Stress: The Steady Killer

By Meghan Goddard

One factor all humans are forced to deal with is stress. Stress sets us apart from most other species. Humans have the highest rate of stress related diseases (Goudarzi). Many modern and prevalent diseases are caused or worsened by stress, such as Alzheimer’s, heart disease, high blood pressure, flu virus, and diabetes. Even in a physically active occupation, stress can negate the benefits of the exercise. These diseases caused by stress are consistent throughout variations in age, sex, BMI, and exercise, proving it is an issue us effecting all (Bryner).

A study on Israeli workers from 1998 to 2003 tested the subjects on job burnout, which is a state of emotional, physical, or mental exhaustion associated with workplace followed by feelings of incompetence and lack of value in one’s work (Mayo clinic). The study found half of their sample of 677 workers of mixed occupations, and mixed levels of control in the workplace, had developed burnout. Of those, 17 had developed Type 2 diabetes in those five years, which is 3.2% of the burnout workers. Researchers believe stress triggers factors of diabetes such as a decrease in necessary cholesterol, along with a large increase in fatty acids in the blood (Bryner). Stress can also be detrimental by the unhealthy behaviors we carryout to cope with different life stressors. Often poor eating habits, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, having a sedentary life style, etc. are used to cope with stress (Dotinga). These can also lead to illnesses like diabetes and cancer. Stress in general can disturb the body’s glucose production, one of the most important processes in the human body (Bryner). All of which can be damaging to our physical health.

A study at Indiana University found that low control in a stressful workplace correlates with stress related disease and even death. Essentially, the less control one has, the younger they die. Comparably, those in high demand jobs who did have high control, decreased their chances of death during the study by 34%. A study at Wisconsin also showed that a higher percentage of workers with less control over their stress provoking jobs are overweight. This is compared to those in control of setting their own goals and make their own decisions on executing and prioritizing work. The low control jobs were those of less power, such as construction workers, mechanics, and nursing aids, while the high-control jobs were mostly supervisors, inspectors, and craftsmen. In this study, the low control had a 15.4% higher likelihood of death compared to the high control. Critiques of this study say these high control jobs tend to come with more responsibility and therefore are more stressful. However, Dr. Gonzalez-Mule argues that this is a different form of stress. The pressure to work fast and concentrate, in fact results in feelings of accomplishment. Joshua Klapow, a clinical psychologist at the University of Alabama, claims it is not about the pressure of amount of work or difficulty of work, but the actual *control* the employee has over outcomes and decisions. They suggest employees setting their own schedules may reduce this stress in the workplace (Dotinga).

These articles fail to go into deep detail about mental health. There is no doubt that stress can affect one’s mentality. It can lead to depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses. This is something unique to primates. Stanford University neuroscientist, Robert Sapolsky does however mention that although as a species we struggle most with feelings of stress, we often have positive coping methods that no other animal can experience. He makes an inspiring point, that

*“…there's no primate out there that can feel better in life just by listening to Beethoven”*

We are able to find comfort through outlets and others that other animals lack. Feelings of connection and knowing other people feel as we do, reduces stress and is unique to humans (Goudarzi).

 Although most studies revolve around stress from the workplace, students deal with a great deal of stress themselves. Most of us have never met a college student who said they were not stressed. Exams, deadlines, extracurricular activities, GPAs, debt, maintaining a social life, forming relationships, and all other stressors could be cutting time off of our lives as university students as well. This is a positive reminder to work toward your career goals in doing something you love that will not stress you out for the rest of your life. Be the doctors, nurses, lawyers, artists, CEOs, teachers, and engineers that we are all stressing out trying to be, so you can have your control and enjoy your life to avoid burnout. It is also important to keep in mind while working our way to these positions, that there needs to be a healthy outlet. Joining a club that you genuinely enjoy or find a hobby you can continue with when your future career gets too stressful and your boss is too controlling as an outlet. This can avoid diseases associated with stress, but also unhealthy habits that typically result from it.

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