

Understanding the Stress Response



Understanding the Stress Response

What is Stress?

We all talk about “how stressed” we are, but we are not always clear about what exactly stress is. Stress can very simply be defined as demands on us (emotional, cognitive, physical) that at any point in time exceed our resources to deal with those demands. Stress comes from both the good and the bad things that happen to us—e.g., a chronic illness, a wedding, a death, and a promotion can all be sources of stress in our lives.

The Stress Response

When we experience a stressor, our body undergoes a series of physiological changes (“the stress response”). There are 3 key stages of the stress response:

Stage 1 - Energy Mobilization

The human body responds to stress by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The adrenal glands release adrenaline and cortisol, which leads to physiological changes such as increased heart rate, facial flushing, increased blood pressure, and increased rate of breathing. Blood vessels open wider (to allow more blood flow to large muscle groups, putting our muscles on alert). Pupils dilate (to improve vision). The liver releases stored glucose (to increase the body’s energy). Sweat is produced (to cool the body). All of these physical changes prepare a person to react quickly and effectively to handle the pressure of the moment.

Stage 2 - Consumption of Energy Stores

If you do not for some reason move past the first stage, the human body starts to use existing energy stores (e.g., releasing stored sugars and fats). Side effects include feeling driven, pressured, and fatigued. You may begin to engage in behaviors (drinking more coffee, smoking, and/or drinking more alcohol) than is good for you. You may also experience ongoing anxiety, attention/concentration problems, some difficulty with sleep, and be more likely to get sick (colds or the flu).



Stage 3 - Draining of Energy Stores

If stress is not resolved, your body's need for energy will become greater than its ability to produce that energy, and chronic stress may result. You may experience chronic insomnia, ongoing errors in judgement, and changes in personality (e.g., increased irritability, frustration, anger, depression). You may also develop a serious health condition (e.g., heart disease, ulcers, clinical depression, or anxiety).

It is important to increase our awareness in regards to our body's stress response. Stress acts as a signal for us, letting us know that we need to do something to reduce the level of stress we are feeling. This simplest way that this can be done by looking for ways to calm down and relax your body.

