

SUPPLEMENT B

“WHAT CAUSES STRESS”

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This supplement looks at some of the factors which may be involved in creating stress. These factors often interact – inbuilt and childhood factors can make you more likely to become stressed when faced with a lot of change in adult life as they may affect the way you deal with these changes. Sometimes stress can arise in the absence of these ‘vulnerability’ factors.

Look at these two very different reports from people under stress:

Peter, Shop Assistant, 27 years old

“I’ve always been anxious. As a young child I was afraid of the dark, had problems coping at school and wouldn’t let my mum out of my sight. I suppose I’ve always been ‘sensitive’. As I get older, I realise that I am a carbon copy of my dad. I’m afraid that my children will end up the same as me.”

Julie, Nurse, 42 years old

“I thought I would be the last person in the world who would be affected by nerves. I’ve always sailed through life – great childhood, good strong personality. Nothing was a problem – life was easy. I’m afraid to say that my view of stress was that there was no such thing. Then last year, out of the blue, it hit me for six and since then it’s like my old personality has been sunk only to be replaced by this nervous wreck. What happened?”

Peter sees himself as a born worrier while Julie sees stress as something alien to her. Are they talking about the same thing? Did they reach the same end by different roads? Let us look at this in two parts. **Firstly**, what makes you vulnerable to stress and, **secondly**, what triggers the stress:

Part 1: Vulnerability factors

Inbuilt Factors

We all have the ability to develop stress. Supplement A tells you why. However some of us are more prone to develop stress than others due to our basic make-up.

If you see yourself as a 'born worrier' – someone who tends to get easily upset, who worries more about things than other people seem to do, who doesn't cope well with too many changes in your life – then it may be that your make-up is playing a part in your stress.

You can't change your basic nature (nor should you try) but you can try to control your stress. This is because your basic nature does not condemn you to suffer from it. **You are not born with stress but with the ability to develop it.**

This is an important distinction. We are very flexible. We all have a great ability to bend with the wind – to adapt to a wide range of situations. This ability can be used to help you combat stress.

Inbuilt (biological) factors account for only a small part of the reasons why stress develops. All 'born worriers' usually say that stress comes and goes to some extent over the months or years. Something else must be causing this to happen. This points to the importance of the things which happen to you in life.

Childhood

Along with love, perhaps the most important gift a parent can give a child is security. A child will have a better chance of feeling secure if he grows up with a predictable and controllable world. So, for example, the child will benefit if the same people are there for him; if he knows that when he acts in a certain way, his parent(s) will respond in the same way as they did yesterday; if he knows that parents will support him if he wants to take on a challenge; that when scared or upset, someone will comfort him.

At a certain age, the child has to feel able enough to cope with more things in life on his own, knowing that his parents will be there for him if the going gets tough. He has to know that failing is not the worst thing in the world. If this security isn't there, the child may grow up unsure of himself; unsure of how to cope with set-backs; be scared of facing challenges and lacking in self-confidence.

Anyone who has had a secure childhood should feel very lucky. Life rarely works out perfectly – parents and grandparents may be ill, may die; may divorce; may have their own problems which prevent them giving the love and security their children need. The child may have to take on too much responsibility at too young an age. It seems likely that adults who have had an insecure childhood are more at risk of stress. It may act as an ‘Achilles Heel’ – a weak point which will be vulnerable when he meets problems in later life.

Modelling and Coping Skills

Children learn a great deal simply from watching how parents handle the world. If a young child picks up that a parent doesn’t handle the world well, the child may, without realising it, **model** (or copy) her behaviour on that of her parent. She may well learn to see the world (or parts of it) as a threatening place. Just as we hope to teach our children to accept the values and the standards we regard as important, we also need to teach them ways of coping with the stresses and problems of life.

These coping skills may stand the child or, later, the adult in good stead as they can be deployed as weapons to deal with the range of problems and stresses she is bound to come across in life. They may give her a sense of inner strength and a feeling that, in a jam, there are things that she can do to get through it. If they have not been learned, the child may feel that she lacks the ability to cope with problems. As a result, when problems arise, she may ‘go under’ without putting up a fight because she does not have the weapons (coping skills) to fight.

As an example of this, imagine the reactions of two adults who have just had the same Life Event – their marriages have just broken down. One comes from a secure childhood, one does not. Compare the way they react to the same event.

