

Stress

Stress is a reaction to *stressors* in the environment. The stressors can be internal or external. ‘For most challenging situations stress is *not* an automatic reaction.

We make two appraisals which influence the stress response:

1. Whether the event is perceived as a threat/stressful
2. Whether we feel we will be able to cope with it.

When our mind *decides* that this situation is stressful, our brain is hardwired to secrete a series of hormones and neurotransmitters, including cortisol and adrenaline. In the rest of the animal kingdom, when the stress is over (e.g., the lion didn’t get you), these chemicals are passed through the system. In modern day society, our minds perceive stress throughout the day and thus these chemicals are secreted semi-continuously at lower levels, and the impact on our lives is enormous. In this context, mindfulness can provide us with tools so that the physiological response is activated less often and less intensely.

Jon Kabat-Zinn emphasizes that “It is not the potential stressor itself but how you perceive it and then how you handle it that will determine whether or not it will lead to stress” (p. 237, *Full Catastrophe Living*). To reduce the damage from stress we need to examine how we respond to change and pressure. “How you see things and how you handle them makes all the difference in terms of how much stress you will experience” (p. 238). “By changing the way we see ourselves in relationship to the stressors, we can actually change our experience of the relationship” and thus modify the extent to which it taxes our resources (p. 240). A classic quote from Zinn’s 8-week workshops: What hasn’t changed much is the pain. What has changed is my relationship to the pain.

While there will always be many potential stressors in our environment over which we cannot have control, by changing the way we see ourselves in relationship to them, we can actually change our *experience* of the relationship and therefore modify the extent to which it taxes or exceeds our resources or endangers our well-being.

Some statements from research:

- An estimated 75 percent to 90 percent of all doctor visits are for stress-related issues.
<https://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/effects-of-stress-on-your-body>
- Stress has been implicated as a major contributor to many chronic diseases including accelerated aging, Alzheimer’s, anxiety, arthritis, asthma, cancer, chronic fatigue, depression, gastrointestinal issues, headaches, heart disease, high blood pressure, insomnia, obesity, respiratory disease, skin conditions, stroke, and tooth decay.

Common symptoms and consequences of chronic stress include but are not limited to:

- Increased susceptibility to colds and flu
- Increased consumption of legal and illegal drugs
- Increased irritability and restlessness
- Decreased ability to cope with routine activities of living
- Decreased ability to concentrate when necessary

Just as secondhand smoke can increase nonsmokers risk of developing lung cancer, second-hand stress can harm us. When I retired, I had very little stress at work: I loved my work and I was on good terms with everyone I knew at the college, *and* I was aware of how much better my body felt within one month of retiring: significantly aching in my shoulder and in many joints.

Two notes:

What is stressful to one person might not be stressful to another person.

There is such a thing as good stress, e.g., an important test coming up or too many things on your plate, all of which are good.