

FELT NEEDS

Understanding Stress

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What is Stress?

Stress is feeling emotional or physical tension or urgency usually resulting from the brain or body responding to adverse or demanding circumstances. Circumstances that precipitate stress are called stressors. Stressors can either be real situations, anticipated ones, or even imagined circumstances. Stress is a normal part of life and can play a positive role by alerting us to a situation needing our attention, pushing us to meet a deadline, helping us avoid a problem or motivating us to study for a test or interview for a new job.

We all react differently to extreme stress, danger or trauma and those responses are often categorized as fight, freeze or fawn responses. When a threat is perceived, Fight is an aggressive response. Flight urges you to run from danger. Freeze is just like it sounds – an inability to move or act. Lastly, fawn is the body's stress response to try to please someone to avoid conflict. Understanding common responses to stress in ourselves and in others is helpful. For everyone, gaining skills to manage stress is key to our overall health.

Stressors

There are multiple stressors that affect people and circumstances in vast ways. A stressor may be a one-time event (running late for a meeting), a short-term situation (having a deadline a couple days away), or a chronic stressor (a loved one dying of cancer after fighting for 16 months). Sometimes stressors are real, current life situations, but sometimes stress results from perceptions about upcoming life situations, such as worries about an upcoming meeting, doctor's appointment, or financial trouble. Sometimes,

stressors are imagined situations that don't actually happen. Thinking you'll fall in front of the class, you'll be fired from your job, or that your house will burn down if you don't re-check the oven – all imagined scenarios that will likely never take place.

When Stress Becomes a Problem

The normal stress we experience as a response to change, adversity, challenges, or upsetting situations, is uncomfortable, but it shouldn't progress to distress or interfere with our daily functions. When we have multiple stressors activated at the same time, or intense serious ones, our coping system gets overtaxed, and distress occurs. Distress distorts our perspective of situations, often causing us to see them as more damaging or dangerous than they truly are. A distorted perspective also pushes a higher sense of urgency into our mind and agenda, usually increasing our stress level even more. The distorted perspective generates and intensifies a lot more uncomfortable emotions, that – again – add more stress. The combination of distress, distorted perspective, and intensified uncomfortable emotions disrupt and interfere with healthy decision-making. In turn, dysfunctional decisions bring on more stress and the negative spiral accelerates and worsens.



Chronic Stress

People in service professions, such as first responders like firefighters, police, paramedics, EMT, doctors, nurses, soldiers, and teachers, can experience “compassion fatigue,” which is a form of combat fatigue. Their routine jobs expose them to significant high-level stressors on a regular and frequent basis, but facing these stressors non-stop over a longer period of time is physically and emotionally exhausting. Chronic stress can lead to physical symptoms, and may contribute to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, chronic infections, worsening pain syndromes, as well as many other illnesses, including behavioral health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and addictions.

Distress: A Key Ingredient of Psychiatric Diagnoses

When a licensed clinician is performing a psychiatric evaluation to determine what the patient is struggling with, either distress or dysfunction are one of the essential and mandatory criteria the person needs to be experiencing in order for the clinician to be able to diagnose 98% of the DSM-5 psychiatric diagnoses. In fact, one of those 2 elements – distress or dysfunction – are the only criteria that are part of almost every single psychiatric diagnosis. Sadly, distress and dysfunction are ripples of intense or prolonged stress not handled in a healthy manner.

Stormy Times

Over the last five years, our society has experienced a non-stop barrage of stressors, with each one being more intense than the previous one. We are bombarded each day with challenging situations and tragedies from all over the world, consistently delivered to us

through our mobile devices. Many haven't been taught how to understand and navigate these stormy times, so they often get tossed to and fro, veering onto a dangerous course leading to harm and destruction.

You have the opportunity to jump into their boat, deliver some compassion so they know they aren't alone and can have some hope. Your steady demeanor can point them to the true Lighthouse that will guide them through the storm and give sanctuary and safety as they weather the adversity.

