

Are you benefiting from stress?

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Anyone who has experienced stress may not until now not have thought about what stress is. We use the label 'stress' so often but what is it? It is not something that is tangible. No-one knows what someone else's experience of stress is like. Anyone who has experienced stress will know that there are different types of stress. There is positive stress and negative stress. So what makes one beneficial and the other detrimental?

Given that we can experience differing degrees of stress that at one point move from being positive to becoming negative; what is it that changes positive stress into negative stress?

What is stress?

Before we address this question, let's look at some of the definitions of stress. Rarely will you find the word 'stress' in scientific literature. Any definitions that are used for stress are often vague and inconsistent. Various definitions of stress include:

Stress being:-

- A stimulus (that which triggers the response)
- The response to the stimulus
- The physiological consequences of the response.

What is more helpful is to think in terms of "*stressors*" and "*distress*". *Stressors*, or stressful life experiences, are defined as circumstances that threaten a major goal, including the maintenance of one's physical integrity or one's psychological well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Examples of *stressors* include work, your boss, money, responsibility, conflict, fear, threats, change etc.

Distress is the negative psychological response to such threats and can include any number of states including anxiety, sadness, frustration, overwhelm etc.

A key factor in stress becoming negative is the perceived controllability of the *stressor*. So to the degree that someone perceives that they cannot control the *stressor*, their response is greater i.e. they experience greater levels of stress the less control they perceive they have. Control is a big driver of stress as is:

- ambiguity
- level of demand placed on the individual
- novelty
- duration

So when someone feels there is a lot of ambiguity in an area of their life and they experience this over a period of months, the stress level will be higher than if there was a short moment of feeling uncertain.

The Impacts of Stress

Consider the following two young ladies (these two ladies are true in life). Both are high achievers, both are the same age, both are independent, both grew up in stable families, both are physically fit

and healthy and both hold highly respected and credible positions in their fields and have a great deal of responsibility sitting with them.

Looking at them you notice a difference. One has deep frown lines, her skin is pale with a number of spots, her eyes are clouded and her hair and nails are in poor condition. She frequently has colds and flu's and general immune system problems. The other lady has a glowing complexion, her eyes are bright and clear and she is full of energy and life. Both work similar hours and have similar work loads and responsibility.

Some may say, "They are two different people so of course they are going to look different and be genetically predisposed to some physical traits". However when you take a look behind the physical appearance another difference exists and could hold the key to understanding the physiological differences.

Talking to these two ladies you'd notice a difference in their perception. Their perception on life and life's circumstances are polar opposites. The first lady is always considering what the impact of the *stressors* in her life will be, whilst the other is always happy and calm knowing that the same *stressors* are present but she is confident that she can handle having uncertainty in her life and be comfortable with this uncertainty.

Given that they both have very similar situations in life, you would think that it should cause similar *distress* but in reality one is nearly paralysed by stress whilst the other is challenged and excited.

Their response to *stressors* is different. This is not to say that one lady is choosing to be stressed and the other not but rather the first lady has developed a *distress* response pattern that negatively impacts her life. This has generalised out to many areas of her life so that the distress response is happening in many circumstances on a consistent basis, altering her perception of herself and how her life is. Her constant state of anxiety and sadness alters her behaviour and her physical appearance changes in response to the constant state of stress, resulting in changes in skin, hair, eyes and her immune systems ability to remain healthy etc.

Where does stress start and end?

When we experience a response to a *stressor* a lot of reactions occur in our bodies as well as our brains. The Autonomic Nervous System, Hypothalamic Pituitary-Adrenal Axis and the Immune System all go into action and a cycle begins. There are changes in biochemistry which influence a change in emotions. The change in emotions triggers a change in biochemistry and so the cycle continues and this is often when you hear people talk about a downwards spiral or that they can't get out of a particular mood. The only way out of this is to change your response to the stressors in your life.

If we can control to some degree our response to stressors then we can control the response of the nervous and immune system. There is a lot of research and even training on stress management. The emphasis always being how we can better manage stress but the real power lies in our ability to change our response to stressors rather than be able to manage stress once we have it.

If negative states of stress are experienced by people who do not cope well with uncertainty in their lives, then what would happen if we could feel comfortable with uncertainty to the extent that we could remain in a positive and healthy state? What if when we knew things were out of our control we could trust in ourselves more than ever before?

A life without stress as you know it

Stress impacts our lives in more ways that we often see at the time of experiencing stress. If stress is playing a role in your life right now and you know you need to do something about it before it impacts your health, happiness, career or loved one's then visit <http://www.becomecoaching.com/whatson.htm> to find out more about the up and coming workshop, "Enough About Stress". This workshop will help you explore your stress and how you can change it. Alternatively call Become Performance Coach - Martine Snow on +44 (0)207 731 6631 to discuss if this workshop is suitable for you. For our

international client email is the best way to make contact with us and private coaching for stress can be arranged for people in all countries across the world.