Understanding and Overcoming Stress
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Objectives
- To understand the nature of stress and its physical, behavioral, and emotional impact
- To examine the impact of life and work challenges on individual stress and productivity
- To learn effective mechanisms for coping with the negative impact of stress

What is stress?
Stress is a state of dynamic tension created when a person responds to perceived demands and pressures which may be external (coming from the outside) or internal (coming from within).

The purpose of stress: Fight or flight?
When early humans living in caves encountered a saber-toothed tiger, their bodies prepared them for “fight” or “flight.” People today respond to modern stress in much the same way, even though these are not necessarily constructive responses

Why are you stressed?
External (factors not under your control)

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Internal (factors under your control)

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Stress has some benefits

• Energy
• Productivity
• Confidence
• Control
• Creativity
• Peak performance:

A level of focused and purposeful activity that harnesses the full physical, mental and emotional capabilities of the individual in achieving some end.
Stress and performance

Performance

Stress
How do you know when you are experiencing too much stress?

How do you feel?

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What do you do?

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Physiological effects of stress

- Increased perspiration
- Dilated pupils
- Heightened senses
- Increased heart rate
- Increased blood pressure
- Rapid, shallow breathing
- Increased blood flow to vital organs
- Decreased blood flow to extremities and digestive organs
• Muscles tensed and ready for movement

**Negative signs and symptoms of stress**

### Physical
- Sleeplessness
- Fatigue
- Poor appetite
- Increased smoking/eating
- High blood pressure
- Muscle pain
- Headaches
- Weight loss/gain

### Behavioral
- Aggressive driving
- Carelessness
- Impulsive behavior
- Risk taking
- Persistent sexual problems
- Grinding teeth
- Use of alcohol/drugs
- Craving for sweets

### Mental
- Feeling of uneasiness
- Anxiety
- Fears
- Sense of suppressed anger
- Angry outbursts
- Depression
Criticism of others  _____
Preoccupation     _____
Reduced creativity/productivity  _____
Suspiciousness     _____
Mood swings       _____

Stress & your health

• **Stress and Hypertension**
  
  Studies show that people who experience ongoing stress are more likely to have chronically high blood pressure. When you are under stress, your body releases adrenaline, which raises your blood pressure, blood sugar and heart rate and increases your muscle tone. This physiological reaction prepared ancient humans to fend off danger such as attacks by wild animals. However, in the case of constant stress, there isn’t anything to fight or run away from. So the adrenaline rush leaves you all geared up with no place to go. Blood pressure drops slowly until the next stressful event occurs. When this keeps up, your body gives up and boosts your baseline blood pressure to a permanently higher level.

• **Stress and Your Stomach**
  
  Your gastrointestinal tract – your stomach and intestines – may respond to stress by slowing down, speeding up, going into spasms or secreting more acid. The discomfort you feel registers in your brain as more stress. The more stress the brain experiences, the more hormones and chemicals it releases, continuing a vicious cycle of stress and discomfort. Some specific symptoms of stress can include bloating, nausea, pain, heartburn and irritable bowel syndrome. Ulcers are caused by bacteria, not stress. However, stress may make your body less resistant to ulcer-causing germs.

• **Stress and Over- and Under-eating**
  
  Stress and your digestive system are connected. In the “fight or flight” response to extreme stress, hormones tell the stomach to either shut down or speed up so that the body can respond to danger. This results in appetite loss or nausea. In contrast, more moderate levels of stress may contribute to excess eating to relieve tension, add to comfort or provide distraction.

• **Stress and Migraine Headaches**
While researchers are still trying to understand the underlying causes of migraine headaches, they do seem to occur more often during times of stress. Since stress releases powerful hormones in your body, it’s not surprising that migraines may be influenced by stress.

- **Stress and Your Skin**

  When stressed, some people break out in hives - red, swollen, itchy welts on the skin. Skin disorders related to stress are influenced by the hormones released when your body is under stress. Stress-related skin conditions include neurodermatitis (itching, thickened patches of skin), acne, psoriasis (dry, red patches of skin covered with scales), lichen planus (itchy reddish-purple patches) and hives.

- **Stress and Sexual Disorders**

  Stress affects your sex drive – nature did not intend for people to have sex when they are in danger. Thus, chronic stress can make it difficult to become aroused, and you may suffer from impotence, premature ejaculation or inability to experience orgasm. Since sexual disorders are themselves stressful, a vicious cycle is created of stress and sexual disorder.

- **Stress and Your Immune System**

  There is evidence that stress can weaken your immune system. The hormones cortisone and adrenaline released in response to stress are potent suppressers of the immune system. Also, people under stress often do not take care of themselves – tending to sleep less, exercise less, eat poorly, drink too much and use drugs more than people who are not stressed.

- **Stress and Risk of Cancer**

  Some studies suggest that stress may increase the risk for cancer. Some association has been found between risk of colorectal cancer, cell damage and a weakened immune system (a strong immune system is needed to destroy damaged cells that could lead to cancer).

**Reducing the negative impact of stress**

- Get organized
- Take breaks (even breathing breaks can help)
- Do it now (don’t procrastinate)
- Know your limits (listen to your body)
- Learn to set boundaries (and know when it is appropriate)
- Learn to relax (identify healthy ways to relax and then continue doing them)
• Take charge (control what you can)
• Schedule your stress (e.g., don’t plan to have family visit and renovate your house at the same time)
• Treat your body right (e.g., eat a healthy diet, get enough sleep)
• Learn positive thinking (don’t always anticipate the negative)
• Attack problems - not people

What works for you now? Stress reduction: “Best practices”

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Changing the way you view stressful events
Psychologists have demonstrated that it is possible for people to learn “cognitive reframing”* - a technique that enables us to shift our perceptions of negative experiences from a “pessimistic” outlook to an “optimistic” point of view.

