

TYPES OF STRESS



We tend to think of stress as a negative reaction to pressure. Stress is the body's natural reaction in response to a physical and/or emotional challenge. Stress is a natural and normal response and is not always a negative experience. Positive life events and well as negative ones can create a stress response to meet the challenges of a new situation.

Stress can be positive in activating a person's body, mind and energy. It can be defined as an individual's capacity to mobilize every resource the body has to react promptly and adequately to any given situation. However, if stress lasts too long, the body's resources will be exhausted and the person will develop harmful or negative forms of stress reactions. To best manage the effects of stress, it is helpful to recognize its various forms and sources.

BASELINE STRESS

Day-to-day living can be stressful in even the best of times. Dealing with routine issues at home and on the job produce an ongoing, but usually manageable level of "baseline" or underlying stress. Baseline stress may be caused by various sources of tensions at the individual, emotional, family or social levels. It may be increased by changes in the day-to-day environment (being away from family without adequate communication, working with new people from different cultures, uncertainty about work, new information to assimilate, etc.). Staff Members need to be prepared for this and learn how to develop strategies to cope with it. Basic stress normally decreases after the first few weeks of a new assignment.

ACUTE STRESS

Acute Stress reactions are our body's reaction to a real or perceived threat to our wellbeing, be it physical or psychological. Acute stress prepares the body to protect itself, and represents a survival function.



CUMULATIVE STRESS

When high levels of stress are constant or ongoing, they may result in a cumulative or chronic stress response. Cumulative stress can build up, often unrecognized, over a period of time. This type of stress can easily become uncomfortable and physically and mentally unhealthy when it occurs too often, lasts too long and is too severe.

It is important to note that what is distressful for one person may not necessarily be distressful for another. Your individual perception, i.e. the degree of threat you feel and the amount of control you have over the circumstances, can affect the degree of distress you personally experience. We know from stress research that the single most stressful experience most people have is to feel that they cannot control their circumstances.

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

A Critical Incident is defined as an event out of the range a normal experience — one which is sudden and unexpected, makes you lose control, involves the perception of a threat to life and can include elements of physical or emotional loss. Such incidents may include natural disasters, multiple-casualty accidents, sexual or other types of assault, death of a child, hostage-taking, suicide, a traumatic death in family, duty-related death of a co-worker and war-related civilian deaths.

Although a critical incident may occur at anytime, anywhere, there are certain occupational groups that are at an increased risk of exposure to traumatic events. These include fire-fighters, emergency health-care workers, police officers, search and rescue personnel, disaster relief and humanitarian aid workers, and United Nations peacekeepers, staff members, observers and monitors. Critical Incident Stress reactions are a combination of acute responses to violence, trauma and threats to life. These require immediate attention from colleagues and the organization.