

Living with Stress: More Than a Job, It's an Adventure

What is stress? Some people consider it a term that had to be invented to describe modern-day life. Psychologists use stress (a term borrowed from engineering) to refer to strain on our mental, physical, and emotional systems. It is a physiological reaction to a real or imagined threat. The demand on an individual's mind-body resources can be *acute* (short-term and intense) or *chronic* (long-term and cumulative).

At mild to moderate levels, stress is a motivator that stimulates us emotionally and challenges us to action. Such challenges successfully may produce feelings of exhilaration, along with enhancing our self-concept and preparing us for greater challenges. When the level of stress is overwhelming or exceeds our self-confidence, however, a pattern of failure, disappointment and expecting negative outcomes can result.

How your physical systems are affected: In response to a perceived threat, certain chemicals are released in the brain that trigger a series of changes in the mind and the body. A path is created to send the emotionally loaded event straight to long-term memory at the same time that the brain redirects its resources to prepare for action (*fight* or *flight*). As part of facilitating a quick response, the ability for complex rational thought is suppressed. There is an instant increase in heart rate and blood pressure as muscles, lungs and brain are primed for increased activity. Nonessential areas of the body are shut down: parts of the immune system are suppressed; fluids from the mouth are diverted elsewhere (causing dry-mouth); skin cools and tightens as blood rushes to vital organs (resulting in goose bumps and hair seeming to stand on end); hands may feel cold and clammy. At the extreme, the need for an empty stomach, bladder, or sphincter may lead these organs to expel their contents in a rapid fashion.

Long-term consequences of stress: The above adaptations have helped us survive as a species (e.g., running in a timely fashion and then later remembering that place where we met the bear). Except for certain competitive or life-and-death situations, however, they are frequently overkill in modern society. Stress easily undermines quality of life. Acute and chronic stress can lead to emotional disorders (e.g., anxiety or depression); insomnia; increased blood pressure and risk of stroke; headaches; nutritional deficiencies; susceptibility to disease; stomach pain; irritable bowel syndrome; skin conditions; deficits in memory and attention; and can intensify chronic pain, such as arthritis or back pain.

Things You Can Do: While we cannot completely eliminate stress from our lives, we have considerable choice in how to reduce and manage it. With attitude being the critical element in confronting stress, it is essential to realize that change takes effort and that each small success indicates progress.

- **Exercise.** Regular physical activity both reduces stress and improves the body's ability to handle it.
- **Eat well.** You can counteract the detrimental effects of stress on the body by eating a balanced diet including fruits, vegetables and the B Vitamins in particular.

- **Reduce or eliminate bad habits.** Besides other negative consequences, cigarettes, alcohol and most illegal drugs undermine the body's resistance to stress.
- **Use humor.** Laughter relieves tension. Keep things in perspective by finding the lighter side of stressful events.
- **Adjust priorities.** Decide what is important for you, then adopt a new attitude and make time for yourself. A change in job or job responsibilities may be in order.
- **Learn to relax.** Start with breathing—the key to evoking the body's calming mechanism. Methods that many have found useful include reading for enjoyment, visual imagery, listening to soothing music, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, tai chi, and massage therapy.
- **Delegate.** Let others be responsible for themselves, learn to say “no” and to ask for help when you need it.
- **Keep a journal.** Use it to process reactions to events.
- **Spend time with people you love.** It is especially important to have friends or family in whom you can confide and who can share their feelings with you.
- **Talk to a professional.** Psychotherapy can be an effective tool for making desired changes in your life.

Robert Rominger, Ph.D. is an Adjunct Clinician at Trinity Center and has his own private practice, Robert Rominger, Ph.D. in Winston-Salem.