

Measurement of Stress



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KEYWORDS

- Stress • Stressor • Measurement of stress • Assessment • Physiologic tradition
- Psychological tradition • Environmental tradition • Mind-body

KEY POINTS

- The popular definition of stress is very different from the scientific definition, and even in the scientific community different fields and specialties define stress in different ways.
- Stress affects how a person performs (behaviors), how a person feels (emotions), and what bodily responses (neurophysiological) are endorsed. All 3 components should be evaluated using a heuristic/holistic approach to understanding health and disease.
- Life changes affect physical and emotional health. Those who experience more life stress are at increased risk for health problems. Specifically, increased life stressors can lead to weakened immune systems and increased vulnerability for chronic diseases.
- There several ways to measure stress. However, the exact way depends on several factors including the questions being raised, the chief complaints of the person affected, the potential impact on a stated person, the socioeconomic experience of the person, the different kind of life events to which the person is exposed, coping resources, resilience, and opportunity for growth.
- Physiological changes in response to stress can be easily evaluated through blood, urine, saliva, and proxy autonomic measures. The psychological impact of stress, on the other hand, can be obtained through observation, checklists, self-report methods, and interviews.

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Abbreviations	
ACTH	Adrenocorticotrophic hormone (corticotropin)
BF	Biofeedback
DHS	Daily Hassles Scale
DUS	Daily Uplifts Scale
ECG	Electrocardiogram
FPG	Finger plethysmography
GAS	General adaptation syndrome
HPA	Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal
HRV	Heart rate variability
IBA	Investigator-based assessment
IBR	Interview-based rating
LDL	Low-density lipoprotein
LEDS	Life Events and Difficulties Schedule
PCP	Primary care physician
RR	Respiratory rate
SAM	Sympathetic-adrenal-medullary
SRE	Schedule of Recent Experiences

THE STRESS PERSPECTIVES

CLINICAL VIGNETTE: RITA

Rita is a 32-year-old woman who recently had a baby boy. She is breastfeeding at this time. Rita has always been a healthy woman. Before getting pregnant, Rita would be cautious about what she ate and would work out 5 times a week. She was also very careful about her health during pregnancy and would participate in yoga classes 3 times a week. On a personal level, Rita has been married for 7 years. Her baby boy is the couple's first child. Her husband is the CEO of at a large corporation, which requires him to work around 60 hours a week. Rita herself has been a very driven woman when it comes to her career. For the past 10 years, she has worked as a lawyer at a high-powered firm that specializes in corporate fraud and other white-collar crimes. For years, she worked 12-hour days and had proved herself to be a top-notch competitor for the next opening as partner in the firm (which is scheduled to take place within the next 10 months of the evaluation). For Rita, having taken time off from work because of maternity leave was a strange sensation. In reality, she had never been away from work for more than 1 consecutive week. After the 3-month leave, Rita was finally back in the office. She had been hoping for this day for a couple of weeks and had expected it to be a joyous occasion. It was not. In fact, today she arrived to see her primary care provider (PCP) reporting several changes in her body and overall health. "Something is terribly wrong," she exclaimed. She noticed that these changes began 2 weeks after returning to work 2 months ago. She is concerned about what these changes might mean. Specifically, she is worried that she might have a terrible illness and that she may not be able to take care of her family nor have success in her professional life. She seeks medical advice, wanting to understand the etiology of such complaints and eager to discuss possible treatment alternatives.

Stress

Stress is a popular topic nowadays and has long been a subject of study.¹⁻⁴ Despite its popularity the concept of stress is not properly understood by all, and has therefore been conceptualized in different ways. Commonly stress is a term that comes from physics, and is thus conceptualized as a pressure, force, or demand placed on the body of an organism. It is a force that triggers a type of reaction that might indicate that a person is feeling some sort of strain.⁵ This pressure allows a person to respond either by adapting or adjusting to these life demands. In scientific terms, stress has

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