

3 STRESS

O B J E C T I V E S

After reading the chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Define stress, stressor, and stress response
- Discuss the differences between eustress and distress
- Describe the “fight-or-flight” response
- Discuss the role of stress on health and wellness
- List the common sources of stress
- Describe effective methods of managing stress and grief

Stress is experienced by everyone. In fact, stress is a critical factor affecting an individual’s health, and is estimated to contribute to 50 percent of all disease.¹ Dr. Hans Selye, a leading pioneer in stress research, states that, “stress is the spice of life or the kiss of death—depending on how we cope with it.”² Learning how to cope with stress is vital to maintaining a state of high-level wellness.

People often say, “I’m stressed out,” or “I’m under so much stress.” But what exactly does this mean? Just what is “stress”? How can stress be managed? What effect does stress have on a person’s body and health? Understanding stress and learning how to deal with it are crucial, especially considering today’s fast-paced and pressured lifestyles.

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WHAT EXACTLY IS STRESS?

Selye defines stress as “the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it.”³

When individuals refer to “stress,” typically they are talking about both the situation that actually elicits such a response

and the response itself. Technically, however, there is a distinct difference. For example, when a police officer pulls up behind a motorist, turns on the “blue lights,” and sounds his siren, the typical motorist experiences stress. The police officer’s actions—i.e., turning on the blue lights and sounding the siren—alarm the motorist and elicit certain responses. Such response-producing stimuli are known as stressors. In turn, the motorist’s responses to these stressors, such as an increased heart rate and “butterflies” in the stomach, are called stress responses, and can be either physiological or psychological in nature.



Accomplishing a goal, such as being graduated from college, is an example of eustress.



Distress produces negative effects and leaves one feeling awkward and unpleasant.

PHYSIOLOGICAL RESPONSES

The human body is composed of many systems. These systems contain various organs; the organs contain various tissues; the tissues contain various cells, and so on down to the atomic level. Each of these is affected by stressors. But stressors primarily impact two major systems of the body: the nervous system and the endocrine system. The nervous system—“the body’s control center and communications network”⁴—has three major components: the brain, the spinal cord, and the nerves. In turn, each of these possesses various sub-systems. The nervous system senses changes in the environment, both inside and outside the body. It then interprets and integrates these changes, initiating bodily action, be it muscular contraction or glandular secretions, to maintain optimal body functioning.⁴

The nervous system has two primary components: the central nervous system (CNS) and the peripheral nervous system (PNS). The CNS is basically the brain and the spinal cord. The PNS is the network of nerves connecting muscles and glands to the CNS. The PNS is further divided into the afferent and efferent sub-systems. The afferent subsystem is comprised

of sensory neurons, those nerves that send messages to the CNS. The efferent sub-system is comprised of motor neurons, those nerves that carry impulses to the muscles and glands from the CNS.⁴

The efferent system is further divided into the somatic nervous system (SNS) and the autonomic nervous system (ANS). The SNS controls voluntary skeletal muscle movement. The ANS controls involuntary contractions of cardiac and smooth muscle tissues, as well as glandular secretions.² Finally, the ANS is divided into two counterbalancing divisions: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. These divisions alternately regulate glandular responses, depending on the situation. The sympathetic is in control during emergencies and serves to increase the heart rate, as well as the rate and intensity of other bodily functions. The parasympathetic is in control during normal circumstances. Both maintain bodily functioning at a normal level, and inhibit the sympathetic system's effects once the emergency is over. One stimulates and the other inhibits, e.g., the sympathetic division stimulates the heart rate, while the parasympathetic slows it down.

The endocrine system regulates hormone production and comprises the following glands: the pituitary, thyroid, pineal, thymus, parathyroids, and adrenals. Additionally, many organs (e.g., pancreas, testes, ovaries) contain endocrine tissue.¹ Hormones are chemical secretions produced by glands that trigger specific responses in the organs and help the body respond to a variety of stressors.

STUDY TIP :

Stress is a critical factor affecting an individual's health, and is estimated to contribute to 50 percent of all disease.

For instance, when someone is walking down a dark alley and is suddenly startled by a strange noise, the sympathetic division triggers specific endocrine responses. The adrenal glands release two hormones into the bloodstream, epinephrine and norepinephrine (also known as adrenaline and noradrenaline), causing major changes throughout the body almost instantaneously. Vision and hearing are enhanced, perspiration and heart rate increase, digestion slows, and skeletal muscle contracts, readying the body for an immediate "fight or flight." The "fight-or-flight" response is a protective, evolutionary carryover. Once, it was much needed for man's survival from immediate threats, but it is rarely necessary today. Nonetheless, in varying degrees, these responses occur to every stressor.

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After every “fight-or-flight” response, the parasympathetic division assumes control and returns the body back to its normal state. This process is called homeostasis, and refers to the fact that the human body resists dramatic change and prefers to function at an even and stable rate.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSES

In addition to physiological responses to stress, an individual also responds psychologically. These psychological responses vary greatly among individuals, in contrast to the fact that most physiological responses are similar from person to person. For instance, some individuals are absolutely terrified to speak in public, whereas others feel quite comfortable doing so.

