

3.4: What Is Stress?

Learning Objectives

1. Learn about the General Adaptation Syndrome.
2. Learn what stressors are.
3. Understand the outcomes of stress.
4. Understand individual differences in experienced stress.

Gravity. Mass. Magnetism. These words come from the physical sciences. And so does the term *stress*. In its original form, the word *stress* relates to the amount of force applied to a given area. A steel bar stacked with bricks is being stressed in ways that can be measured using mathematical formulas. In human terms, psychiatrist Peter Panzarino notes, “Stress is simply a fact of nature—forces from the outside world affecting the individual” (Panzarino, 2008). The professional, personal, and environmental pressures of modern life exert their forces on us every day. Some of these pressures are good. Others can wear us down over time.

Stress is defined by psychologists as the body’s reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental, or emotional adjustment or response (Dyer, 2006). Stress is an inevitable feature of life. It is the force that gets us out of bed in the morning, motivates us at the gym, and inspires us to work.

As you will see in the sections below, stress is a given factor in our lives. We may not be able to avoid stress completely, but we can change how we respond to stress, which is a major benefit. Our ability to recognize, manage, and maximize our response to stress can turn an emotional or physical problem into a resource.

Researchers use polling to measure the effects of stress at work. The results have been eye-opening. According to a 2001 Gallup poll, 80% of American workers report that they feel workplace stress at least some of the time (Kersten, 2002). Another survey found that 65% of workers reported job stress as an issue for them, and almost as many employees ended the day exhibiting physical effects of stress, including neck pain, aching muscles, and insomnia. It is clear that many individuals are stressed at work.

The Stress Process

Our basic human functions, breathing, blinking, heartbeat, digestion, and other unconscious actions, are controlled by our lower brains. Just outside this portion of the brain is the semiconscious limbic system, which plays a large part in human emotions. Within this system is an area known as the amygdala. The **amygdala** is responsible for, among other things, stimulating fear responses. Unfortunately, the amygdala cannot distinguish between meeting a 10:00 a.m. marketing deadline and escaping a burning building.

Human brains respond to outside threats to our safety with a message to our bodies to engage in a “fight-or-flight” response (Cannon, 1915). Our bodies prepare for these scenarios with an increased heart rate, shallow breathing, and wide-eyed focus. Even digestion and other functions are stopped in preparation for the fight-or-flight response. While these traits allowed our ancestors to flee the scene of their impending doom or engage in a physical battle for survival, most crises at work are not as dramatic as this.

Hans Selye, one of the founders of the American Institute of Stress, spent his life examining the human body’s response to stress. As an endocrinologist who studied the effects of adrenaline and other hormones on the body, Selye believed that unmanaged stress could create physical diseases such as ulcers and high blood pressure, and psychological illnesses such as depression. He hypothesized that stress played a general role in disease by exhausting the body’s immune system and termed this the **General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)** (Selye, 1956; Selye, 1976).

