

Stress: Tolerable Today, It Could Kill You Tomorrow

Stress is the most common characteristic among people in this millennium. Most of us know little about its effects. Here are facts. Find author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

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The ability to delude yourself may be an important survival tool.

- [Jane Wagner](#), American writer, director and producer (b.1935)

"I work better under pressure." "I need a deadline to crank me up to do my best work." These excuses for adopting stress instead of independent work skills and developing an ability to focus on work at hand may be too much cost for too little benefit.

It's like saying that you can type better with one hand tied behind your back. Or that you perform better at sex when you are impaired with alcohol or drugs. Believe it if you will, but it's still not true. In the final analysis, stress always does more damage than good.

Long term, stress can shorten a "normal" lifetime (dying of natural causes) by three to seven years. It compromises the immune system, meaning that a reduced immune reaction to an attack by viruses or bacteria means a person will get sick. The hormone cortisol is emitted by the adrenal gland to reduce the damaging effects of stress. It's part of our natural "fight or flight" response to danger. But if the stress continues, this strong hormone continues to be pumped into the body. That can result in impaired cognitive performance, thyroid problems (the thyroid prompts the brain to act in many ways, so the brain is affected as well), blood sugar imbalances, higher blood pressure. It can even cause an accumulation of abdominal fat. No one is certain today what effects cortisol exposure can have on the brain, including mood, temper, sleep pattern and personality as each person may react differently to its long term effects.

It is known, through studies, that long term exposure to cortisol causes damage to the human hippocampus, which is very important to learning new things and to memory of what a person has learned.

In a 2010 study by the American Psychological Association, money, work, financial future, family and relationships caused the greatest amount of stress for Americans. Stress itself may be tied to cancer, though the exact linkage is unclear.

Can it cause a broken heart? Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, or "broken heart syndrome," occurs when the bottom part of the heart balloons out, caused when grief or another major stressor floods stress hormones into the heart. Yes, a person can die of a broken heart and the causes are both physical and emotional.

High levels of cortisol in pregnant mothers has been associated with lower IQs in their children, tested at age seven. It has also been associated with autism, though whether stress in mother or baby actually causes autism has not been proven.

One way of avoiding job stress is to have a career in a job expected to be obsolete within a few years. CareerCast.com, in a survey of 200 professions, found bookbinders have the least stress of any in 2011. Firefighters and airline pilots have the most. Another way is to move to a less stressful location. Portfolio.com found Salt Lake City, Utah, the least stressful city among 50 studied in the United States. Detroit took top spot as the most stressful.

This may come as a surprise to some, but not at all to others. Texas A&M International University gave 103 test

subjects several stressful tasks, then had them play violent video games. Their stress eased considerably. Best results: *Hitman: Blood Money* and *Call of Duty 2*. **For those under great stress**, virtual violence decreased their bodily reactions to stress.

Militaries handle stress differently. They have their soldiers eat veggies. *Military Medicine* magazine reported that Yale researchers found eating carrots and potatoes boosted a soldier's cognitive functioning after intensive sessions of survival training. The militaries call it "carbohydrate administration," but it's simply eating complex carbs of any kind. Eating simple carbohydrates like cookies and cake didn't do the trick.

A sudden change of diet can cause stress as well. Going on a restrictive diet quickly (without easing into it) can cause depression or anxiety, according to a study by neuroscientists at the University of Pennsylvania who studied sudden changes of diet with mice that had been fattened up then had their calories severely limited. What is a stressor to a mouse? One method used by the researchers was hanging the mice by their tails for six minutes.

Louisiana State University researchers tried it differently. They caused their test rats to be subjected to random electric shocks to their feet. Then the rats were allowed to self administer intravenous doses of cocaine. As the stress was increased, the rats gave themselves more cocaine. [Anyone who doesn't generalize on that finding is simply not thinking enough. Why do we take so many drugs these days? A more pertinent question might be why do we not teach kids in high school how to cope with stressors in their lives before they resort to possibly harmful alternatives?]

Eating excessively and obsessively is a reaction to constant stress. Researchers at the U.S. National Institutes of Health and Portugal's University of Minho stressed lab rats then allowed them to self access treats. Trained to press a level to receive treats, stressed rats continued to press the level after the stress had stopped and even after they had been fed a meal. The brains of the rats showed shrunken neurons in the dorsomedial striatum, an area of the brain associated with goal directed behaviour, and growth in the dorsolateral striatum, which is related to habitual behaviour. In other words, constant stress caused the rats to habitually overeat.

Do you wonder if overly stressed researchers reduce their stress by conducting experiments on lab rats and mice?

We will conclude this article with an anecdote that has been circulating the internet in recent months.

A young lady confidently walked around the room while explaining stress management to an audience.

With a raised glass of water (everyone knew that she was going to ask the ultimate question, "half empty or half full?"), she fooled them all.

"How heavy is this glass of water?" she inquires with a smile.

Answers called out ranged from 8oz. to 20 oz.

She replied, "The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long I hold it. If I hold it for a minute, that's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my right arm. If I hold it for a day, you'll have to call an ambulance. In every case, it's the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes."

She continued, "And that's the way it is with stress. If we carry our burdens all the time, sooner or later, as the burden becomes increasingly heavy, we won't be able to carry on."

"As with a glass of water, you have to put it down for awhile and rest before holding it again. When we're

refreshed. we can carry on with the burden. So, as early in the evening as you can, put all your burdens down. Don't carry them through the evening and into the night.

Pick them up tomorrow. "Whatever burdens you are carrying now, let them down for a moment. Relax, pick them up later after you've rested. Life is short." There may not be so many then and they won't be so heavy.

That's one way we can all learn to cope with stress in our lives.

Bill Allin is the author of ***Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems***, a guidebook for parents, grandparents and teachers who want to teach their children how to cope with an increasingly stressful world. Better they learn young than depend on medical professionals to try to put them back together when they break as adults.

Learn more about this book and read part of it at <http://billallin.com>

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