



## INFO SHEET: Stress

### Stress & Resilience

All organisms have an ideal state of equilibrium and regulate themselves to maintain that state (see homeostasis below). Stress arises when environmental demands exceed the natural regulatory capacity of an organism. Most of the creatures on our planet experience stress as three minutes of sheer terror on the savannah, after which the stress is over. This biological stress is of no concern to most humans (for the poorest 25% however, the story is different). In fact, the thrill of roller-coasters and scary movies lies in playing with our biological stress response.

Our issue is a psychological stress. As humans we are unique in that our thoughts, memories, anticipations and emotions can trigger a stress response, meaning no place and no time is safe. This can lead to chronic stress – a situation where we never return to equilibrium, and instead keep adding more and more stress. Chronic stress will eventually lead to mental and physical breakdown, and to a lowered quality of life long before that.

Note that stress is a very subjective phenomenon. It's difficult to predict a person's stress level based upon their circumstances. You are as stressed as you feel you are. Resilience is the measure of an organism's ability to recover from stress and return to equilibrium. Increased resilience means feeling stressed less often, and experiencing a smaller stress response and a quicker recovery when you do get stressed.

Mindfulness practice directly targets and strengthens your natural regulatory capacity – your resilience. Resilience is strengthened by focusing on the root cause of stress – your reactions to your body sensations (explained in detail below). The method of building resilience is to consciously maintain equilibrium – to deliberately not react in the face of provocation. For example, say your nose begins to itch, and as itches are somewhat uncomfortable, your natural, knee-jerk reaction is to scratch it and make it go away. If however, you can closely observe the itching sensation as it grows, peaks, and diminishes, without reacting to it, you will have strengthened your resilience (think of it like ten resilience push-ups). Another example, sitting at your desk you notice a pain in your back and your natural, unconscious reaction is to adjust your posture slightly to alleviate the pain. Employing mindfulness, you sit still and calmly observe the pain, also observing your urge to react and move, and accepting that “I am feeling a painful sensation”.

Even a few seconds of this non-reactive observation and acceptance strengthens your resilience and starts to break down your habit of reacting, which is the root of your stress. An itchy nose or uncomfortable sitting is a very small amount of stress and is easily taken care



## Developing Human Potential

---

of. But the difference between that and something much larger that you have no control over (e.g. losing your job or relationship, the biopsy coming back positive, etc.) is one of degree only – structurally they are exactly the same; stress is stress. Developing strength/resilience towards the mundane allows you to employ that strength/resilience in the face of the extreme. Of course, if you are currently dealing with major stress in your life, you are starting your exercise program with heavier weights, and will develop that much faster.

### Stress & Mindfulness: environmental factors

The following four factors increase the likelihood of feeling stressed:

**1. Control:** Do you feel in control of your life, or of any particular situation? Feeling a lack of control, or out of control, is stressful. Mindfulness addresses this by uncovering the fact that you, and only you, are in control of your reactions to everything that happens in life. Once you understand how stress works (see below), with practice, circumstances begin to carry less and less power over you, eventually having none. Ergo, you are in control of the state of your mind and body.

**2. Predictability:** The more unpredictable you find your life, the more likely you are to feel stressed. Mindfulness addresses this by developing an increased awareness of your body, which has a tangible continuity over time (the details change throughout your life, but the architectural plan remains the same). Additionally, the five “channels” that one observes (thoughts, emotions, breath, sensations, and awareness) are constant, even if the data is ever in flux. Your structure is predictable, even when life is not.

**3. Interpretation:** Do you tend to interpret life events negatively or positively? The mindful perspective is to do neither. Rather, add a stage of simply observing and accepting the facts as they are before you interpret/judge. Doing this will nip your unconscious reactivity and stress in the bud, giving you the space to respond consciously and rationally.

**4. Social connectedness:** We are hardwired as social creatures, and feeling isolated is a huge stress in our lives. (We will cover this area in more detail in the coming weeks.) Mindfulness practice develops insight into the nature of oneself, leading to empathy, attuned communication, and compassion towards others, leading to a developed moral sense.