

## LIVING WITH STRESS

Stress is a fact of life. Dr. Hans Selye, author of *Stress Without Distress*, points out that stress can be a good thing. In fact, he calls it "the spice of life." "Since stress is associated with all types of activity," he explains, "we could avoid most of it only by never doing anything. Who would enjoy a life of no runs, no hits, no errors?" The big question, then, is how can we make the most of the unavoidable stresses of life? How can we avoid or reduce the harmful effects of stress?

## WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress can be defined as anything which upsets our equilibrium. It is "an inner feeling of apprehension, uneasiness, concern, worry, and/or dread which is accompanied by heightened physical arousal." Stress may be acute (of high intensity with a short duration) or chronic (of low intensity but persistent and long-lasting). Stress may be normal (in proportion to the danger) or neurotic (danger is mild or nonexistent). Stress is real and necessary. Stress helps us accomplish our tasks. Stress helps us deal with threat. Stress can help refine our character. But on the other hand, too much stress can be dangerous. The hormone of stress is adrenaline, which produces a physical "high" or "kick". So stress can be addictive, and excessive stress can result in physical problems such as ulcers, headaches, hypertension, etc.

## IDENTIFYING CAUSES OF STRESS

Everyone experiences stressful situations from time to time. We call these events stressors because they represent the demands that are responsible for triggering the stress response. One of the most important skills in learning to cope with the effects of stress is knowing what causes stress in your life.

Threat. Threat of death (loss of physical life) or threat of meaninglessness (loss of spiritual / psychological life) can cause stress. The threat of danger due to violent crime or war, the threat of separation from important people in our lives, the threat of losing self-esteem--these threats produce uncertainty, helplessness, and stress.

Conflict. A struggle between two or more alternatives can cause uncertainty and stress.

Fear. Fear of failure, the future, rejection, conflict, loneliness, etc. can cause stress.

Unmet needs. The failure to meet one's basic needs for survival, security, love, and significance in life can cause frustration, fear, and stress.

Take a few moments to consider what causes stress in your life. Many stressors will be familiar to you because they occur as part of the daily routine. They may include traffic, work deadlines, or family problems. Other stressors may be less obvious and require more thought. If you have difficulty in identifying as many stressors as you would like, close your eyes and think about the activities of the past week. What has been stressful for you?

## WHAT DOES STRESS COST?

In all of these situations, change has made itself felt, putting pressure on us to adapt. In his book *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler claims, "All change carries a physiological price tag with it." The more radical the change, the steeper the price." Two psychiatrists at the University of Washington Medical School, Dr. Thomas H. Holmes and Dr. Richard Rahe, have developed a scale that rates the stress caused by different changes in life--major and minor, pleasant and unpleasant. They assigned a weight of 100 to the most serious of these events, gave other events lesser weights, and listed them in order of their degree of impact upon people. They further noted that if a person undergoes more than 200 impact units in any one 12-month period, he or she has experienced enough stress to warn him or her of danger. To quote Dr. Holmes, "Serious illnesses and physical or mental breakdown are often preceded by a cluster of life events. Two hundred life-change units in a single year may be more than an individual can stand, and he may be headed for a major crackup. Widowers, for example, die 40 percent faster in the first six months than comparable peers. Even if stress doesn't produce physical illness, it often exacts a mental and emotional price. At minimum, it weakens the reasoning powers, depletes physical energy, and creates an emotional imbalance that adversely affects his ability to work properly." Take a moment to read over the list on the following page and record the weighted value of each change that has occurred in your life within the last year.

NOTE: Although the LCI (Life Change Index) has been validated with large numbers of people, your personal score may or may not be an accurate predictor of future health changes. With a total score of over 200, it is possible that you could experience some type of illness or health change within a year's time. With a total score of over 300, the odds increase considerably. This index is important because it links stress with life changes. Of all stressors, the most powerful seems to be the impact of change on your personal circumstances. If your score on the scale is high, you may want to limit the number of changes you make in the near future.

The following scale is from Holmes, T. H., and Rahe, R. H., "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 11:213-218, 1967.

