

Well-being this Week

FOR EDUCATORS • BY EDUCATORS

What is stressing you out?

by Lisa Sanetti, PhD

Everyone (yes, everyone) experiences at least some stress. It's universal and experienced in cultures around the world; and it always has been. Eons ago, when humans lived in the wild with other animals, having an automatic response take over when danger arose—for example, when a saber-toothed tiger approached—was critical to self-preservation. This “fight or flight” response was critical to our ancestors. Modern life still has its share of situations in which we need this response, but most modern stressors come from work, relationships, finances, health, and daily life hassles. Obviously, these modern-day stressors don't pose the same risk to life as the tiger our ancestors faced, but our bodies can't tell the difference. To your brain, a threat is a threat. So, to be on the safe side, your body can react to being 5 minutes late to a Board of Education meeting the same as if a tiger was hunting you. It can, but it doesn't have to.

How stressed you feel at a given time depends on how much you think you are (1) threatened and (2) able to address the situation. Consider the following scenario and the importance of threat perception: Two principals are both 5 minutes late to a Board of Education meeting (potential threat):

Scenario 1:

Principal Cool Cucumber gets off the phone with a parent and leaves for the Board of Education meeting as soon as possible, knowing they will be at least 5 minutes late. During the commute, Cool Cucumber thinks through the report they are about to give. Cool Cucumber understands the situation is not ideal but believes the Board of Education members will not hold the tardiness against them. When Cool Cucumber provides a report on their school, they start by apologizing for their tardiness, explaining that there was a crisis for a school family they were addressing, and then calmly provides their report. Cool Cucumber doesn't think of the event again. After the meeting, Cool Cucumber goes home, says good night to their children, has an engaged conversation with their partner, and gets a good night's sleep. Cool Cucumber wakes up the next morning ready to tackle the day.

Scenario 2:

Principal Prickly Pear gets off the phone with a parent and leaves for the Board of Education meeting as soon as possible, knowing they will be at least 5 minutes late. During the commute, Prickly Pear's heart and mind are racing, palms are sweating, and they are impatient with other drivers on the road. Prickly Pear thinks being late will be very negatively perceived by the Board of Education members and will be used in their evaluation of Prickly Pear's professionalism and effectiveness. Throughout the Board meeting, Prickly Pear is highly alert, monitoring the moods and expressions of Board members. When Prickly Pear provides a report on their school, they speak fast and lose their train of thought several times. Prickly Pear plays this scene over and over in their head throughout the night and following day, resulting in lost sleep and distracted interactions with family and staff.

The difference between Cool Cucumber and Prickly Pear?

Different interpretations of the same situation.

Our thoughts and perceptions have A LOT to do with how much stress we experience. One important strategy for managing stress involves developing more useful ways for thinking about stressors.

To do that, you need to understand what your stressors are. Consider using the checklist below to reflect on your stressors.

Stressful Events:

- _____ Death of a spouse
- _____ Divorce
- _____ Marital separation
- _____ Jail term
- _____ Death of a close family member
- _____ Personal injury or illness
- _____ Marriage
- _____ Fired from work
- _____ Marital reconciliation
- _____ Retirement
- _____ Change in health of family member
- _____ Pregnancy or new baby
- _____ Sex difficulties
- _____ Poverty

- _____ Being in debt
- _____ Change in financial state
- _____ Death of a close friend
- _____ Change to a different line of work
- _____ Frequent arguments with spouse or partner
- _____ Mortgage or loan
- _____ Foreclosure of mortgage or loan
- _____ Change in responsibilities at work
- _____ Child leaving home
- _____ Trouble with in-laws
- _____ Outstanding personal achievement
- _____ Spouse begins or stops work
- _____ Begin or end school
- _____ Change in living conditions
- _____ Business readjustment
- _____ Trouble with boss
- _____ Change in work hours or conditions
- _____ Change in residence
- _____ Change in schools
- _____ Change in recreational activities
- _____ Change in religious affiliation or place of worship
- _____ Change in social activities
- _____ Change in sleeping habits or sleep schedule
- _____ Change in number of family get-togethers
- _____ Change in eating habits
- _____ Vacation
- _____ Major holiday get-together
- _____ Minor violations of the law

Stressful Daily Hassles

- _____ Excess noise
- _____ Bureaucracy or workplace politics
- _____ Misplaced or lost items (e.g., keys, phone, etc.)
- _____ Arguments
- _____ Waiting in lines
- _____ Inconsiderate people
- _____ Difficult neighbors
- _____ Loneliness

- _____ Traffic
- _____ Time pressures
- _____ Car troubles
- _____ Deadlines at work
- _____ Deadlines at school
- _____ Concerns about crime
- _____ Shopping
- _____ Large crowds
- _____ Pollution
- _____ Relatives
- _____ Gossip
- _____ Cooking / food preparation
- _____ Frequent traveling (e.g., driving long distances, flying, long commute to work)
- _____ Problems with children
- _____ Exposure to negative news stories
- _____ Political debates and controversies
- _____ Harassment or bullying from others
- _____ Colds and colds
- _____ Bad or extreme weather (e.g., snow, cold snap, heat wave)
- _____ Boredom
- _____ Speaking in public or to a group of people
- _____ Exams or job interviews
- _____ Broken appliances
- _____ Home repairs

Stressful School Hassles

- _____ Challenging colleagues
- _____ Challenging students
- _____ Challenging parents/guardians
- _____ Poor communication
- _____ Evaluation processes
- _____ Lack of time
- _____ Extra duties
- _____ Too few staff
- _____ Changing requirements
- _____ Administrative tasks
- _____ Lack of community support

Other Stressors

The lists above are just examples. Have stressors that weren't included?
Note them here.

Select content adapted from Abramowitz, J. S. (2012). The stress less workbook. Guilford Press.

Why does this matter for my well-being?

- Identifying what is causing your stress is the first step toward understanding the ABC's of your stress:
 - A = activating events (those you just identified!)
 - B = beliefs (thoughts and perceptions related to A)
 - C = consequences (negative emotions and poor coping resulting from AxB)
- Next issue, we will dive into how your beliefs (Bs) about stressful events (As) to help improve the outcomes (Cs).

Well-being thisWeek Take-Aways



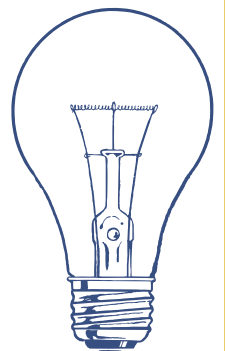
Everyone finds different things stressful.



Stressors can be big or small, discrete or on-going, at home or at work.



Knowing your stressors is the first step to changing your perceptions.



Well-being work isn't selfish. It's necessary.

If you have suggestions for future columns, please email Dr. Sanetti at wellbeingthisweek@gmail.com