

# *Insights into the Concept of Stress*

*by Cyralene P. Bryce*

Pan American Health Organization



*Insights into the*  
**CONCEPT OF STRESS**

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This workbook was developed by Dr. Cyralene P. Bryce for the Stress Management in Disasters in the Caribbean (SMID) course. It is intended to be used in conjunction with the *Stress Management in Disasters* workbook. It is not intended to be a complete text on the subject of stress.

The compilation of this book benefitted from the input of too many persons for them to be mentioned individually. We would however like to express our deepest gratitude to everyone for their invaluable contributions and criticisms. Thank you.

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*“When you become preoccupied with the difficulties of a given task, it is easy to overlook its sheer simplicity.” –CPB*

M O T T O :

You can control how stressed you become.

*“If your fight for acceptance results in your exhaustion, then maybe you’re seeking to be accepted by the wrong persons.” –CPB*

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# C O U R S E O B J E C T I V E S

1. Define stress.
2. List the various stressors which may be encountered.
3. Identify the qualities of stressors.
4. Recognize the common signs and symptoms of stress.
5. Understand the physiological basis of the stress response.
6. Appreciate the possible impact of the stress response.
7. Determine one's own level of stress.
8. Identify aspects of one's life-style that may predispose one to stress.
9. Understand how to prevent and how to manage stress.

# P R E F A C E

It is universally accepted that optimum levels of stress can act as a creative, motivational force that can drive people to achieve incredible feats (eustress). Chronic or traumatic stress (distress) on the other hand, is potentially very destructive and can deprive people of physical and mental health, and at times even of life itself.

Emergency response personnel are unique in that they dedicate their time and energy in assisting persons during stressful times of their lives, for example, after disasters such as hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, etc. By doing this however, they are themselves repeatedly exposed to very stressful situations. Even though their training prepares them to deal with such situations, the reality is that they have a higher than normal risk for developing post-traumatic stress syndromes, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Hence, it must be deduced that the repeated exposure of emergency response personnel to critical incident stress does have a potentially deleterious effect on their well-being. It has also been found that the psychological well-being of emergency response personnel dealing with emergency situations can greatly affect the overall outcome of such situations, including the prognosis of the primary victims of the event.

Despite all of this having been well documented and the Caribbean's repeated exposure to natural disasters, the vast majority of Caribbean countries do not have a comprehensive stress management program in place to preserve the psychological well-being of their emergency response and disaster workers. The Office of Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Coordination Program of the Pan American Health Organization, Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization, took the initiative of bringing resource persons from throughout the region together in late 1998 to develop the Stress Management in Disasters in the Caribbean (SMID) Program.

The SMID Program is a comprehensive, peer-driven, multi-component stress management program which is administered on a volunteer basis and was designed to prevent and to mitigate the psychological dysfunction which exposure to traumatic situations like disasters may cause in emergency response personnel. The program is based on the principles of crisis intervention and critical incident stress management and it is not intended to take the place of professional therapy. Instead, it seeks to provide persons with the knowledge and skills to better understand, recognize and manage their emotional responses to traumatic situations. While the SMID Program was developed with emergency response personnel and disaster workers as its primary target group, the principles of the program, with appropriate modification, can be readily extended for use in the broader community, including with children and adolescents, to prevent and mitigate traumatic stress.

This workbook, *Insights into the Concept of Stress*, and the companion workbook, *Stress Management in Disasters*, were designed to provide the basic training material for persons who will be providing such a service.

# SECTION 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO STRESS



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**STRESS...**

**The confusion created when one feels totally out of control.**

## What is meant by the term stress?

For the purpose of this course, stress is defined as the body's response to situations that pose demands, constraints or opportunities, and stressor is defined as the stimulus that evokes a stress response.

## Why is the issue of stress such an important one?

Severe or chronic stress can result in disease or death. In the United States, approximately 80% of all non-trauma deaths are caused by stress-related illnesses. Below are some of the disorders that are thought to be stress-related:

- High blood pressure
- Strokes
- Heart attacks
- Headaches
- Diabetes mellitus
- Peptic ulcer disease
- Menstrual problems
- Musculoskeletal pain
- Increased vulnerability to infection and cancer
- Memory impairment
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Sexual difficulties

## Who experiences stress?

Anyone can be affected by stress, but the extent to which we experience stress depends on our life-style and is, therefore, largely self-imposed. Whether you have control over the situation that is causing you stress or not, you can have control over your reaction to the situation. In other words, *you can control how stressed you become.*

