

[IMAGE]

Understanding the Stress Burden

By Dr. Andrew Glanville

Heart disease is known as the silent killer, but there's no denying that stress works in much the same way. It slowly builds up and we usually ignore it until something bad happens. Most of us don't do enough to limit our stress (just like we don't do enough to reduce our risk of heart disease) and we often resist admitting that our fatigue, impatience, poor work performance and even poor health (heart problems, for one) are actually caused by it. Yes, it's the burden of stress and it reveals itself in many forms.

In my profession I hear people talk about pain and other symptoms quite often. Sometimes these ailments come on quite suddenly, and sometimes they are gradual. Sometimes it is easy to determine the cause; sometimes it is not so easy. Trauma caused by a car accident or a fall, for example, can be relatively easy to determine. But what about when someone says they bent over to pick up a paper clip or sneezed and ended up in excruciating pain? That can be baffling.

Stress and the Stress Threshold

stress burden - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark I pay attention when people talk about sudden onset of bizarre and unusual ailments. When I hear people say things like, "I did not eat anything different yesterday and today my guts are going crazy" or "This is the type of situation I can usually handle, but for some reason I am not processing it well this time," my ears tend to perk up.

The answer can be found in a little word with big implications: *stress*. Our bodies endure stress, which can be simply defined as anything that causes a reaction. There are three main areas in which we experience stress: physical, emotional and chemical. Stress involving any of these areas can affect us profoundly.

We are all born with a capacity to handle stress (our stress threshold), and throughout our lifetimes our bodies do everything in their power to keep us below that threshold. Some are born with a higher capacity to handle it than others, and are said to have a strong constitution. Others are born with a lower capacity and may be referred to as sickly or weak, particularly when young. Part of this has to do with genetics and part has to do with the stress endured by our mother while we were in the womb. Regardless of how we obtained it, our particular threshold changes little throughout our lifetime (although our ability to handle stress once

we have exceeded that threshold can change/improve). It is this threshold, or more specifically, the crossing of it, that causes crisis in our health and well-being.

Stress in Action: Three Examples

Scenario #1: Consider a young, healthy businessman who is coping well with a new wife, a new child and a career. He seems to have it all together. He works hard, makes decent money, even exercises regularly and sometimes tries to eat healthy, but his diet is the Standard American Diet (SAD) full of processed, refined foods. One day, he gets in a little fender bender on his way home from work and suddenly, his life falls apart. Over the next several weeks, he experiences physical pain and begins to lose control emotionally.

Why did our businessman suffer emotionally after a physical accident? It is easy to recognize that he suffered significant physical trauma, but so do many other people without similar effects. A closer look at his life reveals other areas of stress that put him over the threshold. His job stresses him out more than he lets on; since he does not like to talk about it, he holds it all inside (emotional). The food he eats does not provide adequate nutrition and in many cases, even adds additional stress (chemical). Since his exercise is not supported by proper nutrition, it actually has a negative effect on his body (physical and chemical). The car accident was the final stress that put him over the threshold and it all came crashing down.

Scenario #2: Here is another scenario: a construction worker with 20 years experience who recently lost his 15-year-old dog bends over to pick up a screwdriver and throws his back out, causing him to miss work for several weeks. Why did our construction worker, who uses his body every day in the most efficient way possible, suffer a major injury when performing a mundane task? While his body was prepared for the strain of both his daily job and the picking up of a screwdriver (physical), it was the stress of losing his dog (emotional) that caused him to cross the threshold. The screwdriver becomes the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Scenario #3: One final scenario: A woman in her mid-40s with a busy schedule and a demanding job has frequent bouts of digestive issues. From day to day, she does not know whether what she eats will "settle" in her stomach or send her into bouts of diarrhea, indigestion and abdominal pain. This scenario is both the most simple and most complicated to explain. It is obvious that something she is eating (chemical) on a regular basis could be contributing to her digestive issues, but why are they sporadic? Other areas of stress in her life (physical and emotional) and how she is processing them determines how close to her threshold she is. On days when she is experiencing less stress or processing it well, she is able to handle the stress

brought on by the foods she eats. Conversely, on days she experiences more or does not process stress well, the foods she eats put her over her threshold.

Stress is a dirty word in today's society. Everyone seems to know what it is and has too much of it; they just don't know what to do with it. It is no wonder to me that we have the chronic health issues we do. Heart disease, diabetes, digestive issues and obesity are at epidemic levels. It is likely that these and many more conditions are related to stress. It is time we start investigating the full spectrum of what stress is, where it comes from and how we can reduce it. Talk to your doctor about your stress threshold and how stress is playing a role in your life (and health).

Stress Signals

Are you stressed out? Believe it or not, many people don't recognize that they're stressed or actually think they're handling it. If you're experiencing any of the following, you're a prime candidate for some stress reduction:

Unusual fatigue: Stress weighs on you physically, emotionally and mentally. It wears you down and drains you. Can't get out of bed in the morning? Stress may be what's keeping you there.

stress signals - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark *Sleeplessness:* You may feel like sleeping for a day or two, but stress tends to keep you up at night, pondering how to pay that bill, meet that work deadline or heal that broken friendship.

Impulsivity: If you find your eating habits changing suddenly, you may be turning to comfort foods to deal with stress. The same is true with impulse buying, particularly when it involves items you don't really need.

Anger/impatience: Stress can make you short-tempered and easily roused to anger, even if your demeanor is normally calm, quiet and reserved.

Lack of concentration/forgetfulness: Stress usually occupies our mental time, so much so that we can have trouble remembering things or make more mistakes. Never forget your keys in the morning? When you're stressed, you just might.

Physical ailments: Back pain, neck pain and pain in general that doesn't have a clear cause (e.g., an injury) is often related to stress. The same is true for colds and flu; stress can lower your immune system,

increasing your risk of developing illness.

Reduce Your Stress Burden

reduce stress - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark You might not be able to change your stress threshold that much, but you can get better at dealing with stress when it builds up. Here are a few suggestions:

Work it off: No, we don't mean spending another five hours a day at the very location that may be a major source of stress; we do mean finding the time to exercise. Whether it's an a quick trip to the gym, a peaceful run or a brisk walk with family or friends, exercise puts the focus somewhere else for a while.

Biochemically, exercise has a big anti-stress benefit: It helps reduces levels of the stress hormone (cortisol) and increases your "feel-good" hormones, endorphins.

Get away from it: This can be challenging, especially if your stress has reached near-obsession levels, but doing what you can to distract yourself can go a long way toward reducing stress. Schedule a vacation, visit old friends, take a long walk; whatever it takes to remove yourself from your stress environment.

Smile about it: It's much harder for stress to exist in a fun, laughter-filled environment, so put yourself in a position to smile when you're under stress. Watch your favorite sit-com, get tickets to a comedy show, organize a fun night out with the family or friends. After all, laughter truly is the best natural medicine.

Talk about it: When you're stressed, your mind can be a continual stream of negative, overwhelming, stressed-out thoughts. Don't keep it all to yourself; talk to your significant other, closest friend or even a trusted co-worker about what's bothering you. Sometimes the best way to reduce your stress is to vent about it and get a neutral perspective, rather than staying in a bottled-up, stressed-out state.

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