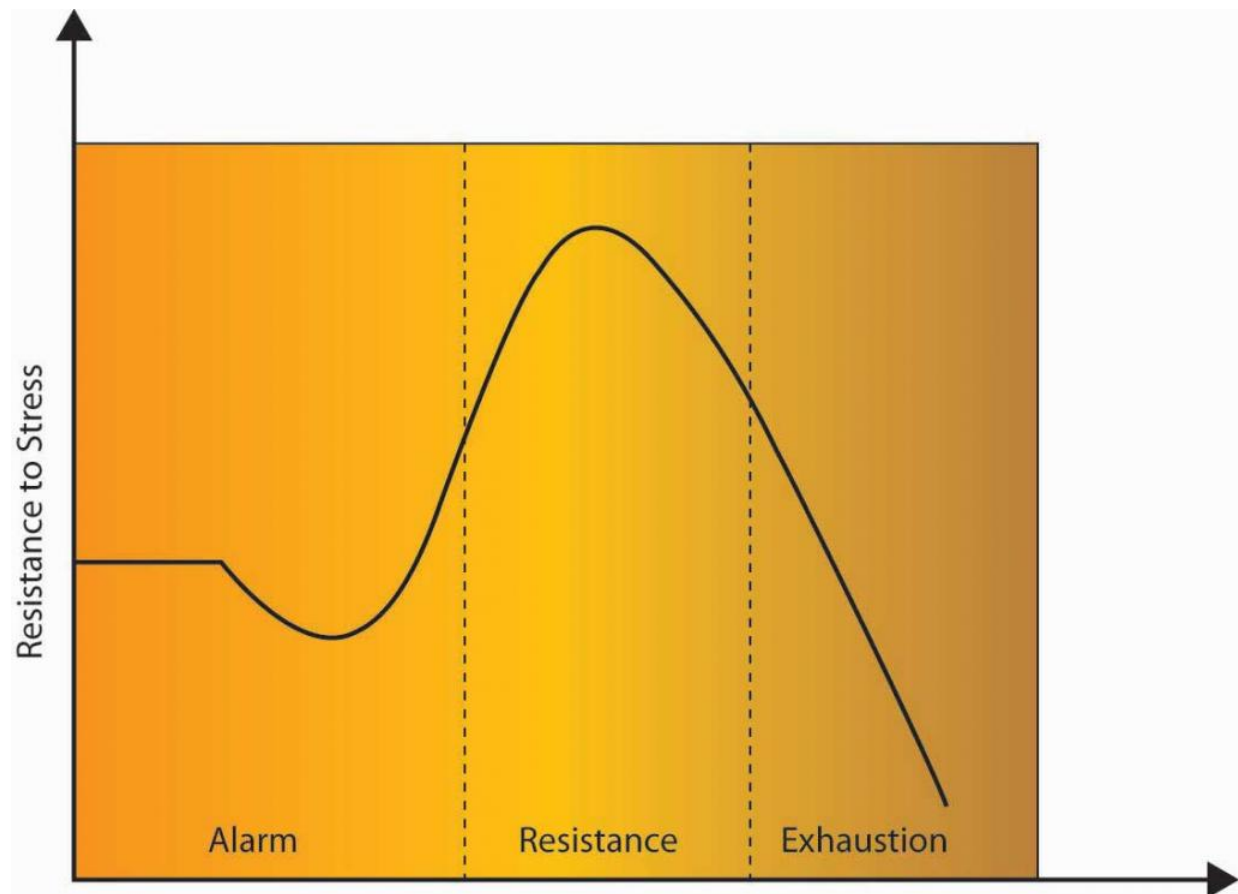


Figure 3.4.2: In Selye's GAS model, stress affects an individual in three steps: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion.

In the **alarm phase** of stress, an outside stressor jolts the individual, insisting that something must be done. It may help to think of this as the fight-or-flight moment in the individual's experience. If the response is sufficient, the body will return to its resting state after having successfully dealt with the source of stress.

In the **resistance phase**, the body begins to release cortisol and draws on reserves of fats and sugars to find a way to adjust to the demands of stress. This reaction works well for short periods of time, but it is only a temporary fix. Individuals forced to endure the stress of cold and hunger may find a way to adjust to lower temperatures and less food. While it is possible for the body to "adapt" to such stresses, the situation cannot continue. The body is drawing on its reserves, like a hospital using backup generators after a power failure. It can continue to function by shutting down unnecessary items like large overhead lights, elevators, televisions, and most computers, but it cannot proceed in that state forever.

In the **exhaustion phase**, the body has depleted its stores of sugars and fats, and the prolonged release of cortisol has caused the stressor to significantly weaken the individual. Disease results from the body's weakened state, leading to death in the most extreme cases. This eventual depletion is why we're more likely to reach for foods rich in fat or sugar, caffeine, or other quick fixes that give us energy when we are stressed. Selye referred to stress that led to disease as *distress* and stress that was enjoyable or healing as *eustress*.