Stress Often Looks Like

- Struggling to get out of bed
- Minimal motivation
- Lack of energy
- Eating too much or not enough
- Ruminating thoughts about sad events
- Crying episodes
- Feeling like a failure
- Lacking confidence in one's ability to accomplish something
- Minimal self-worth
- Feeling unloved



- Feeling rejected or lesser than the rest
- Thinking of yourself as a burden and people would be better off if you weren't around anymore
- Difficulty making decisions
- Trouble concentrating, staying focused, or remembering things
- Restlessness, pacing, or agitation
- Stressed by simple or routine tasks
- Pessimism or always feeling gloomy
- Trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, waking up early, or trouble getting up in the morning
- Not enjoying activities or people you once did
- Minimal sexual libido or appetite
- Lonely or choosing to be isolated
- Thoughts running through your head of many possible worst-case scenarios
- Procrastination
- Using harmful ways to soothe or calm yourself
 - food, alcohol
- Emotional outbursts of anger, agitation, frustration
- Impulsive decisions
- Thoughts of death, not waking up in the morning, or suicidal thoughts
- Self-medicating behaviors such as drinking alcohol, misusing pain meds or tranquilizers, overeating, cutting or other self-harm activities
- Feeling disorganized
- Trouble keeping up with usual home, work, education, financial, family, or relational activities and responsibilities
- Feeling numb with no feelings
- Often using words like “always”, “never”, “should”, “can’t”, “if only”

Sometimes Stress is Physical

Stress causes the release of a number of neurotransmitters in the brain, and they cause the release of the stress hormone Cortisol, as well as other hormones and chemicals throughout the body. Acute stressors, when intense, usually have some short-lasting physical symptoms. Whereas when a person has been stressed over a period of time, they almost always will have some physical symptoms that can cause some significant distress, damage, and dysfunction. These are some of those physical symptoms:

- Increased heart rate
- Heart palpitations
- Pounding heart
- Elevated blood pressure or hypertension
- Heart Disease
- Type 2 Diabetes
- Faster but shallower breathing
- Excessive sweating
- Dry mouth
- Tremors
- Shaking
- Twitches
- Queasy, upset, or butterflies in the stomach
- Stomach ulcers
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Lightheadedness
- Tingling
- Dizziness
- Rashes
- Shingles
- Tunnel vision
- Fatigue

- Headaches
- Teeth grinding
- Stuttering
- Muscle tension
- Frequent infections
- Vague or chronic pain syndromes
- Feeling detached from your body
- Pacing
- Physical agitation
- Restlessness

What an Explorer Might Say

- I am stressed.
- I constantly feel on edge – on pins and needles.
- Sometimes I can't sit down.
- Relaxing is so hard for me.
- I get on people's nerves. People have a hard time relaxing around me
- Everything bothers me.
- Our world is falling apart and I don't know what to do.
- I worry about so many things.
- My perfectionism steals joy from life.
- I wish others didn't have to live with my stress.
- My finances/job/debt/parents/etc. are sucking the joy out of my life.
- I'm at my wit's end.
- I have too much on my plate.
- I think I have burnout.
- I am running myself into the ground.
- I lose sleep over the littlest of problems.
- I worry about things that don't even happen.
- I'm at the end of my rope.
- I feel like I am coming apart at the seams.
- I am worried sick.

- I am at my breaking point.
- I am in over my head.
- Some days I am on the verge of collapse.

Wise Connections

- The Explorer who struggles with stress has reached out to you, a stranger, and has no idea how you will respond. Even though the Explorer is stressed and is having trouble functioning, they're willing to endure the stress of talking to a total stranger about something very personal. You want to represent Jesus to them by showing you are a safe person who can provide a stress-free interaction while giving them hope that they will access the peace that surpasses all understanding. Your interaction with them should be soothing, comforting, and peace-inducing, not rushed, hurried, intense, judgmental, or condemning.
- Always pray first. Ask God to make His peace and joy clear and meaningful to the Explorer. Ask God to settle your heart and awaken your mind so you can use your skills and equipping to engage, soothe, and guide the Explorer.
- Resist the urge to fix or immediately fire out a Bible verse. First you want to just let them know they aren't alone, that you are jumping into the problem with them, and you will hang in there with them until they feel safe enough to navigate with some other helpers or on their own.
- The initial process will be asking them questions about what they feel and think as well as the effects stress has on them. Then you want to show empathy and acknowledge their struggle while also showing you are in this storm with them, emotionally and psychologically holding them.

