



The Anatomy Of Stress

Because ‘stress’ is such a commonly used word on a daily basis, I started to wonder if people assume it’s a natural part of existence that they have no control over. I pondered whether people understood the physiology of stress, let alone what to do about it.

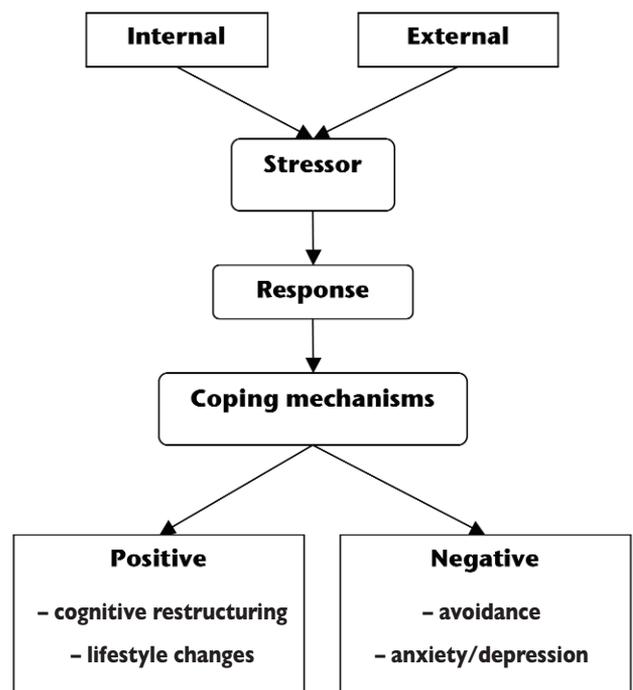
So I decided to undertake the **stressful** challenge of trying to understand it.

The statistics on stress are not surprising: 40% of Canadians on a health care plan said they experience “a great deal of stress at work.” Statistics Canada reported that, from 1992 to 1998, the proportion of Canadian women who felt severe time management stress rose from 16% to 21%, and for men it climbed from 12% to 16%.

So what is stress? Is it necessarily a bad thing or can it be good for you?

Stress is defined as “the perception of a physical or psychological threat and the perception of being ill-prepared to cope with the threat.”

The following diagram illustrates the stress pathway:



The key here is to focus on the actions you take when you feel stressed, and be aware of whether or not the action alleviated the stress.



There are two types of stress: acute and chronic.

Acute stress results from a sudden, unexpected event or difficult task, and goes away when the event or task is over. Acute stress causes the ‘fight or flight’ mechanism – an increase in hormones that results in heightened alertness, increased heart rate and blood flow to help us react to the situation by ‘fighting’ or ‘fleeing.’ This innate mechanism enabled our ancestors to increase their chance of survival – so acute stress is not always negative stress.

Chronic stress is prolonged, where negatively perceived circumstances have no positive results. Stagnant jobs or relationships, long-term unemployment or role changes are some of the situations that with repeated exposure can cause our bodies to deteriorate as it struggles to regain its internal balance.

The negative effects of repeated exposure to any kind stress with poor coping mechanisms are endless. They include weight loss or gain, cardiovascular disease, depression, anxiety, relationship problems, workplace dissatisfaction, agitation or irritability, restless sleep, reduced sex drive, fatigue, gastrointestinal disorders, bone loss, poor illness recovery levels, impaired memory, allergies, and on and on and on ...

So now that I’ve *stressed* to you the negative impacts of stress, how do you start managing it?

The good news is that stress is rarely constant throughout the day. We often oversimplify stress instead of being aware of what impacts our *level of stress*. If we were to track our level of stress at set times throughout the day, we would find that it is constantly changing and it’s important to develop an awareness of this to avoid thinking we should be in the stress response 24 hours a day.

The best way to increase this awareness is by using a stress diary to document what triggers your stress. The goal here is to determine four to six specific times in the day that you will chart your experiences. The reason to do this at set times is that if you only wrote in your diary when you were feeling stressed, you would oversimplify the matter. Instead, check in with yourself periodically during the day to:

- analyze the situation.
- rate the physical sensation (1 = intense to 10 = mild) and describe it.
- rate the level of emotional distress and describe it
- indicate what action you took.

