The Stress Response & its Functions

Although most people talk at least occasionally about being “stressed” at work, we may not always clear about what exactly stress is. Stress can very simply be defined as demands on us (emotional, cognitive, physical) that at any point in time exceed our resources to deal comfortably with them. Stress comes from both good and bad things that happen to us – e.g., a chronic illness, a wedding, a death and a promotion can all be sources of stress.

The Stress Response

When we experience a stressor, our body undergoes a series of physiological changes known together as the “stress response”. There are three key stages to the stress response (see www.cmha.ca → Your Mental Health → Stress).

- **Stage 1 – Energy Mobilization**
  The human body responds to stress by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The adrenal glands release adrenaline and cortisol, which leads to physiological changes such as increased heart rate, facial flushing, increased blood pressure, and increased rate of breathing. Blood vessels open wider (to allow more blood flow to large muscle groups, putting our muscles on alert). Pupils dilate (to improve vision). The liver releases stored glucose (to increase the body’s energy). Sweat is produced (to cool the body). All of these physical changes prepare a person to react quickly and effectively to handle the pressure of the moment.

- **Stage 2 – Consumption of Energy Stores**
  If the stress continues, the body starts to use existing energy stores (e.g., releasing stored sugars and fats). Side effects include feeling driven, pressured and fatigued. You may begin to engage in behaviours (drinking coffee, smoking, and drinking alcohol) without healthy moderation. You may also experience ongoing anxiety, attention/concentration problems, difficulty with sleep, and be more likely to become sick (cold or flu).

- **Stage 3 - Draining of Energy Stores**
  If stress continues, your body’s need for energy will become greater than its ability to produce that energy, and chronic stress may result. You may experience chronic insomnia, ongoing errors in judgment, and changes in personality (e.g., increased irritability, frustration, anger, depression). You may also develop a serious health condition (e.g., heart disease, ulcers, clinical depression or anxiety).

Functions of the Stress Response
The stress response (and associated worry and anxiety) can be essential for our survival. It is important to remember that the stress response serves several important functions:

1. It can **motivate** actions that are essential to our survival (i.e., a “fight, flight or freeze” response).
2. It can **communicate** to those in our environment that we are dealing with stressors and that we need support.
3. It can serve a **self-validating** function (i.e., tells us something important in our life is changing or is affected, and helps us learn how to deal with recurrent stressors over time).

We are all faced with stressors on a daily basis...“stressors” very simply become “stressful” when we are not sure how to handle an event or a situation or when our worry or anxiety associated with that stressor fails to serve an ongoing purpose.

The types of situations that cause stress for you may not be a problem for certain other people, and things that cause other people stress may not worry you at all. It is how you think about and react to events that determine whether you experience them as stressful or easily manageable.

The information handouts **Tips for Stress Management** and **Stress Reduction and the Power of Thought** provide strategies to effectively manage stress.