



EAP Educates: Stressed Out (The Psychology of Stress)

Stress and emotions have a very close relationship. By understanding this, you can find ways to manage your stress response before it gets out of hand. Your emotions can set off very powerful physical responses that can create turmoil in your life. The way you interpret events and the emotions that those interpretations bring up are core to how you respond. In order for something to feel stressful for you, you have to have made the decision somewhere along the line that it is in fact so. If you can learn to recognise your thoughts and feelings, you can learn to change or manage them which in turn will help you to change or manage your stress levels.

Psychological studies have confirmed that our mind, emotions and perceptions of stress are intertwined. “Your interpretation of a situation and the meaning you attach to the source of stress are responsible for the degrees and intensity of your response.”

Not all stress is negative. Not all stress is bad. Not all stress will cause damage. Stress is necessary for our survival, and exciting stress can move us to achieve great things. Some stress in our lives is necessary for us to live and perform well. Stress can motivate, make you productive and keep you alert. The thing to know is that *we need to react appropriately to our stressors* so that we can perform well and so that our sense of wellbeing is heightened. “The way you perceive a particular situation determines whether or not it is stressful for you.” Your perception of a situation is driven by your beliefs, assumptions, values and conditions. “Your response to stress is a product of your past experience, genetic predisposition, personality, lifestyle and culture.

The emotions of stress

Richard Lazarus (in McClellan and Hamilton) outlined six broad situations that create stress-inducing emotions:

1. The situation has to be *relevant* to what you want.
2. The situation *threatens your achieving what you want*.
3. *Something important to you is being threatened*.
4. You *blame yourself* or others for a bad situation. If you take on blame, you will experience guilt, shame and anger at yourself. If you blame others, you will be angry.
5. *Feeling powerless* or overwhelmed always leads to stress. You feel that a bad situation is beyond your control or that you will not be able to cope.
6. *Expectations that things will not work out in your favour*. Having the expectation that the situation will turn out badly will obviously result in negative emotions.

It is also important to remember that when you are chronically stressed, your thinking can become distorted and the things that are causing you to feel stressed may not be as big a threat as you perceive them to be. “You can actually create stress simply by anticipating a stressful situation”.

Stressful core beliefs and crooked thinking

Everything that happens around you is interpreted by you according to the set of beliefs that you have developed over time. These beliefs were formed based on interactions throughout your life from your parents, at school, your friends, culture, religion, media and the arts. It is important to realise that your beliefs do not necessarily reflect reality. “Beliefs are opinions, not facts”. It is important to assess your thoughts and beliefs to see if they reflect reality.

“Stress inducing beliefs almost always include the words *ought, should* or *must*.” Albert Ellis calls this “Should-izing”; “*My house should be immaculate; He should be nicer to me; I ought to earn more money; I must finish my to-do list*” Should-izing creates an enormous amount of stress and guilt.



Albert Ellis, back in 1975 created a list of the most common misconceptions and core beliefs that can provoke a stress response. This list has expanded over the years, but important to note is that these beliefs and irrational ideas can limit your experience of life and produce frustration and negativity. These distortions in your thought process he calls “Crooked Thinking” and they contribute to your perception of a stressful situation. Below is a list of the most common core beliefs and forms of crooked thinking that can lead to a physical stress response.

- **Demand for Approval** – measuring your worth by how others treat you.
- **High Self-expectation** – achievement focused and you must be successful in everything you do.
- **Emotional Control** – overly sensitive to the opinions and judgements of others.
- **Dependency** – belief that you cannot cope by yourself.
- **Helplessness** – thinking that you can’t do anything to solve your problems.
- **Fairness Fallacy** – believing that the world and everyone in it must be fair and just.
- **Avoidance** – rather than confronting challenges, you avoid facing them.
- **Discomfort Anxiety** – you won’t rock the boat or challenge yourself because you risk pain and anxiety.
- **Perfectionism** – you feel there is a perfect solution to every problem.
- **Fear of losing control** – when under stress, you feel you are losing it or going crazy.
- **All-or-nothing Thinking** – there is no middle ground when you are in this space.
- **Catastrophizing** – assuming the worst will always happen.
- **Keeping the Negatives** – never focusing on positives, perceive and hold on to only the negatives in a situation.
- **Magnifying or Minimizing** – losing your sense of proportion.
- **Personalization** – when something goes wrong, you feel you are totally responsible.
- **Jumping to conclusions** –
 - Fortune telling; you know how things are going to turn out even with no supporting evidence
 - Mind reading; you know what other people are thinking, and it’s usually negative about you
- **Emotional Reasoning** – your feelings, rather than facts, dominate your interpretations
- **Hindsight** – preoccupation with past mistakes that limit your thinking and behaviour in the present and going forward.
- **What-ifs** – focusing on the worst possible outcome if taken to the extreme will muddy your thinking.
- **Egocentric thinking** – feeling the need to persuade others to believe what you believe.
- **Control Error** – feeling either responsible for everything, or helpless to change anything.
- **Heaven’s Reward Thinking** – putting other’s needs first because you will gain your reward in the future.
- **Unrealistic Comparisons** – comparing yourself to others and automatically judging them to be better than you.

None of the above thinking is helpful and is probably a real “kill joy” in your life. In order to reduce your stress, you need to recognise how your assumptions and reactions contribute or even cause stress. Once you begin to become aware of your automatic responses, you can learn to stop or manage them.

Third instalment on stress to follow next month.

Contact the EAP for more information or confidential assistance.