



BodyWork

A s s o c i a t e s

Stress: Dispelling Misconceptions **By Doug Nelson**

Somewhere along the way, the meaning of the word stress went astray. Today, stress is usually considered a negative, and most active people view stress reduction as impractical at best. To better understand stress, we must first look at its history.

Stress research originated with Dr. Hans Selye, who won the 1950 Nobel Prize for his research. The concept of stress was new at the time, so Selye borrowed the term from mechanical engineering in an attempt to define the physiological response he was identifying. Ultimately, Selye pioneered a new field of human health, but the foundations of his research are often misunderstood, as is the effect of stress on the system.

What is stress?

Selye defined stress as simply the cost of adaptation. When the human nervous system senses change, a response is needed and adaptation is required. The collective cost of all adaptations is called stress. Selye made no mention of whether the stimulus (which can be emotional, mental or physical) was by nature good or bad; any change requires response and adaptation. Therefore, stress is simply responding to life, and life is stressful. Lack of stress is called rigor mortis. Not much of a choice!

Many people become “turned off” when someone talks about the evils of stress. Others believe if you simply breathe deeply, life will be better. But, breathing deeply isn’t enough. So, how do we reduce stress—close a business, sell the house, get rid of the pets?

With today’s hectic pace of life, there is an imperative for every leader (in any field of endeavor) to understand and deal with stress appropriately. Here are a few points to consider:

- **Stress is cumulative.** The initial effect of stress is to stimulate the system, much the way a performer is energized by adrenaline before a performance. If that adrenaline rush lasts too long, or is too intense, performance suffers. The cost of adaptation is cumulative; unrelenting stress will damage the system over time.
- **Bodies are battlegrounds.** Have you ever come home after a tough day and said, “Wow, it’s a war out there”? The battleground of this war is your own body. Each skirmish, each victory or defeat, leaves a few casualties on the battlefield. Eventually, the “wounded”

are strewn everywhere. Self-care approaches, such as physical or playful activities, clear the field (body) and are enormously helpful in reducing the harmful effects of stress.

- **Stress can be managed.** To attempt to eliminate stress completely is misguided. Every active person must learn to intelligently address the cumulative residual effects of stress and find reasonable methods to manage it. What works for one person may not work for another, but understanding and committing to a method that works for you can help improve performance, productivity and overall health.

Let's face it: For a boat to push forward in the water, waves must be created. Boats that do not move in an effort to avoid stress may as well be called docks. Those of us with a mission in life don't want to sit, we want to sail! Sailing can be stressful. Managing stress shouldn't be.