

THE STRESS FACTOR

STRESS is inescapable. Many of our problems are self-created; they stem from ego and greed.

There is no simple definition of stress. Stress can be thought of as the perception that events or circumstances have challenged or exceeded the person's ability to cope. Stress is determined by a person's characteristics. This helps explain why some events, say a deadline at work, can almost paralyse one person and inspire another.

Stress can be immediate and short-term, such as waiting for a job interview. It can also be protracted and chronic, like a family conflict. It can also be brought on by events that trigger major life changes, like getting fired or a divorce.

Stress is either positive or negative. Many think of stress as negative, sapping energy, decreasing productivity and increasing susceptibility to illness. However, researchers have shown that stress has a positive side, and that some stress is necessary for functioning effectively, leading a full life.

Under certain conditions, stress helps improve self-esteem and competence, enhance development and relieve boredom.

Whether stress is positive or negative depends on how you perceive and respond to stressful situations.

Recognising stress and coping with it are processes you can learn from.

Symptoms of stress overload are so wide-ranging that people often do not recognise them. They include emotional responses such as overreacting to minor problems, inappropriate anger or impatience, overreacting or loss of appetite and increased use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs.

A stress-overload may leave one feeling anxious or unable to relax. One may experience long periods of boredom. Stress can disrupt sleeping patterns and performance at work.

Finally, it may manifest in physical symptoms such as headaches, cold hands or feet, indigestion, aching neck or back, ulcers, nausea, diarrhoea or constipation, asthma, high blood pressure, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, teeth grinding,

muscle spasms and skin conditions like acne.

According to a study of 311 male and 171 female executives, men and women responded to stress differently.

Male executives with stress-related problems tended to suffer from physical illnesses such as ulcers and cardiovascular disease, while women often developed mental disorders, such as excessive anxiety, obsession and depression.

However, some reactions are similar like drug abuse, a sedentary lifestyle and compulsive work habits.

It is well-known that people under stress develop illnesses more often. There is mounting evidence that stress increases vulnerability to infectious diseases and



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a PERFECT fit

reduces body's resistance to pathogens.

Researchers have measured significant depression of the immune system during intense stress, such as bereavement or anguish over a divorce. In one study comparing samples of women who had been divorced for one year or less to those who were still married, researchers found that the married women had depressed immunity. The less time that had passed since the divorce, the more impaired the woman's immune system was.

People who actively manage stress are less likely to develop infectious diseases.

Smoking apparently can reduce stress. It appears that smoking is a 'coping response'. Without cigarettes many smokers are unable to perform or compete. But its long-term effects are devastating.

Smokers suffer significantly higher rates of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, stroke and cancer. In addition, smoking impairs immunity to infectious diseases.

Effects of alcohol on stress have pro-

duced mixed findings. The expectations of a mood change is apparently more powerful than the actual effect.

It is commonly said that laughter is the best medicine, and it requires no special training or equipment, just a sense of humour.

While it is not possible to be immune to stress, you can become 'inoculated' to make it bearable and reduce its harmful effects.

Mental or physical rehearsals of stress-inducing situations have more recently been used in a number of settings. Doctors often help patients become inoculated against stress of surgery by reviewing the procedure, with all its dangers, discomforts and benefits.

Studies show that stress inoculation enables patients to deal better and recover quickly.

Death and divorce are among the most stressful events in life. Researchers find that those around you can have an equally powerful effect in combating stress. Physical and psychological benefits from friends and family can be dramatic. Studies conducted over a nine-year period in California have indicated that people who have extensive networks of social support may live longer.

Other studies have shown that social support can reduce symptoms following the loss of a loved one, help speedy recovery from surgery and heart attacks, and alleviate symptoms of asthma and other disorders.

The role of exercise:

Exercise helps cope with stress.

People often exercise for physical reasons, yet many who exercise report that they "feel good" after vigorous exercise. Regular exercise is a powerful anti-stress activity. Exercise has been shown to

reduce anxiety feelings of helplessness, depression, hostility and physical symptoms associated with stress.

For instance, it reduces muscle tension more effectively than most tranquilizers. It also improves cholesterol levels and reduces the risk of hypertension and cancer.

Often, persons starting out on an exercise programme to reduce stress tend to overdo it and become permanently fatigued and perhaps injured. To avoid this, start out gradually (thrice a week) at a non-competitive pace.

Relaxation techniques alleviate stress effectively.

Setting time aside to learn to relax can help reduce stress levels.

Experts regard exercise as the safest and most effective way to reduce stress.

Stress-reducing exercises fall into various categories. Some of them are:

Aerobic Exercise: It is associated with a lower resting heart rate, reduced risk of hypertension, muscle tenseness, depression, anxiety and obesity.

Progressive relaxation: This involves gradual and systematic tensing and relaxing of major muscle groups. It lowers blood pressure and reduces tension.

Stretching: This can reduce muscular tension, improve posture and increase the sense of relaxation. It prevents and relieves muscular pain that results from overusing muscles.

Meditation: This powerful relaxer has been shown to reduce symptoms of bronchial asthma, hypertension and anxiety.

Back relaxers: Stretching and strengthening exercises can alleviate low back pain produced by muscular tension, stress and poor posture.

Imagery: This technique is similar to one athletes use to improve their performances. Individuals imagine themselves in pleasant or relaxing situations to improve their sense of relaxation. Any one or a combination of the above offers fast, easy and simple methods of keeping those stress levels in check. Start thinking long-term and gear yourself for a stress-free tomorrow.