* Martin Seligman, Learned Optimism

Changing the way you view negative events

**Positive Spin**
Limits the negative impact of the event to the “now,” the present (“It is happening now but does not happen all the time and will not last forever”)
Confines the negative to a single event (“I am not good at tennis,” does not mean: “I am not good at sports.”)

**Negative vs. positive thinking**
Negative thinkers view events in terms of always and never
Positive thinkers use qualifiers like sometimes or lately to describe events

“Diets never work.”
“You never include me in your discussions.”
“Your diet won’t work if I keep eating out.”
“‘I’m feeling all washed up.’
“You haven’t been including me in your discussions lately.”
“I’m particularly stressed today.”

Positive thinking

How would you respond to the following situations?

You’ve been feeling run down for the last few days ...
A. I’m never able to relax
B. This has been an unusually tough week.

You’ve had difficulty trying to learn a new computer program...
A. This program seems harder than some others I’ve tried
B. I’m no good at my job.

A coworker says something that upsets you...
A. My coworker was in a bad mood and took it out on me.
B. People always blurt things out without thinking of my feelings.

My examples

Think about at least one situation you have faced that could create stress. Then, indicate an example of a negative response to the situation and a positive response to the situation applying what you have learned about the value of optimism.

Situation #1: __________________________________________________________
Negative response: ____________________________________________________
Positive response: ____________________________________________________

Situation #2: __________________________________________________________
Negative response: ____________________________________________________
Positive response: ____________________________________________________
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Additional Resources

Thinking positively in stressful times

*Difficulties mastered are opportunities won.*

- Winston Churchill

Problem or opportunity? The way you describe a situation will predict how you are likely to respond. Are current events viewed as obstacles destined to defeat you or challenges that will motivate you to take action? Are problems threatening or do you see opportunity for personal growth hiding in even seemingly impossible situations?

Research has demonstrated that how we view a situation affects our emotional state, level of stress, job performance, and even our health. People who have a more positive perception of the outcome of events will experience less stress, be healthier and generally be more successful than those who expect the worst or continually minimize their own efforts. Fortunately, there is evidence that positive thinking can be learned. The first step, however, is to become aware of any negative patterns of thought that exist. Then, there are techniques you can practice to change unproductive and even harmful ways of thinking.

The main difference between positive and negative thinkers is that positive thinkers don’t allow negative experiences to keep them from moving forward, while negative thinkers feel (and often act) helpless. Let’s take an example from the aftermath of the September 11th events to see how this process works.

A supervisor criticizes two employees in a New York City office, a negative thinker and a positive thinker, for frequently coming in late to work. The negative person thinks: “How can she expect me to get here on time? My commute is much longer and it’s a hassle. Everything has gotten much more difficult and I can’t handle it well.” The employee may even generalize the feedback by thinking, “It feels like it’s going to be like this forever. Maybe I just can’t handle this kind of pressure.” This type of response to the supervisor’s expectation can result in the employee’s feeling frustrated, depressed and anticipating negative job consequences.

In contrast, the positive person accepts the criticism as being specific only to this particular aspect of work (lateness) and does not believe it reflects on her overall ability to handle stress or adjust to change. The positive person may think: “My commute is longer and a hassle and that’s a real pain. However, I don’t expect this situation to last forever, so in the meantime, I’ll just have to allow more time. I should be able to handle this.”
Since the positive person has isolated the negative event to this one example, assumes that the situation is temporary rather than permanent, and presents a challenge rather than a barrier - she is motivated to find a way to overcome the problem.

So, how can you change your way of thinking from a negative to a positive outlook? There are two general ways for dealing with negative beliefs – finding a way to put them out of your mind when they pop up, and proving to yourself that they’re incorrect. The first strategy requires you to find a way to ignore or “turn off” negative thoughts. Some people do this by creating positive mental images to counter the negative thoughts; others find it useful to concentrate on some external object to help shift attention away from the negative thought.

These techniques can be good “first aid.” However, a more lasting solution is to disprove negative thoughts by arguing against them. The most convincing way to argue against a negative belief is to prove to yourself that it’s factually incorrect. Many negative responses are overreactions, so often it isn’t hard to come up with evidence to counter the belief. For example, the employee who assumed that “Everything has gotten much more difficult and I can’t handle it well” could take a realistic look at what he has actually been handling well and address his strengths rather than his weaknesses. He also might think about times in the past when he has been able to overcome challenges. Furthermore, he could consider discussing the situation with his supervisor to see if there is any possibility of having a more flexible schedule for a specific time period.

It’s important to remember that merely saying positive things to yourself will not work to change your thinking from negative to positive. Being more positive is not based on making yourself feel better through pretending, but about thinking clearly.

Don’t let your thoughts lead you to the worst possible conclusion. You can take adequate steps for protection without assuming that every fire alarm means a new disaster has occurred. Such “catastrophic” thinking will only immobilize you. Again, remember that the negative thinker expects only the worst. The positive thinker, however, looks at the situation as a challenge and makes plans to take action.

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