Even when confronted with the same stressors, there is no clearly defined set of psychological responses that applies to all individuals. What explains this disparity? Personality, past experiences, social conditioning—plus a host of other factors—can affect how a person responds to stressors. Personality is critical in one’s response to stressors. Some individuals are “calm, cool, and collected,” while others are “nervous, jittery, and excited.” Basically, their personalities differ. Exactly how personality develops is not known; however, it is certainly known that individuals’ personalities impact their health. For instance, psychologists have labeled certain personality traits as being “Type A” or “Type B.” Type A personalities are usually characterized by competitiveness, impatience, and aggressiveness. On the other hand, Type Bs are characterized by being more relaxed and reflective. The Type A person responds to stressors very quickly and more powerfully than a Type B. Type A personalities are more “explosive,” and this explosiveness, particularly as it relates to anger, cynicism, and hostility, can have a direct correlation to cardiovascular disease (CVD).⁵

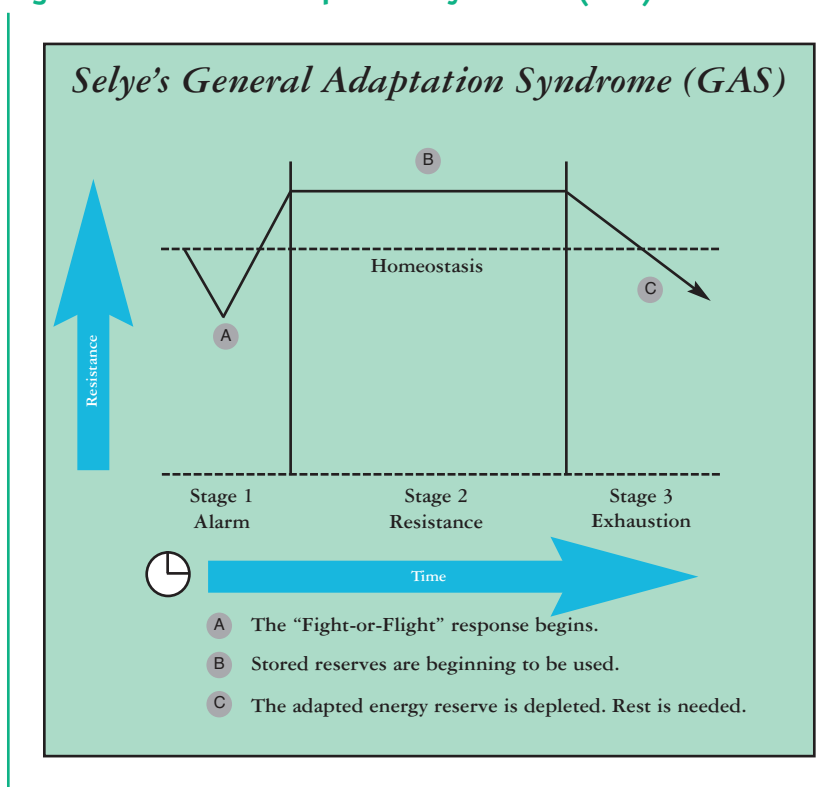
Type A personalities are usually characterized by competitiveness, impatience, and aggressiveness.



Type A personalities do not automatically suffer from CVD. If these individuals view stressors as a challenge rather than a burden, they typically manage their stress well, and are probably not at a greater risk for developing CVD.⁶ These individuals possess a “hardy” personality and have high levels of self-efficacy—they believe in their abilities and feel assured that they can handle the stress in their life.

Stress can be either beneficial or harmful, depending on the person and the situation. For example, when a woman’s boyfriend proposes to her, she experiences a great deal of stress. If she loves him and wants him to propose, she enjoys the stress. Stress of this sort is known as eustress, and produces a positive effect on the person. However, if she is not ready for marriage and did not expect nor want her boyfriend to propose, she is likely to be apprehensive about the whole situation. Stress of this sort is known as distress, and produces negative effects on the individual, often leaving one feeling awkward and unpleasant. As previously mentioned, Dr. Hans Selye was a pioneer in researching the effects of stress on humans. His efforts led to one of the first theories concerning stress—the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)³ (See Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)



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Selye proposed that stress could be both good and bad (i.e., eustress and distress, respectively). He further proposed that each individual responded generally the same way with respect to stressors, and that these responses progressed through three distinct stages: 1) alarm; 2) resistance; and 3) exhaustion.

ALARM. The “fight-or-flight” response that is induced by the sympathetic division of the ANS places the body in an “alarmed” state. Basically, the person feels “stressed” and anxious. If this “alarmed” state continues for any serious length of time, the individual is prone to disease and often experiences unpleasant side effects, such as headaches and disrupted eating and sleeping patterns.

