

A LINE ON LIFE

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Stress and the Type A Personality *

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In the 1980s, many articles have been printed about stress and how it is bad for you. What is stress? What are its effects? What factors influence these effects?

Stress is any stimulus that upsets the dynamic balance of your body. Stress can be caused by hunger, thirst, work, psychological pressures or a multitude of other things. Stress is an unending aspect of life. In other words, the only way to have no stress is to be dead! However, most stresses are relatively easily confronted. For example, if you are hungry, you eat. Thus you restore your bodily balance and temporarily reduce that stress.

Stress is a normal part of everyone's life.

What happens if the stress cannot be so easily handled? The effects of extreme stress were first systematically studied by Dr. Hans Selye, a physiologist from the University of Toronto. As early as 1950, Selye mapped out the general effects of severe stress called the **General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)**. The GAS has three overlapping stages - alarm, resistance, and exhaustion.

The first response to a strong stressor is **alarm**. The body recognizes danger and mobilizes for a "*fight-or-flight*" situation. Heartbeat and breathing quicken, muscles tense, and other physiological changes occur to cope with the stress. The person may show various symptoms of stress -- headaches, fever, fatigue, sore muscles, shortness of breath, diarrhea, upset stomach, and so on. These are also the symptoms of being physically sick, of stressful travel, of final exam week, and even of falling in love!

As body defenses stabilize, the symptoms of alarm seem to disappear. However, the adjustment to stress and the outward appearance of normality are maintained at high cost. During this **resistance stage**, the body is more able to cope with the original stress. However, its resistance to any other stress is lowered. (This may help you to understand why drafts and cold temperatures — although they do not cause colds directly - may lead to catching a cold by reducing your resistance to the cold germs.)

If stress still continues, the third stage — **exhaustion** — occurs. The coping patterns of the resistance stage start to collapse. The body's resources are exhausted, and the immune system is depleted. The weakest organ system in the body (cardiovascular, respiratory, digestive, etc.) is the first one to break down.

Depending on the individual and the stressor(s), continued stress can lead to "*burnout*," specific serious diseases, organ failure -- or even death.

What factors make stress more severe and threatening? Various qualities of a stressor increase the adaptive demands on the individual. Selye's GAS emphasizes **duration**. The longer the threat lasts, the more severe it will be.



Likewise, greater **intensity** creates more severe stress. Failing a bar exam to become a lawyer is harder to cope with than doing badly on a short quiz. The **number** of stressors will also contribute to the severity. Insufficient sleep is not as severe a problem as it would be with several others added, like a demanding boss and an unsympathetic spouse.

Predictability reduces the severity of the stress. Knowing what to expect when having surgery, retiring, or getting a divorce eases the pressures. It allows us to prepare in advance. Prior experience (including a formal education) increases predictability. Therefore, it also reduces the severity of the stress. Past experiences can help the person to call on successful coping methods or avoid ones that have previously failed.

In contrast, **imminence** increases the severity of the stress. Surgery two weeks away is less threatening than being rolled into the operating room.

Specific types of **personalities** seem to be more susceptible to the effects of stress than others. In 1959, two cardiologists, Drs. Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, summarized decades of research to come up with the much publicized **Type A personality**. The person with a Type A personality:

- has a chronic sense of time urgency. Rushed and hurried, this person is always "on edge."
- has quick and abrupt speech, often interrupting others.
- is very competitive - even in noncompetitive situations.
- is a hard-driving, achievement-oriented, and status-conscious person.
- frequently becomes hostile and aggressive.

In contrast, the Type B person has an easier-going lifestyle and is much more able to sit back and relax. The most important difference is that Type A men are 2-3 times more likely to suffer angina, heart attacks, or sudden death than type B men. Although differences in lifestyle (such as cigarette smoking) did have some effect, about half of the difference could not be explained by these factors.

The Type A personality seems to be promoted in our society. Does this mean that our competitive American ideal is more likely to lead to an early death? Is there any way to reduce the negative aspects of stress? These questions will be answered a following column.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1995, pages 354-362.