



Recognizing & Managing Your Stress

“What Do You Mean, I’m Stressed?”

Martin Lesperance

Inter Provincial Safety Resources Ltd.

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DEFINITION

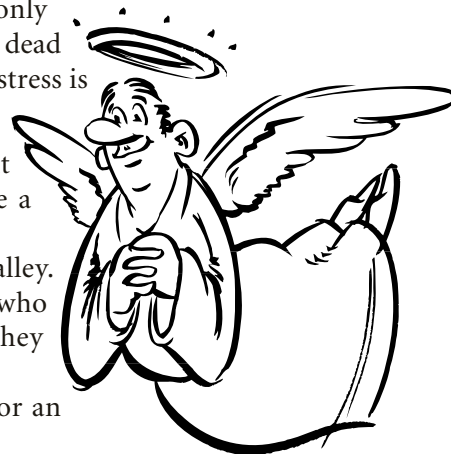
Richard Lazarus of the University of California defines stress as “a state we experience when the demands that are made upon us cannot be counterbalanced by our ability to deal with them” (as quoted in *I’m Too Busy to Be Stressed* by Dr. Hillary Jones).

The demands we perceive may be real or imaginary. In either case, it is how we respond to the demands that determines whether stress will get the better of us. Some people thrive on the stress of a nearing project deadline. Others who are facing the same demands will lose sleep, have a decreased appetite, and go home and kick the dog. We are all different. Different things push our buttons.

SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM STRESS

Everyone has stress in their lives. The only people who feel no stress whatsoever are dead and happily buried or in a coma. Some stress is very short term. For example:

- While trying to make an important phone call, you constantly receive a busy signal.
- You are walking down a dark alley. Three rough-looking hoodlums who are following you mention that they would like to see your wallet.
- You are in a traffic jam and late for an appointment.

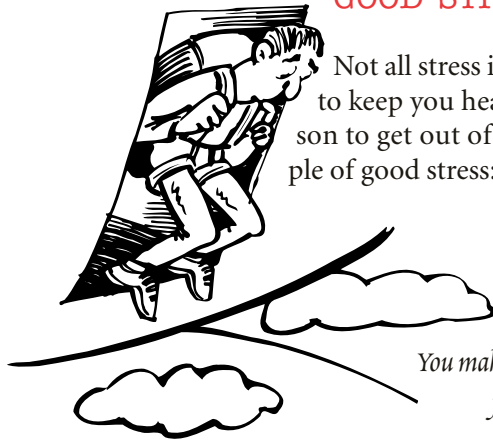


- Your boss dumps an unexpected project on you. (If the project is big, this could become long-term stress.)

Other stress can be long term, as in these examples:

- There are threats of layoffs at work.
- You have made a career change within your organization.
- You are unhappy with your child care situation.
- Your elderly mother has just moved in with you.
- You constantly face serious money problems.
- You are looking after a seriously ill or injured family member.
- You are seriously injured or ill.
- Your spouse wants a divorce and you don't.
- You hate your job and/or your boss.

GOOD STRESS (EUSTRESS)



Not all stress is bad. You need some stress in your life to keep you healthy and feeling alive. You need a reason to get out of bed in the morning. This is an example of good stress:

You're at the top of a very steep ski run. You notice your heart pumping, and your senses are keen. Your body is ready for the run.

You make the run, test your limits and feel great. You feel excited and alive.

Working on a project that is going well can produce good stress. You feel confident in your abilities, and that everything is under control. But if the project runs into major problems as the deadline approaches, what was once good stress may turn into bad stress. You now feel a loss of control.

BAD STRESS (DISTRESS)

Bad stress develops when you feel you can't control the situation. For example, you may feel overwhelmed in the face of an

impending layoff. You become angry, worried or tense. You find that you are thinking about the situation all the time. When your mind is in this state, it affects your body. Physical problems develop. Unless you can recognize bad stress and learn to manage it, big trouble awaits you. Be aware of the pressures you put on yourself.

WHO IS PRONE TO STRESS?

Some people are more prone to stress than others. One attempt to explain this is the Type A and Type B personality studies done in the U.S. in the 1950s. When American cardiologists Mayer Friedman and Ray Rosenman collected information about 1500 men, they found that their subjects fell into two groups with distinctively different traits. The “Type A” personalities seemed more prone to heart attacks.

Type A personalities:

- are hard-driving
- want to achieve as many things as possible (high achievers)
- tend to become irritated and angry over seemingly minor things
- tend to put personal goals and careers before family and friends
- become impatient when listening to others
- are not observant about little things
- are perfectionists
- like to be busy; have a hard time relaxing
- do several things at once (e.g., eating while working)
- are critical of other people and of themselves
- are impatient
- are very competitive (e.g., playing games to win)

In their excellent book *Anger Kills*, Drs. Redford and Virginia Williams say the “hostility” trait in Type A personalities is especially dangerous, as it seems to increase the risk of cardiovascular disease.



A man who was going through a divorce seemed more concerned about deadlines at work than about the divorce. He had planned for the divorce and knew what to expect. He was in control of the divorce proceedings, while at work he had no control over deadlines.



Type B personalities:

- are laid back and bothered by very few things (In a traffic jam, a Type B person might just say, “Oh, well.”)
- are usually happy with less
- are not as competitive and play for fun, not caring if they lose the game
- can relax without feeling guilty
- do not feel a sense of urgency or that they just don’t have enough time

Clearly, Type B personalities tend to be more relaxed than Type A people. There is some of both Types A and B in most people, but one type will be more dominant.

