

Chapter 3. Stress And Confusion

We all know what it feels like to be stressed, and confusion is likewise a familiar feeling, but how would you define each? First of all, what is stress? Stress is a rather vague term, like "upset," which can refer to almost any negative feeling, or "nervous breakdown," which can refer to any type of severe loss of emotional control, whether it be profound depression, unremitting panic, psychotic loss of reality contact, etc.). Stress is a concept which encompasses a variety of emotional as well as physical symptoms that we experience when some external event threatens our basic needs, and to a lesser extent, our desires and expectations. When the satisfaction of these needs is threatened by events around us, we experience vulnerable feelings, such as anxiety and fear if the outcome is still uncertain, or sadness and grief if we have already lost something important to our needs. We then scramble to activate defenses or coping skills to minimize the intensity of these vulnerable feelings. To the extent that our vulnerable feelings exceed our defenses and coping mechanisms, stress results. From this perspective, stress is equivalent to feeling overwhelmed, when our combination of external resources, as well as internal defenses and coping skills, are overwhelmed by the intensity of our vulnerable feelings.

The nature of the resulting stress is affected by both the nature of the external stressor, and our personality type. Certain stressors are more likely to invite the development of certain feelings. For example, the death of a loved one, and other major losses which have already taken place, are likely to elicit depression and grief, while an approaching major hurricane, and other future threats, are likely to invite anxiety. However, our personality style will significantly impact what we feel. If we tend to suppress vulnerable feelings, we may find ourselves feeling numb at the funeral of a loved one. If our personality requires us to be strong and appear invulnerable, these defenses may lead us to become angry, while concealing our underlying sadness when rejected by a mate. Thus, different people may react differently to the same stressor, with some of us being more vulnerable to sadness, others more subject to anxiety, and others more likely to experience anger or other feelings. Our personality will also affect the intensity of the feelings we experience. If we have already endured a long series of losses, we are likely to be more overwhelmed and respond to the death of a loved one with much more intense sadness and grief than would otherwise be the case. If we have been previously traumatized, e.g. by abuse, combat experiences, or victimization in a crime, we are more vulnerable, and likely to experience more intense anxiety in future traumatic situations than the average person would feel in that same situation.

The way that we approach stress is also likely to significantly impact the intensity and duration of our stress. Stress has both an external and an internal component. The external component is the outside stressor that is impacting us, whether it be rejection by a lover, being cut off in traffic, being awakened by a frightened child at night, or any other external event which disturbs our emotional equilibrium. The internal component of stress involves our own reactions to this external event. Some reactions are quite effective in minimizing the impact of the external stressors, while other reactions clearly intensify this impact. Sometimes we

have very little control over the external stressor itself, but we typically have a great deal of potential control over how we react to this stressor. Since we typically have more control over our own behavior than we do over the world and the people around us, we are likely to be more effective and feel more powerful if we focus more of our attention and energy on how we are responding to the stressor, instead of allowing our attention to be consumed by the stressor itself. Thus, when we are cut off in traffic, we can allow ourselves to be preoccupied with the perpetrator and his thoughtless behavior, which will all but ensure that we are consumed with frustration and anger. Or, we can instead focus upon our reaction to this event, recognize that people are imperfect, that we ourselves cut corners when hurried, that no real harm was done, etc., and perhaps turn on the radio and relax. We all want control, but there are different types of control, and the question becomes what types of control can we actually attain. In situations where we have no control over external reality, we can still maintain control, but only by focusing upon a different target for control, specifically our own thoughts, feelings, and reactions. By putting our energy into something we can control, i.e., our own response, we can end up feeling more effective and powerful, rather than experiencing the helplessness, frustration, and anger that result from trying to control something that may be beyond our control, i.e., other's behavior. This is simply an adaptation of the Serenity Prayer. If you do indeed have potential control over the people and events around you, by all means exert that control in order to persuade others or otherwise bend reality to meet your needs and expectations. However, when such control is impossible, it makes sense to take a step back and adjust your expectations, bringing them in line with the reality of events around you, or find other ways to soothe yourself to minimize your emotional distress. Using our wisdom to know the difference between what we can and cannot control, and to quickly identify the most beneficial target of our control efforts (i.e., others or ourselves), will yield maximum dividends in our attempts to regain control, and minimize stress.