RESISTANCE. At this stage, the body has adapted to the stress and has developed an altered level of homeostasis. A person in this stage can function normally, but is more susceptible to disease. Over time, added stressors can lead to exhaustion.

EXHAUSTION. The alarm and resistance stages tax an individual’s ability to cope with stressors. If the individual is repeatedly stressed with no reprieve, exhaustion occurs. The exhaustion referred to here is not the same exhaustion that one feels after a long, hard day. It is more serious and is characterized by extended periods of stress, resulting in disorganized and unclear thinking. Basically, individuals have lost their ability to cope. They have depleted their stockpile of energy available for coping (i.e., the adaptive energy reserve), and are simply worn out.

PERFORMANCE AND STRESS

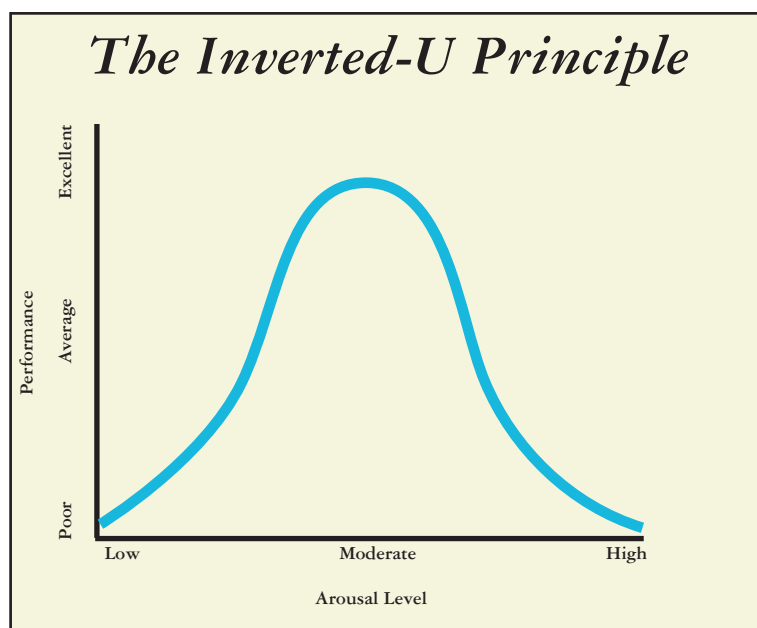
Performance is related closely to stress, or more specifically, arousal. Arousal is “the level of excitement or activation generated in the central nervous system, low levels of arousal [are] associated with sleeplike states, and high levels [are] associated with the agitated and extremely alert states.”⁹ Performance, both physical and mental, is affected by one’s arousal level. For instance, imagine a backup quarterback immediately entering a game after the starting quarterback has been injured. The backup quarterback is very excited and highly aroused, yet must perform specific and highly skilled tasks. At first, he typically overthrows his receivers because he is too excited. But after a few plays, he settles down and is able to complete the passes. This example demonstrates the inverted-U principle (See Figure 3.2). The inverted-U principle states that, “increased arousal improves performance only to a point, after which further increases in arousal degrade performance.”⁹ Optimal arousal is important for performance. Fine motor skills and critical thinking reach peak performance with modest levels of arousal; however, gross motor skills and non-critical think-

ing require a much higher arousal rate to reach the same level of performance. Schmidt⁹ summarizes the inverted-U principle as follows:

- Increased arousal improves performance, but only to a point.
- Further increases in arousal cause performance decrements.
- Tasks with high decision-making components or fine motor control have relatively low optimal levels of arousal.
- Some are more easily aroused than others.

The inverted-U principle applies directly to an individual's daily life. Stress, or more specifically, arousal, is necessary to perform well; however, excessive stress that results in over-arousal places an individual in a situation where very little can actually get accomplished. Optimal arousal is critical, but the level of arousal is specific to the task being performed.

Figure 3.2 The Inverted-U Principle



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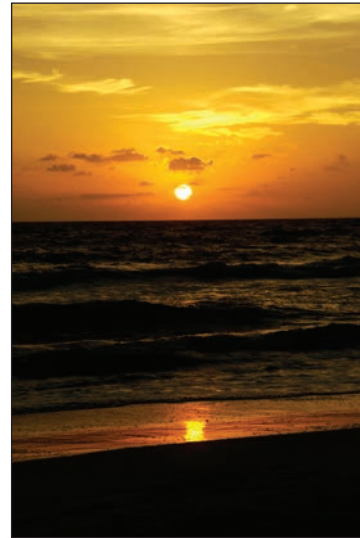
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THE TYPES OF STRESS

The American Psychological Association (APA)¹⁰ lists three different types of stress: 1) acute, 2) episodic acute, and 3) chronic. Each of these forms of stress has its own symptoms and characteristics.

