

UNDERSTANDING WHAT STRESS IS AND HOW IT AFFECTS YOU

Stress does NOT cause anger or disrespectful behavior. But, depending on the choices and decisions you make, stress can certainly be related to your anger and your disrespectful behavior. This section discusses what stress is and how it can play a part in what happens with how you experience and express your anger.

DEFINING STRESS:

- Stress was originally an engineering term used to describe how material weakens and breaks when enough pressure is applied.
- Stress can be defined as the rate of “wear and tear” (physically and emotionally) experienced in the living of your life. Anytime change occurs around you, the potential for stress to arise is present.
- **SOME SOURCES OF STRESS IN OUR LIVES CAN INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:**
 - **THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND YOU:**
 - ...Demands to adjust and adapt to external situations and the other people in your life
 - ...Job pressures
 - ...Time pressures
 - ...Financial pressure
 - ...Weather and noise
 - ...Criticism directed at you
 - ...Trying to balance family and work expectations
 - ...Experiencing conflict with your partner, children, family members, and others
 - **YOUR PHYSICAL BODY:**
 - ...Not taking care of yourself physically
 - ...not getting enough sleep
 - ...working, eating, or drinking too much or engaging in self-destructive behaviors
 - ...not getting regular exercise
 - ...Experiencing physical symptoms as a result of illness or injury
 - **YOUR INTERNAL STATE OF MIND AND YOUR THOUGHT PROCESS:**
 - ...Continual worrying and brooding about the past, present, and future
 - ...Viewing yourself or others in negative, judgmental, critical, or demeaning terms
 - ...Having unrealistic or perfectionistic expectations for yourself and others
 - ...Constantly re-hashing pain, hurt, and resentment from the past
- Relate these sources of stress to the specific cues and triggers you will identify in your *Escalation Prevention Plan*

STRESS IN HUMAN BEINGS ARISES FROM YOUR “ANIMAL INSTINCTS,” THE “FIGHT OR FLIGHT” RESPONSE OF YOUR PREHISTORIC ANCESTORS THAT ACTUALLY HELPED HUMANKIND SURVIVE AS A SPECIES

- Originally, the physical stress arousal served as a mobilization of human beings’ bodily defenses in response to an actual “life-or-death” threat to our well-being
 - ...e.g. hearing a dangerous animal nearby and then having to decide what to do in the situation

- Essentially, we are “hard-wired” as human beings to experience this physiological arousal (an internal “churning” and “revving up”) that originates in the oldest part of the brain, the limbic system, which is the “seat” of human emotion (the amygdala is a part of this system and is directly connected to your pre-frontal cortex which is a more recent and the “thinking” part of your brain).
- This “*fight or flight response*” is triggered:
 - ...when positive or negative changes in our lives occur;
 - ...when there are high levels of noise or crowding or significant temperature changes;
 - ...when we are feeling “overwhelmed” in our lives by too much to do and too little time to do it;
 - ...when we experience emotional or physical pain or injury;
 - ...when we are socially isolated and/or are feeling abandoned or rejected;
 - ...when we are startled;
 - ...when we feel fearful or threatened;
 - ...when we believe that our expectations are not being met or that things around us seem “out of control;” and
 - ...when we feel a sense of confusion, insecurity, uncertainty, or self-doubt.
- Adrenaline, cortisol, and other hormones are released through a biochemical reaction in our bodies designed to protect us in a truly life-threatening situation. This process:
 - ...increases your heart rate and blood pressure so that blood carrying nutrients and oxygen to your tissues and cells can be done with greater speed and waste products can be more efficiently eliminated
 - ...speeds up your breathing to provide more oxygen to the blood and to remove carbon dioxide from the blood
 - ...elevates your blood sugar level and releases more fat into the bloodstream to create additional energy
 - ...dilates your pupils to enable you to see better
 - ...tenses your large muscles for the movement necessary to flee or attack a real “danger” to us
 - ...slows your digestion so blood is available for your muscles and your brain
 - ...increases perspiration to keep your body cool
 - ...secretes chemicals to make it easier for your blood to clot in case of an actual injury
- All of these changes prepare your body for an emergency, whether it is real or simply imagined
 - ...just thinking about a difficult person or situation can create enormous stress for you
- This physiological arousal is directly related to the physical cues you have been asked to identify in your *Escalation Prevention Plan* (in the *Program Tasks* section of this workbook)
- Unfortunately, this physical process still occurs in human beings today even when it does not actually serve a useful function
 - ...e.g. when your boss tells you to do something you don’t really want to do, you can’t simply run away from your workplace or lash out at him or her (without losing your job)
- If the adrenaline and other hormones being released are not dealt with effectively and you do not learn ways to dissipate this physical arousal, you force your body to stay “on alert” and “on guard” for long periods of time
 - ...this is directly related to maintaining a higher level of escalation and agitation in your day-to-day life
- This constant arousal (that state of escalation) can trigger reactions that are painful and uncomfortable for you and others (like explosive and abusive anger) and that are even harmful to your physical health
 - ...e.g. contributing to symptoms like headaches, chest and back pain, and ulcers