*“We all boil at different temperatures.”
—Ralph
Waldo Emerson*

WHAT STRESSES YOU; WHAT STRESSES ME

Numerous things can increase a person’s stress level: different things bother different people. Let’s take a look at some of the more common events that increase stress. I’m sure you will be able to add to the list.

Family stress

Although family is a major source of strength for most people, it is also the source of much of our stress.

Divorce. Almost half of all marriages end in divorce, and few events in life are more stressful, especially if the divorce is messy. Every aspect of the lives of the people involved will be changed.

Bad relationships. Not all bad marriages end in divorce. For different reasons, people decide to stay married even though the bad times are outnumbering the good. In these types of relationships, just the sight of your spouse may be enough to get you wound up. And even if you are in a good relationship, little things can cause stress.

Birth of a child. Anyone who has raised children will agree that the birth of a child certainly changes the way things are done in a household. Parents of a young child get less sleep, for example, and that increases stress levels.

Teenagers know everything there is to know and their parents know nothing. Their wish to flex their independence muscles increases the stress level in many homes.

Parents. Aging parents often end up living with their children. No matter how much love there is between parents and their children, this can be quite a difficult time for all involved.

In-laws. More than a few people have trouble with their in-laws. This can be an ongoing problem leading to frequent arguments between spouses.

Financial stress

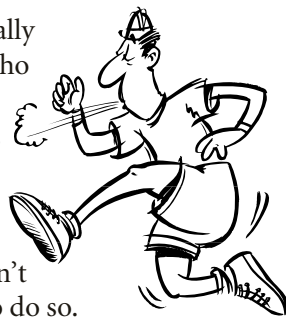
Many families living close to the poverty line are under constant stress because of a lack of money. However, people who make a very good living may also have serious money problems. People seem to want more and more. The more money they make, the more they spend—on bigger and nicer homes, newer cars, more expensive holidays, expensive jewelry and other things that not do not necessarily make them happier.

In many cases, financial stress is easy to manage. Simply live within your means. Do you really need the \$20,000 power boat that you use twelve times a year? Could you manage to survive in a house that costs \$30,000 less? Do you really need that trip to Hawaii this year? Yes, these things are nice to have, but if they significantly increase your stress, are they really worth it?

You might consider consulting a financial advisor about planning a budget and getting your financial situation under control.

Physical stress. A person doesn't need to have a physically hard job to become physically stressed. Many people who work 60 hours a week at a desk job become physically stressed, especially if they are not getting enough sleep, have a poor diet or are not getting enough exercise.

Keeping in shape gives you the extra energy you need to get you through stressful times. When you're in shape, you feel better about yourself. If you don't already participate in an exercise program, plan now to do so.



THIS FEELS GREAT!

*“I once
complained
because I had no
shoes, until I met a
man who
had no feet.”
— Author
unknown*

*“Never keep up
with the Joneses.
Drag them down
to your level.
It's cheaper.”
— Quentin Crisp*



Death. Nothing rates higher on the stress scale than the death of your spouse or child. This is an incredibly hard time for people. The death of a close friend can also be devastating.

Job stress and job changes. As a result of the downsizing trend in many companies, thousands of people have been laid off and the remaining workers are expected to do more with less. Workplaces have changed. People who stick with the old saying, “I don’t like change,” are finding themselves out of a job.

Environmental stress. Living in a neighborhood that has a high crime rate. Working in a small, cramped and noisy office. Having your spouse’s friends and their five children come to visit for a month ... Your environment can definitely add to your stress.

A man shot himself in the head and died. Later, it was learned that the man had lost his job and then his wife left him, taking the kids. The stress of these two major events added up to more than he could handle by himself.

Cumulative effects of stress. Many people have to deal with more than one type of stress. Stress has a way of accumulating: one form of stress seems to come along just when you are already struggling with another.

Several stressors, large or small, when left unchecked, can add up to big-time trouble. Before you know it, you’re ready to blow. It’s important to deal with challenges when they come up. Don’t wait. They won’t go away by themselves.

Warning! If at any time you feel just too overwhelmed, that life is not worth living or that you might harm yourself, seek professional help immediately.

THE WORKING WOMAN AND STRESS

In the many families where both parents work, there is extra stress, especially for women. A common concern is the care of children. Starting work at 7:00 a.m. and working until 6:00 p.m. is hard enough. Add to that dropping the children off at daycare and picking them up after work. Then take them home and play with them before giving them a bath and putting them to bed. Then, there are just two more loads of laundry before you finish your report for an important client. At last, it's bed time.

In bed, your husband leans over and tells you what a busy day he had. He barely made it to the golf course on time. You consider killing him but you don't like the idea of prison.

The alarm goes off at 5:00 a.m., and it starts all over again.

Who wouldn't be stressed in a situation like this?

In two-career households, communication is crucial. Ground rules have to be set and followed. The work load has to be divided up. Let your spouse know how you feel. Don't wait until it is too late. The earlier you discuss problems, the better off you will be.

I have to constantly juggle being a writer with being a wife and mother. It's a matter of putting two different things first, simultaneously.

—Madeleine L'Engle

"I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish that he didn't trust me so much."

—Mother
Theresa