ACUTE STRESS. Acute stress is short-term stress, and is most common. It involves the daily pressures and demands of life and provides, as Selye says, “the spice of life.”² However, in large doses, acute stress can be exhausting, and eventually causes minor, but irritating, conditions, such as headaches or upset stomach. The APA¹⁰ lists the symptoms of acute stress as follows:

- *Emotional distress—some combination of anger or irritability, anxiety, and depression, the three stress emotions;*
- *Muscular problems, including tension headache, back pain, jaw pain, and the muscular tensions that lead to pulled muscles and tendon and ligament problems;*
- *Stomach, gut, and bowel problems, such as heartburn, acid stomach, flatulence, diarrhea, constipation, and irritable bowel syndrome;*
- *Transient over-arousal leads to elevation in blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, heart palpitations, dizziness, migraine headaches, cold hands or feet, shortness of breath, and chest pain.*



Imagining a relaxing place, such as a beach at sunset, often helps to reduce acute stress.

Everyone encounters acute stress nearly every day. If properly managed, however, stress has very minor health consequences, and, in fact, provides many of the pleasures associated with daily living. But if left untreated, stress can cause serious health problems.

EPISODIC ACUTE STRESS. Individuals who frequently encounter bouts of acute stress and live a chaotic, disorderly life undergo episodic acute stress. Basically, these individuals suffer from the stressors of everyday life and become overwhelmed. They simply, as the old adage states, have too many irons in the fire. Often, these individuals perceive life as an ongoing example of Murphy’s Law—if something can go wrong, it will—and are typically very pessimistic. Disorganization, as the result of trying to accomplish too much and with insufficient planning, is the basis of their lives, resulting in them being “constantly in the clutches of acute stress.”¹⁰

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Further characteristics of individuals who suffer from episodic acute stress are short-temperedness, irritability, and anxiousness. These individuals are almost always rushed, typically abrupt, and occasionally are perceived to be hostile because of their irritability.¹⁰ Life, in general, is very stressful and unpleasant for them. Additionally, these individuals are commonly categorized as “worry warts—individuals who see disaster around every corner and pessimistically forecast catastrophe in every situation.”¹⁰ The APA¹⁰ lists the following symptoms of episodic acute stress as the result of extended over-arousal:

- *Persistent tension headaches*
- *Migraines*
- *Hypertension*
- *Chest pain*
- *Heart disease*

Individuals who suffer from episodic acute stress are often very stubborn and resist change. Treating this form of stress can be difficult, because it requires an individual to change personality traits and lifestyle habits. However, with professional assistance and a strong will, individuals can and do learn to deal with these stressors effectively. But it is usually “only the promise of relief from pain and discomfort of their symptoms” that keeps these individuals “on track in their recovery programs.”¹⁰

CHRONIC STRESS. The worst, most damaging form of stress is chronic stress. Chronic stress is the “grinding stress that wears people away day after day, year after year,” destroying a person’s body, mind, and life through long-term attrition.¹⁰ This form of stress often accompanies circumstances such as poverty, a dysfunctional family, a failing marriage, an unrewarding occupation, etc. Often, the individual loses hope in a better existence and has no joy in living. Further, “the worst aspect of chronic stress is that people get used to it. They forget it’s there . . . because it is old, familiar, and sometimes, almost comfortable.”¹⁰ The person simply feels frustrated, has forgotten how life could and should be lived, and has simply given up.

Stress can cause serious health problems, including hypertension and heart disease.



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Chronic stress eventually brings a person to a final breaking point. Sometimes this “breaking point” can become fatal, resulting in disease (e.g., heart attacks, strokes) and even suicide. Recovering from chronic stress is usually difficult because it demands major changes in a person’s lifestyle and outlook, often requiring extended behavioral and medical treatment.¹⁰

HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT HEALTH AND WELLNESS?



Stress can be felt both positively and negatively, and is necessary for a full, interesting life.

Stress affects everyone, both positively and negatively. Often, acute stress accentuates the pleasures of life; from the adrenaline rush of a roller coaster ride to the anxieties of a first date, these types of stressors are necessary for individuals to lead interesting, fulfilling lives. However, stress can be very harmful. Research shows that excessive stress can impair the immune system, reducing the number of germ-fighting cells in the blood and increasing the risk of infection.⁷⁻⁸ This impairment results from hormonal changes within the bloodstream that alter germ-fighting cells and reduce their effectiveness. In short, the immune system is negatively affected by stress, but improves with relaxation.⁸

The Wellness Councils of America¹ report the following concerning stress and its relationship to illness, particularly the common cold:

- *People who have been under severe stress for 1 to 6 months are two times more likely to get a cold.*
- *Individuals undergoing more than 2 years of stress are four times more likely to get sick.*
- *The least likely to catch a cold are those with many relationships.*
- *Unemployment or underemployment increases the risk of developing a cold by 3¹/₂ times.*

Many other illnesses are directly related to stress. Some of these include hypertension (i.e., high blood pressure), ulcers, and skin disorders. Of these, hypertension is the most problematic because of its strong relationship to cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in the United States.

When an individual is stressed, physiological changes occur that are beyond the control of the individual. As Selye theorized, these changes, over time, can have a very negative effect on the body. An individual's health and even life, may be compromised as put forth by Selye in his General Adaptation Syndrome theory. All individuals undergo stress, but all individuals do not suffer from stress-related illnesses. The difference lies in how the individual copes with stress.

