

Promoting the Health and Well-Being of Families During Difficult Times

Stress Management After a Disaster

Marta Stuart

Extension Specialist Yavapai County, Arizona

The purpose of this fact sheet is to introduce information on the symptoms of stress, and how individuals can effectively manage their stress. Everyone experiences stress on a daily basis. We experience positive stress when we are excited about something important or interesting that happens in our lives such as getting a new job, getting married, buying a new home, winning the lottery, going on vacation, and meeting new and exciting people. These experiences prompt us to take action.

We experience negative stress when a sudden or disagreeable event or disaster occurs such as the loss of a farm due to disaster, drought, tornado, hurricane, decreasing farm market prices, pest infestation, or fire. Disasters can cause traumatic stress. Negative stress may also occur in response to death, personal injury, illness or divorce. Too many stressful events can cause extreme stress. Too much stress will result in physical or emotional reaction. Everyone reacts to stress differently; what one individual sees as very stressful may not be stressful for another individual. Individual differences play a major role in how well we handle stressful situations.

What Is Stress?

Stress is the “wear and tear” our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment. According to Hans Selye, a pioneer researcher in stress reaction, “stress is the human response to changes that occur as a part of daily living.” Stress has a physical and emotional effect on us, and it can create positive or negative feelings. “Stress comes from any situation or circumstance that requires behavioral adjustment. Any change, either good or bad, is stressful, and whether it’s a positive or negative change, the physiological response is the same” (Lazarus, 2000).

Symptoms of Stress

When you are stressed, your body creates extra energy to protect itself, which then creates an imbalance within your system. This energy needs to be directed into responses to regain a sense of balance. The American Psychological Association (APA) identifies four different types of stress: acute stress, episodic acute stress, chronic stress, and traumatic stress. Here is a summary of the symptoms for each type of stress (Lazarus, *Stress Relief & Relaxation Techniques*, Pages 10-17):

Level 1 - Acute Stress

Stressors defined as acute are the things that hamper your plans or your day: transportation problems that make you late to work, a missed deadline, an unexpected meeting with your child’s teacher. Acute stress happens to everyone and tends to be manageable.

Symptoms of Acute Stress:

- Emotional distress: worry, anger, irritability, anxiety, frustration, impatience
- Physical problems: fatigue, headache, back pain, jaw pain, trembling, cold hands and feet, and muscular stiffness that can lead to pulled muscles, tendons, and ligaments
- Digestive problems: heartburn, acid stomach, diarrhea, constipation, flatulence, irritable bowel syndrome
- Vital-Sign disturbances: rise in blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, heart palpitations, dizziness, shortness of breath, chest pain
- Mental disturbances: confusion, inability to concentrate, indecisiveness, mind racing, mindlessness, or blankness

Level 2 - Episodic Acute Stress

Episodic acute stress is characterized by intense reaction to everything: the classic type A personality, an excessive competitive drive, aggressiveness, impatience, and having a sense of time urgency. Episodic acute stress involves worry that a disaster is going to happen any minute.

Symptoms of Episodic Acute Stress (In addition to symptoms of acute stress):

- Persistent headaches
- Hypertension
- Asthma
- Chest pain
- Heart disease

Level 3 - Chronic Stress

Chronic stress is the long-standing stress that wears people down. It can be associated with such problems as poverty, illness, dysfunctional families, or work dissatisfaction.

Symptoms of Chronic Stress:

- Loss of appetite, or overeating
- Feeling of insecurity & inadequacy
- Weakened immune system
- Heart disease
- Chronic pain in joints, back, jaw, or shoulders
- Pessimism
- Resentment
- Extreme or chronic anger
- Inability to concentrate
- Peptic ulcers
- Diminished coping ability
- Depression
- Chronic fatigue
- Migraine headaches
- Persistent anxiety
- Reclusiveness
- Constant irritability
- Cynicism
- Low performance levels
- Digestive Disorders

Level 4 - Traumatic Stress

Traumatic stress occurs when a person has had a traumatic experience such as being in an accident, witnessing a terrible crime, losing a job, or having extreme financial problems in keeping the farm as a result of a drought or any natural or human disaster. Individuals experience extreme emotional responses. The shock can make you dazed and the denial is the coping mechanism – putting off feeling the intensity of the experience.