## LIFE CHANGE INDEX

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Impact Units</u>
1	Death of spouse	100
2	Divorce	73
3	Marital separation	65
4	Jail term	63
5	Death of close family member	63
6	Personal injury or illness	53
7	Marriage	50
8	Fired from work	47
9	Marital reconciliation	45
10	Retirement	45
11	Change in health of family member	44
12	Pregnancy	40
13	Sex difficulties	39
14	Gaining new family member	39
15	Business readjustment	39
16	Change in financial state	38
17	Death of close friend	37
18	Change to different line of work	36
19	Change in arguments with spouse	35
20	Mortgage over \$10,000	31
21	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
22	Change in responsibilities at work	29
23	Son or daughter leaving home	29
24	Trouble with in-laws	29
25	Outstanding personal achievement	28
26	Wife begins or stops work	26
27	Beginning or end of school	26
28	Change in living conditions	25
29	Revision of personal habits	24
30	Trouble with employer, boss	23
31	Change in work hours or conditions	20
32	Change in residence	20
33	Change in schools	20
34	Change in recreation	19
35	Change in church activities	19
36	Change in social activities	18
37	Mortgage, loan less than \$10,000	17
38	Change in sleeping habits	16
39	Change in number of family socials	15
40	Change in eating habits	15
41	Vacation	13
42	Christmas	12
43	Minor violations of law	11

## HOW STRESSFUL IS YOUR WORK?

Answer the following questions as they relate to experiences in your current job during the past twelve months. Place the appropriate number on the line before each question. The numbers correspond to the following descriptive terms:

6 = Always

4 = Often

2 = Seldom

5 = Frequently

3 = Occasionally

1 = Never

- \_\_\_ 1. Do you feel overqualified or underqualified for the work you actually do?
- \_\_\_ 2. Do you feel lack of identification with your profession?
- \_\_\_ 3. When you compare yourself with your co-workers and personal friends with respect to their accomplishments, are you unhappy with your career?
- \_\_\_ 4. Do you think you won't be able to satisfy the conflicting demands of the various people around you?
- \_\_\_ 5. Does your job interfere with your personal life?
- \_\_\_ 6. Does your personal life interfere with your job?
- \_\_\_ 7. Do you feel you have to do things that are against your better judgment?
- \_\_\_ 8. Are decisions or changes that affect you made without your knowledge or involvement?
- \_\_\_ 9. Are you expected to accept others' ideas without being told the rationale?
- \_\_\_ 10. Do you feel you have too little authority to carry out your responsibilities?
- \_\_\_ 11. Are you unclear about what is expected of you?
- \_\_\_ 12. Do others you work with seem unclear about what you do?
- \_\_\_ 13. Do you feel unclear about the scope and responsibilities of your job?
- \_\_\_ 14. Does management expect you to interrupt your work for new priorities?
- \_\_\_ 15. Must you attend meetings to get your job done?
- \_\_\_ 16. Does your job require travel?
- \_\_\_ 17. Do you have too much to do and too little time in which to do it?
- \_\_\_ 18. Do you have too little to do?
- \_\_\_ 19. Do you think the amount of work you have to do may interfere with how well it gets done?
- \_\_\_ 20. Do you have differences of opinion with your supervisors?

- \_\_\_ 21. Do you lack confidence in management?
- \_\_\_ 22. Do you feel unable to influence those decisions and actions of your immediate supervisors that directly affect you?
- \_\_\_ 23. Do you have unsettled conflicts with people you work with?
- \_\_\_ 24. Do you have an inappropriate amount of interaction with the people you work with?
- \_\_\_ 25. Do you feel you may not be liked and accepted by the people at work?
- \_\_\_ 26. Is there conflict between your unit and others it must work with?
- \_\_\_ 27. Must you go to other departments to get your job done?
- \_\_\_ 28. Are the people you work with trained in a different area than yours?
- \_\_\_ 29. Do you worry about decisions that affect the lives of other people?
- \_\_\_ 30. Do you feel you have too much responsibility for the work of others?
- \_\_\_ 31. Are you unaware of the manner in which your performance is evaluated?
- \_\_\_ 32. Are you in the dark about what your supervisor thinks of you, that is, how she or he evaluates your performance?
- \_\_\_ 33. Are you unaware of the degree to which your performance is evaluated as acceptable?

To score: Total your answers and divide by 33. The higher your score, the more stress you are experiencing. A score between 1.8 and 4.4 falls within the norm. However, too little stress can be as detrimental as too much. If your score is greater than 4.4 or less than 1.8, you might begin to look at the stressors or lack of stressors on your job. Also, you may want to see if your high or low scores correspond to any set of questions. This will help determine specific sources of job stress for you.

