the right person. Some usually "good" methods can be wrong for some individuals. Also check to see if you are addicted to your own particular ways of dealing with stress (e.g., If I don't exercise today I'll be in a bad mood tomorrow). Use your intuition and tune into what you need.

Some ways of coping that tend to be more successful and encourage growth are:

- A first step is to recognize the stressor (what's really bugging you?), accept the situation, and then deal with it as directly as possible.
- Assertiveness training: learn to state clearly without manipulation how you feel and what you need from people. There are some books available on this. It is important to be sensitive about this new technique and not to use it in a blatant way.

- Temporary escape helps reduce the immediate tension caused by stress. Vacations. Time out. Entertainment. If the stress is recognized and accepted and you then divert yourself from it, the mind will continue to work on the problem unconsciously. The solution could come as a flash. This is a good release from too much circular thinking too. like the intellect chasing its tail and resolving nothing.
- Using it as a creative springboard (hopefully not as a diving board to submerge yourself in the waters of oblivion!) Write, dramatize, sing, dance, paint, etc. E.g., sadness could go into a poem; a tense situation could be dramatized or laughed at; sing the blues; draw a picture of one part of you arguing with another part, etc.
- Get the volatile emotional content out. Express it in some way by talking to friends, letting out a good yell in the right place, breaking dishes, beating phone books with a whip, crying, leaping in the air and shouting hurrah! etc. etc.
- Change to another form of stress. If you feel emotionally uptight you might want to play tennis to work it out. Try pounding nails when you're angry. If one activity becomes boring and tiring, change to another. Boredom is stressful!
- Are you arguing a lot? It can be helpful to give in occasionally. Is it really that important to be right about a trivial thing? Is it worth the hassle?
- If you are really stuck in your own problems try diverting your attention to someone else's needs. If you can make someone else happy it will take some of the pressure off your own problems and help give you a wider perspective.
- The NEW HAT method. New clothing can help you to see yourself in a new light. You can express yourself with colour and texture, etc. This can lift your spirits and help you to cope in a more positive way.
- Getting into nature. Go out into the woods. Become a part of nature and feel the intrinsic harmony of it all. Then bring the harmony inward. Stop to smell a daffodil or a hyacinth in the middle of car exhaust smells on a busy street.
- Pamper yourself. Treat yourself to your favourite food, a warm perfumed bath, incense, your favorite music, soften your skin with delicious lotions, whatever makes you feel good. This is a method especially recommended for preorgasmic women.
- Release tension by relaxing and letting music totally absorb you, by being massaged, by practising yoga, by loosening the body into dance.
- Arrange your life so that you feel happy in more than one situation. If you put all of your eggs in one basket what happens when the basket falls? If things are uptight at home maybe they'll be more relaxed at work.

Some inner changes:

- Examine your attitudes: Are you overly competitive? Do you constantly need to play one-upmanship games to bolster your ego? (insecurity) Do you really want to be Superwoman? Do you expect too much from other people? Are you constantly disappointed? Do you have much confidence in your coping ability or do you see yourself as weak and inadequate? Do you take things as they come, letting life happen to you or do you continually struggle against it?
- Humor: Can you joke today about situations that seemed serious to you yesterday? Talk about it and have a good

laugh over it. Distance yourself from it and see it as another play in the human melodrama. You can take life like a dance or like it's a heavy load on you.

- **Imagination:** Create an image in your mind of how you'd like to be. See yourself as coping with the situation in a healthy growing way. See that you are getting something positive out of every stressful situation.
- **Dreams.** Become more aware of your dreams. Sometimes messages from your intuition come through your dreams to help you understand your situation.
- **Tune into your intuition.** Trust yourself. Balance your mind energy by using both sides of your brain appropriately.

Relationships

- Learn to see through the manipulative game-playing that goes on in many relationships and be more direct in expressing your feelings. It helps to be clear about the problem, to state it and to avoid blame. Encounter groups can help by confronting you with your gimmicky behavior and helping you to uncover your underlying reality. What do you really want? How do you really feel? If you feel left out, slighted, neglected and rejected remember that the other person could feel the same way. Instead of shrinking away, make yourself available without being pushy.

In short, first be aware that you are tense and under stress. Then identify its source; then deal with it in a constructive way. The ways of handling stress are as limited as your imagination. You are your own healer.