

STRESS: GOOD VS. BAD



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local
expert

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Have you ever heard anyone say, "I have so much stress, isn't that great?" Probably not. Most of us think of stress as negative and something we need to rid ourselves of. Though it's important to lower your bad or negative stress, it's equally important to increase your positive or good stress. Most people do not separate stress into good and bad. Increasing self-awareness and learning to manage symptoms is key to maintaining your emotional well being.

Stress is defined as anything that alters your homeostasis — good or bad. Bad stress is created when something (a situation or relationship) feels out of your control. Good stress usually involves that which you perceive to be within your

control, such as an assignment at school or a project at work that you can accomplish by working hard. Here's great news: you have control if you have self-awareness. Learning how to respond in a difficult situation or with a difficult person will help to reduce your bad stress, even if you can't change the person or situation. There is always some part of a situation which you can own and work on changing (good stress). Sometimes that will be something within yourself.

Let's use the story of a caterpillar as it turns into a butterfly. The caterpillar needs to experience the struggle of freeing itself from the cocoon. Without struggle, a caterpillar will not fully develop into a butterfly. The same can be

said of people. Without stress, a student would probably not study for exams and push themselves. Without the stress of deadlines, you may not reach your goals.

Stress can sometimes energize you and help you get things done more efficiently, but it can also paralyze you. Learn to view stress as useful information — it's a signpost. Where is it pointing? Is the stress helping you to reach your personal or professional goals or is it keeping you from functioning, causing you to shut down emotionally or physically? It's true that too much stress, whether good or bad, can cause the body to shut down. Pay attention to your body and if you're having health problems or you keep having tension headaches or unexplained back pain, it may be an indication that your stress level is too high. The problem with many women is that we are good at multitasking and being all things to all people. So much so that we can easily push past those early warning signs as we

head for a breakdown. Before there is depression and anxiety there is stress. In fact, stress and feeling overwhelmed are the complaints I hear most from my clients.

Let's talk about your children. Guess what? They also feel stress but they are unlikely to be able to name their feelings correctly. Children, like adults, will present with irritability, anger, and annoyance when their stress level gets too high. Helping your child to name their feelings and incorporate stress reducing activities (such as old fashioned play time) in their day will help them in becoming stress resilient. Children with high levels of stress will often present with headaches, stomach aches, and poor sleep. The physical symptoms are usually easier to notice.

Stress is contagious. Have you ever been around someone who is always stressed out and worrying? Do you feel stressed in their presence? I do. On

"STRESS IS CONTAGIOUS."

the flip side, if you surround yourself with people who have learned to deal effectively with stress, you are likely to feel calmer. Children are particularly susceptible to feeling the stress of their parents. I hear many parents complain that their kids really don't have anything to be stressed about. This is

unfair. Children and teens have worries, friendship problems, fears, social media stress, etc. Stress affects everyone regardless of age. Children can even feel stress more deeply since they have little control over their environment.

How do you handle stress? Do you internalize or externalize stress? Women are more likely to internalize stress which can manifest in the form of anxiety, depression and emotional eating. Men are more likely to externalize stress which can manifest in the form of addictions, anger issues, and working too much.

We can't discuss stress without focusing on self-care, which is a key component of good mental health. Regardless of whether you have good stress or bad stress, you will need to implement self-care and self-compassion. I define self-care as being good to yourself. This includes speaking kindly to yourself (no harsh criticism) and engaging in activities that bring you joy or calm you down. For me, self-care starts with saying no to others when I'm asked to do something that will cause me stress. When I say no to others, I am saying yes to myself. This is good advice for anyone who tends to be a people pleaser. Self care is not being selfish.

As with all things in life and mental health, you must stay in the self-awareness zone to maintain your mental and emotional stability and be able to care for those around you. ♦