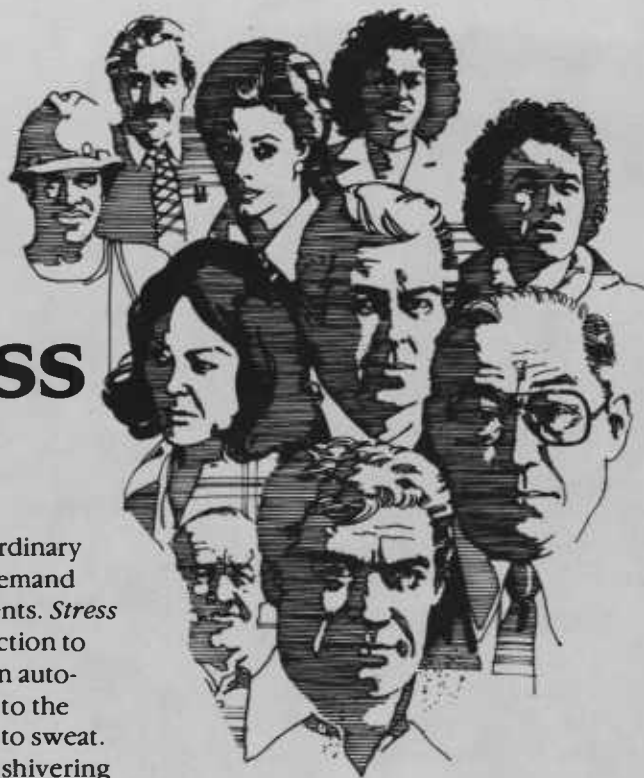


Thriving On Stress



Stress. For most people, the word itself conjures up distasteful and frightening images. Whether you've just married, retired, lost a loved one or a job, received a letter from the IRS, or are scheduled to give a speech, you'll probably experience the tell-tale signs of stress; your heart will pound, you'll breathe rapidly, your palms will perspire, or your stomach will contract into a knot.

Stress attacks all ages and sexes: at home, on the job, at school, on crowded streets, and at play. Three-year-old toddlers and 85-year-old grandparents may get sick or act differently when stressed. You don't have to live in the fast lane either. Some of the calmest-appearing people harbor emotional volcanoes; they either don't know or won't admit that stress haunts them.

Stress is an unavoidable part of being alive. It charges athletes with adrenalin before a big race and it helps us to move faster in the face of danger or think more quickly when pitched against the clock. Dr. Hans Selye, a prominent authority on stress and health, declared, "Stress is the spice of life," and like it or not, everyone gets their fair share.

To make stress a positive force in your life, you need to understand what it is, what it does to your mind and body, and how you can keep it at a manageable level.

What is stress?

Stressors are out-of-the-ordinary disruptive influences that demand more than routine adjustments. *Stress* is an automatic physical reaction to stressors. One example of an automatic response you'll make to the stressor of excessive heat is to sweat. Or, to a chill you'll react by shivering or getting "goose bumps." Stressors can be threats to safety like the driver who fails to yield the right-of-way as you enter an intersection or the child you've just found wielding a dangerous kitchen utensil. Automatic stress reactions are fast and efficient in the face of danger.

Alarm, the first reaction to a stressor, activates immediate changes in your body chemistry. The biochemical and nervous systems respond to a stressor with a rush of hormones and adrenalin that trigger rapid heart beat, increased blood pressure, and oxygen intake—all of which tense the body for action. Stages of *resistance* and *adaptation* follow as threats are resolved and the body returns to normal functioning. The sensations are familiar because every day you juggle tasks, fidget over inconveniences, handle relationships with children or co-workers, or tackle strenuous exertion. The stress

reaction process, often called "build up, blow up, and fold up," is not a threat to health when you bounce back quickly.

Stress creates energy for emergencies. It provides the stamina to help you perform at peak levels when you face disruptive changes or make tough decisions. It's the drive behind great discoveries, inventions, and creative works. The word *Eustress* was invented by Selye to separate the buoyant "high" feelings of good normal stress from distress. The key to healthful living lies in balancing the stimulations you encounter so the cycle of alarm, resistance, and adaptation is complete and won't over-tax you to the stage of *exhaustion*.

