

STRESS: How does it affect YOU?

By: Dr. Brandon Crouch

The American Institute of Stress contends that 75 to 90 percent of visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related complaints. Nothing is more common than stress. Yet, few realize the degree to which chronic stress affects us at all levels – physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

We all live life in the hopes we will BE and STAY healthy. We also want those who mean the most to us: family, friends, and co-workers to be healthy and well too. (Okay, so I know there may be a few of you reading this mustering under your breath that your co-workers are the cause of your stress.) Regardless of your relationships, we all wish those around us a healthy life free of sickness and disease. In this article I want to explore the three fundamental forms of stress that ultimately lead to a poor immune system, sickness, and disease.

You may be wealthy, broke, tall, short, catholic, baptist, shy, out-going, spanish, french, white, black, purple, or green and you will still encounter stress! It doesn't matter where you live, work, or play. We all encounter stress and it is inevitable. If you can identify and learn to reduce the stressors in your life then you will in fact have a much greater opportunity to have a healthier immune system free of sickness and disease.

The three basic forms of stress are *Physical, Chemical, and Emotional Stress*. Each type of stress is directly or indirectly an insult to your body's nervous system. Your nervous system is your body's master system and its job is to not only send messages to allow your body to perform every action (move, hear, see, feel, etc.), but to also adapt to all the stressors you encounter. If you find out how each form of stress affects you then you can also learn how to reduce them.

About a million people each day in the US are absent from work due to stress-related disorders.

Let us start with the easy one. **PHYSICAL STRESS**. Physical stress is anything that directly causes stress to our physical body. A car accident can be a large or small physical stressor depending on how bad the accident. This of course is a what is called "acute" or unavoidable stress. There is often little you can do to prevent these "acute" stressors, however, you can reduce their impact by doing such things a wearing your seatbelt, driving slower, and more carefully.

You can, however, reduce "chronic" physical stressors. These are types of physical stressors that you encounter often and affect you negatively. In the day of computers we often sit for hours. If you sit with poor posture, use the wrong kind of chair, have your computer keyboard or monitor in the wrong positions, etc. for 6-8 hours a day your body will break down.

The same "chronic" stress occurs if your job requires a lot of drive time, you have to be on the phone and computer simultaneously, your bending down often to care for

little ones, you work in a factory/plant and do the same repetitious movements all day, waiting tables carrying heavy trays, and standing for long periods in one place like a cosmetologist or grocery clerk. This is also known as repetitive micro-traumas. Over and over they insult the body which can lead to multiple health challenges.

CHEMICAL STRESS, the second of the three types of stress, is not only misunderstood but also one we abuse all too often. Chemical stress to your body can come from what your body takes in that it should not **or** what your body is not taking in that it should. When it comes to the different types of stress it is essential that you do what you can to reduce them. Chemical stress is the easiest and hardest stress to work on. It is the easiest stress to decrease by making simple lifestyle changes, yet hardest for many to stay committed.

- *Cigarette smoking causes 87 percent of lung cancer deaths and is responsible for most cancers of the larynx, oral cavity and pharynx, esophagus, and bladder.*
- *Secondhand smoke is responsible for an estimated 3,000 lung cancer deaths among U.S. nonsmokers each year.*
- *Tobacco smoke contains thousands of chemical agents, including over 60 substances that are known to cause cancer.*

Types of chemical stress include: smoking, inhaling dangerous air pollution, eating poorly nutritious foods (processed, high caloric, high fat, high sodium, sugar filled, little protein, etc.), poor water intake, little to no vitamins or minerals, alcohol, and drugs (legal and illegal). Each and every one of these are essential parts of your daily life that you must make wise decisions about.

Unfortunately our country is one of the worst regarding chemical stress. Obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally, with more than 1 billion adults overweight - at least 300 million of them clinically obese - and is a major contributor to the global burden of chronic disease and disability. According to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data, today about 15 percent of children and adolescents can be labeled as having childhood (pediatric) obesity in the U.S. Over the past 20 years, the proportion of overweight children ages 6 through 11 has more than doubled and the rate for adolescents ages 12 through 19 has tripled.

Cigarette smoke, another big chemical stressor, contains about 4,000 chemical agents, including over **60** carcinogens (cancer causing agents). In addition, many of these substances, such as carbon monoxide, tar, arsenic, and lead, are poisonous and toxic to the human body. In return for inhaling this chemical toxin, cigarette smoking causes 87 percent of lung cancer deaths.

"Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be."

Abraham Lincoln

The last form of stress that is just as devastating as the previous two is **EMOTIONAL STRESS**. When emotional stress is unrelenting it can lead to many serious health complications. Migraines, heart attacks, high blood pressure, ulcers,

digestive disorders, sleep disorders, and fatigue are just a few of the health challenges that can be brought on by emotional or psychological stress.

Often our emotional stress stems from our reaction to the people and situations in our daily lives. Children and teenagers often stress about their social interaction and school exams while young adults struggle with the idea of jobs, careers, and starting families. As adults we worry about our children, our parents, and our financial situations. No matter what your age, gender, race, or religion, emotional stress affects us all.

"Mental tensions, frustrations, insecurity, aimlessness are among the most damaging stressors, and psychosomatic studies have shown how often they cause migraine headache, peptic ulcers, heart attacks, hypertension, mental disease, suicide, or just hopeless unhappiness."

Hans Selye

(1907 – 1982, Canadian Physician Born in Austria, Research On Stress)

When it comes to emotional stress a classic is "road rage." It can affect even the best of us on a busy afternoon when you get cut off by a quick driving, inconsiderate, non-blinker driver who makes you slam on your brakes. Emotional stress can come on in a flash.

If you and your spouse are having difficulties or even contemplating divorce then you are dealing with emotional stress. If you are wondering how to make this month's paycheck stretch to meet all the bills then you know emotional stress. If a loved one has passed on and you have had to say "good-bye" all too soon then you definitely know emotional stress.

No matter who you are it is important to learn about stress and how it affects you. The key to any of these types of stress is to realize what you can and can change. Most chemical stressors in our life are lifestyle choices. You can choose not to smoke. You can choose to drink more water. You can choose to eat nutritious fresh foods.

Physical Stressors are the second easiest to deal with. Most physical stressors such as our jobs and work environments can be modified and ergonomically improved. Make sure you are using the correct bending and lifting techniques. Make sure your computer, workstation, and chair is in the proper position and height. We can also be prepared for unforeseen accidents while driving by wearing a seatbelt, driving slower, and watching out for the reckless driver.

Emotional stress is probably the hardest to deal with for most of us. It is easier said than done to let bad emotions "roll off your shoulder." All of us should be granted some space and be allowed to work through our emotional stressors. In the end, however, it is best to focus on the positives or we will be no good for others or ourselves. Time continues to move forward and we have loved ones, friends, and colleagues who count on us. We are only good for others when we are good to ourselves. Studies show that most concerns are over issues we have no control over.

"Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one."

Hans Selye

The first step to reducing the stress in your life is to identify them. You might even want to literally make a list of all your Physical, Chemical, and Emotional Stressors. Once you can identify them you can begin to reduce or eliminate them one by one. If you can find out how to beat your stress you will be healthier and happier and so will those around you!

About the Author:

Brandon Crouch, D.C.

Dr. Brandon Crouch is a Chiropractor with Crouch Family Chiropractic.

Sources:

1. WHO, www.who.int, Oct 2007
2. National Cancer Institute, www.cancer.gov, Oct 2007
3. Harvard Medical School, Harvard Health Pub, Oct 2007, Staff