Important Stress Definitions

Because stress has become such a popular point of discussion in everyday life, many terms used in technical discussions are relatively well known. Still, for this book to be of most use, it is necessary to provide descriptions of those terms and phrases early on.

Stress occurs at a time of change. We experience stress in physiological, cognitive, behavioral, social and spiritual ways.

Distress can be described as strain; it occurs when stress causes an individual to move away from his or her normal healthy functioning towards a less healthy state.

Stress management is a term that now comprehensively refers to any and all actions (preventative or curative) taken by individuals, communities, organizations and even countries to reduce incidences of distress and to enable individuals and groups to cope with stress.

Stressors i.e. stress factors, are those single, multiple or complex events (changes) that bring about either stress or distress (strain).

Day-to-day stress is the term given to normal, anticipated events that occur regularly and with which we cope. Getting to work every day, paying the bills, and so on, are stressful, but once handled, are considered behind us. Most people cope with day-to-day stress.

Chronic stress is the result of single, multiple or complex events (changes) that become repetitive or never ending. This can be a form of day-to-day stress, but generally it refers to an environment in which the ability to cope with repetitive stress factors has diminished and distress (strain) begins to rise. Chronic stress is a likely experience of humanitarian aid workers, and in its extreme form appears to differ very little from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (see below). Recent research suggests, in fact, that PTSD (or something very similar to PTSD) in humanitarian work is most likely to be caused by high levels of chronic stress rather than exposure to single critical events. Humanitarian workers appear to have very low levels of PTSD associated with critical traumatic events but seem to develop the range of symptoms associated with PTSD through chronic and cumulative stress.

Cumulative stress is similar to chronic stress in that the stress becomes ever present. The slight difference is that cumulative stress generally refers to an increasing number of stress factors on top of each other, further reducing ability to cope or deal with the distress. Alternatively, cumulative stress may also refer to a situation where the number of stress factors remains the same but their intensity or demands become greater, thus increasing strain.

Burnout is generally used to describe results of prolonged strain, either chronic stress or cumulative stress. Burnout is a result, not a cause. When individuals' coping strategies have not been sufficient to handle strain over a period of time, a set of identifiable symptoms often emerge, leading to burnout. Although people experience burnout in unique ways, generally symptoms cluster around physical health concerns (heart, back pain, stomach complaints, cancer, etc.) mental health concerns (depression, anxiety, suicidal thinking, etc.), or spiritual concerns (loss of faith, inability to attend religious occasions, etc.). Burnout is a serious condition from which recover may be long term and problematical unless managed carefully.

Flameout describes a kind of temporary burnout with a very rapid onset. It may be experienced at the conclusion of a particularly difficult period, maybe a high-intensity relief assignment or something similar. Often flameout is experienced as an almost overwhelming weariness, excessive desire for sleep, lethargy, difficulty in thinking clearly, excessive sadness or grief, failure to admit to loss of functioning and an inability to see oneself objectively. The popular understanding of the stress related ulcer is probably related to flameout. Because with sufficient rest flameout is usually somewhat temporary, some people view flameout

as less damaging than burnout. However, incidents of flameout should be treated seriously. Often such an experience is indicative of a high degree of chronic stress and unless significant adjustments occur, the long-term prognosis is not good.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the most commonly referred to condition under the general grouping of the Acute Stress Reactions (ASR). Despite it's increasing usage in popular media, PTSD is one of the least understood of the stress and strain conditions. Utilized, as it has been as a plot factor in TV and movie scripts, PTSD has unfortunately come to refer to almost all kinds of distress and strain. Everyone can, it is assumed, "get" PTSD from such common experiences as having a tooth filled or being in an argument with one's boss. For the purposes of this book, a professional understanding of PTSD and other ASR's will be used. An ASR (which includes PTSD) is something that afflicts an individual who experiences an event that is so overwhelming that any "normal person" would be unable to cope. Such events therefore are restricted to those that are personally life-threatening or where a person is in a setting where others are at major risk. For a clinical diagnosis of PTSD, precipitating events on this order of magnitude must be clearly identified.

John Fawcett in Stress and Trauma Handbook, repurposed with permission