Distress, the negative side of stress, is the plague of modern life. Most people are nagged by worries that keep the mind and body "up-tight."

Seething with unused stress energy, you may deny that anything is bothering you. But inner turmoil over unresolved stressors can cause persistent anxiety, frustration, discontent, or anger and are serious symptoms of distress. Stressors such as noise, fear of failure on the job, or a fussy baby can relentlessly alarm your system day after day and eventually exhaust your adaptive capacity.

Experiments show that each individual varies in his or her stress energy.

“Stress is the spice of life . . .”—Hans Selye

The adaptive capacity operates like a checking account. If you make withdrawals but no deposits, it won't last long. Constant unresolved stress exacts a price in tired organs and irrational behavior and thinking.

While stress does not cause disease, scientific evidence links it to heart disease, cancer, alcoholism, leukemia, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, and the common cold. In addition, researchers suspect that many other vague symptoms for which no organic or infectious cause can be found are stress related. These disorders, called *psychosomatic diseases*, are presumed to be emotional in origin. Doctors have found that physical discomforts, including diarrhea, constipation, backache, headache, muscle ache, skin rashes, peptic ulcers, and some respiratory disorders are often stress related. In the digestive track alone, stress arousal has been shown to affect every aspect of the system.

It may seem impossible that changes in your life can affect your organs and muscles. However, stressors create extra energy within every cell of your body. To maintain your mental and physical health, you must use the

extra energy to exercise or else redirect it in some way. Doctors estimate 80 percent of their patients suffer from ailments connected with bottled-up stress energy. Continuous wear and tear on stress-stimulated organs and muscles increase their susceptibility to bacterial invasion and weaken their ability to function normally or heal themselves.

Stress is no greater today than in years past. Our ancestors were threatened by wild animals, starvation, robbery, and disease. They crossed oceans and prairies in the face of great danger. Forty years ago many families lost children because they lacked antibiotics and immunization.

Stressors of previous generations were life threatening, but our ancestors used stress energy for what it was intended—“fight or flight” action. Now, for the most part, physical threats have been traded for threats to mental and emotional well-being. Our ancestors looked at life philosophically—they believed that what happened, good or bad, was a matter of fate or destiny and didn't blame themselves when things didn't work out. Modern Americans, however, feel responsible for controlling life's

Misconceptions about handling stress have helped feed a multi-billion dollar drug industry . . .

events; this attitude only increases anxiety and worry. Now, most stress stems from inner conflicts.

While action was the solution to most stressors in the past, modern stressors require action and complicated mental gymnastics. Misconceptions about handling stress have helped feed a multi-billion dollar drug industry which supplies billions of pain relievers, anti-depressants, tranquilizers, and vitamins. Mind-altering drugs, including alcohol and nicotine, are high on the list of “problem solvers” that lead to more problems.

You don't have an automatic pilot to keep stress tolerable. Events are filtered by your interpretation of whether or not they're threatening. Some people habitually bring more prolonged stress energy to situations than is warranted. Others will view the same situation as simply another of life's hurdles

If you know your pattern of conscious or unconscious thought, you'll be able to monitor your attitudes and develop strategies for eliminating unnecessary negative stressors and arousal. You may think, “I'm too old to change my ways,” or “I'm just the nervous type,” but studies of behavior show humans have a remarkable capacity to change attitudes and living habits.

Remember that personality traits, background, and experience play an important role in determining tolerance level and perception of stressors for each individual.

Personality traits affecting stress reactions may be inborn or developed during childhood. Your genes have a great impact on how you react to stressors. Selye pointed out that people innately tend to act like race horses or turtles. Race horse people love life generously peppered with uncertainty and risk. They seek challenging work or community activity. Turtles, on the other hand, prefer a steady routine with few surprises. This, however, doesn't mean they can't manage stress or be equally involved and successful. Their motivation stems from goals not stimulated by stress arousal.