Your chart may look like this:

Time	Situation	Rate sensation	Describe sensation	Rate distress	Describe distress	Action
6:00AM	Watching news	2	Mild nausea	4	Sad/tense	Change channel

Once you have a greater sense of what your stress triggers are, you can start to change them. The key here is to focus on the actions you take when you feel stressed, and be aware of whether or not the action alleviated the stress.

You’re starting to gain an understanding of your internal and external environments and how they impact you.

Another tool I suggest to clients is the creation of a ‘stress ladder.’ Here, you rank your stress issues from easiest to change to hardest to change. Then, tackle the stressors that are easiest to change first. Determine if there are external factors that can be modified to manage the stress and, if not, identify how you can manage internally.

Here are some ways to help manage your stress in healthy ways:

Develop good nutritional habits. Restrict alcohol and caffeine intake, eliminate refined carbohydrates from your diet, and eat a diverse range of whole foods. Digestion is most effective in a relaxed environment, so you’re doing your body a favor by eating in a calm environment rather than a hectic one.

Exercise! This can be the hardest thing to do, but the one from which we can derive the most benefits. It is important as we age to incorporate cardiovascular and weight training into our weekly regime for better mental and physical health. Once you begin an exercise program, you will have an increased energy level and feel positive impacts on your ability to deal with stress.

Relax. Try meditation, yoga, hypnosis, or a variety of other techniques to calm and focus the mind. It can add years to your life and it helps to ‘reboot’ your mind and body to be better prepared to take on the day.

Access counseling. You don’t know what you don’t know, and sometimes seeing a professional can help you gain a greater awareness of what makes you feel ‘stuck.’ It can be a positive, life-altering experience, and seeing a therapist does not mean you’re ‘crazy’ or ‘broken.’ It’s about having someone help you acquire new tools to enhance and develop your full potential to feel really ‘alive.’

Reduce energy drains. Identify things in your daily life that zap your time and energy such as

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advertising mail, email and complicated meal preparations. Simplify your current approach to some activities and don't be afraid to ask for help.

Pay attention to ergonomics. Our body experiences the stress response from poor posture, visual strain and body movement patterns. Check to ensure that your workspace is ergonomically sound. Your computer should be positioned so that you are at arms length away from the screen and that the top of the screen is at eye level. This will reduce headache and neck strain. Another consideration is to ensure you are lifting and stretching appropriately when performing household duties or child care. Be conscious to bend at the knee to lift things (never bend over at the waist), be careful when reaching and avoid twisting your body. Minor adjustments to the way you move your body can greatly reduce the stress you put on it.

Practice diaphragmatic breathing. This instantly produces a physiological relaxation response. Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach, then slowly breathe in through your nose, allowing your stomach to rise, not your chest. Slowly breathe out through your lips, letting your stomach go down again. We often breathe shallowly, with our stomach sucked in, allowing our chest to rise and fall. This does not allow oxygen to fully enter our body and work optimally for us.

Learn to say 'no' and stop over-nurturing. You'll help diminish the intensity of stress by speaking up for yourself. This means refusing to 'add to your plate' at the expense of your time and emotions. If you routinely take on other people's problems, learn to

gracefully disengage. Nurture *yourself* instead!

Understand anger. Anger is a cover-up emotion that activates the stress response in a negative manner. When we are angry, we are really feeling hurt, grief, threatened or a combination of these. And when we connect with how we are truly feeling, we can choose to handle it differently and be kinder to ourselves. Others are more likely to respond kindly to us when we can share our true feelings, and not use anger to defend or keep people at a distance.

Stop the denial. Listen to your body and admit to the stresses and pressures which have manifested physically, mentally or emotionally.

Stress can be a useful tool to help us act in dangerous situations, increase our alertness when we need it most and to signal that we must tend to our body and mind. But too much stress can shorten our lifespan and cause day-to-day struggles with our physical and emotional well-being. Understanding our stressors and how we cope can enable us to do things differently and have a healthier and more relaxed life. **MP**

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