When a person encounters a stressor, an immediate physiological and psychological reaction occurs (i.e., Selye's Alarm Stage). Typically, most individuals cope with the stressor (i.e., Selye's Resistance Stage), and return to a normal, healthy state. However, some individuals do not cope very well. Many times, these individuals develop negative coping behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking, rage) that only compound their problems. In fact, many of these negative coping strategies increase a person's stress. And, ultimately, these individuals severely impair their health (i.e., Selye's Exhaustion Stage).

STUDY TIP:

All individuals undergo stress, but all individuals do not suffer from stress-related illnesses. The difference lies in how the individual copes with stress.

HOW CAN STRESS BE MANAGED EFFECTIVELY?

Everyone must realize that life is full of stressors. Stress plays an important role in every person's life. Without stress, life is dull and boring, but too much stress often results in a person becoming overwhelmed and eventually ill. Each day, individuals face numerous stressful events, some major, though most very minor. However, the minor ones add up, and if not managed effectively, one's health may decline.¹¹ Effective stress management is critical to maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Managing stress effectively involves the following steps:

1. Realizing and accepting that life is stressful;
2. Identifying the actual and potential stressors in one's life;
3. Becoming proactive instead of reactive, by taking charge of the situation and seeking solutions to problems;

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4. Accepting what one can and cannot change; and
5. Using proven stress-management techniques and coping behaviors.

REALIZE THAT LIFE IS STRESSFUL. Stress is simply a part of living. Daily stressors occur, and coping with these is necessary in order to be well. Accepting that life is stressful and adjusting one's thinking accordingly is the first step in managing stress successfully.

IDENTIFY ACTUAL AND POTENTIAL STRESSORS. The second step in learning to cope with stress is identifying what is actually stressful. For many, the answer to this question is obvious (e.g., work, family, school assignments); but, often, many stressors go unnoticed. Whenever the basic symptoms of acute stress (e.g., tension headache, anxiety, neck and shoulder tension, fist-clenching) arise, the individual should stop, assess the situation, and determine what triggered the response. Often, just knowing what the stressors are and how they can impact the individual leads to a

reduction in stress responses. Also, potential or future stressors need to be identified. If someone knows that a major assignment is coming up, preparing oneself for this is important. Knowing that the stressor is coming is very important in the coping strategy.

BE PROACTIVE. After identifying the stressors in life, attempts should be made to reduce these. Establishing a detailed and well-designed action plan to minimize unnecessary exposure to stressors is critical. The goal is not to eliminate all stressors from life, or even to eliminate most of them. Rather, planning activities and routines in a way that accomplishes goals and maintains schedules, while at the same time, manages to leave room for some excitement and variety in life is the challenge. If a large assignment is due soon, start work on it early; do not avoid it, and do not put it off until right before the deadline. Otherwise, much of the enjoyment and satisfaction of the work is lost in the hectic and chaotic scramble to finish the project; "stress" overwhelms the experience and often threatens to intrude on other aspects of life,

also. Likewise, if driving in "rush hour" traffic is intolerable, leave earlier or seek an alternate route. The goal is to avoid as many daily stressors as is realistically possible and reduce the number of potential stressors, as well.

ACCEPT WHAT CAN AND CANNOT BE CHANGED. Accepting what is within one's control is paramount for success in coping with stress. The following quote is well known, but rarely truly employed:

God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, courage to change things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.



The first thing to grasp about stress management is that life is stressful.

These words from the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr summarize the ultimate principle in stress management—accepting what one can and cannot control. To learn to cope with stress effectively, individuals must accept their abilities and limitations. However, many individuals constantly try to change things, or worse, worry incessantly about factors that are simply beyond their control. Obviously, this approach fails because the individual's actions have absolutely no effect on the specific stressor. Worse still, the individual often feels guilt and loses self-worth because of this behavior. To quote the philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand:¹²

Most men spend their lives in futile rebellion against things they cannot change, in passive resignation to things they can, and—never attempting to learn the difference—in chronic guilt and self-doubt on both counts.

Basically, it must be understood that not all situations and factors can be controlled. That does not mean individual action is futile; it is just the opposite. Individuals should choose wisely, control what can be controlled, and accept what cannot. Learning to say, “Oh, well. So it goes,” when a situation is out of one's control is vital to successfully cope with stress.¹

USE STRESS-MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES. Exercise, relaxation techniques, and cognitive interventions are the major methods used to minimize stress. No one method is superior to the others; in fact, a combination of the three produces the best results.

