

- Stress

LET'S TALK ABOUT STRESS

De-stress by learning about stress

If stress were a person, you would avoid him, would not be friends with him, or even talk to him—ever. You see, even the word “stress” can trigger a negative, uncomfortable feeling. Stress is our body’s natural defense mechanism against dangerous or difficult situations. In the presence of a threat that can either come from the environment or be imposed by ourselves, our bodies react to be able to conquer or escape it. That being said, stress is not a negative thing, or something that should be avoided. In fact, stress is inevitable. It is a part of being human. Without it, the human species may not have survived at all!

Everybody experiences stress at some point in their lives. The difference lies in how one handles stress or copes with it. Psychosocial stress factors that contribute to stress are the following:

1. Negative life events (death of a close person, conflicts in partnership, divorce, abuse, neglect as a child, emotional conflicts, strong events such as accident/operation/theft/burglary, social isolation, pain, disease)
2. General (poverty, noise, restriction of sleep, flooding of irritation, lethargy, anxiousness/anxiety)
3. Profession (lack and pressure of time, lack of interest, high responsibility, mobbing in the workplace/school, shiftwork, continuous concentration during work, overdemand by any technical development, poverty)

Other predisposing factors for stress-related health problems are based on the genes, life phases of the individual, intense or continuous emotional load, and decrease of stress coping (Hellhammer DH, 2008).

Stress increases vulnerability, especially in these stages of life: during Intrauterine (problems of mothers or partners), postnatal, childhood (unwanted child, problems of parents, social conflict, abuse, and neglect), adolescence, fertile phase, premenstrual, postpartum and postmeno-

pausal (Wolf, 2018). These periods in life are the most crucial and would dictate how resilient or vulnerable a person is. For example, stress during childhood is the most traumatic, as there is increment of post traumatic stress disorder and vulnerability for future psychiatric diseases. The frequent neurological stress symptoms that we see in children are anxiety, headache, ADHD, loss of concentration, and sleeping problems. This can be attributed to stress in early childhood such as separation or divorce of parents, loss of one parent, abuse, neglect, and trauma. When one feels any type of threat, our bodies automatically get in a “fight or flight” mode. These threats can be real or imagined, mild or major, and can come from the environment or from ourselves. Once this happens, our bodies release these main hormones:

1. The stress hormone cortisol, which is produced by the adrenal glands, maintains the fluids and salts in the body to keep the blood pressure constant. Moreover, it stops insulin and releases glucose to the muscles and the brain for energy, and restrains the immune system from causing sickness and infection.
2. The fight-or-flight hormone called adrenaline, which is produced at the center of the adrenal glands. It is responsible for the increase in heart rate and blood pressure. It makes you breathe faster, decrease your feelings of pain, and even slows

down other bodily functions that are not as crucial during stress.

3. The hormone norepinephrine, also called noradrenaline, is also produced by the adrenal gland, in the adrenal medulla. It helps the adrenaline in keeping organs functioning properly while under stress, such as maintaining blood pressure and energy levels. Norepinephrine also breaks down fat for energy usage, switches the blood flow to other parts of the body where it matters more, and it increases blood sugar levels for energy too.

4. The hormone and neurotransmitter dopamine, released by neurons. Its function is more on controlling desires, appetite, emotions, behavior, focus, and learning. Under stress, dopamine helps you identify and analyze the threat, act on the threat, learn, and remember it. It also helps you manage your emotions during the threat.

How the body reacts when faced with anything, from lions and sharks to speeding cars and deadlines, are all because of these main hormones. Normally, these hormone levels increase in response to the threat. That is why they are also expected to decrease and return to their proper levels once the stress is over. All these hormones serve not only to manage the threat, but also to protect our organs and other bodily functions from malfunctioning or being damaged. For chronic, repeated, or long-term stress, however, having continued or prolonged high levels of these hormones may cause more harm than good. High blood pressure, high blood sugar, increased risk of osteoporosis, irregular menstrual cycles, low testosterone, weight problems,

and sleep disturbance may occur with raised levels of cortisol. For extended high levels of adrenaline, one may experience irritability, weakened immune systems, and bowel problems. Continuous high levels of norepinephrine may increase the risk of heart disease and diabetes. And for dopamine, high amounts for an extended period of time may cause mood disorders, focus, learning, and attention problems, among others. This is why it is important to learn how to manage stress as one encounters them at different moments of their lives.

Consequences of chronic stress can be seen on an individual as somatic or psychologic. Such consequences are the following: Back pain, hypertension, metabolic syndrome, diabetes type 2, atherosclerosis, myocardial infarction, stroke, atopic dermatitis, spastic bronchitis, asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, sterility, chronic fatigue syndrome, increased morbidity and mortality, depression, burnout, anxiety disorder, sleeping disorders, eating disorder, tinnitus, addiction, and suicidality.

The fast-paced 21st century can be overwhelming for some: deadlines, job loss, traffic, family matters and relationships, pollution, technology, and a thousand more can trigger different levels of stress, from acute to chronic, in a lot of individuals. In fact, stress has been hailed as the “Health Epidemic of the 21st Century” by the World Health Organization (WHO). According to WHO, workplace stress is costing businesses \$300 billion per year in the United States alone, which leads to the question, does a work-life balance exist?

Some of the direct and indirect costs of stress associated disorders are the following: increment prescription of antidepressants, longer hospitalization, absenteeism, early retirement, burnout, sleeping disorders, depression, and anxiety. While it is good to know that workplaces and educational institutions have included stress management programs, it is still up to the individual to find out how to manage his or her own stress levels. As they say, “Manage stress before it manages you!”

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DR. KAYCEE REYES