Workplace Stressors

Stressors are events or contexts that cause a stress reaction by elevating levels of adrenaline and forcing a physical or mental response. The key to remember about stressors is that they aren't necessarily a bad thing. The saying "the straw that broke the camel's back" applies to stressors. Having a few stressors in our lives may not be a problem, but because stress is cumulative, having many stressors day after day can cause a buildup that becomes a problem. The American Psychological Association surveys American adults about their stresses annually. Topping the list of stressful issues are money, work, and housing (American Psychological Association, 2007). But in essence, we could say that all three issues come back to the workplace. How much we earn determines the kind of housing we can afford, and when job security is questionable, home life is generally affected as well.

Understanding what can potentially cause stress can help avoid negative consequences. Now we will examine the major stressors in the workplace.

A major category of workplace stressors are role demands. In other words, some jobs and some work contexts are more potentially stressful than others.

Role Demands



Figure 3.4.3: George Lucas, one of the most successful filmmakers of all time, found making *The Empire Strikes Back* stressful both personally and financially. Those who worked with him on those early *Star Wars* films describe him as fully engrossed in the process, which led to role overload and work–family conflict. Following the making of that film, Lucas said he was “burnt out” and didn’t want to make any more *Star Wars* films. [Wikimedia Commons](#) – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Role ambiguity refers to vagueness in relation to what our responsibilities are. If you have started a new job and felt unclear about what you were expected to do, you have experienced role ambiguity. Having high role ambiguity is related to higher emotional exhaustion, more thoughts of leaving an organization, and lowered job attitudes and performance (Fisher & Gittelsohn, 1983; Jackson & Shuler, 1985; Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006). **Role conflict** refers to facing contradictory demands at work. For example, your manager may want you to increase customer satisfaction and cut costs, while you feel that satisfying customers inevitably increases costs. In this case, you are experiencing role conflict because satisfying one demand makes it unlikely to satisfy the other. **Role overload** is defined as having insufficient time and resources to complete a job. When an organization downsizes, the remaining employees will have to complete the tasks that were previously performed by the laid-off workers, which often leads to role overload. Like role ambiguity, both role conflict and role overload have been shown to hurt performance and lower job attitudes; however, research shows that role ambiguity is the strongest predictor of poor performance (Gilboa et al., 2008; Tubre & Collins, 2000). Research on new employees also shows that role ambiguity is a key aspect of their adjustment, and that when role ambiguity is high, new employees struggle to fit into the new organization (Bauer et al., 2007).

Information Overload

Messages reach us in countless ways every day. Some are societal—advertisements that we may hear or see in the course of our day. Others are professional—e-mails, memos, voice mails, and conversations from our colleagues. Others are personal—messages and conversations from our loved ones and friends. Add these together and it’s easy to see how we may be receiving more information than we can take in. This state of imbalance is known as **information overload**, which can be defined as “occurring when the information processing demands on an individual’s time to perform interactions and internal calculations exceed the supply or capacity of time available for such processing” (Schick, Gordon, & Haka, 1990). Role overload has been made much more salient because of the ease at which we can get abundant information from Web search engines and the numerous e-mail and text messages we receive each day (Dawley & Anthony, 2003).^[1] Other research shows that working in such a fragmented fashion significantly impacts efficiency, creativity, and mental acuity (Overholt, 2001).

Top 10 Stressful Jobs

As you can see, some of these jobs are stressful due to high emotional labor (customer service), physical demands (miner), time pressures (journalist), or all three (police officer).

1. Inner city high school teacher
2. Police officer
3. Miner
4. Air traffic controller
5. Medical intern
6. Stockbroker
7. Journalist
8. Customer service or complaint worker

9. Secretary
10. Waiter

Source: Tolison, B. (2008, April 7). Top ten most stressful jobs. *Health*. Retrieved January 28, 2009, from the WCTV News Web site: www.wctv.tv/news/headlines/17373899.html.