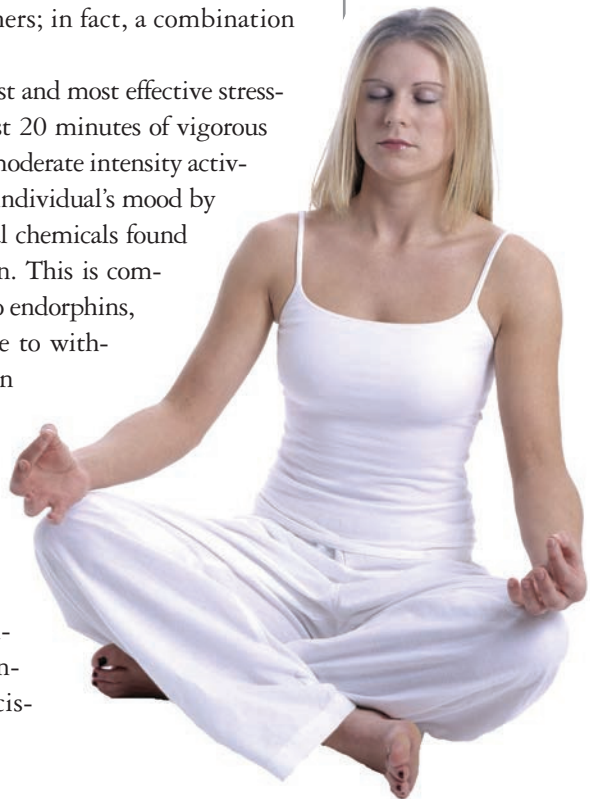
EXERCISE. Regular exercise is one of the simplest and most effective stress-relievers available.¹ Exercising regularly (i.e., at least 20 minutes of vigorous intensity activity 3 days per week or 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity 5 days per week) produces positive effects in an individual's mood by eliciting the body to release endorphins, the natural chemicals found in the brain that are responsible for decreasing pain. This is commonly referred to as a “runner's high.” In addition to endorphins, exercise makes the physical body stronger and able to withstand greater amounts of stress. (More information about exercise is covered in Chapter 4.)

Simple stretching exercises can help reduce muscular tension that is often a symptom of acute stress. Stretches as simple as separating and curling the fingers or lifting the arms over the head can help reduce stress.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES. Relaxation techniques are designed to reduce the amount of tension felt. They range from simple breathing exercises to meditation.

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It is believed that successful meditation can reduce stress by decreasing certain physiological factors, such as respiration, heart rate, and blood pressure.



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Massage reduces stress by increasing blood flow to body tissues and minimizing muscular tension.

DEEP BREATHING. This technique can be performed anywhere and is rather inconspicuous. It simply involves breathing in through the nose and exhaling through the mouth according to the 3:3:3 principle. Inhale slowly and deeply, through the nose, for 3 seconds, and feel the tension leave the body. The inhalation is followed by exhaling for 3 seconds, very slowly through the mouth. The individual then waits 3 seconds and repeats the process for several minutes. This technique helps oxygenate the cells of the body, and is very good at relieving acute stress because the focus is on breathing.

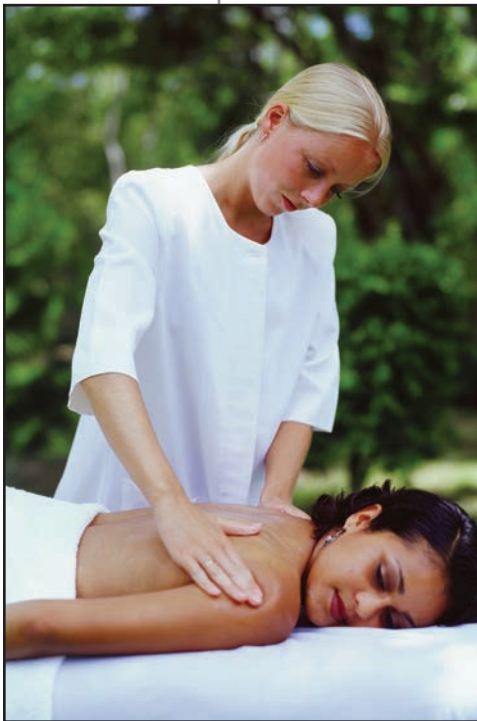
PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION. Progressive relaxation consists of systematically tensing and then relaxing specific muscles. The principle underlying this technique is that, by definition, a relaxed muscle is not tense. Thus, individuals with relaxed muscles should have minimal stress.

To perform progressive relaxation, an individual finds a comfortable chair or sofa (preferably a sofa or bed) and then lies down, face-up, with arms to the side, and legs straight. The technique begins with a few minutes of deep breathing, followed by a systematic tensing of muscle groups throughout the body, starting with the head and working down to the feet. A specific muscle should be tensed for about 5 seconds and then relaxed, gradually working down the body.

Progressive relaxation teaches an individual how to relax the entire body, thus reducing muscular tension and stress. It is also an excellent method to use when experiencing difficulty falling asleep.

MASSAGE THERAPY. Massage, the gentle rubbing of body tissues, is very effective in inducing relaxation. Massage reduces stress by increasing blood flow to those tissues and by minimizing muscular tension. An individual can self-massage certain areas that are prone to stress. However, massage is most beneficial when performed by another person, especially a licensed massage therapist.

