

STRESS

A human experiences the feeling of stress when its levels of alertness are kept artificially high by overexposure to problems. One wonders why some people are essentially "laid back" while others are getting ulcers. The real difference (medical conditions aside) is that some people know how to avoid stress, while others do not.

WHY BE CONCERNED ABOUT STRESS?

Excessive stress in your life interferes with your interpersonal relationships at home, on the job, and socially. It can make you spend your efforts on not being unhappy, rather than on being happy. Stress can waste your vitality and deplete your personal energy resources that could be used for enjoyment. You can become negatively influenced in your attitudes and feelings about yourself more easily. In addition, medical research estimates as much as 90 percent of illness and disease is stress-related. Stress can interfere with your physical functioning and bodily processes. High blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and heart disease have been linked to stress factors. Other stress-related ailments include ulcers, allergies, asthma, and migraine headaches. Most health professionals agree stress can be a contributing factor in making existing medical problems worse.

Environmental and societal pressures—our competitive, success-oriented way of life—may lead us to potentially hazardous health. According to the United States Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, "Eighty-three percent of all deaths for adults between the age of 21 and 65 are related to lifestyle." Unmanaged stress is increasingly a characteristic of many Americans today.

(Source: U.S. Center for Disease Control)

COMMON CAUSES OF STRESS

Everyone differs in what is stressful or potentially stressful. What for one person might seem to be a catastrophic event may be a minor setback for another. The following are some common causes of stress:

Physical Fears—examples include working with heavy/dangerous machinery, exposure to toxic chemicals and dangerous/congested traffic situations.

Psychological Fears—such as failure, not being able to get the job done and inability to manage debts.

Uncertainty—In each person's life there are uncertainties that can cause stress. The change of a job may necessitate many other changes in the life of a person or family members. Trying to sell a home and buy another in the new location may be stressful. Logic and informed predictions have a place, but often stress piles up because there are so many "unknowns" in such situations. Life is filled with uncertainty. It is discomfiting not to know what is going to happen, particularly if your control of the situation is impeded by weather, market fluctuations, illness or traffic accidents.

Attitudes—A positive or negative attitude influences a person’s reaction to stressful situations. For example, if you feel your job is worthwhile, you may see some of the problems you encounter as challenges. Seen as pluses, the problems or potential problems become motivators. However, if you resent your situation or feel “stuck” in your job, similar experiences create stress, a stress that frustrates instead of motivating you.

Perceptions—Past experiences and the resources you feel you have available to meet life’s demands will affect the degrees of stress you may experience. The degree of stress experienced will be affected by your perception of your ability to meet the particular demands. How you perceive the situation determines if it is or is not stressful. Perception can be broken down in the following ways:

- Self - Your sense of competency, self-esteem, values, interests and needs.
- Personal resources - Past experience in handling stress and your health.
- Material resources - Finances, equipment and storage.
- People resources - Other people who can assist you, such as friends, coworkers, family members and professionals.

Change—All change produces stress, even positive changes. Marriage is a positive change that is also a period when adjustment is necessary. For some people, this adjustment can be stressful. A vacation may also be stressful; arrangements must be made for the trip and for work, and there is always a tendency to plan too many activities.

Negative changes are not as difficult to identify as stress-producing. These are situations you would not like to occur, such as children leaving home to start careers, economic recession causing financial crisis, or loss of a valuable possession.

Change demands your adjustment to the particular situation, whether you desire the change or not. Developmental changes that you are able to plan for—pregnancy and birth, children growing up, the aging process—may still be stressful even though anticipated.

(Source: U.S. Center for Disease Control)

DEALING WITH STRESS

When experiencing stress, you may be affected totally, not only in your body but also in your emotional reactions, your personal thoughts, and your relations with others. Additionally, stress levels can be elevated simply by your driving environment. Many recent scientific studies have shown that congested traffic conditions can heighten stress levels in drivers. The longer distance one has to commute can cause a dramatic increase in the level of stress one experiences. Here are a few helpful tips for keeping your stress levels under control:

- Deep Breathing: You can obtain a more relaxed state by slowing and deepening your breathing. Your body can influence the calming of your mind.
- Attitude Adjustment: Your reactions to potentially stressful situations are the real causes of your stress. It is important to analyze these situations and adjust your attitude to accept them positively. Have a sense of humor.
- Planning Ahead: Planning your route and schedule carefully ahead of time is a good example of how to avoid preventable problems. Do you have to take this route? Would another route with less traffic be an option? How about carpooling? You get the picture.