Work–Family Conflict

Work–family conflict occurs when the demands from work and family are negatively affecting one another (Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996). Specifically, work and family demands on a person may be incompatible with each other such that work interferes with family life and family demands interfere with work life. This stressor has steadily increased in prevalence, as work has become more demanding and technology has allowed employees to work from home and be connected to the job around the clock. In fact, a recent census showed that 28% of the American workforce works more than 40 hours per week, creating an unavoidable spillover from work to family life (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Moreover, the fact that more households have dual-earning families in which both adults work means household and childcare duties are no longer the sole responsibility of a stay-at-home parent. This trend only compounds stress from the workplace by leading to the spillover of family responsibilities (such as a sick child or elderly parent) to work life. Research shows that individuals who have stress in one area of their life tend to have greater stress in other parts of their lives, which can create a situation of escalating stressors (Allen et al., 2000; Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Hammer, Bauer, & Grandey, 2003).

Work–family conflict has been shown to be related to lower job and life satisfaction. Interestingly, it seems that work–family conflict is slightly more problematic for women than men (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Organizations that are able to help their employees achieve greater work–life balance are seen as more attractive than those that do not (Barnett & Hall, 2001; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Organizations can help employees maintain work–life balance by using organizational practices such as flexibility in scheduling as well as individual practices such as having supervisors who are supportive and considerate of employees’ family life (Thomas & Ganster, 1995).

Life Changes

Stress can result from positive and negative life changes. The Holmes-Rahe scale ascribes different stress values to life events ranging from the death of one’s spouse to receiving a ticket for a minor traffic violation. The values are based on incidences of illness and death in the 12 months after each event. On the Holmes-Rahe scale, the death of a spouse receives a stress rating of 100, getting married is seen as a midway stressful event, with a rating of 50, and losing one’s job is rated as 47. These numbers are relative values that allow us to understand the impact of different life events on our stress levels and their ability to impact our health and well-being (Fontana, 1989). Again, because stressors are cumulative, higher scores on the stress inventory mean you are more prone to suffering negative consequences of stress than someone with a lower score.

OB Toolbox: How Stressed Are You?

Read each of the events listed below. Give yourself the number of points next to any event that has occurred in your life in the last 2 years. There are no right or wrong answers. The aim is just to identify which of these events you have experienced.

Table 3.4.1: Sample Items: Life Events Stress Inventory

Life event	Stress points	Life event	Stress points
Death of spouse	100	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
Divorce	73	Change in responsibilities at work	29
Marital separation	65	Son or daughter leaving home	29
Jail term	63	Trouble with in-laws	29
Death of close family member	63	Outstanding personal achievement	28
Personal injury or illness	53	Begin or end school	26

Life event	Stress points	Life event	Stress points
Marriage	50	Change in living location/condition	25
Fired or laid off at work	47	Trouble with supervisor	23
Marital reconciliation	45	Change in work hours or conditions	20
Retirement	45	Change in schools	20
Pregnancy	40	Change in social activities	18
Change in financial state	38	Change in eating habits	15
Death of close friend	37	Vacation	13
Change to different line of work	36	Minor violations of the law	11

Scoring:

- If you scored fewer than 150 stress points, you have a 30% chance of developing a stress-related illness in the near future.
- If you scored between 150 and 299 stress points, you have a 50% chance of developing a stress-related illness in the near future.
- If you scored over 300 stress points, you have an 80% chance of developing a stress-related illness in the near future.

The happy events in this list such as getting married or an outstanding personal achievement illustrate how eustress, or “good stress,” can also tax a body as much as the stressors that constitute the traditionally negative category of distress. (The prefix *eu-* in the word *eustress* means “good” or “well,” much like the *eu-* in *euphoria*.) Stressors can also occur in trends. For example, during 2007, nearly 1.3 million U.S. housing properties were subject to foreclosure activity, up 79% from 2006.

