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### Stress and Strength Distract the Entire Life

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ABSTRACT: Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When you sense danger—whether it's real or imagined—the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the "fight-or-flight" reaction or the "stress response."The stress response is the body's way of protecting you. When working properly, it helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life—giving you extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring you to slam on the brakes to avoid a car accident. Stress can have other positive aspects, sometimes referred to as "eustress." For example, it can help you rise to meet challenges such as keeping you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpening your concentration when you're attempting a game-winning free throw, or driving you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching TV. But while not all stress is bad for you, beyond a certain point, it stops being helpful and starts to cause major damage. Stress that feels overwhelming can have a negative impact on your health, mood, productivity, relationships, and your quality of life. If you frequently find yourself feeling frazzled and overwhelmed, it's time to take action to bring your nervous system back into balance. You can protect yourself—and improve how you think and feel—by learning how to recognize the signs and symptoms of chronic stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.

**KEYWORDS:** stress, strength, life, danger, response, quality, chronic, eustress, reaction, energetic

#### I. INTRODUCTION

It can be helpful to think of stress as being on a spectrum. At one end, you have "eustress," the manageable levels of stress that can motivate you to meet challenges at work, school, or in your personal life. While eustress may take you out of your comfort zone, it can help you to succeed in a job interview or on first date, for example, or complete a project at school or work that means stretching yourself and learning new skills.<sup>1</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, you have "distress," the stress that makes you feel overwhelmed and can damage your mood and outlook, disrupt your sleep, and trigger health issues such as depression and anxiety. Distress occurs when you feel you're under more stress than you can handle, whether it's from feeling too busy at work, not having enough money, or suffering an illness or bereavement.

Your individual perception of stress often affects whether you experience eustress or distress in a situation. For example, if you feel worried, exhausted, and overwhelmed by an impending work deadline, you could experience distress. On the other hand, if you feel excited that hitting the deadline could positively affect your career, the stress you experience may be more motivating and helpful.<sup>2</sup>

When you feel threatened, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, which rouse the body for emergency action. Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed up your reaction time, and enhance your focus—preparing you to either fight or flee from the danger at hand. Your nervous system isn't very good at distinguishing between emotional and physical threats. If you're super stressed over an argument with a friend, a work deadline, or a mountain of bills, your body can react just as strongly as if you're facing a true life-or-death situation. And the more your emergency stress system is activated, the easier it becomes to trigger, making it harder to shut off.<sup>3</sup>

If you tend to get stressed out frequently, like many of us in today's demanding world, your body may exist in a heightened state of stress most of the time. And that can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in your body. It can suppress your immune system, upset your digestive and reproductive systems, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, and speed up the aging process. It can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems.



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Health problems caused or exacerbated by stress include:

- 1. Depression and anxiety
- 2. Pain of any kind
- 3. Sleep problems
- 4. Autoimmune diseases
- 5. Digestive problems
- 6. Skin conditions, such as eczema, stress rash, or hives
- 7. Heart disease
- 8. Weight problems
- 9. Reproductive issues
- 10. Thinking and memory problems<sup>4</sup>

#### II. DISCUSSION

The most dangerous thing about stress is how easily it can creep up on you. You get used to it. It starts to feel familiar, even normal. You don't notice how much it's affecting you, even as it takes a heavy toll. That's why it's important to be aware of the common warning signs and symptoms of stress overload.<sup>5</sup>

#### Cognitive symptoms:

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Seeing only the negative
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying

#### Emotional symptoms:

- Depression or general unhappiness
- Anxiety and agitation
- Moodiness, irritability, or anger
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Loneliness and isolation
- Other mental or emotional health problems

#### Cognitive symptoms:

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Seeing only the negative
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying<sup>6</sup>

#### Causes of stress

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on you can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion. Of course, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be internal or self-generated, when you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life. Finally, what causes stress depends, at least in part, on your perception of it. Something that's stressful to you may



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not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. While some of us are terrified of getting up in front of people to perform or speak, for example, others live for the spotlight. Where one person thrives under pressure and performs best in the face of a tight deadline, another will shut down when work demands escalate. And while you may enjoy helping to care for your elderly parents, your siblings may find the demands of caretaking overwhelming and stressful.

#### Common external causes of stress include:

- Major life changes
- Work or school
- Relationship difficulties
- Financial problems
- Being too busy
- Children and family

#### Common internal causes of stress include:

- Pessimism
- Inability to accept uncertainty
- Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility
- Negative self-talk
- Unrealistic expectations / perfectionism
- All-or-nothing attitude

#### Top 10 stressful life events

According to the widely validated Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale, these are the top ten stressful life events for adults that can contribute to illness:

- Death of a spouse
- Divorce
- Marriage separation
- Imprisonment
- Death of a close family member
- Injury or illness
- Marriage
- Job loss
- Marriage reconciliation
- Retirement<sup>8</sup>

Whatever event or situation is stressing you out, there are ways of coping with the problem and regaining your balance. Some of life's most common sources of stress include:

While some workplace stress is normal, excessive stress can interfere with your productivity and performance, impact your physical and emotional health, and affect your relationships and home life. It can even determine the difference between success and failure on the job. Whatever your ambitions or work demands, there are steps you can take to protect yourself from the damaging effects of stress, improve your job satisfaction, and bolster your well-being in and out of the workplace. Losing a job is one of life's most stressful experiences. It's normal to feel angry, hurt, or depressed, grieve for all that you've lost, or feel anxious about what the future holds. Job loss and unemployment involves a lot of change all at once, which can rock your sense of purpose and self-esteem. While the stress can seem overwhelming, there are many steps you can take to come out of this difficult period stronger, more resilient, and with a renewed sense of purpose. Many of us, from all over the world and from all walks of life, are having to deal with financial stress and uncertainty at this difficult time. Whether your problems stem from a loss of work, escalating debt, unexpected expenses, <sup>9</sup> or a combination of factors, financial worry is one of the most common stressors in modern life. But there are ways to get through these tough economic times, ease stress and anxiety, and



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regain control of your finances. No matter how much you've been looking forward to it, retiring from work can bring stress as well as benefits. Escaping the daily grind and a long commute can seem like a great relief at first. But after a few months you may miss the sense of identity, meaning, and purpose that came with work, the structure it gave your days, and the social aspect of having co-workers. To help you through the stress of retirement, there are healthy ways to make adjustments and deal with this major life change. <sup>10</sup>The demands of caregiving can be overwhelming, especially if you feel that you're in over your head or have little control over the situation. If the stress of caregiving is left unchecked, it can take a toll on your health, relationships, and state of mind — eventually leading to burnout. However, there are plenty of things you can do to rein in the stress of caregiving and regain a sense of balance, joy, and hope in your life. Coping with the loss of someone or something you love is one of life's biggest stressors. Often, the pain and stress of loss can feel overwhelming. You may experience all kinds of difficult and unexpected emotions, from shock or anger to disbelief, guilt, and profound sadness. While there is no right or wrong way to grieve, there are healthy ways to cope with the pain that, in time, can ease your sadness and help you come to terms with your loss, find new meaning, and move on with your life. Because of the widespread damage stress can cause, it's important to know your own limit. But just how much stress is "too much" differs from person to person. Some people seem to be able to roll with life's punches, while others tend to crumble in the face of small obstacles or frustrations. 11Some people even thrive on the excitement of a high-stress lifestyle. Factors that influence your stress tolerance level include:

Your support network. A strong network of supportive friends and family members is an enormous buffer against stress. When you have people you can count on, life's pressures don't seem as overwhelming. On the flip side, the lonelier and more isolated you are, the greater your risk of succumbing to stress.

Your sense of control. If you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges, it's easier to take stress in stride. On the other hand, if you believe that you have little control over your life—that you're at the mercy of your environment and circumstances—stress is more likely to knock you off course. 12

Your attitude and outlook. The way you look at life and its inevitable challenges makes a huge difference in your ability to handle stress. If you're generally hopeful and optimistic, you'll be less vulnerable. Stress-hardy people tend to embrace challenges, have a stronger sense of humor, believe in a higher purpose, and accept change as an inevitable part of life.

Your ability to deal with your emotions. If you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or troubled, you're more likely to become stressed and agitated. Having the ability to identify and deal appropriately with your emotions can increase your tolerance to stress and help you bounce back from adversity.

Your knowledge and preparation. The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. For example, if you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less stressful than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately. Improving your ability to handle stress<sup>13</sup>

Get moving. Upping your activity level is one tactic you can employ right now to help relieve stress and start to feel better. Regular exercise can lift your mood and serve as a distraction from worries, allowing you to break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed stress. Rhythmic exercises such as walking, running, swimming, and dancing are particularly effective, especially if you exercise mindfully (focusing your attention on the physical sensations you experience as you move).

Connect to others. The simple act of talking face-to-face with another human can trigger hormones that relieve stress when you're feeling agitated or insecure. Even just a brief exchange of kind words or a friendly look from another human being can help calm and soothe your nervous system. So, spend time with people who improve your mood and don't let your responsibilities keep you from having a social life. If you don't have any close relationships, or your relationships are the source of your stress, make it a priority to build stronger and more satisfying connections. <sup>14</sup>

#### III. RESULTS

Engage your senses. Another fast way to relieve stress is by engaging one or more of your senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, or movement. The key is to find the sensory input that works for you. Does listening to an uplifting song



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make you feel calm? Or smelling ground coffee? Or maybe petting an animal works quickly to make you feel centered? Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so experiment to find what works best for you.

Learn to relax. You can't completely eliminate stress from your life, but you can control how much it affects you. Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the polar opposite of the stress response. When practiced regularly, these activities can reduce your everyday stress levels and boost feelings of joy and serenity. They also increase your ability to stay calm and collected under pressure.