BIOFEEDBACK. Biofeedback refers to a person's ability to alter the body's normal autonomic nervous system by responding to "feedback" from an external monitoring source. The goal of this technique is to develop relaxation through self-control. For biofeedback training, an individual is connected to a measuring device, such as an EKG. When exposed to certain stressors, the person's heart rate increases. Provided with "feedback" by the EKG, the individual then attempts to voluntarily reduce that rate by relaxing.



Over time, a person becomes attuned to these physiological responses and can control them without the aid of the external feedback (e.g., the EKG). Such a heightened awareness of the body's responses to stress enables the use of specific and pinpointed stress-reduction techniques before the stress situation progresses to unhealthy levels. Biofeedback can also alert the individual to previously unidentified stressors.

MEDITATION. Meditation is a focused attempt at deep relaxation. This technique typically revolves around the use of a mantra—a word, sound, or phrase repeated over and over while trying to relax. The purpose of the mantra is to free the conscious mind of extraneous thoughts and ideas. The ideal situation for meditation involves sitting quietly for 15-20 minutes, breathing slowly, and concentrating on the mantra. It is believed that successful meditation can reduce stress by decreasing certain physiological factors, such as respiration, heart rate, and blood pressure.

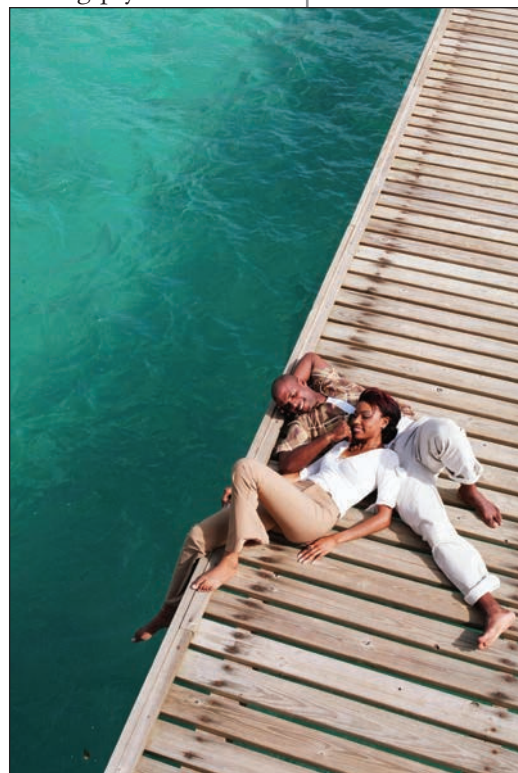
LAUGHTER. Laughter is very effective at reducing stress. Humor helps to elevate a person's mood and can decrease muscular tension. Laughter is a simple technique, readily available to everyone.

COGNITIVE INTERVENTIONS. The power of the human mind is phenomenal, and is able to both reduce and intensify stress responses. Often, individuals “think” themselves into distress and become ill, creating psychosomatic illnesses. Accordingly, if people can think themselves ill from distress, they can also, to a degree, think themselves well.

POSITIVE SELF-TALK. Keeping a positive attitude is critical. If an individual believes that something is possible, it probably is. If, on the other hand, they believe something is impossible, they almost certainly will not accomplish it. Many adages describe this phenomenon: “You must believe to achieve,” and “Can't never could do nothing” are just a few. One of the most popular and enduring of these comes from the children's story, *The Little Engine That Could*. No one believed the little train could go over the mountain, but he just kept repeating to himself, “I think I can . . . I think I can” until he reached the peak and was on the other side. The purpose of the story is to teach children to believe in themselves. This same principle applies to adults. Maintaining a positive self-image and using positive self-talk is highly effective in reducing the detrimental effects of stress. It may sound simple, but it works.

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Imagining a relaxing place can help reduce acute stress. Adding specific details, such as the feel of warm sand on your feet, or the sound of ocean waves, can help return you to a more normal level of functioning.





Meditation and stretching exercises are useful means to manage stress successfully.

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IMAGERY. The human imagination is powerful. (If in doubt, think of the last time you were in a dark place and heard a strange sound.) By harnessing the power of the imagination, individuals can significantly reduce stress. For instance, visualizing the successful performance of a certain task usually makes that task easier, and certainly makes it more familiar to the individual. So whenever a stressful event is approaching—e.g., an oral presentation, meeting new people, taking an examination—mentally rehearsing the situation is quite beneficial. Individuals need to see themselves accomplishing the task successfully and with ease. This exercise often helps reduce the stress response when the individual is actually in the situation.

Imagery also can help in the reduction of acute stress. Someone imagining a relaxing place, such as a sandy beach, often works. This should be done with the eyes closed, and the person should actually place him- or herself there on the beach. The imagery should be specific, e.g., warm sand on his or her feet, the sun on his or her face, the ocean waves crashing to the beach. A few minutes of this can very easily reduce acute stress and help someone return to a more normal level of functioning.

