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SPOTLIGHT ON STRESS

WE ALL KNOW STRESS IS BAD FOR OUR HEALTH. BUT DO WE TRULY UNDERSTAND WHY? RASHIDA TAYABALI EXPLORES WHAT HAPPENS INTERNALLY WHEN WE EXPERIENCE STRESS.

REMEMBER THE LAST TIME YOU FELT STRESSED? Was it an hour ago, yesterday or are you stressed right now?

Does work or personal stress cause you to become moody, irritable and suffer sleepless nights? Unfortunately, this scenario is all too common in our modern society. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found more than 55 per cent of people who suffered stress on the job took five days or more off from work during 2009 and 2010.

You might be familiar with some

outward signs of stress, such as lack of concentration or a faster heart rate, but have you ever wondered what happens inside your body every time you get stressed?

Stress occurs when an individual fails to respond suitably to an emotional or physical threat (real or perceived). When you see a threat (stressor), a complex set of physiological processes begins to take place in your body. Your body sends stored energy quickly to the required set of muscles giving rise to a 'flight-or-fight' response, this increases

your heart rate, blood pressure and rate of breathing. Your body's natural response to stress also suppresses growth, sexual drive, the immune and digestive systems so as to conserve valuable energy. For a short period, while adrenalin and endorphins are flowing through your bloodstream, you do not feel pain and experience heightened thinking and sensory skills. Once the 'threat' is seen to have passed, the body initiates another complex process in order to achieve its previously balanced state.



RESEARCHERS FOUND THAT MEN AND WOMEN MANAGE THEIR STRESS LEVELS USING DIFFERENT METHODS.

HORMONAL CHANGES

The stress hormone, cortisol, is released by the adrenal glands located on your kidneys after receiving a signal from the pituitary gland found at the base of your brain. Your nervous system responds by releasing adrenaline into the bloodstream and glucose levels are heightened so that you have energy available for action. Your body also suppresses production of insulin and reproductive hormones testosterone and oestrogen so that the entire focus is on providing sufficient energy for the body to deal with the crisis. Research shows that women with raised levels of the stress hormone can become infertile and have problems conceiving.

HOW MEN AND WOMEN REACT TO STRESS

Interestingly, men and women react differently to stress as discovered through a study conducted by UCLA researchers. Previously, women were excluded from such research because of their fluctuating monthly hormonal levels hence prior studies had concluded that both genders had the same response to stress: fight-or-flight.

The scientists observed that when men were confronted with stress, they adopted a fight-or-flight action; became aggressive physically or withdrew from the situation. However, women were

more likely to use 'tend-and-befriend' methods to manage their stress such as talking on the phone with their friends or relatives. Females (in other species) counter stressful situations by protecting and nurturing their young (tend) and seeking social contact and support especially from other females (befriend response).

IS IT WORTH GETTING STRESSED?

The Australian Psychological Society in a recent survey found that 12 per cent of Australians had experienced severe stress levels with a majority of respondents being younger adults. Acute stress (short term) is thought to be beneficial and a necessary part of life in helping to strengthen the body's defences, chronic (continuous) stress can lead to a lot of health problems over your lifetime. Chronic stress stops the body achieving and maintaining its balanced state after experiencing a fight-or-flight action.

Prolonged stress leads to abnormal cortisol levels in the body, which affects memory formation and retrieval. Have you heard people say 'my mind went blank?' This is a direct consequence of high cortisol levels, which leads to confusion in traumatic events.

Chronic stress can also affect the

learning part of the brain, which is extremely sensitive to stress hormone levels. Research conducted at the University of Washington found rats when restrained for an hour and given electric shocks to their tails lost their ability to navigate a maze in which rewards were placed.

Modern stressors cause our bodies to remain continually in a state of fight-or-flight response leading to wear and tear on body cells, suppression of immune systems, growth systems and reproductive systems. Stress also places pressure on organs leading to a greater risk of developing disorders and diseases later in life.

The next time you experience stress because of a deadline or a result of being stuck in traffic, stay calm. Remember continuous stress attacks means your body system is also taking a major 'battering' internally. Take a deep breath; maintain your perspective and smile, your body will thank you for it.

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