Source: Adapted from Holmes, T. H., & Rahe, R. H. (1967). The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11, 213–218.

Downsizing

A study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor to examine over 3,600 companies from 1980 to 1994 found that manufacturing firms accounted for the greatest incidence of major downsizings. The average percentage of firms by industry that downsized more than 5% of their workforces across the 15-year period of the study was manufacturing (25%), retail (17%), and service (15%). A total of 59% of the companies studied fired at least 5% of their employees at least once during the 15-year period, and 33% of the companies downsized more than 15% of their workforce at least once during the period. Furthermore, during the recessions in 1985 to 1986 and 1990 to 1991, more than 25% of all firms, regardless of size, cut their workforce by more than 5% (Slocum et al., 1999). In the United States, major layoffs in many sectors in 2008 and 2009 were stressful even for those who retained their jobs.

The loss of a job can be a particularly stressful event, as you can see by its high score on the life stressors scale. It can also lead to other stressful events, such as financial problems, which can add to a person’s stress score. Research shows that downsizing and job insecurity (worrying about downsizing) is related to greater stress, alcohol use, and lower performance and creativity (Moore, Grunberg, & Greenberg, 2004; Probst et al., 2007; Sikora et al., 2008). For example, a study of over 1,200 Finnish workers found that past downsizing or expectations of future downsizing was related to greater psychological strain and absence (Kalimo, Taris, & Schaufeli, 2003). In another study of creativity and downsizing, researchers found that creativity and most creativity-supporting aspects of the perceived work environment declined significantly during the downsizing (Amabile & Conti, 1999). Those who experience layoffs but have their self-integrity affirmed through other means are less susceptible to negative outcomes (Wisensfeld et al., 2001).

Outcomes of Stress

The outcomes of stress are categorized into physiological and psychological and work outcomes.

Physiological

Stress manifests itself internally as nervousness, tension, headaches, anger, irritability, and fatigue. Stress can also have outward manifestations. Dr. Dean Ornish, author of *Stress, Diet and Your Heart*, says that stress is related to aging (Ornish, 1984). Chronic stress causes the body to secrete hormones such as cortisol, which tend to make our complexion blemished and cause wrinkles. Harvard psychologist Ted Grossbart, author of *Skin Deep*, says, “Tens of millions of Americans suffer from skin diseases that flare up only when they’re upset” (Grossbart, 1992). These skin problems include itching, profuse sweating, warts, hives, acne, and psoriasis. For example, Roger Smith, the former CEO of General Motors Corporation, was featured in a *Fortune* article that began, “His normally ruddy face is covered with a red rash, a painless but disfiguring problem which Smith says his doctor attributes 99% to stress” (Taylor, 1987).

The human body responds to outside calls to action by pumping more blood through our system, breathing in a more shallow fashion, and gazing wide-eyed at the world. To accomplish this feat, our bodies shut down our immune systems. From a biological point of view, it’s a smart strategic move—but only in the short term. The idea can be seen as your body wanting to escape an imminent threat, so that there is still some kind of body around to get sick later. But in the long term, a body under constant stress can suppress its immune system too much, leading to health problems such as high blood pressure, ulcers, and being overly susceptible to illnesses such as the common cold.

The link between heart attacks and stress, while easy to assume, has been harder to prove. The American Heart Association notes that research has yet to link the two conclusively. Regardless, it is clear that individuals under stress engage in behaviors that can lead to heart disease such as eating fatty foods, smoking, or failing to exercise.

Psychological

Depression and anxiety are two psychological outcomes of unchecked stress, which are as dangerous to our mental health and welfare as heart disease, high blood pressure, and strokes. The Harris poll found that 11% of respondents said their stress was accompanied by a sense of depression. “Persistent or chronic stress has the potential to put vulnerable individuals at a substantially increased risk of depression, anxiety, and many other emotional difficulties,” notes Mayo Clinic psychiatrist Daniel Hall-Flavin. Scientists have noted that changes in brain function—especially in the areas of the hypothalamus and the pituitary gland—may play a key role in stress-induced emotional problems (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2008).