GRIEF AND THE ABILITY TO COPE SUCCESSFULLY

Everyone grieves. It is essentially impossible to live, especially as an adult, without undergoing a serious loss at some time in one's life. At the beginning, the loss, perhaps the death of a loved one or the breakup of a serious relationship, can be quite debilitating. In time, however, the grief begins to subside. However, understanding grief and successful coping mechanisms is very helpful in having one maintain high-level wellness.

The initial stages of grief are marked by the following characteristics:

- Denial
- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Disinterest in favorable activities
- Disrupted sleeping and eating patterns

Grief is not limited to human relationships either. The loss of a beloved pet or the inability to achieve a cherished dream are traumatizing

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as well. But it is important to remember that grief works in direct proportion to the value one places on what was lost. This loss can be horribly debilitating, and it generally elicits the following five stages of grief as defined by the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (www.helpguide.org):

1. Denial: "This cannot be happening to me."
2. Anger: "Why is this happening? Who is to blame?"
3. Bargaining: "Make this not happen, and in return I shall..."
4. Depression: "I am too sad to do anything."
5. Acceptance: "I am at peace with what happened."

These stages are a natural reaction to a loss. If someone experiences them, he or she is acting perfectly normal, but know that not everyone goes through each stage. Kübler-Ross believed that these stages were a general guideline and not "a rigid framework" that everyone would endure. That said, understanding the typical stages of grief and the characteristics that one experiences from grief is part of coping.

According to the non-profit resource HELPGUIDE.ORG, one of the first steps in successfully coping with grief is to seek support from others. Going it alone while coping with a major loss generally is not a good idea. Sharing your feelings and expressing your emotions are very two of the best things that one can do to help one cope. Depending upon one's specific situation, talking to friends and family members as well as speaking to support groups and trained professionals can be very beneficial. Also, it is important to take care of one's self. One should face the feelings that he or she is experiencing rather than trying to suppress them. Trying to suppress them ultimately just delays the whole healing and coping process. Some cope best by writing, say keeping a journal of thoughts and feelings about the loss, and others do better by creating remembrances of the event or person. In the end, one must do what works best for him or her. And, no one person knows what is best, and no one can tell another to simply "get over it." Lastly, with respect to high-level wellness, the physical dimension of wellness, if taken care of properly through nutrition, exercise, and sleep, a person's other dimensions, in this case, the emotional dimension of wellness, can improve. One must not neglect any of the other five dimensions of wellness. In fact,

Exercise is an excellent means of managing stress.



–NOTES–

Eustress produces positive effects and leaves one feeling pleasant and happy.



working on those can be the cathartic experience that one may need to cope better with the loss. Focusing on improving one's spiritual and occupational wellness, for example, can be very helpful in increasing one's emotional wellness. Remember, all of the dimensions are interwoven to form a whole (The principle of Holism as discussed in Chapter 1). Lastly, the grieving process can take a while, and often there are “triggers,” such as birthdays, anniversaries, or other special events, that could bring up a series of powerful emotions. While not always possible, it is best for individuals to think ahead when these things are going to occur and to plan accordingly. Triggers are going to happen, but planning ahead can help with some of the anxiety.

Occasionally the grief can be too overwhelming, and an individual can become seriously depressed. The main difference between grief and depression is that during grief, there are highs and lows, and at times, a person is sincerely happy and content. With depression, it is quite the opposite, and the feeling of despair is almost constant. If this occurs, an individual would want to seek the help of a trained professional such as a psychologist or psychiatrist.

SUMMARY

Stress is commonplace and encountered every day. Stress can be both good (i.e., eustress) and bad (i.e., distress). But in the proper amounts and handled effectively, stress makes life interesting and worth living.

Stress affects the body both physiologically and psychologically. When individuals are first confronted with a stressful situation, the “fight-or-flight” response is activated. There are three types of stress: acute, episodic acute, and chronic. If stress becomes chronic, and an individual does not learn to cope with it effectively, illness and even death can result.

Managing stress effectively involves a variety of methods, from exercise to relaxation techniques to cognitive interventions. No one method is superior to another, and an effective stress management regimen combines a variety of these techniques individualized to the needs of each person. The key is recognizing that stress exists and is necessary for optimal performance. The challenge is learning how to cope with that stress positively, while maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is stress?
2. What is a stressor?
3. How does the human body respond to stress both physiologically and psychologically?
4. What are the characteristics of the “fight-or-flight” response?
5. What is Selye’s General Adaptation Syndrome? What are its three stages?
6. What are the three types of stress delineated by the American Psychological Association?
7. What role does stress play in disease?
8. How does stress affect an individual’s health?
9. What are the three major categories of stress management techniques?
10. What are the most effective ways to cope with grief?

RELATED WEBSITES

American Institute of Stress

www.stress.org

Medline Plus

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/stress.html>

Mind Tools

www.mindtools.com

Stress Assess—National Wellness Institute

Wellness.uwsp.edu/Health_Service/services/stress.shtml

Help Guide

www.helpguide.org