Other researchers, however, have focused on stress reactions as **learned** behavior. For instance, Doctors Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, cardiac specialists, noticed that their patients, successful businessmen, exhibited similar behavior in the office waiting room. Conversations always centered around time pressures, work, and achievement. The doctors called it Type A behavior: “hot reactors.” These hard-driving men were habitually trying to achieve more and more, faster and faster. You’ve seen the

Modern families face relentless demands from the clock, economic instability, and evolving social values.

type—always in a rush, showing exaggerated work activity, impatience, and frustration. Further research identified Type B personalities who were relaxed, selective, and deliberate in their undertakings. They seemed better able to gauge their potential and accomplished equally well while managing work, family, and recreation for a more tranquil lifestyle. The cardiologists concluded that over 50 percent of American men are Type A reactors with increasingly more women adopting their habits.

Type A behavior differs from the high inborn stress tolerance Selye observed in race horse people in that it is a learned behavior promoted by societal rewards for superior achievement. Type A reactors have stress alarms that were set early in life to stimulate attitudes and behavior that are predictive of premature heart diseases. Type B personalities do not escape periodic stress caused by heavy work loads or family crises, but their self-protecting attitudes direct them to trust themselves

and monitor tough situations when they arise. While Type B takes a pre-dinner swim to restore tranquility, Type A stays behind with unfinished work or makes jittery preparations for tomorrow.

Type A men and women are addicted to “super performer” behaviors they believe bring success. Even Type B individuals can be swept into Type A behaviors when new jobs or positions of leadership impose unfamiliar standards of performance, responsibility, and knowledge requirements.

Experience helps you to cope with stress. The struggles of growing up taught you to manage stressors in both positive and negative ways. Families give children beliefs about their physical attractiveness, intelligence, loveability, social acceptance, and competence that either strengthens or weakens their resistance to unnecessary stressors. Early home experiences build stress-resolving habits that later function automatically.

Learning to ride a bicycle is one example of a stressful childhood learning experience. Goal-setting helped you through trials and spills while you learned to coordinate your hands, feet, and balance. You mastered bike-riding because you imagined yourself pedaling your way around town and you enjoyed encouragement from others. By directing your energy to the challenge rather than focusing on your anxiety and frustration, you achieved success. Success bolstered your self-confidence for facing increasingly complicated stressors.

Family life both shelters us from stress and prepares us to respond to it. Ways to handle stress are subtly transmitted as modern families face relentless demands from the clock, economic instability, and evolving social values. New issues concerning child discipline, work expectations, and aging relatives routinely emerge. Increasingly, it takes a balancing act to cope with stressors caused by two-worker families, divorce, single parenthood, and remarriage.

Are you a “hot reactor”?

If over half the following descriptions fit you, you tend toward Type A behavior:

- have few interests other than work (occupation, housework, study)
- feel guilty when not accomplishing something all the time
- try to do several things at once whenever possible
- am impatient when waiting
- feel compelled to compete in everything—work or play
- tend to interrupt and finish other people’s sentences
- never have enough time
- lose your temper frequently under pressure
- usually “go for it” before giving thought to how or what
- believe if you want a job done well, you have to do it yourself.

Three families may define and treat any given problem in three different ways. One family will see the problem as someone else's fault and give up the responsibility for the future by submitting to what others tell them to do. Family members may attempt to abide by rules laid down by parents or grandparents or follow television role models. Such families eventually feel victimized by outside forces and unable to control their lives. Whatever happens is credited to either good or bad luck.

A second family will break tension by putting problems in a humorous perspective. As bad as things seem, they'll use laughter to relax stress. Laughter is a coping mechanism that reduces tension and helps you feel better before tackling the problem seriously.

A third family will analyze the problem before systematically resolving it. Dr. Hamilton McCubbin of the University of Minnesota found that in the most competent problem-solving families, members help each other because they think of themselves as a unit. Together, family members determine what the real problem is, gather information, and utilize community and neighborhood resources to help themselves reach decisions. Resolving stressors brings a sense of pride and accomplishment. Characteristic of these families is an openness to discuss problems and flexibility to experiment.

