

Siding with the stress response

All I want is to have a stress-free life. I am so tired of being stressed all the time. I am not sure that even a few days or weeks away from school is going to relieve my stress. I was stressed out before Covid-19 and now it is even worse.

The human stress response has a bad rap for a long time! And it is completely unnecessary and mistaken.

No matter how hard we work or wish for a life without stress, it will not happen. And no, it has nothing to do with living in a complex world or even finding ourselves amidst a world-wide pandemic. Stress has to do with the physiological make-up of the human body.

It is a reflex performed without conscious thought. Since we cannot, **not** interact with our world, we instinctively react to e.g. loud noises, bad smells, the aggressive tone in someone's voice, the ring of a phone. Long before the information about the stimulus has reached our conscious mind, our autonomic nervous system, our endocrine system and immune system have already responded.

Wishing for a stress-free life is like wishing for a breath-free life - it is asking for the impossible.

But the problem is not stress per se. The problem is that when we talk about stress we mix up terminology related to:

1. Stress as a normal physiological process that comes and goes and
2. Stress as a prolonged reaction that exceeds the person's ability to cope.

The first is a **response to environmental demands** or pressures that require us to adjust our behaviour to ensure our survival. The second is a **pathology** and the result of repetitive and prolonged stress responses that overwhelm the person's physical, emotional and mental resources causing and leads to a variety of chronic health problems.

SELF-CARE SKILLS FOR TEACHERS: DEALING WITH DEFENSIVE REACTIONS

The easiest way to explain it is that we all experience stress as a response to stimuli and if it overwhelms us and the stressful situation lasts a long time, we get stressed out.

We, like all other living organisms from viruses to antelope, respond to what is happening in our surroundings, both good and bad. We experience stress as a consequence of our interaction with something in our environment which then provokes the stress response. The stimulus can be a person, an object or an event even a thought or memory. The stress response is the result of our assessment of whether the situation is threatening or not. This is important because sometimes our nervous system reacts to something as if it is a life or death threat while in fact it is not. Think of going to the dentist and the anxiety that causes.

The stress response protects us against threats. Without this innate survival mechanism, we cannot survive for one hour in this world. Imagine not being aware of what you see, feel, hear, taste smell and where you are in space. And then there is the social interactions we have to navigate. We will be completely vulnerable and unable to protect ourselves.

It is also known as the fight-flight-or-freeze response, although lately scientists have begun differentiating between the way men react to stressful situations (fight or flight) and the way women response namely the tend-and-befriend response.

According to Dario Maestripieri in Psychology Today: "when it comes to stress, women are different from men. Instead of getting ready to fight or to flee, women become more likely to express affiliative social behavior, either to befriend the enemy - if there is an enemy and is causing the stress - or to seek social support from their family members or friends".

The stress response helps the body perform the physical activity needed to fight, flee, tend or befriend. Energy is mobilised to support the muscles, sight, hearing, the cardiovascular system etc. The stress response also prepares the body to respond to possible injury. The body also prepares for possible injury by speeding up blood clotting while the cortisol controls swelling after injury by suppressing the immune system during this time. It doesn't matter whether the stimulus is physical or emotional threat, the process is the same. And always it happens without us having to decide to allow it or not.

A healthy level of stress is in fact good for us. We do not always respond negatively to stress. A mild stress response that doesn't last a long time, is experienced as positive. It allows us to respond to a stressor as a challenge. It even fills us with excitement, hope, inspiration and motivation to complete a task. It can inspire and improve cognitive function, life satisfaction and wellbeing.

The normal stress response is our ally, an innate system we can rely on in times of need and when faced with a threat.

Stress response' evil twin, Stressing Out, well he is something else. We can talk about his or her influence on our lives next time.

Keep well
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