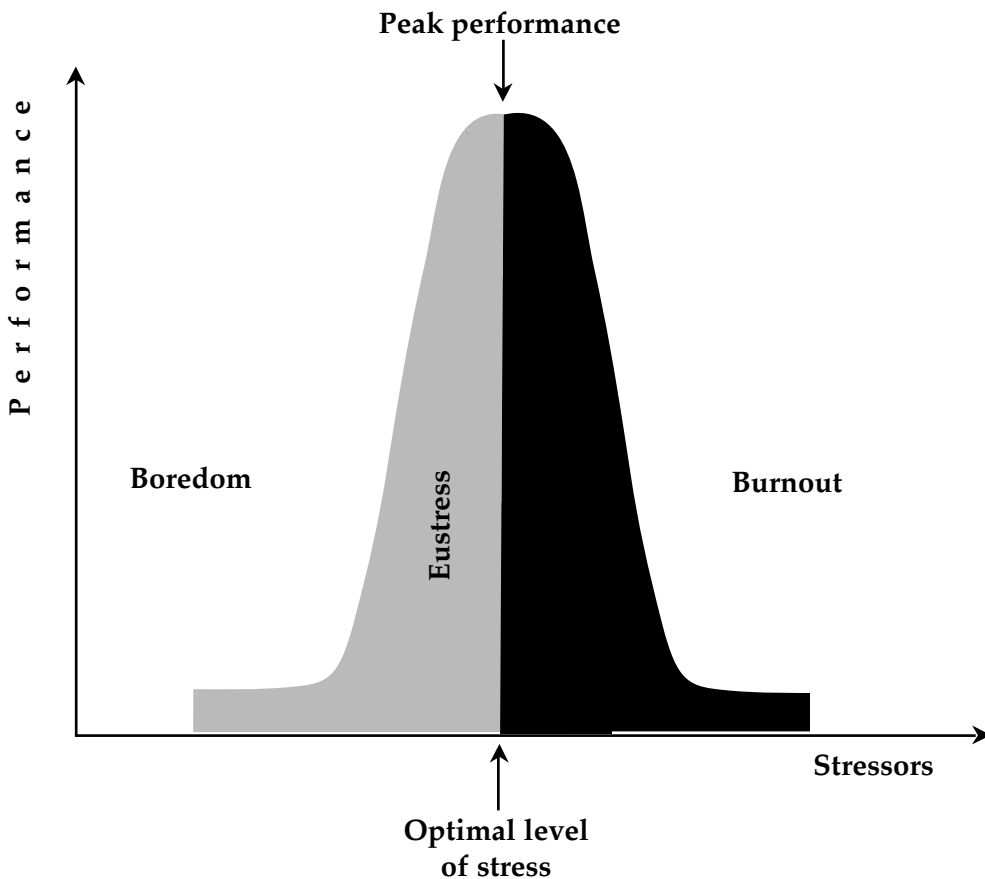
## Are the effects of stress always harmful?

Stressors in our lives are not invariably bad. When the stressor is brief and not traumatic, our physiological state quickly returns to normal. In many instances, the normal stress response is the one which makes us perform. In fact, the absence of stressors in our lives would result in non-achievement.

*Stress has been likened to the tension on the strings of a violin. You need enough to make good music--too much and the strings will snap, too little and there will be no music.*



Health and performance peak when the number of stressors in our life are optimal. Each individual has his/her own level of stress tolerance. What may be overwhelming for one person is someone else's challenge. When stress acts as a positive motivating force it is termed eustress. When it acts as a negative force it is termed distress. Stress only becomes a problem when it is chronic or severe. Chronic stress tends to erode coping mechanisms.



## End of Section Quiz

*Please circle the correct answer.*

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| 1. All persons react the same way to the same stressor.  | T | F |
| 2. Only poor people become stressed.   | T | F |
| 3. All stressful events are negative ones.   | T | F |
| 4. Getting married can be stressful.   | T | F |
| 5. Only anxious people ever experience stress reactions.   | T | F |
| 6. Chronic stress is not harmful.  | T | F |
| 7. Most of the stress that we experience comes from our life-styles and is therefore self-imposed. | T | F |
| 8. Severe stress can kill.   | T | F |
| 9. Increased vulnerability to cancer is a possible consequence of chronic stress.                  | T | F |
| 10. You can control how stressed you become.   | T | F |

Quiz answers appear in Appendix 2.

