

Keeping Stress in Check for Optimal Performance

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Have you ever wondered what it really means to be “stressed out?” So often we make casual remarks about stress, and how stress takes its toll on our motivation, perseverance, and overall quality of our efforts, but have you ever stopped to think about what “stress” really is? This month I would like to offer a few thoughts on stress, including what it is, how it impacts our minds and bodies, and what you can do to quickly overcome the stress in your life.

To begin with, it is quite amazing how many different definitions there are pertaining to stress. In a recent survey of about a dozen Introductory Psychology textbooks I have stacked on bookshelves in my home and office, I was amazed to see the variance in opinions of definitions of stress. As I looked more closely for common denominators amongst these definitions, I came up with the following: Stress, which can be manifested both cognitively (i.e. negative, overwhelming thoughts) and physically (body aches and pains), occurs when we experience an imbalance between situational expectations (including self-imposed expectations) and our perceived resources available (the ability to complete the task). In short, we get “stressed out” often due to the relationship between demands placed on us (often by us), and the time, energy, and resources we have to expend to successfully complete/overcome the demands.

Interestingly, it is often our perception of the demands placed on us that really triggers one of two common cycles: The “I can” cycle occurs when we immediately appraise a situation as OK, non-threatening, and to a large extent under our control. In these situations we think clearly, experience confidence, and usually develop tactful strategies that allow us to successfully complete the task. On the other hand, when our first appraisals are “I can’t,” an entirely different cycle occurs. In these negatively viewed situations, we immediately experience an entirely different cognitive process (we focus on the negative qualities of the task rather than the possibilities for success), while simultaneously experience the physiology of negativity (neurotransmitters fire in alarm and quickly expend our emotional and physical energy). In these situations, it is very common for us to actually feel the negative consequences of perceived stress, often displayed through tension headaches, back pain, ulcers, and a host of other ailments.

What is even more amazing is how subjective our appraisals actually are (think the old saying “one mans garbage is another mans treasure”), and how immediately and automatically they take place (often our opinions develop in a split second). The domino effect of our response and coping immediately follows, which if experienced negatively can result in chronically experienced stress and body aches and pains for years on end.

The following are some quick tips to dealing with stress:

- Keep in mind how your subjective appraisals of situations immediately impacts your thoughts and physiology
- Examine your negative appraisals critically by viewing the stress as challenging rather than debilitating
- Keep in mind how much of our physical pain is often related to perceived stress; consequently, try working on your stress appraisal system before immediately resorting to pain relief medication and/or other medicinal approaches to pain management
- While it is impossible to live a stress-free life, it is possible to immediately change the way you think about the demands put on you and to foster an optimistic outlook that will allow you to be more energized, creative, and ultimately more successful
- Prioritize downtime and fun in your life; don't just make it an afterthought at the end of the day. Creating regular opportunities to smile, laugh, and not have to think real hard can be terrific preventative measures to future potential stress on the horizon

