Stress

Stress is harmful physical or emotional arousal and responses that occur when faced with threatening events in the environment (stressors).

Periods of our lives are more stressful than other including
- Death of a family member or close friend
- Personal injury/disability
- Job loss

Positive life changes can be stressful as well including
- Starting a new job
- Moving house
- Going out with a new partner
- Doing something daring

Physiological arousal does occur by itself. Biological, psychological and social factors all play a part. Events themselves don’t cause stress rather the way we perceive and deal with situations. Stress can be gradual and therefore many people are unaware they suffer from stress.

When the body is challenged, the brain activates the autonomic nervous system (ANS), the involuntary system of nerves which controls and stimulates the output of two hormones, cortisol from the adrenal cortex and adrenalin from the adrenal medulla. These two hormones and the activity of the ANS help us cope.

The autonomic nervous system is broken into two divisions:

- **Sympathetic nervous system** → responds to speed up the body’s functioning
- **Parasympathetic nervous system** → slows down the body’s functioning

This bodily response is what we know as flight, fright or fight response

**Body reactions in sympathetic division**

Reacting to a threat → increases heart rate, blood pressure, blood flow to muscles, pupils widen, perspiration and breathing increases and digestive activity decreases.

When the body is alert, energy is directed to our adrenal glands and this results in the release of adrenalin, and noradrenalin and hormones such as corticosteroids (cortisal)

**How long can the stress response last** → it’s important that the body does not have a long-term stress response as it is hazardous as the body is in a constant state of alert.

The parasympathetic division → assists in heart regulation and digestive processes returning the body to a state of rest following arousal.

**The ability of the body to balance the two divisions is essential in maintaining adaptive and healthy functioning.**
How stress affects us?

Arousal and Task Performance

There is a belief that optimal levels of arousal = optimal levels of performance.

Arousal activates the sympathetic nervous system and therefore prepares your body for the situation.

It is important to get the right amount of arousal/stress as too much allows you not to perform as well and too little may mean you find it hard to perform also.

Therefore optimal performance is achieved at medium levels of arousal.

Stimulants can raise arousal levels i.e. coffee. Depressants can lower arousal levels i.e. alcohol. As can psychological factors such as anger, anxiety increase arousal and relaxation and confidence can lower arousal.

The complexity of the task can have an effect on performance → difficult tasks combined with high arousal has a negative effect.

Personality factors can affect arousal → introverts are thought to be more arousable and extraverts less arousable.

When the body is continually sustaining a high level of arousal without opportunity for recovery, then health problems may occur.

Stress can be the cause of → hypertension, cardiovascular disease, anxiety, depression and post traumatic stress disorder.

REFER TO GENERAL ADAPTATION SYNDROME INFORMATION BOX IN TEXT BOOK.

Stress can occur in any setting and arises in direct response to a stressor.

Major life events → both positive and negative life events can create stress. Studies have found a relationship between the number of major life events and the subsequent development of colds, influenza and cardiovascular disease. The social readjustment rating scale demonstrates the value of major life events.

Post traumatic Stress Disorder → develops from intense, acute events often life threatening and beyond normal expectations e.g. violence, witnessing crimes, working with abuse clients, road accidents. Symptoms include intrusive recollections of event, dreams, sensitivity to associated stimuli, avoidance of activities or situations associated with trauma.

Work Stress → short term effects include inability to concentrate, anxiety, depression, violence, anger, and behaviour changes e.g. smoking, use of alcohol. People with work related stress have low arousal levels and the increase of arousal to meet certain demands will affect the body's functioning.

Exposure to stressors does not necessarily cause health problems in all people. Factors within the makeup of people determine the actual impact of stressors.

Work stress theories

Demand – control – support model of work stress → draws on the structure or organisation of the work environment rather than personal attributes.
Person – Environment Fit model → focuses on the extent to which the individuals’ skills and abilities match the job, and personal needs are supplied by the job. When misfit of either occur adverse health effects can occur.