

## SECTION 2: THE NATURE OF STRESSORS

### *A Winner's Creed*

*If you think you are beaten, you are.  
If you think you dare not, then you won't.  
If you like to win, but you think you can't,  
it is almost certain you won't.  
If you think you'll lose, you're lost.  
For out of the world we find,  
success begins with a fellow's will—  
it's all in the state of the mind.  
If you think you are outclassed, you are—  
you've got to be sure of yourself before  
you can ever win a prize.  
Life's battles don't always go  
to the stronger or faster man,  
but sooner or later the man who wins  
is the man who thinks he can.*

*—Author unknown*

## **Examples of stressors**

*Stressors can be divided into various categories:*

### **(a) Physical or environmental stressors:**

- Inadequate ventilation
- Pollution
- Overcrowding
- Famine
- Excessive or continuous noise
- Peer pressure
- Work pressure
- Family pressure
- Information overload
- Social isolation

### **(b) Natural disasters or disasters caused by human activity:**

- Multiple injury or fatality accidents
- Fires
- Hurricanes
- Floods
- Volcanic eruptions
- Earthquakes
- Tornadoes
- Explosions
- Airplane crashes
- War

### **(c) Major life changes:**

- Marriage
- Marital separation
- Divorce
- Exposure to assault or abuse
- Birth of a child
- Death of a loved one
- Change of job
- Imprisonment
- Retirement
- Illness of a family member

**(d) Hassles, i.e., minor changes or day-to-day aggravations:**

- Dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance or sex appeal
- Concerns about the well-being of persons dear to us
- Job dissatisfaction
- Feelings of estrangement
- Relationship problems with spouse/partner
- Relationship problems with in-laws
- Financial concerns
- Housekeeping responsibilities
- Lost or misplaced items
- Concerns about one's safety

**(e) Personality-related stressors:**

- Poor self-concept
- Impatience
- Poor consequential thinking
- Inability to set realistic goals and to prioritize
- Poor resource management
- Poor health habits
- Over-dependence
- Inflexibility
- Poor communication skills
- Poor interpersonal skills



## Features of stressors

A stressor is any stimulus which evokes a stress response. Stressors may be *real* or *imagined*, *internal* or *external*. The overall impact of a stressor will depend on its characteristics and the characteristics of those who have been affected. The *perceived* more than the *absolute* qualities of a stressor determine its potential impact. For example, if you are listening to a type of music that you like and the radio station starts to play a type of music that you dislike, you will likely turn the volume of the radio down and complain that it was too loud!

Two conditions are necessary for a potential stressor to become an actual stressor: there must be uncertainty over the impact which such a stressor will have on the individual and the outcome must be important to that individual.



*Stressors are not all unpleasant—most life situations that require change or adaptation can be viewed as stressors. Even pleasant events such as promotions, vacations and marriage are stressors since they require many adjustments and place demands on the person.* Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence that it is not the change per se, but the quality of the change that is potentially damaging to people. Events which are sudden, abnormal, undesired, severe and sustained and those over which the individual has little or no control are the most detrimental.

Any event which is very distressing and outside of the realm of normal human experience is termed a *traumatic stressor*, for example, rape, physical assault, natural disasters and serious accidents. Such events normally involve a perceived threat to the physical integrity of the individual or others and evoke reactions of intense fear, horror and/or helplessness.



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Exposure to such stressors can produce a very intense response which may overwhelm the individual's coping mechanisms. Such a response is a *common* reaction of *normal* people to an *abnormal* situation and it does not indicate that the person has developed a *psychiatric disorder*. Nonetheless, such exposure can lead to the development of a *post-traumatic stress syndrome*.