- There are, in fact, several other responses to stress that are worth noting that can occur when stress is present
 - ...The first of these is called the “*freeze response*,” when a human being is literally “paralyzed” by the stress experience and he or she does not know how to respond effectively. This may lead to someone reacting in a passive way to a stressful situation and “stuffing” their anger and their other feelings and not responding at all or in any effective way to address what is occurring around them.
 - ...The second of these is called the “*tend and befriend response*,” often more common in women, which involves reaching out and connecting with others and increases empathy, motivates caretaking and caregiving behaviors, and strengthens social relationships. The hormone oxytocin (also called the “love hormone”) is released during this response and its most important function is to build and strengthen social bonds, which is why it is released during hugs, sexual involvement, and breastfeeding. This can actually be part of the de-escalation strategies section of your *Escalation Prevention Plan* when you reach out to friends and family during times when you are feeling stressed or angry.
 - ...The third of these is called the “*challenge response*” (more about this in the research discussed below near the end of this section), which increases self-confidence, energy and concentration. This allows access to your mental and physical resources; tends to motivate constructive action and assists you in performing well “under pressure;” and helps you learn positive lessons from your life experiences and then grow as a result. This is a “problem-solving” mode where you take on the stressful situation and look for effective options and alternatives and can also be a helpful part of your de-escalation strategies in your *Escalation Prevention Plan*.

THE STRESS RESPONSE CAN BE TRIGGERED BY:

- **MAJOR LIFE EVENTS OR CHANGES which can be either:**
 - **NEGATIVE:**
 - ...A family member or friend dying or becoming seriously ill or injured
 - ...Getting separated from or divorcing a partner
 - ...Being laid off or fired from a job
 - ...Being arrested or going to jail
 - ...Experiencing a pay cut at work
 - ...Being evicted from your residence or losing your home to foreclosure
 - ...Being injured or becoming seriously ill yourself
 - ...Experiencing significant financial pressure or having to go through bankruptcy
 - **Or POSITIVE:**
 - ...Getting a promotion at work
 - ...Getting a pay raise in your job
 - ...Becoming pregnant, having a baby, or being with someone who is having a child
 - ...Moving in with a partner, becoming engaged, or getting married
 - ...Buying or moving into a new home
 - ...An outstanding personal achievement or accomplishment
 - ...Going on vacation
 - ...Returning to, being in, or graduating from school

- **LESS IMPORTANT DAY-TO-DAY SITUATIONS**

- ...Getting a bill in the mail
- ...An argument with your partner, your children, or your extended family
- ...A driver cutting you off or tailgating you on the freeway
- ...Having your boss criticize your work
- ...Losing your keys or your wallet
- ...Burning your dinner
- ...Your children not listening to you or not doing what you would like them to do
- ...Having to wait in a long line
- ...Being stuck in heavy traffic or being held up by highway construction or bad weather

- These also happen to be examples of specific cues and triggers that you can start to identify for your own *Escalation Prevention Plan*

THE REALITY IS THAT WE CANNOT ESCAPE STRESS IN OUR LIVES NOR WOULD WE REALLY WANT TO DO THIS

- Stress is part of the human condition. Your stress response has helped the human race survive
- Everyone has an optimum level of stress that can help motivate you to be productive and to accomplish what you want or need to do
 - ...Hans Selye, the father of modern thought about stress, coined the term, “**eustress**,” to describe this more positive type of stress
- Absolutely no stress in your life would mean experiencing your life in a vegetative state with little or no reaction or response to anything that happens around you
- In the end, stress is not an “evil” to be avoided at all costs but rather a part of life that you need to learn to master and handle more effectively whenever it arises
- However, too much stress (or handling your life stress ineffectively) has the potential to produce the emotional and physical symptoms which can be crippling and, at times, even life-threatening
 - ...Selye referred to this negative type of stress as “**distress**”

THE DAMAGING CONSEQUENCES THAT STRESS CAN CREATE FALL INTO SEVERAL DIFFERENT CATEGORIES:

- **PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS**

- ...fatigue
- ...headaches
- ...dizziness
- ...chest tightness and pain
- ...back pain
- ...neck pain and stiffness
- ...insomnia
- ...high blood pressure

- **EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS**

- ...anxiety and fear
- ...apprehension

- ...irritability
- ...depression
- ...frustration
- ...moodiness and mood swings
- ...unhappiness
- ...discouragement

