

SECTION 4: STRESS AND YOU

How do we contribute to our stress levels?

Most of the stress that we experience comes from our life-styles and is, therefore, self-imposed. Many of the harmful effects of exposure to stressors depend on the individual's perceptions of the stressor, their emotional reactivity toward the stressor and their means of coping with the stressor.

The majority of these stressors tend to be related to our *home* and *family*, our *work* and our *individual characteristics*.

Stress and the family

The family in which an individual grows up, coupled with the family created through marriage, usually provides the most influential and intense interpersonal relationships to be experienced in life. Such relationships play a central role in the mental health and well-being of individuals. Our basic self-concept develops within the family unit through social interaction. Who we are and what we think of ourselves result in a large part from the perceptions and evaluations of our closest relatives. Unfortunately, family interactions are not always healthy and in some instances they can prove to be major sources of distress.

Dysfunctional families are characterized by poor communication, pervasive insecurity, lowered self-esteem, rigid patterns of interaction and a lack of genuine intimacy. Individuality is not fostered and relationships are strained. Some family members may attempt to control others by using fear, punishment, guilt or dominance. Eventually, such systems break down because the rules and restrictions are no longer able to keep the family structure intact.

In healthy families on the other hand, family members each have a voice and can speak for themselves. Individual differences and open communication are allowed and encouraged. Rules are fair, non-discriminatory, achievable, consistently applied, and flexible depending on changing situations. Change is not seen as a threat but it is anticipated and invited. When differences lead to disagreements, such situations are viewed as opportunities for growth and not as forerunners of a crisis.



Strong satisfaction with home and family have been repeatedly demonstrated to mitigate the influences of stressful situations. Below is a list of the possible mechanisms by which the family unit protects members against stress:

1. Provides a safe, supportive and caring network which fosters individuality, clear thinking, goal-directed behavior, wise resource management, maturity and a sense of responsibility;
2. Provides role models, guidance and feedback to allow for the development of adaptive behaviors, adaptive social skills and effective coping mechanisms;
3. Fosters a sense of belonging, self-worth, self-respect, self-confidence, self-actualization and respect for others;
4. Creates an atmosphere which encourages rest and relaxation, recreation, humor, exercise and physical and mental well-being;
5. Provides a forum where information, experiences, ideas and resources can be shared;
6. Offers empathy and encouragement when needed.

The most common causes of marital problems include:

- Poor communication
- Financial disputes
- Sexual difficulties
- Disappointment with the “love object”
- Unreasonable demands or inflexibility
- Differing beliefs, goals and priorities
- Selfishness, dishonesty or insensitivity
- Lack of commitment
- Poor time management
- Jealousy, controlling behavior or abuse
- Problems with in-laws
- Major challenges (e.g., death of a child)



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Stress and the workplace

For most employees, work is more than a 40-hour-a-week commitment. Even if the actual work day is eight hours, most individuals spend at least 10 to 12 hours per day engaging in work-related activities. In addition, many individuals find a substantial portion of their satisfaction and identity in their work. Work exerts an enormous influence on how persons value themselves and how they relate to others.

The distinction between stress at work and stress at home is an artificial one at best. As a consequence of stressors experienced at work, an individual may be irritable at home,

short-tempered and fatigued. This may result in arguments with his or her spouse, and marital discord may become a source of additional stress which may impact negatively on the person's job performance.

Anyone can become a victim of occupational stress. Generally, however, the most stressful jobs are those in which there is responsibility for people. The possibility of physical danger either to oneself or to others contributes to the stressfulness of a job.

People are particularly vulnerable to occupational stress at several points in their working lives--on entry into the working world, at times of promotion and at the time of retirement.

Below is a list of some stressful occupations and the occupational stress rating associated with them:

Air Traffic Controller	8.0	Nurse	6.5
Policeman	8.0	Fireman	6.3
Pilot	7.7	Paramedic	6.3
Doctor	6.8	Teacher	6.2

Overall, persons with demanding jobs with very little say in how to cope with these demands are at the greatest risk for developing a stress reaction. Research has shown that contrary to popular belief managers are not invariably over-stressed, since despite their demanding jobs most of them are in control of how such a job is performed.

What are some of the possible signs of occupational stress?

1. High absenteeism
2. High incidence of stress-related illnesses
3. High staff turn-over
4. Poor productivity
5. Poor staff morale
6. Poor staff relations
7. Clique formation
8. Poor work attitude
9. Lack of initiative
10. Frequent mistakes and accidents
11. Substance use by staff
12. Acts of sabotage



A healthy work environment is one which:

1. Rewards productivity in a tangible way;
2. Fosters healthy competitiveness, high standards of professionalism and self-development;
3. Is flexible, progressive and non-discriminatory;
4. Looks after the interests of its staff by way of appropriate staff assistance and support when necessary;
5. Sets realistic goals, standards and deadlines and assists staff with resource management;
6. Emphasizes job satisfaction and ensures a good match between the person and the job;
7. Keeps staff well-informed with accurate information, encourages worker participation at all levels of the decision-making process and adequately prepares them for change;
8. Gives both praise and constructive criticism when necessary, with a system of accountability for all;
9. Is safe and comfortable to work in;
10. Fosters healthy staff relations.