Experience does not guarantee success, but it develops skills for coping and adjusting to uncertainty and inconvenience. Experience prepares you for crises, the times when you're in big trouble. Survivors of extremely stressful jobs or catastrophes give more credit to skills learned through experience than to talent, education, ancestors, or luck.

It's unlikely your ancestors accumulated the stress energy which brings on headaches and muddled thinking. As far as we know, survival consumed their stress energy. However, we've traded the hungry grizzly bear for national and international worries and the push and pull toward material gain and achievement. We sandwich in eating and sleeping and leave little time for thinking, conversing, or leisure. Intense pressure makes people of every age feel perpetually endangered.

In any mix of people at any moment, most are puzzling with mental or emotional insecurity. Mental stressors in families center around hassles with gaining and spending income, dividing household responsibilities, caring for children, and conflicting employment and family loyalties.

The national admiration for strong, silent men and gentle, compliant women has yielded lives of hidden agony.

Emotional stressors disturb feelings of self-worth and status. For example, unemployment or underemployment is proving to be a greater emotional than economic threat for many people. Young workers are apprehensive about future work opportunities. Middle aged and older people live longer but feel insecure about their status in a society that idealizes youth.

The common thread running through mental and emotional stress today is resistance to change. Some changes are unwillingly encountered, others are chosen; both cause distress. The stress alarm goes off, and the body speeds up for action which doesn't happen. After weighing the consequences of retaliating to the boss, spouse, children, or the whole



system, the contained energy develops into chronic stress. You don't feel bad but you don't feel good either. The national admiration for strong, silent men and gentle, compliant women has yielded lives of hidden agony.

Stress energy requires action, but it's frequently misdirected into repetitive behavior cycles that prevent sensible problem solving. Among the most frequent symptoms of mental and emotional distress are withdrawal, psychosomatic ailments, and aggression.

Distressed individuals may withdraw into a world of worry and self-doubt. Sleeping, running away, or drugs provide escape for many. Sometimes, however, withdrawal is a positive way to pull away from a stressful situation and determine a plan of action. Familiar reactions to emotional and mental stress include:

- thoughts so jumbled you can't sort out what to do first
- forgetfulness
- mentally reliving incidents over and over or not turning off distressing thoughts
- feeling frightened for no reason at all
- thinking you are unappreciated for all you do

- apprehension and fear that something bad will happen
- feeling out of control
- irritableness and moodiness.

Psychosomatic responses to stress are frightening and stressful in themselves. They set up a self-perpetuating cycle that often requires medical diagnosis and treatment. Stress can create body irregularities, such as:

- the heart skipping beats or beating irregularly
- dryness in the mouth
- pains in the chest and shoulders
- numbness in the hands, arms, and legs
- feeling a lump in your throat or having difficulty swallowing
- nausea, dizziness, diarrhea, or constipation
- stiffness or tightness in arms or across the back
- lingering fatigue.

Aggressive behavior may be expressed verbally or physically. Aggressive actions don't resolve stress. Sometimes, however, they relieve the uncomfortable pressure of pent-up stress energy. Misdirected aggression may result in physical or emotional child or spouse abuse. Family problems are frequently vented on subordinates at work. Misdirected aggression is responsible for many industrial and automobile accidents. Even children misdirect aggressive feelings by teasing, hitting, or kicking their playmates.

Aggressive feelings are normal and best vented with physical activity. Some people rely on sports; others use gardening, housecleaning, or walking.

Who gets sick from stress? Usually it's people who don't recognize that their discomfort is an early warning of stress, or people who know they're stressed but put off doing anything positive about it. Stress should signal you to change your attitudes or behaviors so you'll feel better.

Things happen to you in such a way it's often hard to determine what's wrong. In general, stress can be traced to: fear, life changes, overload or underload, or ambiguity. If you know the source of stress, you can uncover clues to decide whether a situation is important to you and how you can control it. This won't change events but will help you settle some items faster and with less anxiety.

