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For a second leader faced with a similar change decision, he will follow an entirely different road – one that is laced with **pessimism and hopelessness**. Even though there are many unknowns, he instead has already made up his mind that terrible things are about to occur, and as a result his thinking becomes convoluted with negative thoughts, and his actions become haphazard (i.e., not paying attention to important details) and maybe even reckless (i.e. drinking to numb the anxiety). Consequently, he “stresses” terribly over the situation, does not adequately review all options, is shoddy in his work, does not eat right, sleep, or exercise, and finally comes up with a decision that he has not sold himself on, yet still has to sell to others. In this example, there is no conviction in his decision, and his colleagues and subordinates are less-than-convinced in his judgment making ability, resulting in even more conflict, anxiety, and you guessed it – STRESS!!!

Human perception plays a big role in how we appraise situations, and consequently what we do after our initial appraisals are made. This is not to say that all psychopathology would go away if we just looked at the world with an optimistic, confident view; but what it does suggest is that our human perception – *something we have 100% under our complete control* - has a direct and major impact on level of our human wellness! Looking for “silver linings” through a realistic world lens is a healthy thing for people to do, and does not mean that you are irresponsible, short-sighted, or not qualified to make big, important decisions in your life. Even in the toughest of times, human beings have always shown resiliency and the ability to fight back, and often good results have followed!

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Tips & Strategies

- Realize that stress impacts people in many different ways, including through thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.
- Often our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors follow the path *we want them to go* – quite simply, view the things in your life as challenges and they will go in a positive, constructive direction; or view things as threats and they will go in a negative, destructive direction.
- Human perception is an individual experience that can be modified and tweaked so that what you “see” is a healthy battle and not a negative, destructive force. Like the saying goes, “One man’s garbage is another man’s treasure.” In fact, e-bay exists because what is perceived as useless to one person is often of great value to another!
- Your thinking impacts your behaviors, while your behaviors impact your thinking. For example, simply thinking about good things will turn negative anxiety into positive arousal (adrenaline). On the other hand, sometimes making yourself do something (i.e. go to the gym) will result in a healthy change in thinking (i.e. feeling great after a good, healthy sweat). The good news is that you control both your thinking and behaviors!
Don’t take for granted how much you control your own wellness, happiness, and even stress levels. By taking control of your life, perceiving the world around you accurately and with a positive enthusiasm, and setting goals for life success, you will experience less negative stress and more life success!

Additional Links

http://www.lessons4living.com/stress_test.htm (A simple stress test)

<http://www.stress-management.net/stress-test.htm> (The Holmes Rahe stress test)

http://www.thedoctorwillseeyounow.com/articles/behavior/stress_3/ (responses to stress article)



Presents:

Stress & Human Perception

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Educational Council is sponsoring two seminars focused on Balance, Wellness and Life Success!

Check out our website to register for and get information on these seminars: www.edcouncil.org

- Optimal Balance
- Changing Habit for Life Success

Stay tuned for next months article on *Stress Inoculation for Peak Performance!*

More Information

Each month Dr. Chris Stankovich writes a newsletter for the Educational Council of Franklin County along the topics of balance, wellness, and life success. To learn more about his products, counseling services, or professional consultation, please visit www.drstankovich.com or email chris@drstankovich.com



Stress & Human Perception

This month's topic is a general overview of stress and human perception, with future newsletters delving into more of the specifics associated with stress. These will include types of stress, variables that mediate stress recovery, and healthy and effective coping responses.

"I'm So Stressed Out!"

When you think of the word "stress," what immediately comes to mind? For many people, the *symptoms* of stress are usually first described (i.e. headaches, upset stomach, loss of sleep, etc.), but when it comes to exactly what stress is, it is often quite difficult to describe. In fact, in reviewing the dozens of Introductory Psychology textbooks I own for a mutually agreed upon definition, I was amazed at how different and varied each author was in his or her description of stress.

Stress Impacts Everything We Do

As a result of these varying opinions, I decided a fairly good "hybrid" definition is that stress is a *psychological, emotional, and behavioral response to a perceived threat, characterized by the perception of changes in habits and rituals and exacerbated by loss of control*. In other words, we "stress" when we feel threatened and think we are losing control and potentially helpless,

and our reaction to the threat is typically manifested through our **thoughts** ("What am I going to do about this?"), our **emotions** ("I feel very sad and depressed about the situation"), and our **behaviors** ("I don't have time to get to the gym, but I do have time for a quick drink after work"). If these reactions continue over time, many bad things can occur, including mental and physical health issues, as well as drug/alcohol dependence in response to coping with the stressor(s). The perception of something stressful activates many adaptive responses within the body, sometimes leading to headaches, stomach aches, and ulcers.

Clinical Psychopathology

Two of the more common mental issues that can occur as a result of perceived stress include **anxiety** and **depression**. While it can certainly be argued that human psychopathological conditions, like anxiety and depression, may be more organically based (genetic in nature); most experts would still agree that how one *deals* with stress is often the true mechanism and catalyst for shifts in mood state and arousal levels (upward and downward). In other words, for most people their symptoms will temper when they feel good and are in control of their life, and their symptoms will "spike" when they feel out of control, hopeless, and threatened by the stressor(s).

Human Perception & Stress

The following is a simple example of how human perception directly activates the stress response cycle. When a person feels **challenged** by something, a **positive adrenaline rush** usually occurs, leading to increased self-confidence and greater motivation and resiliency. Conversely, when a person feels **threatened** by something, the exact opposite occurs with the result often being **negative, counterproductive anxiousness, physical tremors, and a host of other behavioral symptoms (i.e. becoming sick)**.

Amazingly, two people can have the same exact task in front of them, but one will perceive the situation as a **challenge**, while the other will see it as a **threat**. Take for example a leadership task of making changes at the workplace. Obviously, nobody likes to deliver bad news, but we all realize it is sometimes a reality in life. For one leader, she may view the situation **optimistically** and challenge herself to "roll up her sleeves" and make the best of a tough situation. In this example, she might prepare for this task by eating right, exercising, developing a game plan after carefully reviewing options, finally deciding on the best course of action. From there, she will prepare to communicate the changes with the best intentions in mind and with compassion in her delivery, always looking for ways to continue to grow in a positive direction for the future.