



WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress can be defined as the experience of unpleasant over- or under- stimulation which actually or potentially leads to ill-health. No human being can function without stimulation and challenge. It is part of life and provides excitement, impetus and motivation, as well as, unfortunately distress and anxiety.

As long as you feel in control, challenge can be invigorating. However, with some of the challenges you meet, the more disabling, feelings and actions associated with stress, can take hold.

Stress is the result of a mismatch between the challenges you experience and your belief in your ability to cope. The challenges may come from sources external to you and may be the result of too much or too little pressure. Pressures may also come from within you, and be a product of your own value systems, needs and expectations. Do bear in mind that everyone has powerful personal histories which affect their attitudes and actions. Therefore, everyone perceives and interprets stress in different ways.

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

Stress can affect you in four different ways:

THE PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

These result in a physically perceived overload. These are present in many forms. One of the first areas to consider is the chemical burden from our modern and affluent lifestyle. Pesticides, fertilisers, additives, sprays and other chemicals which we constantly contact initiate stress reactions within our bodies. In the excellent book “Allergy Overload”, Stephen Griffiths alerts us to the 5,000 allowable food additives; some of which we will ingest daily. Bluntly stated, they slowly poison us.

The ingestion of allergenic foods is highly stressful. Most people are considered intolerant to something, the detrimental effects of tea, coffee and alcohol. In addition to being nutritionally valueless, these beverages create a direct physical stress on the internal organs responsible for detoxifying them (mainly the liver) and further unbalance our emotional state because they are stimulating drugs.



There can be physical stress from over exertion as in the case of unfit people attempting stressful exercise, or athletes pushing to achieve goals well beyond the intended capacity of their bodies. Some people feel driven by a fanatical desire to exercise and often end up exhausted and totally depleted.

Consider also, people who work long hours or shift-hours where the natural rhythm of bodily function and internal energy exchanges are either inhibited or thrown out of balance. The proverbial ‘workaholic’ very often suffers, primarily from physical exhaustion caused by deep-rooted psychological origins.

THE EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF STRESS



Create tension and irritability which is very often manifested as disease and illness as ways of dealing with emotions that cannot be expressed. When a person finds themselves in a circumstance which they feel is beyond their control and with seemingly no resolve, they will often subconsciously transfer their feelings to the physical, as its form of expression. A common example here is headache, and a common cause of headache is the feeling of hopelessness that results from being locked into a particular role or circumstance. Of course, the more organic causes of headache could include eyestrain, constipation or neck problems and these areas would need to be investigated too. However, no amount of physical therapy will solve the problem if there is a strong emotional “cause” behind it.

A further example of the way that we use disease would be stomach aches in children. This can be a very effective means of gaining parental attention by a child who feels that a new member of the family is getting more than their fair share of attention.

Skin problems usually have an identifiable emotional basis. An irritating skin complaint can often be the result of irritating life circumstances or an irritating person that one would rather not be involved with. It might be irritation with one’s job. If such stresses are not dealt with the right way at the emotional level, they will most likely manifest as an irritating rash or similar condition until the problem is resolved.

Another example is constipation. If chronic cases do not respond to the physical priorities of more water and fibre in diet, the cause may be retention in the mind for example holding on tenaciously to old ideas or relationships that no longer serve our best interests. These mental retentions can manifest as the physical retention of rubbish that we would best be well rid of.

Do note at this point that a seemingly identical emotional problem may manifest as a particular physical disease in one person and yet as a completely different disease in another person. There is no hard and fast rule of “one stress, one disease”. You must be flexible in your analysis and open to all possibilities.

Physical therapies like drugs, vitamins, herbs and diet will be useful in all cases, however to use only physical therapies would not acknowledge the all powerful role that the mind and the subconscious, in particular, play in our state of well being and this shows what an important part massage is in the treatment of stress related disorders.

THE MENTAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

These impair logical thinking and can occur for many reasons. There may be a conflict at work or at home; worry about ones appearance or abilities or relationships, children, career or finances. Indeed anything. A problem which does not bear a second thought for one person, may be a catastrophe for another. These stresses and conflicts are very real for those who are experiencing them. In this sense, stress is highly subjective and here in lies a major key to correcting it. To change ones thinking about a problem is often enough to correct that problem. The very existence of worrying stress is confirmation that better ways of approaching and handling the situation need to be found.



Stressful problems must be rectified or they will make us miserable emotionally and will very likely manifest physically. The vehicles for this physical manifestation being our nervous and endocrine systems, which form the link between thought and the physical. Suppressed emotions result in physical disease as well as mental disease. Two of the more common conditions which are easily related to stress are ulcers and hypochlorhydria. These are often the direct result of emotional and physical stress. You will recognise that these complaints result in pain and poor digestion and will eventually have an effect on every cell within our body.

In recognising the stress-emotional link between the mind and the body, healing must be initiated on both levels. If stress is an identifiable component of most physical problems then every effort must be made to deal with problems emotionally as well as physically.

Dietary intervention is also essential. Dietary indiscretions will be a major factor in maintaining any illness, however it may not be the main issue. If we use ulcers as an example: too only modify the diet would be to treat only half (or less) of the problem. This would not be getting at the cause which may be dissatisfaction with their job or relationship, or just an inability to cope with life as they see it.

To pursue the example of ulcers a little further; we know that they are usually caused by stress. We also know that people under stress are likely to drink alcohol and coffee to try and cope with their stress. Foods that are sugary, fatty and salty are also tasty and satisfying and make a great “pick me up” when we are down or depressed. These foods are popular with ulcer sufferers. So, stress has contributed to the ulcer and has also been a major reason for our choice of inappropriate foods. This poor diet will contribute greatly to increased stress levels because of the “highs and lows” created by the drug-like effect of sugar, coffee and alcohol. You can see that it is a vicious cycle that requires a multi disciplinary approach.

THE BEHAVIOURAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

These are observable in the way we act or behave. For this it is necessary to observe what happens on a physiological level, and understand how stressful events and emotions affect us physically.



TUTOR TALK: The fact that stress is one of the greatest suppressors of immune function is alarming indeed, given that this is the defence system of our body.

We accept that the more toxic elements of our diet have a depressing effect on us. However, it appears that the emotional strains are even more debilitating. Anything which comprises our immune system is a serious threat to our health.