1 thru 3	measure	your fit with the job
4 thru 6	measure	role conflict
7 thru 10	measure	lack of authority
11 thru 13	measure	role ambiguity
14 thru 16	measure	interruptions
17 thru 19	measure	work load
20 thru 22	measure	supervision
23 thru 25	measure	peer relationships
26 thru 28	measure	relationships with other units
29 thru 30	measure	responsibility for others
31 thru 33	measure	evaluation

## RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF STRESS

During moments of stress, people undergo certain changes that prepare them for action. These changes represent cues indicating the early stages of the stress response. As we learn to identify these cues, we increase our awareness of the advent of stress in our lives. "The heartbeat quickens and the blood pressure rises," writes reporter Barbara Archer. "Hormones pour into the blood, alerting various organs and sending sugar to the muscles and the brain. The digestive process turns off so attention can be directed fully to the threat. Red cells flow into arteries to help the body take in additional oxygen." Your body is getting ready to relieve the pressure you are under by fight or flight. Up to this point your reactions have been automatic. What next? You must decide if the fight/flight reaction is suitable for your present circumstances. "The fight-or-flight response is often appropriate," says Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School, "and should not be thought of as always harmful." But there is another option, that is, to learn to stay with the stress situation. Or as psychiatrist Thomas F. Fogarty puts it, "Seek a balance that realistically faces the possibilities, takes action as needed, and accepts what cannot be changed." Such acceptance will exact emotional and perhaps physical wear and tear, but it will also enhance personal character and growth.

Take a few moments to identify the ways in which you recognize that you are experiencing stress. Some people notice changes in their heart rate and breathing, and others feel their muscles tightening. And there are many possible signs that indicate stress. You may wish to remember the last time you felt stressful. How did you feel? What changes did you notice?

## STRESS SIGNS

*Internal Body Processes.* Breathing is often rapid. Body temperature drops while heart rate increases. Feelings of nervousness or tiredness become frequent. Energy level is often visibly higher or lower than usual.

*Muscle Tension.* The muscles of the body tighten. Signs of pain or irritation develop in the neck, jaw, and lower back. General physical pains evolve in the body's extremities. Headaches occur.

*Emotional Reaction.* Tone of voice reflects feelings of stress. Emotional reactions such as fear, anger, and sadness are expressed through facial expressions. Positive emotions, such as joy, may also indicate physiological stress.

*Behavior Patterns.* Changes in such behavior patterns as eating and sleeping are indicators of stress. Common behavior cues are rapid or unusually slow body movements. Nonverbal gestures of hands and face may also reveal stress.

*Thought Patterns.* Excessive thought causes distraction from the here and now. Circular thought patterns often lead to the blaming of self or others for problems. Limited thought patterns exclude everything in life but one problem or situation.

*Note.* These recognizable signs are meant to be guidelines and should be considered in the context of the situation.

## HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS

*Openly express feelings.* Admitting fears, insecurities, conflicts, and anxieties will relieve tension and aid the healing process.

*Examine your relationships.* What can you do to put more warmth, more communication, and more mutual support into them? Also develop acceptable dependency relationship, relationships without excessive clinging and without sacrifice of personal integrity.

*Evaluate.* Not every argument is worth trying to win. Defend values that are important, but learn to ignore lesser issues.

*Talk about the problem.* Stay close to people and don't withdraw.

*Keep your psychological integrity intact.* Be realistic about any guilt or guilt feelings associated with stress. Refuse to pay the "shame" or "blame" tax, a devise used by inadequate people to reduce the potency of those whom they see as a threat to them.

*Be positive.* If you fail, don't concentrate on failure. Recall past successes. Build self esteem.

*Seek good advice.* Confiding in a friend can uncoil the tightly wound spring of tension. Seek professional assistance when needed. You're worth it.

*Do something for others.* Reaching out can take the focus off self and reduce the stress caused by brooding.

*Do one thing at a time.* You'll get more done with less "hassle" when you concentrate on each job as it comes.

*Choose manageable tasks.* Convert the situation to smaller risks and tasks. Don't try to solve the "big" problem all at once.

*Learn to pace yourself.* You can't operate in high gear all the time. Take a break. Go for a walk. Look out the window. Do something else.

*Stay in good physical condition.* Physical exercise can refresh you after heavy mental work. Reading a book can relax you after demanding physical action.

