

STRESS, HEALTH, & DISEASE

By: Paul Schwen

It seems like stress is just an unavoidable part of today's fast-paced, competitive world. But is it really? Stress is the body's instinctive response to external environmental cues, as well as to one's inner thoughts and feelings. It is how you react to perceived danger — the "fight or flight" response, for example. But you do have some control over how stress operates in your life. Below, see the 7 different types of stress and read on for 9 methods for combating it.

1. **PHYSICAL:** intense exertion, manual labor, lack of sleep, travel
2. **CHEMICAL:** drugs, alcohol, caffeine, nicotine and environmental pollutants such as cleaning chemicals or pesticides
3. **MENTAL:** perfectionism, worry, anxiety, long work hours
4. **EMOTIONAL:** anger, guilt, loneliness, sadness, fear
5. **NUTRITIONAL:** food allergies, vitamin and mineral deficiency
6. **TRAUMATIC:** injuries or burns, surgery, illness, infections, extreme temperatures
7. **PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL:** troubled relationships, financial or career pressures, challenges with life goals, spiritual alignment and general state of happiness

Stress management can be complicated and confusing because there are different types of stress — acute stress, episodic acute stress, and chronic stress — each with its own characteristics, symptoms, duration and treatment approaches. Let's look at each one.

Acute Stress

Acute stress is the most common form of stress. It comes from demands and pressures of the recent past and anticipated demands and pressures of the near future. Acute stress is thrilling and exciting in small doses, but too much is exhausting. A fast run down a challenging ski slope, for example, is exhilarating early in the day. That same ski run late in the day is taxing and wearing. Skiing beyond your limits can lead to falls and broken bones. By the same token, overdoing on short-term stress can lead to psychological distress, tension headaches, upset stomach and other symptoms.

Fortunately, acute stress symptoms are recognized by most people. It's a laundry list of what has gone awry in their lives: the auto accident that crumpled the car fender, the loss of an important contract, a deadline they're rushing to meet, their child's occasional problems at school and so on. Because it is short term, acute stress doesn't have enough time to do the extensive damage associated with long-term stress. The most common symptoms are:

Emotional distress — some combination of anger or irritability, anxiety and depression, the three stress emotions. Muscular problems including tension headache, back pain, jaw pain and the muscular tensions that lead to pulled muscles and tendon and ligament problems. Stomach, gut and bowel problems such as heartburn, acid stomach, flatulence, diarrhea, constipation and irritable bowel syndrome. Transient over-arousal leads to elevation in blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, heart palpitations, dizziness, migraine headaches, cold hands or feet, shortness of breath and chest pain. Acute stress can crop up in anyone's life, and it is highly treatable and manageable.

Episodic Acute Stress

There are those, however, who suffer acute stress frequently, whose lives are so disordered that they are studies in chaos and crisis. They're always in a rush, but always late. If something can go wrong, it

does. They take on too much, have too many irons in the fire, and can't organize the slew of self-inflicted demands and pressures clamoring for their attention. They seem perpetually in the clutches of acute stress.

It is common for people with acute stress reactions to be over aroused, short-tempered, irritable, anxious and tense. Often, they describe themselves as having "a lot of nervous energy." Always in a hurry, they tend to be abrupt, and sometimes their irritability comes across as hostility. Interpersonal relationships deteriorate rapidly when others respond with real hostility. The workplace becomes a very stressful place for them.

The cardiac prone, "Type A" personality described by cardiologists, Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, is similar to an extreme case of episodic acute stress. Type A's have an "excessive competitive drive, aggressiveness, impatience, and a harrying sense of time urgency." In addition there is a "free-floating, but well-rationalized form of hostility, and almost always a deep-seated insecurity." Such personality characteristics would seem to create frequent episodes of acute stress for the Type A individual. Friedman and Rosenman found Type A's to be much more likely to develop coronary heart disease than Type B's, who show an opposite pattern of behavior.