Stress and the individual

A situation that is stress-arousing for one person might be a neutral event for another person. Some people can survive in very hostile environments without experiencing stress. Whether a given situation is stressful or not depends on how we appraise it and how we rate our ability to deal with it.

How we appraise and cope with events will depend on demographic characteristics, experiences while growing up, personality traits, coping skills, social support network and socioeconomic status.

The one common variable in all of these aspects is *the individual*. People who generally cope successfully with stressful situations have a variety of personal attributes that minimize the levels of stress to which they are exposed. Such persons know how to approach situations for which they do not have a readily available response. In other words, they have an adaptive personality.

Personality can be defined as the totality of emotional and behavioral traits that characterize the person in day-to-day living under ordinary conditions. It is relatively stable

and predictable. Personality is shaped by both genetic and cultural forces, where culture consists of the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that are transmitted between generations and that mold the developing personality from infancy through to adulthood.

We vary our behaviors as the situation requires. This results in a basic personality that is overlaid with *situational role playing* where the roles can be quite diverse (e.g., you are your child's parent now and your mother's child 15 minutes later!). In this context, roles are normative behaviors expected of a group of individuals (e.g., mothers, teachers, siblings and workers) which are socially defined and tend to be relatively stable. As we adopt new roles we must acquire the behavior expected in that role; effective role performance involves identifying, maintaining and balancing the functions we assume or acquire in society (e.g., as worker, child, parent, student, teacher, friend, politician). *Persons tend to be more effective when they perform a given role the way that they know best and not according to a given stereotype.*

Below is a list of personal attributes that form the basis of an adaptive personality:

1. Positive self-concept
2. Clear thinking
3. Goal-directed behavior
4. Wise resource management
5. Good communication skills
6. Ability to deal with conflicts effectively
7. Use of adaptive social and interpersonal skills
8. Maintenance of good physical and mental health

Exercise: "A Look at Myself"

"Remember, there is good and bad in everyone"

List five good points about yourself. Where possible, use single words or phrases.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

List five bad points about yourself. Where possible, use single words or phrases and place an asterisk next to the ones that you would like to change.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

How stressful is your job?

Read each statement below carefully, then circle the best answer to each question as it relates to the preceding 12 months of your life and find the total scores. Please see Appendix 1 for an interpretation of the total score.

Note carefully that tests like these serve only to alert us that there may be a problem.

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Always</i>
1. I feel isolated in my job.	1	2	3	4
2. I feel frustrated in my job.	1	2	3	4
3. There is a lack of feedback about my job performance.	1	2	3	4
4. I do not know exactly what my responsibilities are at work.	1	2	3	4
5. My level of training is not adequate for me to perform my work duties efficiently.	1	2	3	4
6. I have very poor relations with my co-workers.	1	2	3	4
7. I have very poor relations with my boss.	1	2	3	4
8. Too many people make demands of me when I am at work.	1	2	3	4
9. There is no clear and/or effective management hierarchy at my workplace.	1	2	3	4
10. I have no control over how I perform my job.	1	2	3	4
11. I get very little support from my colleagues.	1	2	3	4
12. I get very little support from my superiors.	1	2	3	4
13. My job is not challenging.	1	2	3	4
14. No one understands the functions of my department.	1	2	3	4
15. Promotions at my workplace are not based on merit.	1	2	3	4

16. I am unsure as to the future of my job.	1	2	3	4
17. I use coffee, tobacco, alcohol and/or other drugs to try and cope.	1	2	3	4
18. My working environment is unsafe.	1	2	3	4
19. My working environment is uncomfortable.	1	2	3	4
20. My job does not pay well.	1	2	3	4
21. The targets related to my job are unrealistic.	1	2	3	4
22. The budgets related to my job are unrealistic.	1	2	3	4
23. I work under inflexible and insensitive working conditions.	1	2	3	4
24. I do not have adequate resources to work with.	1	2	3	4
25. I have to work outside of my normal working hours to complete my work.	1	2	3	4

Total score: _____

End of Section Quiz

Please circle the correct answer.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Good self-esteem protects you from making mistakes. | T | F |
| 2. Strong family ties help to protect against the effects of stressful situations. | T | F |
| 3. Personality variables affect people's reactions to stress. | T | F |
| 4. Some people can work in very hostile environments without experiencing distress. | T | F |
| 5. Males can be victims of sexual harassment on the job. | T | F |
| 6. Situational role playing is indicative of a major psychiatric disorder. | T | F |
| 7. Death of a child is a possible precursor of divorce. | T | F |
| 8. Managers are invariably over-stressed. | T | F |
| 9. We must be loved by everyone for our lives to be useful. | T | F |
| 10. Wise resource management is distressing. | T | F |

Quiz answers appear in Appendix 2.