What about confusion? When it comes to feelings, we are sometimes confused about how we feel. Other times, we may be confused about why we feel the way we do. If you find yourself feeling confused about how you feel, it may be because you are feeling opposite or conflicting feelings at the same time. For example, when a close relative dies from a painful, prolonged illness, we are likely to feel sadness and grief, but also relief that their suffering is over. We may also feel relief that our own lengthy ordeal soothing them through their suffering has ended, and perhaps guilty regarding both this relief and any failings we perceive in our behavior toward them. Do we feel sadness, or relief? Try another example. Perhaps someone tells a horribly off color joke that it is nonetheless amusing. Is the joke disgusting, or humorous? Both. Many events evoke a variety of feelings. If we try to homogenize our emotions, somehow reducing them to a single feeling, we will often find ourselves feeling confused. Feelings are often like oil and water; they swirl around each other but do not necessarily mix and synthesize together into a single entity. We eliminate our confusion only by recognizing that opposite feelings can coexist next to each other without canceling each other out or being reduced to a single emotion. We can allow ourselves to feel ambivalent, both sad and relieved over the death of a loved one, or amused and disgusted by an off color joke. By

tolerating ambivalence, we allow ourselves to appreciate the complexity of feelings, rather than generating confusion by seeking simplicity. And accepting the complexity of our feelings allows us to generate more complex, adaptive behavior. For example, if your child misbehaves again after being corrected for the same behavior an hour ago, you are likely to feel aggravated and angry. If you keep in mind that you love your child, you are likely to administer consequences in a wiser, more tempered manner. If you are only in touch with your anger, while temporarily being out of touch with your love for your child, you are likely to overreact and regret it. Allowing ourselves to simultaneously experience opposite feelings is sometimes more confusing, complicated, or even tension producing, but is likely to lead to more adaptive behavior than focusing upon only one of these feelings.

Sometimes we know how we feel, but we don't know why. Some of us have endured enough pain early in our lives that we learned to quickly shut off feelings and numb ourselves. While protecting ourselves at that time, we may find ourselves emotionally constricted thereafter, or perplexed regarding the source of our feelings when they do surface. A pair of contrasting techniques can be useful in resolving this difficulty, if we can muster the courage to approach our painful feelings. Our minds are naturally capable of two opposite styles of thinking, associational and goal directed thinking. Goal directed thinking involves taking control of the direction of our mind, using logical thinking in order to reach a desired goal. If the goal is to understand the source of a certain feeling which is consuming us, we can ask ourselves when did this feeling arise, and what was going on both within us and around us at the time the feeling first came about. If the feeling came about suddenly, it is usually easier to understand than if it came about gradually. Either way, we can ask ourselves three questions regarding mental and environmental events that were ongoing at the time the feeling arose, or at the time it became more powerful or overwhelming. First, what were we thinking at the time we first felt the feeling in question? Perhaps we were preoccupied with a certain memory, thinking about a certain person, or debating a certain issue. The content of our mind at the time may explain the genesis of the feeling. Secondly, what was going on around us in our environment when the feeling first arose? Our feelings often arise in response to events around us, and therefore, an understanding of the events just prior to and during the emergence of feelings can help us understand the source of those feelings. For example, if your husband is channel surfing and you are briefly exposed to a crime show regarding rape, you may feel a surge of anxiety as your feelings from your own history of sexual abuse are triggered. Finally, feelings sometimes arise in response to other feelings. Anxiety is a good example. Sometimes when we suppress bothersome feelings, particularly feelings associated with traumatic events, anxiety results. We can become anxious when such memories are stimulated, sometimes without knowing why. In the channel surfing example, you may be unconsciously aware that negative feelings regarding your sexual abuse have been triggered, and are surging toward consciousness, and because you feel this threat beneath the surface of consciousness, you become anxious, before those memories and feelings actually reach the surface. By identifying the feelings that were present just prior to the onset of anxiety (e.g., anger toward someone who is powerful

enough to punish us if we express the anger), we can understand the reason why the anxiety came about.

In contrast, associational thinking involves allowing the mind to drift from one association to the next, without controlling the process. This type of thinking often occurs in dreams, daydreams, and psychotic states of mind. For example, if I think of hurricanes, I may recall the sushi party we concocted for our sushi loving daughters during a past hurricane, which in turn may lead me to think about my empty nest, which in turn may lead to thoughts of my freedom to travel next autumn after a quarter century of staying home during their fall academic semesters, which may lead me to think of returning to the Northeast, perhaps sampling lobster in Maine in September, and then thoughts of my mother's love of lobsters, her declining health, etc., etc. Associational thinking can be combined with goal directed thinking quite productively. Thus, when we ask ourselves what we were thinking at time that our guilt first arose, we are directing our mind toward this goal, and toward the time frame in question, to see what thoughts pop up when we ask what thoughts are associated with that guilt feeling. We can thereby utilize the talents and resources of our unconscious mind to answer various questions regarding our mental functioning. It is often best to simply ask our unconscious mind a question, but not deliberately think any further, instead taking the stance of a detached observer, taking note of whatever bubbles up from our unconscious mind. The issue we are questioning, such as our perplexing guilt at the moment, is naturally associated with other issues in our mind, and if we allow these natural associations to take place, merely observing them rather than directing them, we can take note of these associations, and in this case, perhaps identify what is associated with our current guilt. The results of this type of inquiry can then be further assessed or verified by seeking other evidence regarding the issue at hand, using logical, deductive, goal directed thought processes. By using these twin thought processes effectively, we can gain a better understanding of how the various elements of our mind (thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, dream states, identity, etc.) are connected together, and how they interact with events in our lives. This understanding further provides a foundation for developing solutions to conflicts and negative emotions that trouble or confuse us.