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What Is Stress?

Stress is an everyday fact of life that simply can't be avoided. In fact, I would bet that not a day goes by where you don't hear that word. But what is stress exactly? Is it a thing? A feeling? What is **not** up for debate though, is that we all experience it at unhealthy levels and need to transform the way we respond to it.

What is Stress?

To start, we need to clarify the context in which we use the term "stress"...

- ❖ As a "thing" stress (or stressor) is any life change we must adapt to. Stressors can manifest physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and in all degrees of severity. They can come in extremes of physical danger, illness, and trauma – or in abstracts like falling in love or achieving a goal. It can also be small things like managing time, meeting a deadline, sitting in traffic etc.
- ❖ As a condition (i.e. "I'm feeling stressed") stress is any symptom in mind and body that result from excessive exposure to stressors, combined with an inability to be resilient to their effects.

It's important to remember that not all stress is bad. In many cases, it promotes maturation and provides motivation to work towards goals. In the end, it's how we respond and adapt to these life changes that will determine how stress will impact our health and our lives.

Sources of Stress

Stress comes from all sorts of places, but for simplicity we can identify 4 main sources

- ❖ Physical: aging, sleep, activity, diet, illness, trauma
- ❖ Environmental: weather, pollen, noise, traffic, pollution
- ❖ Social: deadlines, finances, work/job, relationships
- ❖ Mental/Emotional: thoughts, feelings, attitudes, belief systems

The Stress Response

So what exactly does stress **do**? You've probably heard of the infamous "**fight or flight**" response, which is a series of biochemical changes in the body that prepare you to deal with a present threat (the proverbial tiger). This response is also called the "**stress response**" and is controlled by a mechanism of the nervous system called the Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. Any time a threat is presented (real or imagined) the cerebral cortex sends an alarm to the hypothalamus activating the sympathetic nervous system, which causes the pituitary and adrenal glands to release hormones like adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol causing:

- ❖ Increased breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure
- ❖ Pupil and bronchial dilation
- ❖ Muscular tension, and increased blood flow to larger muscle groups
- ❖ Decreased activity in the digestive tract

Once the threat dissipates and the “fight or flee” is complete, the nervous system ceases to signal alarm and the stress hormones will be metabolized out of the body. In turn, the opposing parasympathetic nervous system activates and releases hormones like serotonin and neuropeptide Y to return the body to its natural state; this is called the “**rest and repair**” response.

*FACTOID: Recent studies have connected neuropeptide Y with stress resiliency.

During the times of our ancestors, the stress response was useful for ensuring survival. However, today we aren't presented with as many survival threats. Instead, we're presented with unrelenting chronic stressors, like the ones listed above; and therein lies the problem. Even though humans have evolved, our nervous systems have not evolved to distinguish between a potential tiger attack and argument with our partner. When we're arguing with a partner or sitting in traffic, our nervous system still perceives a survival threat and elicits a full-blown stress response. As long as our minds perceive a threat (real or imagined, mild or severe) our bodies will remain in this state, which eventually leads to a heap of health and wellness problems.

How Stress Affects Us

When we're constantly in the stress response, and we're neither fighting nor flying, we become stuck in what we call the “freeze state”. In the “freeze state” the stress response is constantly signaling your body to release stress hormones, which will accrue since they haven't been metabolized out with a fight or flight. Eventually, the levels of these hormones become toxic in the bloodstream, which impacts every system in the body. Conditions such as allergies, asthma, immune deficiency, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, infertility, indigestion, acid reflux, irritable bowel syndrome, insomnia, depression, anxiety, chronic pain, arthritis, and even cancer have all been linked to stress. And let's face it, none of us “feel well” when we're being bullied by stress, and this spills over into our every day lives: our relationships, our jobs, our hobbies and fun activities.

There Are Solutions

I want to assure all of you that stress doesn't have to control you. There are MANY ways to help yourself adapt to the changes of life, and train your nervous system to be less “extreme”. What it comes down to is looking at your life, and figuring out what you need to be doing to make yourself more fluid and adaptable. What works for one person may not work for you, so you have to listen to your body and work towards things that make you look and feel good. You're not alone in this, and we at Stream Point Wellness are here to help you every step of the way!

Stress Awareness

As with any program or therapy we use to help ourselves, there is a step-by-step process. The first step is all about identifying and becoming aware of what it is that's keeping you from being healthy and happy. This is no different when you're learning to manage stress and help yourself become more resilient to the changes of life. When you're ready to open yourself up and face it, all you have to do is identify the following: (1) What's causing you stress? (2) How is it making you feel in body & mind? (3) How would you rather feel? (4) What can be done to achieve that? It almost sounds too simple, perhaps even a bit of a cliché? But lining things out like this enables you to take perspective and see your life in the big picture. An objective mind is a clear mind – a clear mind allows for an open mind – and an open mind is able to transform.

Some Reminders Before You Begin...

Before we delve deeper into this, remember it's very easy to get overwhelmed. So very often I see people make stress lists only to become more stressed when we see the daunting list (myself included!). This can put us into the "freeze" state, which only makes things worse. Therefore I urge you to take a moment and remind yourself of a few things...

1. It's completely normal to have a mountain of things that cause you stress – remember it comes from all areas of life. Don't let that discourage you from moving forward.
2. Even though there are steps to take, these are not cookie cutter steps. What works for one person may not work for you. You are a unique and individual being, so how you learn to adapt to change will also be unique. Your job is to find what works for you.
3. Remind yourself that when you're experiencing stress, you are simply undergoing massive amounts of change in your life, and change means growth. You are growing and you are transforming.
4. Be compassionate with yourself. Don't become your own worst enemy and beat yourself up when you hit a roadblock (we all will, we're human). You have the strength to pick yourself back up again and trek on.
5. Be patient with yourself; change rarely happens overnight, and learning to manage stress is not a linear process. It's multidimensional and takes time. Change is the only reliable constant in this universe, and we'll spend our entire lives changing, so it's only natural that learning to do this smoothly is a life long process as well.

Stress Awareness "Steps"

Now that you can remember not to beat yourself up as you're trying to manage your stress, we can begin...

- ❖ Identify the things that are causing you stress. If it makes it easier, you can categorize them. Some people categorize by source (physical, mental/emotional, social etc), others by severity (major, minor, chronic).
- ❖ Think about the personal meaning of each of these stressors and how they make you feel. Are there physical effects (insomnia, indigestion)? Are there mental/emotional effects (anxiety, depression, restless mind, negative thoughts)? Are there social effects (arguments, poor productivity, social avoidance)?
- ❖ Acknowledge which stressors are in your control to change, and which ones aren't. Some stressors are within your power to change or eliminate, while others you may just have to learn to better cope with.
- ❖ Write out things that are within your power to do to change your life circumstances. Is it within your power to find a new job? Is it within your power to move into a new home? How can you change your diet or exercise regimens?
- ❖ Write how you can better cope with the circumstances that you cannot readily change. How can you have a more harmonious relationship with your partner, family member, friend, or co-worker? How can you cope with chronic pain, or conditions like hypertension and diabetes? How can you cope with the loss of a loved one? Then, embrace yourself and your life as it is – acceptance and surrender. Just keep breathing.
- ❖ TAKE ACTION!!!!!! Seriously!!! This is the most important step, and it's often the step that people never get to, or they start and give up. Identifying your stress and becoming aware of it is the first step, and it's important. But you MUST do the work – you must move forward, and you must not give up!!