

Sample Excerpt From The ABC's Of Stress Sequential Report

Stress – a word we've all heard and used a hundred times. However, if you were asked to explain the concept, what would you say? Stress is something that you know intuitively, but that isn't all that easy to define.

Even people who have spent their professional lives studying stress have trouble defining it. Despite all the hard work of the last half century, there is still no satisfactory definition of stress. Defining stress is like defining happiness. Everyone knows what it is and what it feels like, but no one can agree on a definition. The most understandable one we've found is the following:

Stress is what you experience when you believe you cannot cope effectively with a threatening situation.

Basically that means you experience stress whenever you are faced with an event or situation that you perceive as challenging to your ability to cope. If you only view the situation as mildly challenging, you will most likely feel minimal stress; however if you perceive the situation as threatening or overwhelming your coping abilities, then you will feel a lot of stress. For example, having to wait for a bus when you have plenty of time causes little stress. Waiting for the bus when you are late for a meeting triggers a bit more stress.

The difference between the demands of the situation and your perception of how well you can cope with that situation is what determines how much stress you will feel.

There is another definition of stress – one commonly found taped inside business cubicles.

Stress is created when your mind overrides the body's basic desire to choke the living daylights out of some idiot who desperately deserves it.

However, this definition can be counterproductive to those who act on the body's basic desire.

Stress Causing Stress

A large problem in defining stress is the word confusion of it. We use the word stress to refer to the thing or circumstance out there that is stressing us. Stress is the bus never coming, the deadline, the traffic jam, or the construction on your building. We then use the same word to describe the physical and/or emotional discomfort we are feeling about that situation. Stress is also our anxious feelings, our headache, our irritation. So we end up feeling stress about stress. This can be a bit confusing.

How Stress Started

You have stress in your life for a good reason. Don't believe that? Take a look at the historical evidence:

- **Imagining You Are a Cave Person**

You have regressed in time to a period millions of years ago when men and women lived in caves. You are fond of roaming the jungle in a loincloth and you always carry a club. Your day so far has been the normal routine – the usual cave politics and problems with the in-laws. Then suddenly, on your jungle stroll, you spot a tiger. And this isn't an ordinary cute Princess Jasmine tiger, this is a saber-toothed one. You experience the fight-or-flight response. This response is rightly named, because in that moment, you have to make a choice. You can stay and battle, or you can run like the wind. Your body, armed with automatic stress response, prepares you to do either. You are ready for anything.

- **Seeing How Your Body Reacts**

When you are in fight-or-flight mode, your physiological system goes into high gear. The first thing you notice is that you're extremely afraid. You also notice you're breathing much faster than usual, and your hands feel cool and wet. But that's just the beginning. If you could see what's happening below the surface, you would also notice some other changes. Your sympathetic nervous system, one of the two branches of your automatic nervous system, is producing changes in your body. Your hypothalamus, a part of your brain, is activating your pituitary, a small gland near the base of your brain, which releases a hormone

into the bloodstream. This hormone, called ACTH, reaches your adrenal glands, and they in turn produce more adrenaline (also called epinephrine) along with other hormones called glucocorticoids (cortisol is one of these). This mixture of biochemical changes is responsible for an assortment of other remarkable changes in your body. Some of the major ones are:

- Your heart rate speeds up, and your blood pressure rises (more blood pumped to your muscles and lungs).
- You breathe more rapidly. Your nostrils flare, causing an increased supply of air.
- Your digestion slows. (No time to eat anyway.)
- Blood is directed away from your skin and internal organs and is shunted to your brain and skeletal muscles. Your muscles tense. You feel stronger. You are ready for action.
- Your blood clots faster, ready to repair any damage to your arteries.
- Your pupils dilate, so you see better.
- Your liver converts glycogen into glucose, which teams up with free fatty acids to supply you with fuel and some quick energy.

So basically, when you're experiencing stress, your entire body undergoes this dramatic series of physiological changes that readies your body for a life-threatening emergency. Clearly, stress has adaptive, survival potential. Stress was nature's way of keeping you alive.

Surviving the Modern Jungle

By now, we hope you've realized that you don't actually live in a cave. And perhaps you've noticed it's been a while since you've seen any tigers roaming around, saber-toothed or otherwise. Even so, this incredibly important, life-preserving stress reaction is still hard-wired into your system. And once in a while, it can still be

highly adaptive. Let's say you are on a railroad track and you see a train barreling toward you, an aggressive stress response is nice to have. It will help you to get off those tracks nice and quick.

In today's modern society, we are required to deal with few life-threatening stresses on a normal day. Unfortunately, your body's fight-or-flight response is activated by a whole range of stressful events and situations that are not going to kill you. The physical dangers have been replaced by social or psychological stresses, not worthy of the full on fight-or-flight stress response. Your body, however, does not know this and reacts the same way it did when your ancestors were facing the tiger.

Podium Panic

You are standing in an auditorium in front of several hundred seated people. You are about to give a presentation that is important to your livelihood and your career. All of a sudden you realize you've left several pages of your prepared material on your dining room table. As it starts to dawn on you that this is not just a bad dream that you can laugh about later, you start to notice some physical and emotional changes occurring. Your hands are becoming cold and clammy. Your heart is beating faster and you are breathing harder. Your throat is dry. Your muscles are tensing and you notice a slight tremor as you hopelessly look for the missing pages. Your stomach feels a little queasy, and you notice an emotion that you would definitely label as anxiety. You understand that you are experiencing a stress reaction. You also recognize that you are experiencing the same fight-or-flight response that your caved in ancestors did. The difference is, you probably won't die up there on that podium, even though it may feel that way.

In the modern jungle of today, giving that presentation, being stuck in traffic, confronting a disgruntled client, facing an angry spouse, or trying to meet an unrealistic deadline are what stresses you. These far less-threatening stresses now trigger that same intense stress response. It's basically overkill. Your body is now not just reacting; it's overreacting. And that's never good.

Stress is as Simple as ABC

A good way of understanding stress is to look at a model of emotional distress elaborated by psychologist Albert Ellis. He calls it the ABC model and it's as simple as it sounds.

~End Sample Excerpt~