

Chapter 1. What is Stress?

“Stress is the Spice of Life; the absence of stress is death”

-Hans Selye

Definition

Stress has been defined in many ways by many different people. It has been a topic of interest to medical professionals, social scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, and even zoologists. For our purposes, it seems most enlightening to examine it from several different perspectives, thereby getting a broad overview of the phenomenon, as well as its roots in the history of humankind.

Any discussion of stress would surely be incomplete without some mention of the work of Hans Selye, M.D. Considered by many to be the father of stress research, Selye began studying the phenomenon of stress over 50 years ago. His classic and still widely respected work, The Stress of Life, first published in 1946, gave us this definition: A non-specific response of the body to a demand. It is still recognized today as the simplest and best physiological definition of what happens within our bodies when we are knocked out of our comfortable equilibrium.

Looking a little deeper into the mechanics of this phenomenon, we find that the physiological stress reaction is our body's response to any change, threat, or pressure put upon it, from outside forces...or from within. Our body then tries to regain its normal state and protect itself from potential harm. Thousands of years ago, during a far less structured and complex era, individuals needed this response to stay alive and combat various kinds of physical threats (animals, other humans, flood, fire, etc.). This is one of

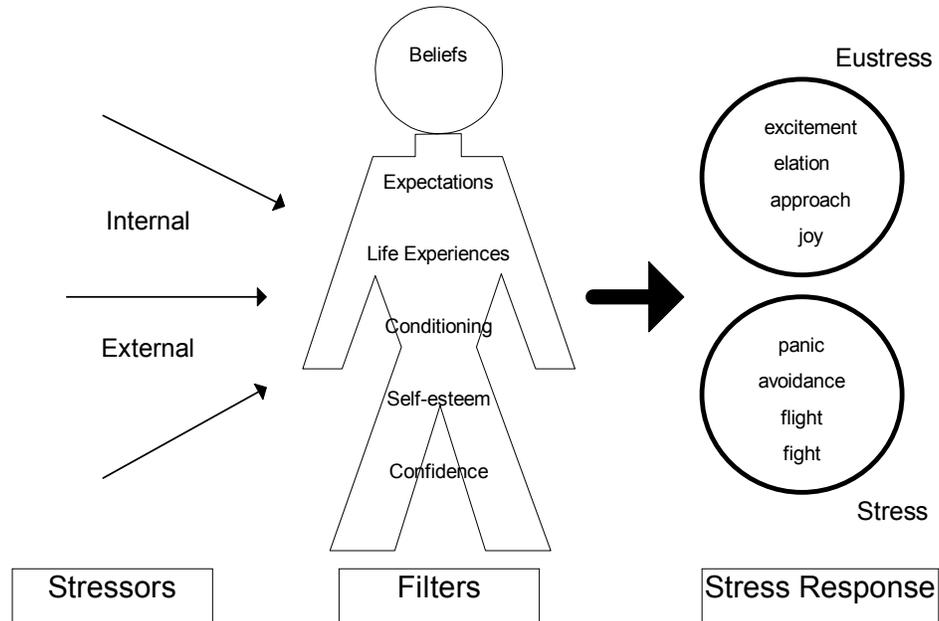
many unique ways in which homo sapiens are equipped to survive in the world. The purpose of stress, then, is to keep us alive and healthy!

Today, much of the stress we experience is manufactured in our minds. We perceive a threat (loss of job, anger from spouse, not meeting a deadline) and we begin to worry. Our bodies, lacking the ability to discern a deadline from a hairy beast, still react in much the same way they did 4000 years ago.

Stress is inevitable. To be entirely without stress is to be dead! However, not all stress is unpleasant. Selye distinguished between pleasant stress, which he labeled eustress, and unpleasant stress or distress. When we discuss stress today we are usually referring to distress, but we can all relate to pleasant situations or occurrences which have caused us stress: weddings, births, promotions, receiving awards, reuniting with old friends, and countless others. Any change, positive or negative, requires a response from our bodies in order to adapt and bring us back to our relatively peaceful state.

We can also look at stress as a state of imbalance between demands (from inside or outside sources) and our perceived abilities to meet those demands. This is experienced most acutely when the expectation is that the consequences of meeting the demand will be quite different from the consequences of not meeting the demand. For example, if you were asked to create a marketing brochure and you felt confident of your knowledge of the product and your ability to organize the information, create attractive graphics, and put an interesting and attractive spin on the information, you will find the whole experience far less stressful than if you considered yourself inadequately informed, a poor writer, and not particularly creative. It would be doubly stressful if, on top of the pressure for an eye-popping masterpiece, the initial recipients were to be a beta-test

group of the company's largest and most valued customers, who would be asked to give feedback on their reactions to the new product based on your marketing piece.



Stressors

The stress response is ignited by a stressor. Some common stressors include:

- Physical threats
- Threats to our self image
- An important life event
- A fight or conflict with a friend/relative/co-worker
- Tight deadlines
- Loss of something or someone we care for

Stressors can be any kind of stimulation, internal or external, that triggers the physiological stress response. But here we begin to see individual differences. In order for an event to be labeled a stressor, it needs to be perceived as one. A request from your spouse to pick up a prescription at the drug store may be perceived as a completely reasonable task and fit right in with other errands for that day (non-stressful). On the other hand, it may require considerable juggling of an already full schedule and cause some bad feelings or an argument between you and your spouse (stressful).

