

## **TEACHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **WHAT IS STRESS?**

**CONCEPT:** Stress is not entirely bad. Everyone is under stress at all times, even when we are asleep. Some stress in our lives is necessary to keep us alert, vital, and interested in what we are doing. Too little stress makes people bored and depressed. Too much stress can cause people to "burn out", become ill or even die.

Stress has been defined by Dr. Hans Selye, the father of stress research, as "a non-specific response of the body to any demand made on it." Drawing from research that goes back to the 1930's, we have reason to believe that stress is the cause of many diseases. Medical proof exists that indicates we experience a dramatic rise in cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure levels while we are under stress.

The body's initial reaction to any stress is alarm--a chemical rallying of the body's defenses. This is not harmful when it happens every now and then, but when the stress is constant and continued over a long period of time, the stress then becomes destructive, draining the body of its ability to defend itself.

### **Two Kinds of Stress**

There are two kinds of stress: 1) good stress (eustress), and 2) bad stress (distress). Stress is caused by life-changing events--events which somehow require readjustment on our part. The life-changing event may be either pleasant (e.g., a wedding, special date, etc.) or unpleasant (e.g., the death of a family member, divorce, etc.). Regardless of the kind of life-changing event we experience, our body is still subject to the stress that accompanies the event. Your perception of the life-changing event you are encountering is an important factor in determining the degree of stress you suffer.

If managed properly, stress can be good for us. For this to happen, we must first become completely aware of the stressors in our lives. Stressors may be found anywhere--at home or school, with friends, etc. You must honestly examine your life and identify those things, both positive and negative, that are causing you stress. Since we can't always control other people's behaviors or events that happen, we must realize that we can only control our reaction or reactions to those behaviors or events.

The body has conditioned itself to produce what has been called a "fight/flight" response to stress. In ancient times, primitive man would either attack or retreat from a threatening situation. Today, our 20th century society does not allow us to react instinctively in the same way; we fight or retreat through our behavior or physical actions. The physical reaction is most often internal and the retreat attitudinal.

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This often results in damage to one or many physical systems of the body (circulatory, digestive, etc.) and/or to the emotional and psychological well-being of the individual.

#### Signs of Stress

When individuals are feeling the effects of too much stress, they often describe their feelings in terms of physical, emotional, or behavioral reactions. You may feel uptight, pressured, or anxious. You may feel tense, have butterflies, or cry a lot. Stress can manifest itself in a variety of ways that may affect one's behavior or physical and mental health. The signs of stress are depicted like this:

Physical Signs:	How you look
Emotional Signs:	How you feel
Behavioral Signs:	How you act

#### Causes of Stress

Stress can be experienced in many areas of a person's life. Once you understand the definition and signs of stress, you can identify typical situations that cause stress in your life. You typically experience stress in one or more of the following areas: 1) in school, 2) with your family, 3) with friends, 4) at work, or 5) in the larger environment. At other times, stress is caused by poor time management, or even by being recognized for outstanding achievement. Stress may be experienced in different categories over time, depending on the individual and the stage of life.

#### Facts About Stress

We often tend to focus on the negative aspects of stress and sometimes fail to recognize the positive effects that stress can have on a person's life. It can motivate us to do our best and stimulate us. Individuals vary in the ways they perceive stress. The amount, intensity, and duration of stressful situations can determine whether a person experiences positive or negative effects. Just as people are different, the amount of stress that each person can adequately manage varies from person to person. Stress tends to vary with situations. At one time in a person's life an event may be perceived as stressful, while at another point in time, the same event is not perceived this way.

#### Coping With Stress

Self-awareness is the first step in coping with stress. The goal of stress management is not total elimination of stress, but the ability to manage it in a positive way so that physical and emotional health are not impaired. Through diet, exercise, regular sleep, and relaxation, stress can be controlled to a degree. Another way to manage stress is to have good interpersonal relationship skills. Time management skills are a third way that individuals can control stress, such as establishing routines, setting priorities, and taking advantage of periods of the day when one works best.