Everyone learns to meet threats of physical harm, but we don't give much attention to reducing or eliminating our fears of losing love or status. These fears bar open communication in families or groups. Jealousy of family members, friends, or co-workers triggers the stress alarm when you're not getting what you perceive is a fair share of rewards or attention. Fear causes you to channel excess energy to anticipating problems or overreacting to unrealistic expectations of yourself.

You can relieve fear by asking yourself these questions: "What is the worst that can happen?" or "Does this situation apply to me?" Everyone wastes worry on frightening things that don't apply to them or probably won't happen.

Stress caused by over-sensitivity to your needs for recognition is not easy to overcome. Many people rely on self-talk that emphasizes the things they do well. They practice stopping negative thoughts about themselves the minute they pop into mind. They realize that everyone is not going to love and appreciate them all the time.

Between birth and death life unfolds in predictable stages. Stress accompanies every passage—from learning to walk to entering school, growing up, marrying, parenting, retiring, and dying. We handle the events which appear on schedule much easier than life's surprises—such as a high achievement or premature death.

Stress accompanies every passage . . .

Drs. Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe of the University of Washington School of Medicine found a close relationship between major life changes and stress-related illness and injury. The top stressors are: death of a spouse, divorce, marital separation, jail term, death of a close family member, personal injury or illness, marriage, being fired from work, marital reconciliation, and retirement. These events all require complex changes in living patterns, economic resources, and social relationships. Among 43 additional stressors are: changes at work, change in residence or schools, major achievement, spouse beginning work, and children leaving home.

When a significant life change occurs, experts recommend you make as few other changes as possible. Keep things calm, exercise, or do something that absorbs your thoughts and creates a buffer between you and your problems.

Research shows hard work isn't stressful; in fact, pressure and activity tend to increase feelings of well-being. Overload, however, is overstimulation—having to respond to more demands or situations than your adaptive system can accommodate. Overload produces irrational actions, disorganization, exhaustion, fatigue, and low self-esteem.

Overload occurs at home as well as at work. Because recruiters select employees based on their ability to out-perform others, workers feel constant pressure to achieve more and labor longer, especially during peak work seasons. The household promotes overload as noisy, growing children and loud appliances invade individual privacy. Home repair, yardwork, and household chores also drain time and energy. Most people say they feel overloaded, not because of hard work, but because of time pressures, heavy responsibility, lack of support, and the overambitious expectations of themselves and others.

Overload becomes serious when life resembles a contest in which you're always running faster and faster to catch up. People who live and work year after year in situations with a potential for overload develop ways to separate themselves from piled-up stressors. One homemaker

Overload becomes serious when life resembles a contest . . .

said, "When there are a dozen things going on, I develop tunnel vision—turn everything else off and finish some small task so I can have an instant success." Success restores her

sense of order and lets her view other demands more calmly.

The harried homemaker or worker views underload as a release from stress. If overload is a switchboard with all circuits plugged in, underload is a switchboard with nothing happening. Unused equipment develops problems through neglect. Underload causes stress because there's no stimulation to tax you mentally or physically. Bored, depressed, useless feelings and low productivity decrease your motivation to make decisions and visit with friends who stimulate you. Without stimuli that promote learning, growth and progress are missing.

Who has underload in this busy world? Workers with monotonous jobs, homemakers with no outside interests, and adolescents who are bored by studies and uncertain of social skills all complain of boredom and uselessness. Children who don't receive sufficient attention or exposure to new adventures become either restless or passive. Depression, loneliness and lack of spontaneity are prevalent among uninvolved older people and others living alone. Many retirees experience underload after leaving the structure and friendships of work.

Stress deprivation, the lack of friends and mental stimulation, is blamed for over or under-eating, mental disorganization, drug and alcohol addiction, and suicide. In many cases, people preoccupy themselves with illness to bring stimulation into otherwise drab lives.

To remain mentally stimulated, you should do two things. First, plan definite goals in all areas of your life to be reached daily, weekly, or within five years. Any project is appropriate, such as losing weight, playing a game well, or learning to swim. Communities offer vast opportunities for expanding skills and friendships.