Work Outcomes

Stress is related to worse job attitudes, higher turnover, and decreases in job performance in terms of both in-role performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2008; Gilboar et al., 2008; Podsakoff et al., 2007). Research also shows that stressed individuals have lower organizational commitment than those who are less stressed (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003). Interestingly, job challenge has been found to be related to higher performance, perhaps with some individuals rising to the challenge (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). The key is to keep challenges in the optimal zone for stress—the activation stage—and to avoid the exhaustion stage (Quick et al., 1997).

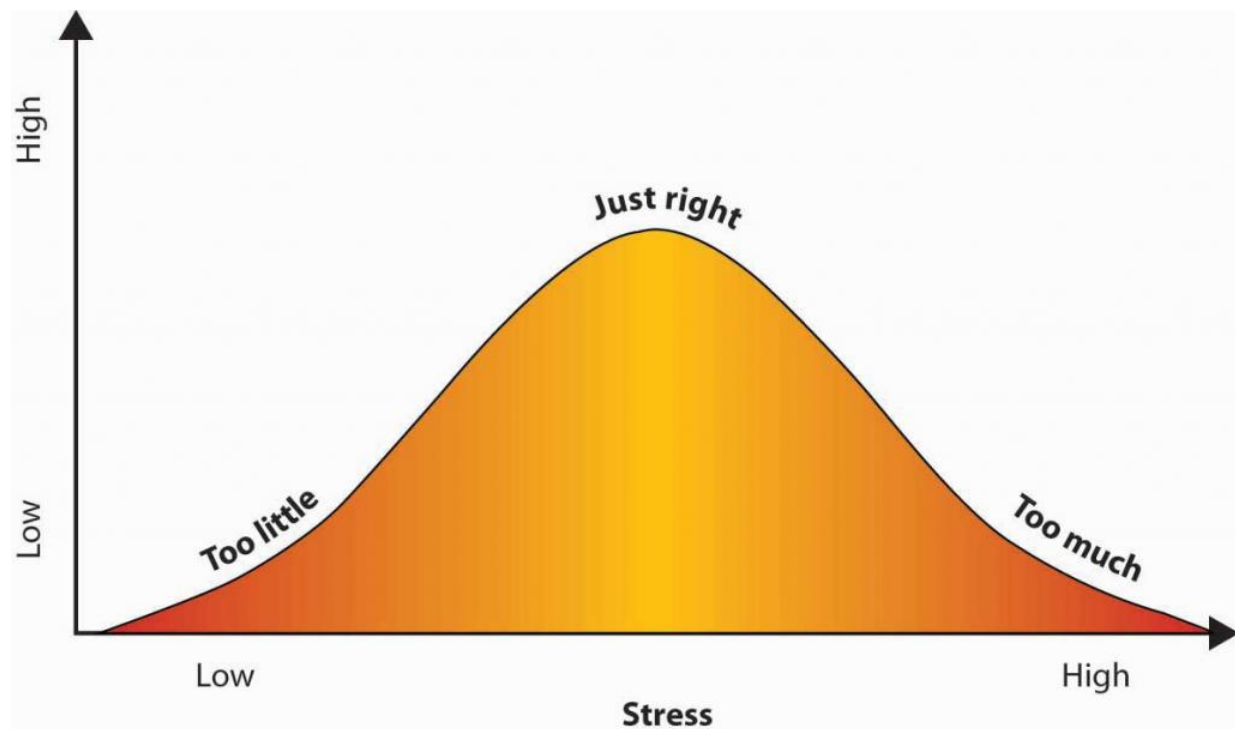


Figure 3.4.4: Individuals who are able to find the right balance between work that is too challenging and work that is not challenging enough see increases in performance.

