Stress or Pressure?

By Lehan Stemmet, Ph.D.

We often hear people say that they or others are under a lot of stress or feel very stressed. Technically speaking this is not a very accurate description. There seems to be quite a bit of confusion about the definition and meaning of stress. I notice this confusion even in published peer-reviewed research. In my experience people describe stress in three basic ways as briefly outlined below.

They call the event, other person, and other external things stressful and therefore describe it as stress. It is referred to as the stress stimulus. The problem with this view of stress is that not everyone experiences the same level of stress as a result of the same event, person or other external thing. Therefore stress cannot reliably be defined in terms of the stimulus.

Others say stress is the response to the stimulus. Technically this is also not really possible and an accurate way to describe stress because often the same response may actually relate to different stimuli. For example, the physiological response we notice in anxious people is quite similar to the physiological response when the same people are excited. When people feel anxious or excited their blood pressure rises, their heart rate goes up and so on.

The third way stress is often described is a combination of the stimulus and response. My view is that this is also not accurate because if it isn't the stimulus and also not the response, then to say it is a combination of the two introduces two inconsistent definitions to come up with a third unclear and inconsistent definition.

By far the best definition I have heard of stress is that it is continuing to ruminate about emotional upsets. Professor Derek Roger is a world leader on the topic of stress and rumination and this definition forms part of the 'Challenge of Change' training programme he developed over many years. We know that rumination prolongs physiological arousal beyond what is necessary and that the impact of a prolonged physiological stress response is in the least not beneficial, and very unhealthy in the longer term. Ruminating about the future seems particularly unhealthy both physically and psychologically[1].

So, if the stimulus and response cannot be defined as stress or the reason why we should experience stress; what is it? Here I also like Professor Derek Roger's description of it being pressure and that we need to distinguish between pressure and stress. In other words, most of

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[1] See for e.g.: Stemmet, L., Roger, D., Kuntz, J., & Borrill, J. (2018). Ruminating about the past or ruminating about the future – which has the biggest impact on health. An exploratory study. *Current Psychology*, DOI: 10.1007/s12144-018-9781-2.

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what we experience daily at work, in our families, traffic, etc is actually only pressure. We need pressure to perform and to get things done, but it turns into a stress response when we add negative emotion to it. When we continue to add negative emotion to the pressure we experience we call it rumination and that is when hormones like cortisol remain in our system at elevated levels for unnecessarily prolonged periods. I have contested the idea of naming these hormones 'stress hormones' for a long time and when I met Professor Derek Roger he agreed that these hormones are simply hormones secreted to help us do what we need to do and that the term 'stress hormones' is very inaccurate.

In my view, then, a stress response is not when adrenalin, cortisol, etc is secreted at elevated levels, but when it is secreted at elevated levels for periods longer than they need to in order to help us perform under pressure. In fact, in a peer reviewed research article[2] we published in 2018 we defined 'acute stress' as pressure and 'chronic stress' as stress to distinguish between short-term pressure (in other words, a demand to get things done), and ruminating about the future as stress which leads to a prolonged physiological response. This prolonged physiological response has been linked to all sorts of negative physical and psychological health consequences, including anxiety, depression, physical symptoms associated with psychological distress, deliberate self-harm, etc.

In summary, then, what things in your life and day could you look at more from a perspective of pressure rather than it being stressors? What things could you simply put on a priority list and focus on getting it done to relieve the pressure and where can you enlist the help of others to help relieve the pressure? How much of the pressure you experience is self-inflicted and where can you prioritise urgent and important things in your life over urgent and unimportant things? This is important because none of us can manage time – we have a fixed number of hours in each day. But, we are able to manage our priorities.

The truth is that comparatively and proportionately very view of us experience truly stressful events and for prolonged periods of time. Not everything is life-threatening, so why allow yourself to get so worked up about it or continue to ruminate about it? In the words of Professor Derek Roger: "Stress results in a short miserable life… or if you have good genes, a long miserable life."

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