- **MENTAL OR COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS**

- ...confusion
- ...difficulty concentrating and focusing on what you need to address and accomplish in your life
- ...forgetfulness
- ...negative, cynical, and judgmental thoughts and attitudes
- ...boredom

- **RELATIONSHIP SYMPTOMS**

- ...withdrawing from and avoiding other people
- ...impatience with others
- ...envy and jealousy
- ...blaming attitudes
- ...resentment toward other people
- ...emotional distance and estrangement from others
- ...feeling abandoned and rejected by those around you
- ...decreased or little physical contact with others (e.g. touching, hugs, affection, and sex)
- ...reactivity/impulsivity with other people

- **SPIRITUAL SYMPTOMS**

- ...loss of purpose, direction, and meaning in your life
- ...pessimism and cynicism
- ...feeling “completely alone”
- ...loss of faith or belief in a Higher Power and a loss of connection with spirituality
- ...feelings of “emptiness”
- ...apathy

IN REALITY, HOWEVER, STRESS IS NOT CAUSED AND MADE WORSE SIMPLY BY EXTERNAL SITUATIONS AND OTHER PEOPLE

- The original research on stress focused only on the impact of major life events
 - ...In the 1960's, researchers Holmes and Rahe hypothesized that the more significant life events you experienced, the higher the probability that you would become physically or emotionally ill. Numbers of points were assigned for specific situations such as the death of a spouse, a divorce, or a jail term. It was believed that if you totaled up 300 points within a 12 to 18 month time frame, you would have a nearly 80% chance of becoming ill within the following two years
- More recent research, however, broadens the picture considerably to look not only at specific life stressors but also at how you perceive those stressors and the role you allow them to play in your life. In one study, researchers Kobasa, Maddi, and Kahn looked at a large group of middle- and upper-level managers for five years, finding that life stress can be

neutralized by a psychological quality that they called “**HARDINESS**” which consists of:

- 1) a notion of **CHALLENGE**, the belief that change is normal, exciting, and an incentive to grow rather than a threat or just an unending series of “hassles”
 - 2) a feeling of **COMMITMENT** toward their activities which includes a sense of purpose and belonging and a belief that what they are doing is good and meaningful
 - 3) a sense of **CONTROL** over their actions and events and a belief that they can handle problems and issues that do arise
- These researchers found that, after two years, the executives who seemed to have a high level of “hardiness” were approximately half as likely to develop illnesses as were the others, regardless of how many major life events they experienced. The “hardy” managers seemed to welcome stress and thrived on it while the less “hardy” managers felt powerless and victimized by it and often became physically ill as a result.

THUS, IN THE END, HOW YOU PERCEIVE LIFE STRESSORS AND HOW YOU ASSESS YOUR ABILITY TO HANDLE THEM ARE THE CRITICAL FACTORS IN DETERMINING WHETHER YOU WILL EXPERIENCE HARMFUL CONSEQUENCES FROM THE STRESS THAT IS A PART OF YOUR LIFE

- It is not just experiencing major life events or trivial daily stressors that determines your arousal level and potential damage to your physical and emotional self but also, and more importantly, how you view and actually interpret what happens around you.
- The intense and destructive reactions to stress that occur within you are generated by your own individual beliefs, perceptions, expectations, and thoughts, and your own unique reactions to the situations and people in your life.
- No situation or person, in and of itself, has the power to create crippling distress in you.
...Rather, it is how you label and define the experience that has the potential to create the damaging impact of stress.
- The reality is that you have considerable control over your reactions to stressful situations and people in your lives through the way that you look at yourself and the world around you and how you think about stress.
...You have the power to make events more or less stressful depending on how you view them and what you say to yourself about them.
...Your self-talk (i.e. the words, phrases, and sentences you are continually thinking) is the critical mediating variable that determines whether you experience your stress in a damaging way or learn to handle it effectively
...e.g. **IS YOUR SELF-TALK NEGATIVE?**
...”*Damn it, now there’s something else I have to deal with in my stupid life!*”
and “*I’ll never be able to get through this ridiculous mess!*”
or IS YOUR SELF-TALK POSITIVE?
...”*I really don’t like what’s happening here, but I’ll find a way to take care of it*”
and “*I know this will work out okay for me eventually*”
- If you consistently label your physical stress arousal as anger, and allow negative thoughts to build and fuel an attitude of cynicism, hostility, contempt, disgust, and entitlement (for yourself or others), you will tend to keep yourself in an agitated and escalated state for much more of the time. Doing this can lead directly to controlling, hurtful, punishing, and abusive behavior and significant physical and emotional consequences for you and the other people around you.