

Stress & the General Adaptation Syndrome

Hans Selye explained that an event that threatens an organism's well-being, a stressor, leads to a three-stage bodily response:

1: **Alarm** - Upon perceiving a stressor, the body reacts with a "fight-or-flight" response and the sympathetic nervous system is stimulated as the body's resources are mobilized to meet the threat or danger.

2: **Resistance** - The body resists and compensates as the parasympathetic nervous system attempts to return many physiological functions to normal levels while body focuses resources against the stressor and remains on alert.

3: **Exhaustion** - If the stressor or stressors continue beyond the body's capacity, the resources become exhausted and the body is susceptible to disease and death.

Whether the stress, perceived as good or bad, or it is passive or active, the response by our bodies is intended to preserve life; it is a survival mechanism. However, this traditional definition of stress, simply geared towards a physical event or a mental state requiring the body to respond may not fully encompass our current lifestyles. We live in a society where there are stressful influences coming at us from all different directions. These stressors are multiple and confounded. Making the issue worse, is the way some choose to respond to their perception of stress. The increase use of alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, sugar and energy drinks in response to dealing with everyday stressors is creating an even more stressful situation in the body.

The human stress response involves many components, as Selye's work portrayed. First, the brain initiates the most immediate response signaling the adrenal glands to release epinephrine and norepinephrine. Then, the hypothalamus and pituitary activate another part of the adrenals, releasing cortisol. This is followed by the nervous system initiating behavioral responses like alertness, focus, reduction of pain receptors and the inhibition of reproductive behaviors and desires. The sympathetic nervous system then kicks in to increase the heart rate, blood pressure and release fuel to help fight or get out of danger as it redirects blood flow to the heart, muscles and brain, away from the gastrointestinal tract and digestive processes. To accommodate these demands there is a vast increase in energy production and utilization of nutrients and fluids in the body. Once the stressful situation has passed, the brain signals the responses to be "turned off" and finally recovery and relaxation allow the body to re-establish balance in all systems, replacing lost nutrients and eliminating waste products accumulated during the process.

Recovery is the key element in this stress response that is missing in our modern day stress paradigm. A lot of our current stressors are so continuous there are few moments where recovery can actually take place. Recurring events like backed up traffic, relationship troubles, financial pressures, job stresses, negative self-talk and image, poor physical conditioning, artificial lighting, malnourished diet, inadequate sleep, genetically modified foods, environmental toxin accumulation and so on. In fact, these types of stressors each day can string themselves together rendering the stress response to be "turned on" all of the time. In 2007, the American Psychological Association (APA) commissioned its annual nationwide survey to

examine the state of stress across the country. The key findings were noted as “Portrait of a National Pressure Cooker” with almost 80% of the people surveyed reporting experiences of physical symptoms due to stress. Stress is a contributing factor for a lot of the health issues happening today.

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