Eat a healthy diet. The food you eat can improve or worsen your mood and affect your ability to cope with life's stressors. Eating a diet full of processed and convenience food, refined carbohydrates, and sugary snacks can worsen symptoms of stress, while a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and omega-3 fatty acids, can help you better cope with life's ups and downs. <sup>15</sup>

Get your rest. Feeling tired can increase stress by causing you to think irrationally. At the same time, chronic stress can disrupt your sleep. Whether you're having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep at night, there are plenty of ways to improve your sleep so you feel less stressed and more productive and emotionally balanced.

As recent months have demonstrated, stress is unavoidable. Now more than ever, it's important to understand stress and how we can manage it. While stress can be beneficial, too much of it can be harmful.<sup>28</sup>

When the body senses a threat (or stressor), it goes on high alert, and once the threat passes, the body quickly recovers. At least that's the way it's supposed to work. Stressors can include health matters, work, money, family issues, racism or gender inequality, and regular daily hassles. With unrelenting or too many stressors, your body might be on a constant state of high alert, leading to poor concentration, bad moods, professional burnout, and mental and physical health problems. When stress becomes chronic, the body cannot return to normal functioning. Chronic stress can be linked with health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression and anxiety. The stress affects women and men differently. Many conditions associated with stress—such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety—are more common in women than men. Beyond sex and gender differences, there are individual differences, too. Some people are more resilient than others. Stress affects them less or more temporarily, and they might even perform better under stress. There's a saying, 'It's not how far you fall; it's how high you bounce.' For those of us who don't bounce back so easily, there's good news. Resilience, to some extent, can be learned and there are some simple, practical things that people can do that may make a noticeable difference," says Dr. Janine Austin Clayton, Director of the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health. Clayton explains that some resilient people might also develop a greater appreciation for their lives, family, friends or other matters after stress. The stress of the stress after stress.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Stress management and resilience building are particularly important to the health of women. Here are several tips to help women as well as men:

- 1. Recognize and counter signs of stress. Your body sends signals that it's stressed, including difficulty concentrating, headaches, cold hands, tight muscles, a nervous stomach, clenched teeth, feeling on edge, fidgety, irritable or withdrawn. Knowing how your body communicates can help you deal with stressful moments. Learn to not only recognize but also to name these feelings, either to oneself or to a friend. Then, take action to counter their effects. For example, deep breathing, stretching, going for a walk, writing down your thoughts and taking quiet time to focus can help induce relaxation and reduce tension. <sup>18</sup>
- 2. Take time for yourself. Make taking care of yourself a daily routine. It's not selfish or self-indulgent and it might require saying "no" to requests or prioritizing yourself along with your responsibilities. Start with small changes in your routine to help build resilience to stressful circumstances. Work in time to exercise, eat healthy foods, participate in relaxing activities and sleep. In fact, including a regimen of exercise, which for some may include yoga or meditation, can be very important when feeling stressed. Also, take time to notice the "good minutes" in each day or to do something that you enjoy, such as reading a book or listening to music, which can be a way to shift your attention and focus on the positive rather than the negative. <sup>26</sup>



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- 3. Try new routines. From scheduling bath and bedtimes to blocking off time to plan and prioritize tasks, additional structure can provide a daily framework that allows you to attune to your body's signals. Then, you can take steps to potentially manage stress earlier than you once did.<sup>25</sup>
- 4. Stay connected and make new friends. Stay in touch with family, friends and groups in your life technology makes this easier than ever. Having or being a person to talk with can be reassuring and calming. Using video features can enhance the connection in telecommunication or online communications for some people. <sup>19</sup>
- 5. See problems through a different lens. Experts call changing the way we think about and respond to stress "reframing." View sitting in traffic or around the house as an opportunity to enjoy music, podcasts or pleasant views. Reduce anger in response to rude or aggressive behavior by imagining what might be happening in that person's life. Keeping situations in perspective is an important way to boost stress resilience. Other steps include positive thinking and creating plans before you begin to resolve problems. You can practice reframing and get better at it over time.
- 6. Seek help with problems. Many people experience the same day-to-day strains related to caregiving, relationships, health, work and money. Look to friends and family, as appropriate, or other trusted individuals or resources for tips and information. <sup>20</sup>
- 7. Talk to a health professional if stress is affecting your well-being, you feel you cannot manage the stress you're experiencing, or stress has caused you to engage in or increase substance use. Seek appropriate care if stress is harming your relationships or ability to work. If you have suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Lifeline chat is a service available to everyone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In addition, if you need help locating a mental health provider, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers a site that can assist you at https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov. People who have experienced traumatic stress (directly or indirectly experiencing life-threatening and dangerous events) should find a treatment provider who practices trauma informed care see https://go.usa.gov/xvydm for details. Additionally, in times of disasters and other sorts of emergencies, the National Disaster Distress Helpline (Call 1-800-985-5990 or text "TALKWITHUS" to 66746) can provide crisis counseling, emotional support and referrals to care related to disasters and public health emergencies.

Recognizing individual signals of a body's stress responses and learning to respond to those signals in new ways can help build the emotional, intellectual and physical strength that comprise resilience, which can help you tackle future stressors.<sup>22</sup>

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