Tips for Responding to Explorers with Chronic Illness

- 1. Your voice should be peaceful and soothing.** Talk in a calm, clear voice. Softer in volume and slower in cadence. Don't be intense, rushed, or hurried, and don't rush them. Your demeanor should exude God's peace, compassion, and joy that will encourage them and make it easier to reach out to you the next time.
- 2. Be empathetic.** When they state difficult aspects or consequences from their stress, acknowledge that "it sounds very difficult" or "it seems like it has impacted you in significant ways".
- 3. Communicate sympathy** with your tone of voice and your comments.
- 4. Avoid "I know how you feel"** or "everyone's stressed" or "it will go away soon" or "you're lucky 'cause it could be worse".
- 5. Asking questions shows you care,** they have value, their story is important, and you are listening. It also helps you gather accurate information so you aren't guessing or making assumptions.
 - a. Can you tell me more about the situations that are causing you the most stress?
 - b. It sounds like you've been under a lot of stress lately, how has it impacted you?
 - c. It sounds like the stress has impacted you a lot. Can you tell me how it has impacted your relationships?
 - d. Thank you for contacting me to talk. Do you have any supportive people to talk to? Tell me a little more about them.
- 6. They might sound like they want answers or reasons why they struggle with stress but avoid giving those at the outset.** Your main focus is to connect, let them know you are with them, and that they can have hope. You can tell them some of the stress tips listed in the upper section and that stress impacts everyone in many different ways, but God has a special peace for them, and they can have hope. Let them know you will be by their side helping them find God's peace, they don't have to navigate this stressful storm by themselves.
- 7. Explorers want to be heard,** so let them know – through reflective and active listening – that you hear what they are saying and acknowledge the feelings they have inside.
- 8. Do not push Scripture** or therapy programs without first building rapport or connection with the Explorer.
- 9. They fear being judged or critiqued so avoid language that can be perceived as judgmental or accusatory.** Don't mention mistakes the Explorer makes or how they could have done things better. You are just using the first couple interactions to connect and build a safe bridge to send more help across to them later on. You also want them to feel safe to reveal deep and personal information to you.
- 10. You don't need to give a diagnosis,** just understand and let them know they don't have to handle this struggle alone.
- 11. Don't overthink your response** as it doesn't need to be complicated. They most likely don't have the capacity to take in complicated info and you aren't going to have a long conversation to give them complicated information.
- 12. When you can, try to use the words or phrases they use to show you are listening** and to form a stronger connection.

A Great Sample Response

Here's a great example of how to put some of those healthy response tips into practice for a stressed Explorer!

EM

= Explorer Message

CR

= Coach's Response

NDR

= Next Day Response

EM

I am struggling to keep my head above water. Everyone wants something from me and it's really starting to stress me out. I should be able to handle these things. I mean, I know I used to. But over the last couple of years I am more overwhelmed than I've ever been.

Hi Diane, this is Karl. I received your message about the stress your experiencing. I'm so glad you're aware of what's happening and took a brave step to reach out for some help even though you're struggling.

CR

EM

Thanks. It really wasn't courage as much as it was necessity. I've tried to change, but it seems like I'm only getting worse. I've been meaning to reach out for a while but I have so much on my plate. I finally realized I need to do something, so I pulled the trigger and took the next step to try and turn this around.

Sounds like your having trouble seeing some of your strengths, but I think you showed a lot of courage and love for those close to you by reaching out.

CR

EM

Not really courage, more like fed up as I'm running out of options and what I've been trying isn't working.

It sounds like you've been stressed for awhile and it's impacting you in many ways. I am interested in hearing how the stress has impacted you. If you are comfortable enough to share, can you tell me about that?

CR

Yes, sure, but I am not sure you want to hear about the boring details of my life. But stress is

EM

I am sorry you are struggling with (you can paraphrase if they mentioned a lot). I want you to know you aren't walking thru this struggle by yourself. I am here to help. This is a stressful world and we all need others to help us navigate storms. I would love to talk more about it and offer support, whatever that might look like. If you are comfortable, can I give you a call tonight or tomorrow morning?

CR

Yes, it's helped just getting some of this stuff off my chest. Hopefully I can find time to talk tomorrow. You can call me tomorrow around 9A.

EM

I'm glad you feel better. Talking about what's going on inside is a big step to start your healing journey. I want to help you and I can call you tomorrow at 9A. Thanks for your willingness to continue this journey together.

CR

Hi Diane, this is Karl following up as we agreed. It took a lot of courage for you to reach out yesterday. I know it can be uncomfortable talking to a complete stranger but I'm glad you saw the benefits of connecting and starting the healing journey. There's no pressure, but I want to let you know I am here to help you. Where would you like to start today?

NDR

Tips

The example response here is empathetic, showed you were listening, and validated the explorer's feelings. Simply engaging, or offering to engage with people is an important step to building rapport and letting them know you are a safe person to bring into their journey.



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