After exposure to a traumatic stressor, minimization of the intensity and duration of the stress response decreases the resultant neurochemical dysfunction which in turn decreases the chances of a post-traumatic stress syndrome developing. *One proven way of minimizing the intensity and duration of such a response is through the expression of emotions, fears, regrets, disappointments and specific traumas in a supportive, structured setting soon after exposure to such an event.*

## The Life Events Inventory

Major life changes that alter a person's social roles and relationships, such as marriage, divorce, job change, serious illness, or the death of a loved one, can increase susceptibility to stress, especially when several of these changes occur within a brief time period. Multiple major life changes within one year correlate with a higher risk of injury or illness.

*Below is the Life Events Inventory. Find your score for the preceding 12 months.*

### *The Life Events Inventory*

<b>Events</b>	<b>Scale Value</b>
Death of spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital separation	65
Imprisonment	63
Death of close family member	63
Personal injury or illness	53
Marriage	50
Dismissal from work	47
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Change in health of family member	44
Pregnancy	40
Sex difficulties	39
Addition of new family member	39
Business adjustment	39
Change in financial status	38
Change in number of arguments with spouse	35
Major mortgage or loan	32
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
Change in responsibilities at work	29
Children leaving home	29
Trouble with in-laws	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Partner begins or stops work	26
Change in living conditions	25
Change in personal habits	24
Trouble with boss	23
Change in work hours and conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in school or college	20
Change in recreation	19
Change in church activities	19
Change in social activities	18
Minor mortgage or loan	17

Change in sleeping habits	16
Change in number of family meetings	15
Change in eating habits	15
Vacation	13
Christmas	12
Minor violations of the law	11

Total Score: \_\_\_\_\_

Holmes and Rahe (1971) found that scores of:

150 - 199 points increase your likelihood of illness by 40%;

200 - 299 points increase your likelihood of illness by 50%;

300 and above increase your likelihood of illness by 80%.

If you complete the inventory for yourself don't worry too much if your scores seem high. Other factors, like your personality and how you react to change also have to be taken into account. In addition, some events may actually decrease one's stress response. For example, a divorce might be preferable to the pain of remaining in a relationship that is filled with turmoil.



## LETTING GO

*To let go does not mean to stop caring,  
it means I can't do it for someone else.*

*To let go is not to cut myself off,  
it's the realization that I can't control another.*

*To let go is not to enable,  
but to allow learning from natural consequences.*

*To let go is to admit powerlessness,  
which means the outcome is not in my hands.  
To let go is not to try to change or blame another,  
it's to make the most of myself.*

*To let go is not to care for,  
but to care about.*

*To let go is not to fix,  
but to be supportive.*

*To let go is not to judge,  
but to allow another to be a human being.*

*To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes,  
but to allow others to affect their own destinies.*

*To let go is not to be protective,  
it is to permit another to face reality.*

*To let go is not to deny,  
but to accept.*

*To let go is not to nag, scold or argue,  
but instead to search out my own shortcomings and correct them.*

*To let go is not to adjust everything to my desires,  
but to take each day as it comes, and cherish myself in it.*

*To let go is not to regret the past,  
but to grow and live for the future.*

*To let go is to fear less and to love more.*

*—Author unknown*

## End of Section Quiz

*Please circle the correct answer.*

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| 1. Stressors vary in their severity.   | T | F |
| 2. Dissatisfaction with one's self-image can be stressful.   | T | F |
| 3. The stimulus which results in a stress response is termed a stressor.                                 | T | F |
| 4. Chronic exposure to day-to-day aggravations is not stressful.   | T | F |
| 5. The death of a close family member is usually more stressful than the death of a spouse.              | T | F |
| 6. The absolute, more than the perceived qualities of a stressor determine its stressfulness.            | T | F |
| 7. Our socioeconomic status can determine how stressful a given situation is for us.                     | T | F |
| 8. All stressors are unpleasant.   | T | F |
| 9. Controlled expression soon after exposure to a traumatic situation has been proven to be therapeutic. | T | F |
| 10. A very intense response after exposure to a traumatic event is abnormal.                             | T | F |

Quiz answers appear in Appendix 2.