*“**This is awful**, I never wanted this to happen but things were going from bad to worse. Now is the time to end it. I’m very fragile and tense now. I know the next year is going to be rough but I will have to cope with it as best I can and I know I will get through this”.*

*“**This is awful**, I never wanted this to happen. It’s all my fault. I just want to run away from all of this. I’ll never marry again – it would just happen again. My life is always going to be a mess. I always screw things up. I’m so unhappy. I don’t know what to do”.*

Which approach do you identify with most? By understanding how these factors affect the way you look at the world and the way you look on yourself, you will better understand your reaction to Life Events. Let us now turn to the things which may **trigger** stress:

PART 2: TRIGGER FACTORS

Life Events

On the whole, routine is good for our sense of security. Of course, too much routine may lead to boredom and so we can also cope easily with making some changes in life. Indeed, we look forward to changes in routine – holidays, new jobs etc – but if too many things change in a short space of time (especially if we did not plan or want the change), most people are likely to go through a period when they are more vulnerable to a stress problem arising (we may be more vulnerable to minor illnesses such as colds and flu as well).

Page 6 shows some of the common Life Events. Think of how many Life Events you had in the year or so before your stress took off. Do you think they may help explain why you feel as you do now?

A life event is anything which happens to you that makes you change your routine. Stress often results when too many changes occur within too short a space of time.

Common sense tells us that bad events can cause stress, eg; the death of a loved one; losing a job. What isn't so easy to understand is that good events – having a much wanted baby; getting promotion at work – can also cause stress. The reason is that all of these will make your life change in some way.

A single Life Event often produces other Life Events in any case – pregnancy may lead to giving up your job, losing contact with workmates, having less money. Once the baby is born, your life will change significantly for example; sleep patterns will change, social life will be different, and your focus in life will have shifted.

Although stress can result from just one extreme Life Event, eg; being badly injured in an accident, it is much more common for it to be triggered by a combination of events. Each one, on its own, may not be enough to trigger stress. Indeed, it may be so trivial that you don't pay any attention to it. So, when you look back, you may not even recall it. It is the power of the events as a whole that can bring the stress to the surface.

Common Life Events

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| Death of spouse | Partner leaves work |
| Divorce | Retirement |
| Separation | Moving house |
| Excessive working | Pregnancy |
| Death in close family | Trouble with boss |
| Death of close friend | Sexual problems |
| Personal injury | Changes in social life |
| More arguments at home | Holiday |
| Change of job | Christmas |
| Great achievement | Birth in close family |
| Large mortgage | Change in finances |
| Child leaving home | Promotion |
| Partner begins work | Child starting school |
| Personal illness | Neighbour problems |
| Unemployment | Burglary |

Often the stress doesn't start when the Life Events occur. It is common to find a time lag between the event(s) and your stress reaction. This often puzzles people. It goes against common sense for your stress to occur when things may have died down. As is often the case in stress, common sense doesn't help much.

If you are under strain for whatever reason, you will do your best to keep going. All the time pressure may be slowly building up inside you. This pressure has to be released. So it may just be the final straw which releases the stress. If I can switch to the example of a volcano, nothing may show on the surface yet there can be a slow build-up of pressure under the surface which will, maybe without warning, erupt.

Conclusions

As we have seen, stress is often caused by **interaction** of the things which make you vulnerable – your biological make-up, childhood factors and the coping skills you have at hand. If you are more biologically prone to stress, then it may take fewer or less severe problems in childhood and fewer or less severe Life Events to trigger stress.

It is similar to a footballer who has a knee injury he got as a result of a bad tackle when he was 12 years old. As a result, he has built-in **vulnerability**. If things go well and if he keeps himself fit, he could play to the end of his career with no problems but it may take only one bad tackle or a series of hard tackles to put him out of the game for a while. He is carrying a vulnerability from his childhood which **might** affect him as an adult.

You do not need to have all of these factors present before stress can arise – people who are not biologically prone to stress, who had secure and happy childhoods – like Julie – also get stress. In their case, it may be that too many Life Events are the main cause of their problems.

Sometimes, a stress problem may result from a drip-drip effect of minor stresses – almost like water torture. If it goes on too long, you will 'break' at some point. You are no different from anyone else – we all have our own breaking point when our ability to cope is outweighed by the pressure placed on us. It is all a matter of balance. Treatment is aimed at restoring the balance in your favour.

Why stress takes the shape it does – phobias, panic, general worry etc., is not all that clear. Modelling factors may be important. Some of us may be more biologically prone to panic. Some, due to their personality, may be more prone to obsessional thoughts or social anxieties, for example.

Life Events may influence the way stress shows itself. So if one of your parents has died of a heart attack, you may pay more attention to (and fear) heart and chest symptoms of stress more than other signs. This may strengthen them. It may come down to the fact that we all may have our own 'Achilles Heel' – a weakness which stress attacks and it is this which determines the shape of the problem.

This supplement has shown that the causes of stress are complex. You may not be able to piece together all the factors in your own case. You may have forgotten them or, because they were so subtle, you may not have paid attention to them at the time. In any case, the causes are in the past (although there may be ongoing Life Events). In order to control stress, you must look at what is keeping it going.

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