

Handout 1.1: Common Myths About Stress

Myth 1: Most stress is caused outside of ourselves.

Do people stress you out? Does traffic stress you out? Does snow stress you out?

Usually, people will answer yes to these questions. Yet, in actuality, stress comes from within ourselves—not from the outside.

The truth is that no one has the power to make you stressed unless you give it to them. Traffic is just traffic. If you were a traffic control officer, that would be your livelihood—no traffic, no job. Likewise, if you were a ski instructor or lift operator, no snow would mean no work. Talk about stress!

Myth 2: Stress is not controllable—it controls us.

Our stress is largely a result of our interpretations. By controlling our perceptions, we control our stress.

Still not sure? Consider the following example.

Imagine that you're taking a shower and the water is lukewarm. Many of us would feel very stressed and experience a range of emotions on a continuum from annoyance to outright anger. It could prove to be a stressful start to what would otherwise be an uneventful day. Now, consider the same shower with the same water temperature. However, this time you know that the hot water heater is broken and expect that the water will be cold until the repairman comes later in the day. The same lukewarm water, expected to be cold, is a positive surprise rather than a source of annoyance. Thus, the negative stress is replaced by a sense of relief, and you enjoy your shower with a sense of gratitude.

Myth 3: Most people find the same things stressful.

Stress is not the same for everyone—and the greater the degree of baseline resiliency a person possesses, the more he or she will find stress motivating rather than debilitating. Consider the adage "One's man's meat is another man's poison." What is stressful for one person is invigorating for another. Whereas some of us find the idea of skydiving, zip-lining, or skiing on an expert trail terrifying, a more adventurous soul will be exhilarated by the stress. Some people seek to repeat the very same experiences that many of us would avoid at all costs.

Myth 4: Stress is bad for you.

Despite the common misperception, stress is not bad for you. To quote Hans Selye, the pioneer of the study of stress, "Stress is the spice of life." We need stress to feel engaged. In fact, trying to escape or avoid stress will make life more stressful!

Selye differentiated between negative and positive stress: He actually referred to positive stress as "Eustress" and referred to negative stress as "Distress." Thus, stress is not good or bad—it just *is*. It is our perceptions that make it seem bad! According to Selye, "Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one."

Myth 5: Stress interferes with success.

Negative stress can be debilitating, but stress itself is not inherently bad. It's stress that is not properly managed that leads to impairment, illness, and even death. Positive stress, however, can be exhilarating and motivating. From youth soccer to the NFL—and everywhere in between—stress motivates players to win. Would people buy high-priced tickets to watch their favorite major league sports team play if they already knew the outcome of the game? Would we really want to know the score ahead of time? What makes watching a game exciting and thrilling is the stress of the unknown.

Myth 6: Stress is hazardous to your health.

Stress, in itself, is not necessarily hazardous. It's how you adapt to stress that determines whether it affects your mind and body. For example, for the Type A stress-ridden personality, there is a correlation between being hard driving and experiencing heart disease, high blood pressure, and even early death. In contrast, the Type B personality is considered to be more relaxed and low-key, and was once thought to be associated with a longer life. However, later studies have shown that it is really the hostility factor that determines whether stress is actually detrimental to our health. Unbridled hostility and anger have been found to be the factors that determine whether stress motivates you or breaks you down. Your anger level is really the determinant—not the stress itself.