Another form of episodic acute stress comes from ceaseless worry. "Worry warts" see disaster around every corner and pessimistically forecast catastrophe in every situation. The world is a dangerous, unrewarding, punitive place where something awful is always about to happen. These "awfulizers" also tend to be over aroused and tense, but are more anxious and depressed than angry and hostile. The symptoms of episodic acute stress are the symptoms of extended over arousal: persistent tension headaches, migraines, hypertension, chest pain and heart disease. Treating episodic acute stress requires intervention on a number of levels, generally requiring professional help, which may take many months.

Often, lifestyle and personality issues are so ingrained and habitual with these individuals that they see nothing wrong with the way they conduct their lives. They blame their woes on other people and external events. Frequently, they see their lifestyle, their patterns of interacting with others, and their ways of perceiving the world as part and parcel of who and what they are.

Sufferers can be fiercely resistant to change. Only the promise of relief from pain and discomfort of their symptoms can keep them in treatment and on track in their recovery program.

Chronic Stress

While acute stress can be thrilling and exciting, chronic stress is not. This is the grinding stress that wears people away day after day, year after year. Chronic stress destroys bodies, minds and lives. It wreaks havoc through long-term attrition. It's the stress of poverty, of dysfunctional families, of being trapped in an unhappy marriage or in a despised job or career. It's the stress that the never-ending "troubles" have brought to the people of Northern Ireland, the tensions of the Middle East have brought to the Arab and Jew, and the endless ethnic rivalries that have been brought to the people of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Chronic stress comes when a person never sees a way out of a miserable situation. It's the stress of unrelenting demands and pressures for seemingly interminable periods of time. With no hope, the individual gives up searching for solutions.

Some chronic stresses stem from traumatic, early childhood experiences that become internalized and remain forever painful and present. Some experiences profoundly affect personality. A view of the

world, or a belief system, is created that causes unending stress for the individual (e.g., the world is a threatening place, people will find out you are a pretender, you must be perfect at all times). When personality or deep-seated convictions and beliefs must be reformulated, recovery requires active self-examination, often with professional help.

The worst aspect of chronic stress is that people get used to it. They forget it's there. People are immediately aware of acute stress because it is new; they ignore chronic stress because it is old, familiar, and sometimes, almost comfortable.

Chronic stress kills through suicide, violence, heart attack, stroke and, perhaps, even cancer. People wear down to a final, fatal breakdown. Because physical and mental resources are depleted through long-term attrition, the symptoms of chronic stress are difficult to treat and may require extended medical as well as behavioral treatment and stress management.

Acute stress

This is stress resulting from specific events or situations that involve novelty, unpredictability, a threat to the ego, and leave us with a poor sense of control N.U.T.S. This 'on the spot' type of stress can be good for you because the stress hormones released help your mind and body to deal with the situation.

i.e.: Almost getting into a car accident or giving a speech in front of people. You feel your heart beat in your throat, you become hyper aware of everything around you, and feel pumped. These are signs that your stress hormones are hard at work!

Chronic stress

This is stress resulting from repeated exposure to situations that lead to the release of stress hormones. This type of stress can cause wear and tear on your mind and body. Many scientists think that our stress response system was not designed to be constantly activated. This overuse may contribute to the breakdown of many bodily systems.

In fact, chronic stress has been linked to heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type II diabetes, and depression. But the effects of chronic stress are worst for people at risk for developing these and other problems. For instance, if one has a family history of heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, or has unhealthy lifestyle habits, then chronic stress can flip the switch that turns on these health problems.

When the stress response system is activated, this automatically affects other systems.

i.e.: Increasing our heart rate, blood pressure, blood sugar levels, and decreasing our immune responses.

If the stress response system goes out of whack, then other body systems like blood pressure and blood sugar stay in fight or flight mode. In essence, chronic stress causes our bodily systems to deregulate. We call this a domino effect. If the first one falls, then the others will soon follow.