

THE STRESS EQUATION

The words 'stress', 'stressed' and 'stressful' have made their way into everyday language, most prominently since the late 1980s. The words themselves are familiar, and we have a good sense of how it feels to be stressed, or when someone recounts a stressful experience we have some understanding of what they are describing. But what exactly is stress, and how does it happen?

Let me begin by defining stress. It may make more sense to compare the experience of being stressed to the experience of coping, to really understand the definition I am about to explain.

WHAT STRESS IS

Stress and coping (which means being unstressed) can be thought of as the result of a specific relationship. The relationship I am referring to has two parts – demands and resources. When these two are in balance, the result is 'coping.' When demands are too high, resources are low, or a combination of the two, the resulting feeling is what we commonly refer to as 'stress'.

A high demand level is if, for example, when you have:

- A high volume of tasks at work
- High demands at home such as:
 - Financial pressure
 - Young children
 - Problem relationships
 - Chronic illness (your own or that of a loved one).

When there are good coping resources to use in dealing with the demands, such as:

- Strong support systems
- Good health
- A sense of humour
- The presence of basic needs such as food and shelter.

The result is a balance between demands and resources. This balanced experience is referred to as coping.



TEST YOUR BALANCE

Take a piece of paper now, and make a list of both the demands and resources present in your life. Typically these will be related to you and to others, and appear mainly in the areas of:

- Your health (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual)
- Your financial status (debt and savings, cash flow, assets and liabilities)
- Your relationships (with your partner, friends, family and at work)
- Your work (formal job, work within the home, studies and any changes).

THE DEMANDS

Let's focus on the demands list first. After making your list of demands, you can further define them according to whether they are acute, chronic or hassles. Acute demands are usually short-term, intense, and out of the ordinary – think of an injury, car accident, deadline, organising an event or occasion, needing to make a large (unexpected) purchase or repair and being ill. These demands are often quite visible and it is easier to ask for, and find support (resources) to meet these demands with. Chronic demands are a different kind, and as they have been present for a longer time, they may have become familiar and part of your life. Think of chronic health conditions, ongoing financial obligations and pressures, constant work stress, such as limited staff but high expectation of delivery and sitting in peak hour traffic daily. These are still stressors, but because the person experiencing them, as well as those around that person, have become accustomed to the presence of these chronic stressors, there is less likelihood of getting support to deal with them. Perhaps there is a reluctance to ask for support, or life moves on and the person living with the stressor feels forced to 'get on with it quietly.'

A third type of demand is that of the hassle factor. Have you had days where nothing acute has happened, and the chronic stress is the same or even less than usual, yet you feel strung out or exhausted by the evening? If there is no physical cause, you may want to consider how many hassles you had that day. Hassles are small stressors, which separately are not noticeable in their effect, but all together can be very stressful. For example, you are in a hurry – not a big hurry, but time is limited – and you cannot find parking, then cannot find your parking ticket, realise you need to refuel your car but there is a long line at the garage, you didn't pack lunch and you're starving. Enough of these tough a day, and they can leave you feeling more stressed than if you had had one big (acute) stressor!

YOUR RESOURCES

Now let's focus on the resources list. You can see that there are many ways in which you can experience demands, and they need to be managed by using coping resources. Just as demands can arise from people, tasks, time pressure and events, resources are also varied. Resources fall into two main categories; inner and outer. Inner coping resources are related to the self:

- Good health
- High levels of knowledge
- Rational thought
- Ability to see the gift in adversity
- Strong spirituality.
- Resources can also come from outside:
 - People around us
 - Finances
 - Comfortable environment
 - Good nutrition
 - Enough help with tasks at work and home.

It is also possible to separate resources into 'for now' and 'ongoing'. For example, a medical professional can be a resource for an acute illness or injury, but doesn't have to be present in your life permanently. You may see a coach or therapist when there is an acute need, and you may do so many times over a number of years, but not necessarily on a regular basis.

BE AWARE OF FAKE RESOURCES WHICH ARE ACTUALLY DEMANDS

At this point I would like to point out 'fake' resources – they look like coping resources, but in reality they are demands in disguise. Look out for any of these on your list. Food is part of every day, yet is what we are consuming a resource or a hidden demand? For example, you have limited time and have to eat on the run; do you snack on high carb, high GI (quick-release) items such as crisps, take-away or chocolate, or throw back a few coffees? They will give you a shortish boost of energy as your blood sugar spikes, but within 30-60 minutes your blood sugar will drop lower than before you had the snack and you will feel horrid as well as need another sugary snack. Alcohol and nicotine have the same effect. The best way to approach a stress situation, is to identify the demands, identify the real resources, and then establish what the stress equation looks like for you. If there are not enough coping resources to meet the demands, at least you know why you are stressed and have a direction for finding a solution.

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