



The Development of Stress and Resistance

Whitney M. Robenolt, Psy.D.

Life is highly unpredictable. We are often given situations, sometimes on a daily basis, that require us to adapt. These situations can bring about the feeling of increased stress, especially when we lack the tools to effectively problem solve. However, what exactly is stress? We often use the term “stress” to define a feeling we are having in relation to an overwhelming situation, such as managing two jobs, experiencing a break-up, or struggling to pay for rent. These experiences that evoke stress are called “stressors” and can manifest in many forms, beyond just individual experiences.

Stressors can be in the form of environmental and social factors. Dramatic changes in your environment, such as a job loss, relationship break, or death of a loved one, can create a stress response. Less radical changes, such as increased job responsibilities, financial strain, or even instances of isolation can cause a similar reaction. In addition to environmental and social stressors, our thoughts can also impact the level of stress we feel on a day-to-day basis. We can develop unhealthy patterns of thinking that can impact our beliefs about a given situation. For example, we can utilize black-and-white thinking (everything is good vs. everything is bad), catastrophizing (expecting the worse to happen), or overgeneralizing (developing conclusions based on one piece of evidence). These thinking processes can impact how think about given situations, propelling us to develop stress.

When we experience these stressors, our body responds, involuntary, as if there is a threat. This is a biological response, which is referred to as “fight-or-flight.” When this response occurs, our body uses a process which was developed to help us survive a situation. During these instances our heart rate will increase, our pupils dilate to increase awareness, our blood circulation reduces to protect vital organs, and we produce increased adrenaline. When we stay in this state for too long, we can develop many health issues, such as increased heart concerns, ulcers, depression, sexual dysfunction, and many more.

Skill development can be beneficial in reducing the impact of this stress response. One of the key ways to reduce stress in day-to-day life is to develop skills that can assist in calming the body during its attempts to fight-or-flight. Increasing methods of relaxation, such as yoga, meditation, and mindfulness practices can be highly beneficial. Additionally, using self-care practices can assist in limiting the damaging effects of continued exposure to stress. Self-care requires you to take an active role in your overall well-being. Making time to go for a 15-minute walk, getting a massage, or talking to a loved one are all examples of small interventions that

can promote a better sense of self. Engaging in psychotherapy can also be a great way of learning more healthy and beneficial thinking patterns, as well as support you in developing coping skills that will work specifically for you.

Starting to make these changes can take some planning, especially when it comes to learning how to add these types of activities into your daily life. I often like to use the phrase, “You can’t pour from an empty cup,” because most of the time we are not fully aware of the impact our lack of self-care may have on our functioning. The more we learn to care for ourselves the more we can be fully invested in multiple aspects in our lives. Learning to make ourselves a priority can at times be a challenge; however, making this investment can lead to substantial growth.