

Life Skills

Developing Skills
for Life's Challenges

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S-T-R-E-S-S

What is It?

Stress is a fact of modern life. The economic downturn the late 1980's and early 1990's forced businesses to streamline to survive and compete. This put many people out of work, left many insecure about their job, and today even those with secure jobs are often required to take on more work and responsibility than ever before. Psychologist Robert Kriegel reports that over 85% of the work force experiences high stress on the job. The world is more competitive and less predictable than ever before.

Work is not the only source of stress. Relationships, managing a home or budget, parenting, and

crises, are just a few of the many things that can lead to feeling "stressed out". But what is stress? We all know the upset stomach, muscle tension, headaches, irritability, and sleeplessness that we experience as a reaction to unpleasant events and circumstances in our lives. Stress is basically the physical and emotional response we have to change. Change requires us to adapt, which challenges our minds and bodies. Some stress can be good; it motivates us and may lead to peak performance. But if stress continues for too long or if there is too much of it, it may lead to physical or emotional breakdown. Dealing with stress in unhealthy ways (for example, avoiding dealing with problems or over-

eating) can lead to further problems. We will always have stress, and need to learn to deal with it in healthy ways. It is possible to thrive under pressure, if we can do so.

Symptoms of Stress

- ✓ Tension
- ✓ Distractibility
- ✓ Irritability
- ✓ Sleep Difficulties
- ✓ Increased susceptibility to colds and other infections
- ✓ Overeating
- ✓ Overreacting Emotionally
- ✓ Sweaty Palms
- ✓ Chronic Fatigue
- ✓ Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, caffeine

For Help or Information:

William D. Morgan, Psy.D.
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- Growth Oriented Psychotherapy
- Assessments and Testing
- Counseling
- Consultations
- Organizational Development
- Executive Coaching

Dr. Morgan is a psychologist in private practice in Paoli, PA. His approach to counseling and therapy is distinctively growth-oriented, emphasizing gaining the skills needed to handle life's challenges.

Stress and the Common Cold

In 1992 The New England Journal of Medicine published a report that concluded stress undermines our defenses against infectious diseases. The study involved 420 men and women and found that people who reported high levels of psychological stress were twice as likely to develop a cold as those reporting low stress levels. So, to avoid a cold, pass up that blow-up with the boss!

Practical Ways to Cut Stress:

- Reduce the number of major life changes occurring at any one time.
- Seek support of family, friends or professionals.
- Pray about your situation.
- Learn to say “No” when your schedule is full.
- Lessen your load—write down all your cares and responsibilities in order of priority, and eliminate the least important ones.
- Exercise helps keep you healthier and burns excess adrenaline caused by stress and anxiety.
- Learn to manage time effectively and organize yourself. Set priorities and plan how to get them done.
- Take time off and get away completely: a vacation, day off, a walk. Relax and restore yourself.

— Facts About Stress —

1. Stress begins with situations, events, and circumstances which occur in our lives. Stress researchers Holmes and Rahe developed a scale of human experiences, each with a corresponding number of “life change units” depending on the level of stressfulness. Death of spouse topped the scale with 100 units. Towards the bottom of the life of 43 experiences was Christmas with 12 units. In between are being fired at work (47 units), pregnancy (40 units), buying a house (31 units), and dieting (15 units).
2. Nothing is automatically stressful. Much of what distresses us lies in how we view or interpret our circumstances. One person may see a job change as welcome, another as the end of the world. If you put ten people in the same situation, each would react differently. Often, the events themselves are not as important in determining stress as how we look at them.
3. We have a physical response to stress. Common responses involve a state of physiological arousal and include increased heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. The chronic and consistent physiological arousal associated with a reaction to stress can result in physical or emotional breakdowns such as ulcers, chest pains, illness, and emotional disorder. Holmes and Rahe found in their research that an accumulation of 300 “life change units” in one year was associated with a high risk for developing a major illness. Other researchers have found that 50-80% of all illnesses (including the common cold) are stress-related.
4. We may tend to react to stressful experiences in unhealthy ways such as:
 - Avoiding the problem
 - Smoking, drinking, eating
 - Being irritable or even exploding at people
 - Procrastinating.

— Ways to Handle Stress —

1. Try to change the stressful situation in your life if you can. If there is something that can be done to alleviate the problem situation, do it.

2. Try to change your view of the stressful situation. Perhaps there is a more realistic way of looking at it. We all tend at times to “make mountains out of molehills”—to catastrophize. What are you telling yourself that is causing you to be anxious? Is it true? Realistic?

3. Learn to relax. Allow time for relaxation and pleasant activities

that will get your mind off of the stressful situation. Get in touch with your body sensations of tension and relaxation and develop the skill of muscle relaxation. Also helpful are exercise, prayer, or taking a few deep breaths.

4. If you are reacting to stress in unhealthy ways—catch yourself.

Example: Instead of avoiding the problem, confront it. Avoiding problems and procrastination tend to increase your stress.

Finding Help

You will notice that each of these approaches to reducing stress derives from one of the four important facts about stress stated earlier. For some people, stress may be overwhelming or unhealthy stress reactions may actually be a part of a difficult-to-change pattern. A counselor can help with changing patterns and coping with stress effectively. Benefits include not only overcoming a problem or making an important change, but a learning and growth experience developing skills for a lifetime.

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