

Stressors and Stress Response

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial, you will learn about how people experience stress in their lives due to events and work. You will also consider how your self and social awareness skill can help you determine the cause for a stressor so you can focus on ways to adjust and overcome. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Stressors

An individual experiences stress when they encounter a potential **stressor**. In general, stressors can be placed into one of two broad categories: **chronic** and **acute**. Chronic stressors include events that persist over an extended period of time, such as caring for a parent with dementia, long-term unemployment, or imprisonment. Acute stressors involve brief focal events that sometimes continue to be experienced as overwhelming well after the event has ended, such as falling on an icy sidewalk and breaking your leg. Whether chronic or acute, potential stressors come in many shapes and sizes. They can include major traumatic events, significant life changes, daily hassles, as well as other situations in which a person is regularly exposed to threat, challenge, or danger.



Stressor

A threat, challenge or danger which a person experiences.

Chronic

A condition that persists over an extended time.

Acute

A condition that occurs intensely over a brief time.

2. Traumatic Events

Some stressors involve traumatic events or situations in which a person is exposed to actual or threatened death or serious injury. Stressors in this category include exposure to military combat, threatened or actual physical assaults (like physical attacks, sexual assault, robbery, childhood abuse), terrorist attacks, natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes, and automobile accidents. Men, people of color, and individuals in lower socioeconomic status (SES) groups report experiencing a greater number of traumatic

events than do women, white people, and individuals in higher SES groups. Some individuals who are exposed to stressors of extreme magnitude develop **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**: a chronic stress reaction characterized by experiences and behaviors that may include intrusive and painful memories of the stressor event, jumpiness, persistent negative emotional states, detachment from others, angry outbursts, and avoidance of reminders of the event.



Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

A chronic stress reaction caused by exposure to extreme stressors.

3. Life Changes

Most stressors that we encounter are not nearly as intense as the ones described above. Many potential stressors we face involve events or situations that require us to make changes in our ongoing lives and require time as we adjust to those changes. Examples include death of a close family member, marriage, divorce, and moving.

In the 1960s, psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe wanted to examine the link between life stressors and physical illness, based on the hypothesis that life events requiring significant changes in a person's normal life routines are stressful, whether these events are desirable or undesirable. They developed the **Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS)**, consisting of 43 life events that require varying degrees of personal readjustment. Many life events that most people would consider pleasant (e.g., holidays, retirement, marriage) are among those listed on the SRRS; these are examples of the good stress mentioned in the last lesson. Holmes and Rahe also proposed that life events can add up over time, and that experiencing a cluster of stressful events increases one's risk of developing physical illnesses.

In developing their scale, Holmes and Rahe asked 394 participants to provide a numerical estimate for each of the 43 items. Death of a spouse ranked highest on the scale and divorce ranked second highest. In addition, personal injury or illness, marriage, and job termination also ranked highly on the scale. Change in residence, change in eating habits, and vacation ranked low on the scale. Minor violations of the law ranked the lowest.

Accumulating a high number of life change units within a brief period of time (one or two years) is related to a wide range of physical illnesses (even accidents and athletic injuries) and mental health problems. In addition, people tend to experience more physical symptoms, such as backache, upset stomach, diarrhea, and acne, on specific days in which self-reported stress is considerably higher than normal, such as the day of a family member's wedding.

Perhaps the most serious criticism of the SRRS scale is that it does not take into consideration respondents' appraisals of the life events it contains. As you recall, appraisal of a stressor is a key element in the conceptualization and overall experience of stress. Being fired from work may be devastating to some but a welcome opportunity to obtain a better job for others. Appraisal all depends on how you use your social awareness skill.

4. Hassles

Potential stressors do not always involve major life events. Daily hassles—the minor irritations and annoyances

that are part of our everyday lives (e.g., rush hour traffic, lost keys, obnoxious coworkers, inclement weather, arguments with friends or family)—can build on one another and leave us just as stressed as life change events.

Researchers have demonstrated that the frequency of daily hassles is actually a good predictor of both physical and psychological health. In a well-known study of San Francisco residents, the frequency of daily hassles was found to be more strongly associated with physical health problems than were life change events. In addition, daily minor hassles, especially interpersonal conflicts, often lead to negative and distressed mood states. Cyber hassles that occur on social media may represent a new source of stress. In one investigation, undergraduates who, over a 10-week period, reported greater Facebook-induced stress (e.g., guilt or discomfort over rejecting friend requests and anger or sadness over being unfriended by another) experienced increased rates of upper respiratory infections, especially if they had larger social networks. Clearly, daily hassles can add up and take a toll on us both emotionally and physically.



Self and Social Awareness: Why Employers Care

Daily hassles may often include conflict with coworkers or bosses or unpleasant tasks at work. Someone who knows themself well and is willing to resolve conflicts with others can be a benefit to employers. Imagine a person who uses strategies to collaborate and communicate effectively with coworkers in order to avoid daily hassles. Employers would likely hire someone like this over someone who is always starting trouble at the workplace.

5. Other Stressors

Stressors can include situations in which one is frequently exposed to challenging and unpleasant events, such as difficult, demanding, or unsafe working conditions. Although most jobs and occupations can at times be demanding, some are clearly more stressful than others. For example, most people would likely agree that a firefighter's work is inherently more stressful than that of a florist. Equally likely, most would agree that jobs containing various unpleasant elements, such as those requiring exposure to loud noise (heavy equipment operator), constant harassment and threats of physical violence (prison guard), perpetual frustration (bus driver in a major city), or those mandating that an employee work alternating day and night shifts (hotel desk clerk), are much more demanding—and thus, more stressful—than those that do not contain such elements. The table below lists several occupations and some of the specific stressors associated with those occupations.