Individual Differences in Experienced Stress

How we handle stress varies by individual, and part of that issue has to do with our personality type. **Type A personalities**, as defined by the Jenkins Activity Survey (Jenkins, Zyzanski, & Rosenman, 1979), display high levels of speed/impatience, job involvement, and hard-driving competitiveness. If you think back to Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome, in which unchecked stress can lead to illness over time, it's easy to see how the fast-paced, adrenaline-pumping lifestyle of a Type A person can lead to increased stress, and research supports this view (Spector & O'Connell, 1994). Studies show that the hostility and hyper-reactive portion of the Type A personality is a major concern in terms of stress and negative organizational outcomes (Ganster, 1986).

Type B personalities, by contrast, are calmer by nature. They think through situations as opposed to reacting emotionally. Their fight-or-flight and stress levels are lower as a result. Our personalities are the outcome of our life experiences and, to some degree, our genetics. Some researchers believe that mothers who experience a great deal of stress during pregnancy introduce their unborn babies to high levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol in utero, predisposing their babies to a stressful life from birth (BBC News, 2007).

Men and women also handle stress differently. Researchers at Yale University discovered estrogen may heighten women's response to stress and their tendency to depression as a result (Weaver, 2004). Still, others believe that women's stronger social networks allow them to process stress more effectively than men.^[2] So while women may become depressed more often than men, women may also have better tools for countering emotion-related stress than their male counterparts.

OB Toolbox: To Cry or Not to Cry? That Is the Question...

As we all know, stress can build up. Advice that's often given is to "let it all out" with something like a cathartic "good cry." But research shows that crying may not be as helpful as the adage would lead us to believe. In reviewing scientific studies done on crying and health, Ad Vingerhoets and Jan Scheirs found that the studies "yielded little evidence in support of the hypothesis that shedding tears improves mood or health directly, be it in the short or in the long run." Another study found that venting actually increased the negative effects of negative emotion (Brown, Westbrook, & Challagalla, 2005).

Instead, laughter may be the better remedy. Crying may actually intensify the negative feelings, because crying is a social signal not only to others but to yourself. "You might think, 'I didn't think it was bothering me that much, but look at how I'm crying—I must really be upset,'" says Susan Labott of the University of Toledo. The crying may make the feelings more intense. Labott and Randall Martin of Northern Illinois University at Dekalb surveyed 715 men and women and found that at

comparable stress levels, criers were more depressed, anxious, hostile, and tired than those who wept less. Those who used humor were the most successful at combating stress. So, if you're looking for a cathartic release, opt for humor instead: Try to find something funny in your stressful predicament.

Sources: Vingerhoets, A. J. J. M., & Scheirs, J. G. M. (2001). Crying and health. In A. J. J. M. Vingerhoets & R. R. Cornelius (Eds.), *Adult crying: A biopsychosocial approach* (pp. 227–247). East Sussex, UK: Brunner-Routledge; Martin, R., & Susan L. (1991). Mood following emotional crying: Effects of the situation. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 25(2), 218–233; Bostad, R. The crying game. *Anchor Point*, 1–8. Retrieved June 19, 2008, from www.nlpanchorpoint.com/BolstadCrying1481.pdf

Key Takeaways

Stress is prevalent in today's workplaces. The General Adaptation Syndrome consists of alarm, resistance, and eventually exhaustion if the stress goes on for too long. Time pressure is a major stressor. Outcomes of stress include both psychological and physiological problems as well as work outcomes. Individuals with Type B personalities are less prone to stress. In addition, individuals with social support experience less stress.

Exercises

1. We've just seen how the three phases of the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) can play out in terms of physical stresses such as cold and hunger. Can you imagine how the three categories of this model might apply to work stress as well?
2. List two situations in which a prolonged work challenge might cause an individual to reach the second and third stage of GAS.
3. What can individuals do to help manage their time better? What works for you?
4. What symptoms of stress have you seen in yourself or your peers?

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