

Stress: Some Basics

Stress is a physiological response to a stimulus – such as anxiety, fear or pain – that disrupts normal patterns of behavior. In and of itself, stress isn't a bad thing. In short bursts, it can actually help if you need to work hard or react quickly.

But prolonged stress can wreak havoc with your health, yielding such physical symptoms as headaches, upset stomach or stiff muscles. Equally important, stress can adversely affect thinking and behavior. Nervousness, insecurity, hesitation and inability to focus are all by-products of stress.



What Triggers Stress?

Stress triggers (or stressors) are often external, but are magnified from within. Among the most common:

- ▶ **Biogenic:** caffeine, sugar, alcohol are but three things whose consumption can elevate heart rate, quicken pulse, heighten (or dull) sensory perception and produce other physiological effects
- ▶ **Psychosocial:** these are events that the mind interprets as threatening to your well-being.

There are three types of psychosocial events:

- Major event, affecting large group of people (e.g. 9/11 terrorist attack, worldwide economic crisis)
- Major event, affecting just you and immediate family (e.g. divorce, job loss, auto accident)
- Minor daily events, affecting just you (e.g. your PC “crashes”, surprise assignments at work, doctor appointments)

Interested in finding out what your stress level might be? You can take an online test at: <http://www.rosemed.com/healthcontent.asp?page=/hic/stress/index>

4 Keys to a Less Stressful Existence

Dr. Smiley Blanton, an American psychiatrist in the early 20th century who studied with Sigmund Freud, observed that “anxiety depression is the great modern plague”. Dr. Blanton also noted that “worry is the most subtle and destructive of all human diseases”: Four easy steps to minimize worry and to improve the quality of your life:

- 1 **Take a day off.** Use this day to unwind totally, to purge your mind of everyday thoughts. Read a book, listen to music, go to the theatre. But most of all: relax!
- 2 **Abandon being “always right”.** Let cooperation, agreement and harmony be your goals. Lower your expectations and don't be fearful of giving into others.
- 3 **Give up the guilt.** Psychologists call guilt a “learned emotion”. While a small measure of guilt serves to fortify the conscience, studies show that we carry around vastly more than we need. Letting go of guilt is essential if one is to be less stressed-out.
- 4 **Breathe.** Slowly, deeply, often. Close your eyes and inhale to the count of ten. Then – as slowly as you can – exhale to the count of ten. Repeat 5-10 times to provide immediate relief from stress.

Welcome to Basis Points! Each month, Basis Points provides you tips and techniques that we've gleaned from a variety of sources to help better your business life. This month's issue focuses on “Conquering Stress” which - given the continued unpredictability of the global economy and equities markets - would seem to be a topic that's as timely as it is relevant.

5 Things We Do that Amplify Stress

- **All or Nothing:** Some people look at the world in binary fashion, judging (wrongly) that everything is black or white, right or wrong. When these people err, they declare themselves ‘total failures’.
- **Personalization:** These folks believe everything is their fault. Example: when an employee misses an assignment, they think: “I should have trained him better.”
- **Approval Seeking:** Some people have an insatiable and unrealistic desire to be liked and endorsed by others. When that doesn't happen, the individual feels miserable.
- **Perfectionism:** No matter how well these people perform, it's never quite good enough. Failing to be perfect (or seeing this “failure” in others) makes one continually disappointed and unhappy.
- **Mislabeling:** Rather than seeing people and situations as they are (complex and nuanced), some people see the world simplistically: taking a single negative event and extrapolating it to a wrongful conclusion. Example: after making a simple mistake, thinking of oneself as “a total loser”.

Source: “Mind Your Heart: A Mind/Body Approach to Stress Management”, Aggie Casey and Herbert Benson; Simon & Schuster, 2004

“Worry is a cycle of inefficient thoughts whirling around a center of fear”

- Corrie Ten Bloom