Occupation	Stressors Specific to Occupation
Police officer	physical dangers, excessive paperwork, red tape, dealing with court system, coworker and supervisor conflict, lack of support from the public
Firefighter	uncertainty over whether a serious fire or hazard awaits after an alarm
Social worker	little positive feedback from jobs or from the public, unsafe work environments, frustration in dealing with bureaucracy, excessive paperwork, sense of personal responsibility for clients, work overload
Teacher	Excessive paperwork, lack of adequate supplies or facilities, work overload, lack of positive

	feedback, vandalism, threat of physical violence
Nurse	Work overload, heavy physical work, patient concerns (dealing with death and medical concerns), interpersonal problems with other medical staff (especially physicians)
Emergency medical worker	Unpredictable and extreme nature of the job, inexperience
Air traffic controller	Little control over potential crisis situations and workload, fear of causing an accident, peak traffic situations, general work environment
Clerical and secretarial work	Little control over job mobility, unsupportive supervisors, work overload, lack of perceived control
Managerial work	Work overload, conflict and ambiguity in defining the managerial role, difficult work relationships

Although the specific stressors for these occupations are diverse, they seem to share two common denominators: heavy workload and uncertainty about and lack of control over certain aspects of a job. Both of these factors contribute to **job strain**, a work situation that combines excessive job demands and workload with little discretion in decision making or job control. Clearly, many occupations other than the ones listed in the table above involve at least a moderate amount of job strain in that they often involve heavy workloads and little job control (e.g., inability to decide when to take breaks). Such jobs are often low-status and include those of factory workers, postal clerks, supermarket cashiers, taxi drivers, and short-order cooks. Job strain can have adverse consequences on both physical and mental health; it has been shown to be associated with increased risk of hypertension, heart attacks, recurrence of heart disease after a first heart attack, significant weight loss or gain, and major depressive disorder. A longitudinal study of over 10,000 British civil servants reported that workers under 50 years old who earlier had reported high job strain were 68% more likely to later develop heart disease than were those workers under 50 years old who reported little job strain.

Some people who are exposed to chronically stressful work conditions can experience job burnout, which is a general sense of emotional exhaustion and cynicism in relation to one's job. Job burnout occurs frequently among those in human service jobs (e.g., social workers, teachers, therapists, and police officers). Job burnout consists of three dimensions. The first dimension is exhaustion—a sense that one's emotional resources are drained or that one is at the end of her rope and has nothing more to give at a psychological level. Second, job burnout is characterized by depersonalization: a sense of emotional detachment between the worker and the recipients of his services, often resulting in callous, cynical, or indifferent attitudes toward these individuals. Third, job burnout is characterized by diminished personal accomplishment, which is the tendency to evaluate one's work negatively by, for example, experiencing dissatisfaction with one's job-related accomplishments or feeling as though one has categorically failed to influence others' lives through one's work.

Job strain appears to be one of the greatest risk factors leading to job burnout, which is most commonly observed in workers who are older (ages 55–64), unmarried, and whose jobs involve manual labor. Heavy alcohol consumption, physical inactivity, being overweight, and having a physical or lifetime mental disorder are also associated with job burnout. In addition, depression often co-occurs with job burnout. One large-scale study of over 3,000 Finnish employees reported that half of the participants with severe job burnout had some form of depressive disorder. Job burnout is often precipitated by feelings of having invested considerable energy, effort, and time into one's work while receiving little in return (e.g., little respect or support from others or low pay).

IN CONTEXT

As an illustration, consider CharlieAnn, a nursing assistant who worked in a nursing home. CharlieAnn worked long hours for little pay in a difficult facility. Her supervisor was domineering, unpleasant, and unsupportive; he was disrespectful of CharlieAnn's personal time, frequently informing her at the last minute she must work several additional hours after her shift ended or that she must report to work on weekends. CharlieAnn had very little autonomy at her job. She had little say in her day-to-day duties and how to perform them, and she was not permitted to take breaks unless her supervisor explicitly told her that she could. CharlieAnn did not feel as though her hard work was appreciated, either by supervisory staff or by the residents of the home. She was very unhappy over her low pay, and she felt that many of the residents treated her disrespectfully.

After several years, CharlieAnn began to hate her job. She dreaded going to work in the morning, and she gradually developed a callous, hostile attitude toward many of the residents. Eventually, she began to feel as though she could no longer help the nursing home residents. CharlieAnn's absenteeism from work increased, and one day she decided that she had had enough and quit. She now has a job in sales, vowing never to work in nursing again.



TERMS TO KNOW

Job Strain

A work situation with excessive demands or with little job control.

Job Burnout

A sense of emotional exhaustion and cynicism about your job.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned about chronic and acute **stressors** that trigger stress. These stressors can come from **traumatic events** and **life changes**, but also from more typical **hassles** and **other stressors**. You also reflected on employers wanting to hire people who can use their self and social awareness skill to avoid and overcome conflict/stress at work.

See you in the next lesson!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Acute

A condition that occurs intensely over a brief time.

Chronic

A condition that persists over an extended time.

Job Burnout

A sense of emotional exhaustion and cynicism about your job.

Job Strain

A work situation with excessive demands or with little job control.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

A chronic stress reaction caused by exposure to extreme stressors.

Stressor

A threat, challenge or danger which a person experiences.