Like stress itself, stressors come in two varieties: distressors and eustressors. An opportunity to stand up at a meeting and say a few words may be perceived as scary, threatening or risky for one individual, but a second individual may have been expecting or hoping to be called upon and see it as an opportunity to appear knowledgeable and intelligent. The first sees the situation as a distressor, the second as a eustressor, or positive challenge.

Theories

Type A vs. Type B

Throughout the last three decades, one of the most popular theories about stress and our health has been that of cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman. They observed two vastly different behavior types among their patients. One kind of behavior, Type A, they found much more likely to lead to heart attacks in otherwise healthy individuals. Individuals exhibiting Type B behavior, on the other hand, were less likely

to ever end up in a hospital bed with heart problems. The following table contains some of the distinguishing characteristics of the two types:

TYPE A	TYPE B
Moves quickly	Moves unhurriedly
Eats fast	Eats peacefully
Speaks rapidly	Speaks slowly
Frequently feels impatient	Patient
Aggressive and competitive at work	Cooperative and collaborative at work
Very time conscious	Not time driven, sometimes late
Easily upset or angered	Easy-going
Highly motivated to achieve	Generally satisfied
Perceived as strong and forceful	Soft-spoken, laid back
Feels restless during periods of inactivity	Enjoys leisure and quiet time
Frequently tries to do multiple tasks at once	Does one task at a time

Type A's often achieve phenomenal career success and a great deal of recognition for their efforts. However, the physical and emotional toll may be quite high. Along with a coronary heart disease rate that Friedman and Rosenman found to be seven times that of the Type B's, Type A's are rarely satisfied with what they accomplish. So they drive themselves harder and harder, pushing other people away as a consequence. And

Type A behavior is not limited to work and career. Type A's report less satisfaction with family and other relationships, as well, further alienating those close to them. This might lead us to conclude that the saying "it's lonely at the top" may have more to do with alienation and provocation than a mere pyramid of numbers.

P-E Fit

Another popular theory about stress is the Person-Environment Fit Theory, developed at the Institute for Social Research. The focus of this theory is the relationship between an individual's perception of a task, their perception of their ability to complete that task, and the motivation to complete the task. The hypothesis is that feelings of stress should increase as the P-E gap widens. Findings indicate that this is in fact the case, and that stress varies as a function of level of challenge (stress) preferred by the individual.

Let's take an example: Some engineers are challenged by long hours, a fast pace, and a chaotic atmosphere. They enjoy the feeling of importance that comes with being a big fish in a small pond where lots of people depend on them. And they don't particularly mind letting their job take priority over everything else in their life. Small, newly formed, start-up companies need to look for individuals like this in order to create a good person-environment fit. These engineers will thrive in that kind of climate.

On the other hand, if the president of a small start-up company decided to recruit engineers with a good reputation and track record from IBM, he may soon discover he has some very stressed-out people on his hands. Individuals who thrive in a large stable environment often do poorly in chaos. It creates a level of stress for them that is often

intolerable. The same is true in reverse. An entrepreneurial engineer will feel stifled, unmotivated, and out of place in a traditional, slow-moving company.

Coping

Stress is cumulative. Our bodies are well equipped to deal with a reasonable amount of stress throughout our lives. However, as we shall explore in chapter 6, our world is becoming more and more complex and demanding. It is particularly important today, and will become increasingly critical in future decades, to make sure we have adequate coping techniques to manage our stressful lives.

Coping techniques are thought patterns and behavioral habits that neutralize stressors or mitigate their impact on us. When we receive a poor review at work, our thoughts often focus on ideas like “my manager didn’t really have an adequate opportunity to observe how hard I worked” or “my supervisor just doesn’t value non-technical skills.” You’ve probably called these thoughts rationalizations. That’s exactly what they are; rationalizing is a coping mechanism. (They’re much easier to see when others are doing it!)

Coping is our effort to manage the demands we perceive as negative. Human beings automatically develop complex coping mechanisms; it’s part of the socialization and maturation process. These coping mechanisms differ widely from one individual to another. And they range from trivial to severe.

At the extreme or severe end is what psychiatrists call repression. When something truly devastating happens in life, especially when it occurs at a young age, our minds may simply destroy all record of it in a desperate effort to maintain normalcy. The

memory becomes unavailable to the conscious mind. You could compare it to pressing the “delete” key on your computer to wipe out a file. Much has been written lately about repressed memories with regard to childhood sexual abuse. That is the kind of severe trauma that can cause full repression.

At the milder end of the spectrum are unconscious coping strategies like moving slower on a hot day or staying in bed when we don’t feel very well. We also engage in many deliberate coping activities like putting cotton in our ears to work in a noisy room, cuddling with the dog or cat when we feel lonely or unloved, or taking a long bubble bath after a trying day.

Sometimes we must supplement these everyday coping mechanisms in order to meet elevated demands. The fact that you are reading this book may mean you are currently experiencing increased demands in your life. In the second half of the book we will explore a great variety of ways in which you can enhance your ability to cope. You may want to supplant old ways with new ones, or simply try some new techniques for awhile.

Satisfaction

One final element completes our big-picture understanding of the nature of stress: its mirror image, satisfaction. Stress and satisfaction often operate like a teeter-totter; when one goes up the other goes down. But this is not always the case. It is possible for someone to have high stress and high satisfaction, if they have a feeling of control and choice in the situation, and have functional coping mechanisms. It is not as likely, however, that someone with low satisfaction would also have low stress. Generally,

feelings of discontent or dissatisfaction go hand-in-hand with high levels of stress. In Chapter 3 you will have an opportunity to assess your satisfaction level.