Symptoms of Traumatic Stress:

- Feelings: unpredictable, intense mood swings; anxiety; nervousness; depression
- Thoughts: flashbacks; vivid memory of event; inability to concentrate
- Physical reactions: rapid heartbeat; sweating; headache, nausea, chest pain, general pain, and digestive problems
- Relationship problems: strained, frequent arguments with family members and/or coworkers; withdrawal and isolation from group activity

Coping Skills

What can we do to cope with stress in our lives? “Coping reflects thinking, feeling, or acting so as to preserve a satisfied psychological state when it is threatened. Coping is typically not a single response, but a series of responses, initiated and repeated as necessary to handling the remaining, continuing, or transformed nature of the stressor.” (Synder, page 4)

Practical Coping Skills

Problem-Focused	Environment-Directed	Emotion-Focused	Self-Directed
Know Your Enemy— What is causing the stress?	Work to make your home a safe place	Develop and continue friendships/relationships	Do things that help you relax-walk, hike, read a book
Develop a stress management plan	Reduce stress in the workplace	Have hope and optimism that things will get better	Breathe
Utilize community resources	Breathe clean air and avoid toxins	Keep a sense of humor	Go Outdoors
Communicate with your immediate family about what is stressing you	Recognize what you can and cannot change in the environment	Be kind to yourself Have a positive attitude	Healthy Diet Reduce sugar and fat
Develop a family plan to address the stressor	Accept help from others	Participate in spiritual/faith-based activities	Drink Water
Time management	Seek to have a sense of control of your environment	Make time for quiet time each day	Regular aerobic exercise
Money management	Communicate your values, goals and action plans	Exercise regularly to build your self-esteem and manage stress	Participate in spiritual activity - get a massage, meditate
Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress	Make a list of things that are important to you that affect your environment	Develop thinking and behavior strategies to deal with your feelings and control your emotions	Get enough sleep
Seek professional help	Talk to a close friend about your stress	Join a support group	Avoid nicotine, caffeine, and other stimulants- avoid alcohol and drugs

Note: Many of the categories overlap and integrate

Stuart, M.E., adapted from Lazarus

Internet Resources

Getting Through Tough Times: Controlling Stress: Information on how to cope with personal crises, including information on relaxation techniques and when to get help. <http://www.extension.uiuc.edu/ruralroute/controllingstress.pdf>

Stress and the Farm or Ranch Family: Information on why farming is particularly stressful, steps to understanding the symptoms of stress, why prevention of stress is important, and how families can be resilient to stress. <http://agbiopubs.sdstate.edu/articles/ExEx14058.pdf>

Managing Farm and Family Stress: Information on the symptoms of stress, managing stress, the barriers to managing stress, and strengthening personal and family relationships. <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wholefarm/pdf/c6-54.pdf>

Change, Crisis, and Loss in Our Lives: *Fact Sheets offering insights on how families can deal with stress.* <http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/DE2466.html>

Responding to Farm Stress: Information on the signs of stress, what people in crisis need, how to help by listening or contacting outside resources. <http://abe.sdstate.edu/agSAFE/mind/respond.htm>

Farm Families Under Stress: Information about how farm families can be stressed. Includes ideas for dealing with stress, how reactions to change can be positive, and community support. <http://www.agnr.umd.edu/ces/FCS/familylife/familystress.html>

Supporting Families Following a Disaster: Series of fact sheets covering special needs of families during difficult times. http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/

References

Lazarus, J. (2000). *Stress Relief & Relaxation Techniques*. Keats Publishing, Los Angeles, CA: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group Inc.

Snyder, C.R., (2001). *Coping With Stress: Effective People and Processes*. Oxford University Press, NY.

Managing Your Stress – North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension. <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/disaster/drought/dro-40.html>

Simple Things You Can Do Today to Control Stress
<http://stress.about.com/library/weekly/aa112600a.htm>

Introduction To Stress Management. Retrieved March 2003, from <http://www.noah-health.org>