

## Developing stress-fighting strengths means knowing your weaknesses

We all have a stress tolerance threshold: That tipping point at which eustress (healthy stress) turns into distress. This threshold is based on past experience, the type of stressor you are dealing with as well as its intensity, your perception of the stressor, and the coping skills you have readily available in your arsenal (if any). There are, however, certain factors that can make a person more vulnerable to stress. Some are changeable, some are not.

Unchangeable vulnerability factors include:

- ❖ **Biological and genetic factors:** For example, if hypertension runs in your family, your body's response to stress will be more pronounced (increased heart rate, dizziness, etc.).
- ❖ **Past experiences:** If you experienced a traumatic event in your past, you are more likely to be hyper-vigilant to threats in your environment. This puts your body on high alert (i.e. in constant "fight or flight" mode).
- ❖ **Mental illness:** If you have a predisposition for depression and anxiety, Bipolar Disorder, or Schizophrenia, you are more likely to be vulnerable to stress.



The good news is that there are some vulnerability factors that you CAN change:

- ❖ **Type A Personality:** Certain Type A Personality traits like impatience and hostility can increase your stress level drastically. By tempering these traits (learning how to relax, how to adjust to time pressures, how to accept situations that are not within your ability to control) you put less pressure on yourself.
- ❖ **Lack of social support:** Loneliness and isolation make life's ups and downs all the more difficult to deal with. Having someone to talk to can make any burden seem less heavy. You can join a support group in your local area or online, volunteer, or get involved in charities and activities with like-minded people. Even owning a pet has been shown to improve emotional health.

- ❖ **Poor coping skills:** Research shows that it isn't necessarily the nature of the stressor that matters but rather, your response to it. The use and practice of healthy coping skills (which we will cover in detail in a future article) can buffer the effects of stress. Poor coping skills like avoidance or rumination, on the other hand, will only make matters worse.
- ❖ **Emotional fragility:** Resilience can vary from person to person. Some people can go through the worst hardship and still come out of it with a smile on their face and a "lessoned learned" attitude. Others never get through it at all, lamenting over a failure or problem years later. Being emotionally fragile can make you more vulnerable to stress, but resilience can be developed.
- ❖ **Learned helplessness:** If you expose a rat to electrical shock with no possible means of escape, the rat will eventually give up trying to escape and accept its fate. If the rat faces the same stressor again (only this time, it is given a means to escape), it won't even bother trying to escape - it will simply resign itself to torture. This concept of "learned helplessness" also applies to humans: If you accept a negative situation because past experience has made you believe that you are helpless, you will be much more vulnerable to other stressful conditions. However, through therapy and education on proper coping mechanisms, you can break a pattern of helplessness or victimization.
- ❖ **Poor self-esteem** – If you believe you are powerless against stress or are plagued by constant self-doubt, you leave yourself vulnerable to the effects of disappointment, rejection, failure, and other stressors.
- ❖ **Distorted beliefs:** When you're under stress, your thoughts and feelings become distorted (e.g. "I am never going to get through this," "She didn't praise my work, so she must hate it," "I just noticed a typo in my report. My boss is going to think I'm incompetent."). These distorted beliefs will increase your stress level and make a situation seem worse than it really is. In such cases, it's important to stop and take a moment to put a problem, an annoying person, or a worry in perspective.



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