



Randy Frost, M.Div, RCC

Stress and the Family

By RANDALL T. FROST, M.Div, RCC

Study of the stress response usually centers on the individual and the definitions of stress and stressor focus on the physiology of the individual. A stressor, according to Robert Sapolski, is anything that throws our body out of allostatic balance and the stress response is our body's attempt to restore the balance. People need the proper stress response in order to mobilize energy to face real and perceived challenges. Chronic under-secretion of stress hormones is a problem associated with diseases like Addison's, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis and some types of depression. A person's chronic inability to turn off the stress response at the end of a stressful event is a problem associated with an increase in the risk of getting cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Either extreme can increase an individual's risk of getting a chronic illness.

Systems theory, however, focuses on the family as an emotional unit. How does the research on the stress response of the individual fit into the concept of the family as an emotional unit?

Stressors from a systems perspective can be anything that upsets the balance of individuality and togetherness in a family. To the extent a new challenge to one member of the family requires time and energy that subtracts from the time and energy that person previously devoted to other members of the family, the other family members may react anxiously to the change. For example, the birth of a child requires time and energy from the mother that is no longer available for her husband. To the extent the husband's sense of well being is dependent on the previous amount of attention he received from his wife, he may react to the change by being more critical of his wife or more distant or both. Rather than restore the previous balance in the husband-wife relationship, the criticism and distance may raise the wife's anxiety. She in turn may reduce her anxiety by focusing even more on the newborn child, further raising the husband's anxiety. If the pattern persists, it may result in an intense mother-child bond that makes the normal separation process more difficult for both mother and child.

If the stress response constitutes a physiological component of anxiety, then the physiological aspects of anxiety rise or fall in each member of the family depending on how the family unit distributes the anxiety. As anxiety increases, it strengthens the tendency for people to put pressure on one another to function in a way that reduces their own level of anxiety, often at the expense of another. Each person's effort to reduce their own anxiety—and the stress response that goes with it—may increase the stress response in other members of the family. The operation of triangles in the family determines who in the family is most likely to experience a chronic stress response, regardless of which person was initially most affected by a stressor. While the stress response describes one aspect of an emotional process at work in an individual, it leaves out a description of how the unit functions to determine the intensity and duration of the stress response for each family member.

The upcoming conference on Stress and the Family: Widening the Lens provides an unusual opportunity to explore how knowledge about the stress response of the individual fits into the concept of the family as an emotional unit. Dr. Bruce McEwen is considered to be the world's leading expert on stress. Dr Michael Kerr is considered to be the world's leading expert on Bowen theory. Joined by several other outstanding researchers and systems therapists, the conference will engage the interplay between family relationships and the physiology of stress.

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Design and layout:
inEthos Graphic Design
and Illustration
www.ethosgraphicdesign.com

EDITING: TANYA HAWKE,
tjwordsmiths@telus.net

Leila Howard,
Business Office,
604 926 5496 ext.300,
livingsystems@telus.net

www.livingsystems.ca

CONFERENCE

“Stress in the Family: Widening the Lens”

October 15 and 16, 2010

with Dr. Bruce McEwen & Dr. Michael Kerr and five other remarkable speakers
SFU Harbour Centre, Downtown Vancouver

VISIT livingsystems.ca for registration and other details!