Second, develop and follow a plan to reach your goal.

The key to well-being is to seek enough stress to keep yourself learning and progressing but to reduce stimulation when it goes beyond your ability to cope. Exceeding your optimal stress level once in a while may be desirable, but staying there is not.

Another difficult stressor is *ambiguity*. Ambiguity is the feeling you have when you move to a new town—the uncertainty as you replace your familiarity with people and places with exploration and experimentation. Ambiguity occurs in marital relationships, too, as couples fail to communicate their expectations of one another or share values and goals. Parents feel ambiguous as they wade through numerous philosophies of child-rearing. As children learn or are exposed to a variety of caretakers with different rules for behavior, they feel ambivalent. In fact, our lives seem dominated by ambiguity as we try to understand the regulations of institutions and bureaucracies and the steady flow of new and conflicting consumer information.

As women have broadened their horizons, work places and homes have undergone dramatic changes. Ambiguity lies in assimilating changing expectations, goals, and actions.

Uncertainty causes distress in all types of change, positive or negative. It forces you to ask questions, communicate opinions, and assume a flexible attitude.

The presence of stress does not imply mismanagement or illness. Many healthy people live apparently stressful lives. Whether stress challenges or defeats you is up to you. Each threat to your tranquility is different from the last. This requires you to identify the source of your stress and take action. To keep your life flowing with good feelings, try balancing stress with the methods recommended by health professionals and medical scientists:

- Pay attention to physical and mental signals of distress no matter how slight. Avoid self-medication that masks symptoms. The decision to use drugs belongs to your doctor. Drugs can be a form of flight. You need to resolve stress from within.
- Identify the source of your stress. Worry only increases the problem and makes you feel worse. Ask yourself, "What is *really* bothering me?" and "What can I change to make this better?" Your answers will tell you whether you can do anything. If a problem is beyond your control, you'll need to make adaptations to cope with it.
- Set priorities for the dozens of tasks you juggle. Make a list of what you want done in a day or week. Write an A by the urgent ones, B by the next urgent, and C by those less pressing. Start with the A's and work through your list. If the C's don't get done, add them again next week, but stop worrying about them until they become A's; if ever.
- Get adequate rest, nutrition, and exercise. You can survive on will-power, but you pay a price in irritability and decreased productivity.

The well-nourished individual is better prepared to handle stressors. Changes in nutrient needs and metabolism during stress are not well established. However, many people tend to upset their diets with junk food or over or undereating. In the

case of undereating, a doctor may recommend dietary supplements. There are, however, no magic vitamins to relieve stress.

Under certain kinds of stress some people overeat. They use food as a tranquilizer and set themselves up for undesirable and stressful weight gain. Overfat people in our society often avoid exercise that reduces stress. A balanced diet selected from the four basic food groups strengthens the body.

Physiologists agree that people of all ages need vigorous exercise at least three times a week. Household chores, chasing after children, marketing, yard work, or occupational activity isn't vigorous enough to burn up stress energy. You need to walk briskly, run, dance, bicycle, or swim to reduce stored stress energy and tone your body too.

- Relax with a conscious effort to detach yourself from pressures surrounding you. Sit comfortably in a chair with eyes closed while relaxing each muscle from the tips of your toes to the top of your head. A ten

minute break before an important meeting or in the middle of the day can rejuvenate your entire system. Set aside personal time for meditation, yoga, or soaking in a hot tub to help you unwind.

- Commit yourself to a hobby, club, or volunteer activity. It's important to switch gears from everyday demands and enjoy interludes with different people and different goals.

- Talk it out. Don't keep everything inside until trifles turn into disasters. Families are usually the closest source of help and support but sometimes professional counsel will clear your mind for sensible action. Other people cannot solve your problems but an understanding listener can soften their impact.

- Pay attention to your successes. Don't measure your worth by any single event. When you've eliminated a stressor, pat yourself on the back. After resolving a stressful situation, analyze how you handled it. Was the approach effective or would something else have worked better? Use your analysis to guide you in facing new challenges.

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