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Stress Response

The notion that stress affects health is certainly not a novel concept, as it has been in the health literature since the 1950s. It is well established that living with chronic stressors --- circumstances that remain constant from day to day (e.g., low socioeconomic status, caregiving for a person with dementia) --- is associated with poorer health.

Daily stressors, as distinct from chronic stressors, are the more minor but perhaps frequent challenges in life that may be predictable (e.g., needing to rush to pick up children from school) or unpredictable (additional work due to a co-worker's illness). Daily stressors are reported as occurring for individuals on approximately 30-40% of days. On days when such stressors occur, people tend to report more symptoms of poor health, and physiological changes (e.g., increased cortisol) associated with poorer health are found on such days.

While a potential stressor is an event or circumstance, whether or not an individual experiences stress depends upon psychological factors. A simple and common model to describe this process is as follows. Stress is experienced if an event or situation is appraised as potentially threatening or harmful, and the individual believes that she/he does not have the resources to cope with the threatening circumstance. The perception that demands exceed resources results in the experience of stress. What this means is that exposure to a potential stressor is distinct from one's reaction to the situation.

A study reported in the current issue of the Annals of Behavioral Medicine examined adults' reports of daily stressors

(stressor exposure) and the experience of negative emotions in response to these stressors (stressor reactivity), which were obtained in the mid-1990s. They also looked at these adults' health status in the mid-2000s, especially the presence of chronic illness. The investigators found that there was no increase in chronic illness associated with simple exposure to daily stressors 10 years earlier. However, those adults who tended to have greater negative emotional reactions to the presence of daily stressors did have more chronic illness. In other words, for these adults, simply having daily stressors in life wasn't associated with more health problems years later, but having negative emotional reactions to these stressors was associated with poorer health in the future. The category of chronic illnesses most closely related to stressor reactivity was gastrointestinal disorders.

The implication of the study is that how we cope with life's daily stressors matters for health. Learning to take daily stressors in stride and managing problems without strong negative emotions seems to have health advantages. This isn't to suggest that experiencing negative emotions is a bad thing, but rather that habitually getting upset with the frequent challenges in life (whether predictable or not) appears to come with health consequences.

Given that chronic health problems are costly, both in dollars and quality of life, managing daily hassles with less negative emotion is an important investment. One starting point can be learning to be more discriminating about whether a problem is truly a threat or whether it rather is a common challenge that one is capable of handling. Many daily stressors are just that --- inconveniences rather than threats.

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