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Reactions to Everyday Stressors Predict Future Health

Science Daily, Nov. 2, 2012 — Contrary to popular perception, stressors don't cause health problems -- it's people's reactions to the stressors that determine whether they will suffer health consequences, according to researchers at Penn State.

"Our research shows that how you react to what happens in your life today predicts your chronic health conditions and 10 years in the future, independent of your current health and your future stress," said David Almeida, professor of human development and family studies. "For example, if you have a lot of work to do today and you are really grumpy because of it, then you are more likely to suffer negative health consequences 10 years from now than someone who also has a lot of work to do today, but doesn't let it bother her."

Using a subset of people who are participating in the MIDUS (Midlife in the United States) study, a national longitudinal study of health and well being that is funded by the National Institute on Aging, Almeida and his colleagues investigated the relationships among stressful events in daily life, people's reactions to those events and their health and well being 10 years later.

Specifically, the researchers surveyed by phone 2,000 individuals every night for eight consecutive nights regarding what had happened to them in the previous 24 hours. They asked the participants questions about their use of time, their moods, the physical health symptoms they had felt, their productivity and the stressful events they had experienced, such as being stuck in traffic, having an argument with somebody, or taking care of a sick child.

"Most social-science surveys are based on long retrospective accounts of your life in the past month or maybe the past week," Almeida said. "By asking people to focus just on the past 24 hours, we were able to capture a particular day in someone's life. Then, by studying consecutive days, we were able to see the ebb and flow of their daily experiences."

The researchers also collected saliva samples from the 2,000 individuals at four different times on four of those eight days. From the saliva, they were able to determine amounts of the stress hormone, cortisol. They then linked the information they collected to data from the larger MIDUS study, including the participants' demographic information, their chronic health conditions, their personalities and their social networks.

"We did this 10 years ago in 1995 and again in 2005," Almeida said. "By having longitudinal data, not only were we able to look at change in daily experiences over this

time but how experiences that were occurring 10 years ago are related to health and well being now."

The team found that people who become upset by daily stressors and continue to dwell on them after they have passed were more likely to suffer from chronic health problems - especially pain, such as that related to arthritis, and cardiovascular issues -- 10 years later.

"I like to think of people as being one of two types," Almeida said. "With Velcro people, when a stressor happens it sticks to them; they get really upset and, by the end of the day, they are still grumpy and fuming. With Teflon people, when stressors happen to them they slide right off. It's the Velcro people who end up suffering health consequences down the road."

According to Almeida, certain types of people are more likely to experience stress in their lives. Younger people, for example, have more stress than older people; people with higher cognitive abilities have more stress than people with lower cognitive abilities; and people with higher levels of education have more stress than people with less education.

"What is interesting is how these people deal with their stress," said Almeida. "Our research shows that people age 65 and up tend to be more reactive to stress than younger people, likely because they aren't exposed to a lot of stress at this stage in their lives, and they are out of practice in dealing with it. Younger people are better at dealing with it because they cope with it so frequently. Likewise, our research shows that people with lower cognitive abilities and education levels are more reactive to stress than people with higher cognitive abilities and education levels, likely because they have less control over the stressors in their lives."

While stress may be a symptom that a person's life is filled with hardship, it could also simply mean that the person is engaged in a wide variety of activities and experiences.

"If this is the case, reducing exposure to stressors isn't the answer," said Almeida. "We just need to figure out how to manage them better."

The National Institutes of Health provided funding for this research. Other authors on the paper include Susan Charles of the University of California at Irvine, Jennifer Piazza of California State University at Fullerton, and Martin Sliwinski and Jacquie Mogle, both at Penn State.