*Avoid impulsive action.* This includes, for example, "magic of the mouth" such as excessive eating, drinking, smoking, gabbing, etc.

*Develop a workable philosophy of life.* Create a quiet place. Take time to relax, to meditate, to pray.

## FIND A PERSONAL VISION

Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who was a deeply spiritual man and a leading social activist, expressed his sense of awe at God's hand in the world. "Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple, to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal." Some find their guiding force in another person, their work, or an avocation. Others in devotion to God, service to their country, or ministering to suffering humanity. In any event, if stress threatens our equilibrium, one antidote lies in a personal vision that can strengthen and restore that balance.

## CONSTRUCTIVE WAYS OF COPING

1. Facing the problem.
2. Enlarging one's understanding of it.
3. Working through negative feelings such as resentment, anxiety, guilt.
4. Accepting responsibility for coping with the problem.
5. Exploring alternative ways of handling it.
6. Separating the changeable from the unchangeable.
7. Accepting the unchangeable as unchangeable.
8. Surrendering grandiose, burdensome aspects of one's self-image.
9. Opening channels of communication with helping persons.
10. Taking constructive action.

## NONCONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSES TO CRISES

1. Denial that a problem exists.
2. Evasion of the problem (e.g. drugs).
3. Refusal to seek or accept help.
4. Inability to express or master negative feelings.
5. Failure to explore the nature of the crisis.
6. Failure to explore alternative solutions.
7. Projection onto others of total responsibility for causing the crisis.
8. Turning away from friends and family.

## HOW NOT TO HANDLE STRESS

"Boy do I need a drink" is a common statement from someone who has just emerged from a lot of pressure. Taking one may be the worst thing to do. A. T. Back, writing in *US News & World Report*, explains that using alcohol as a means of relaxation can set up a vicious cycle: "You have stress, then tension, and then the alcohol to relieve the tension. Then you get into a vicious cycle when the alcohol itself produces undesirable effects, and the person starts drinking more to undo the undesirable effects." Nor are pills a long-term answer. Dr. Theodore I. Rubin writes, "In many cases men and women use tranquilizers as a substitute for the healthy struggle that leads to free choice and inner growth. Anxiety is often a signal that something is going on within us which we haven't yet faced, but which is trying to surface." Avoiding stress with pills or alcohol won't solve a thing. Life is a forceful teacher. It has an uncanny way of presenting the same lesson again and again until we really learn them.



*"rules for right living"* by Satchel Paige

1. Avoid fried foods which "angry up" the blood.
2. If your stomach disputes you, lie down and pacify it with cooling thoughts.
3. Keep the juice flowing by jangling around gentle as you move.
4. Go very lightly on the vices such as carrying on in society.
5. Avoid running at all times.
6. Don't look back. Somethin' might be gaining on you.

WHY WORRY?

Is concern over the past or the future a major source of stress in your life? Consider the conclusion reached by a woman who came to the sudden realization that fears were ruining her peace of mind. She took a pencil and made a tabulation of her worries, estimating as well as she could their nature and origin. These were her conclusions:

- 40% will never happen; anxiety is the result of a tired mind.
- 30% about old decisions which I cannot alter.
- 12% others' criticism of me, most of it untrue.
- 10% about my health, which gets worse as I worry.
- 8% "legitimate" since life has some real problems to face.

Adding it up, ninety-two percent of her worries were unproductive. What would your worry balance sheet look like?

PERSONAL PLANNING

How do you spend your time? How would you like to spend your time, taking into account the importance of certain activities in your life? Make a list of fifteen specific activities related to work, family life, social and community life, and recreational, educational, or religious pursuits on which you typically spend significant time each week. Underline those activities that you consider to be very important in your life. Now add any other activities that you do not now do, or that you seldom do, that you would like to do if you had time. When you have completed your list, look back over all the activities that you have labeled as important in your life. Circle those that also give enjoyment and satisfaction to you. Do the circled items represent the kind of range and balance of values and joy that you would really like to see in your life? Add one or two others if you wish. Now put a check mark in front of those activities on which you believe you spend about the right amount of time. Put a minus sign in front of those on which you should (and conceivably could) spend less time. Put a plus sign in front of those on which you would like to (and conceivably could) spend more time. You now have some ideas as to how you might better allocate your time to the activities that you consider most important and/or enjoyable. What kind of planning would improve your situation?