

STRESS – SOME BASICS (Alan Craddock PhD)

What is Stress?

In psychology or biology stress "...is a strain or interference that disturbs the functioning of an organism. The human being responds to physical and psychological stress with a combination of psychic and physiological defenses" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1999).

The factors that cause strain or interference are called stressors. When working with the Customized Version of PREPARE, individuals read through a checklist of 25 items (stressors) and indicate how often each "has caused them stress" over the past year.

How does stress relate to satisfaction?

The functionality of responses to stressors follows an inverted U-shape:

- Very low levels of stress associated with boredom
- Very high levels associated with discomfort.
- Moderately low levels of stress are associated with comfort and moderately high levels with excitement.

People are likely to be bored if stressors are non-existent or are of very low impact. They will experience discomfort when the stressors have a high impact. Hans Selye proposed a "general adaptation syndrome" in which responses to very high-level stressors follow this pattern:

*ALARM --> RESISTANCE --> RESISTANCE --> EXHAUSTION
DEPLETION*

The Customized Version provides the partners' personal stress profiles based on their responses to the checklist. In couple-work it is useful to identify the stage of stress they are in and the nature of their main stressor(s) to provide a clearer and more exact context in which to help them begin reflecting on what kinds of action plans are most likely to be beneficial to them.

Types of stressors:

Physiological	Inner-Psychological	External Demands
eg. Heat/cold	Expectations	Relational conflict
Sickness	Fears	Abuse
Noise	Low self-esteem	Events to organize
Tiredness	Uncertainty	Financial demands

Polarities in stressor characteristics:

- Internal vs. external (locus)
- Normative vs. non-normative (normal/common vs. unusual/rare)
- Ambiguous vs. non-ambiguous (degree of clarity)
- Volitional vs. non-volitional (extent of controllability)
- Chronic vs. acute (slow onset/buildup - long duration vs. sudden onset and short-term severe)
- Cumulative vs. isolated (stressors combining and building-up vs. stand-alone stressors)

Stressor Reduction – Action Plans:

As a couple ...

Identify a source of stress – consider the personal attitudes that are associated with it.

Then develop a plan that...

- Is stressor related (eliminate or modify the stressor).
- Is response related (changing one's reactions to stress).
- Includes necessary attitude-changes considerations (changing one's beliefs+feelings about the stressor and or the reactions to stress).

Implement the plan(s).

Monitor the effects of the plan(s).

Evaluate and fine-tune as required.