

Six myths about stress that create more stress

Stress is one of the most severe causes of personal crises in the Western world today. According to figures from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 75% of European employees suffer from stress, 30% of cases where people are unable to work are stress-related, and 85% of executives feel increasingly overwhelmed by stress.

One of the explanations for this state of affairs is that our understanding of stress is based on myths about what causes it and how we can overcome it. Like all other myths, some of our myths about stress are partially true, while others are wrong and in fact function as a harmful source of additional stress.

Myths about stress

1. You suffer from stress because you are a perfectionist
2. The solution to stress is personal development
3. Stress-related breakdowns are entirely your own fault
4. Stress is caused by issues in your personal life
5. Stress is caused by working too much
6. Having a stress-related breakdown makes you more vulnerable to stress

Myth # 1: You suffer from stress because you are a perfectionist

One widespread assumption is that stress is due to individual 'personality factors' – usually identified as low self-esteem and perfectionist behavior. This assumption is rooted in Friedman's¹ personality theory, which was published 50 years ago. The theory holds that human personalities can be categorized as either type A or type B, and that it is type A individuals who suffer from stress.

Although it might appear that way when we encounter someone who has suffered a breakdown, there is no evidence to support this theory today, and recent research in fact shatters the myth that stress-related breakdowns are a reflection of personality types. Thus, Alexander Perski of the Swedish medical university Karolinska Institutet underscores in his book "Stress och Sjukdom" (Stress and disease) that *pathological stress responses are rarely about individual personal factors but instead about long-term exposure to excessive stress.*

Just as mouse-related injuries are due to long-term repetitive strain, stress-related breakdowns too are the result of excessive strain, not a personality flaw, and the cure is CALM and RELAXATION.

Myth # 2: The solution to stress is personal development

It is thus widely held that people who have stress-related breakdowns are perfectionists with low self-esteem.

If we turn cause and effect upside down, however, these attributes and heavy feelings can also be seen as a *reaction* to stress. In a stress-related breakdown, our psychological personality structures collapse. Does this collapse reflect a personality

characterized by low self-esteem and indicate a need for personal development? Or is it rather a symptom of an essentially strong personality that has been exposed to long-term stress?

Of course there are considerable individual difference in our response and resilience to stress. But just as a sprained joint or repetitive strain injury has more to do with excessive strain than with any personal factors, stress-related breakdowns are typically the result of overload rather than inherent psychological factors.

The only thing that is really required to heal the stress condition – is to eliminate the stress. In other words: the cure for stress is calm and relaxation. *Not* personal development.

There is a big difference in a fundamental view of stress which assumes that someone broke down *because* he or she had emotional issues – and one that assumes that he or she developed emotional issues *because of* long-term over-exposure to stress. The latter perspective alleviates the heavy burden of guilt on the individual and thus facilitates the healing process.

Myth # 3: Stress-related breakdowns are entirely your own fault

The assumption that certain personality types are particularly vulnerable to the effects of stress implies that the breakdown is entirely the individual's own fault. This myth poses a *severe* obstacle to our efforts to address the issue of stress.

Although stress affects the individual it must be addressed in the context where it occurs. Only if we understand that the entire system – society at large, cultural factors, family structures, workplaces, coworkers, supervisors and professional and personal networks – is involved in creating stress across a wide range of contexts can we hope to modify the parameters that produce unhealthy levels of stress.

Therefore stress is a *shared responsibility*. When an employee is suffering from stress it is not helpful to offer the person treatment outside the workplace and then expect the problem to be solved when he or she returns. Preventing unhealthy levels of stress in the future requires changes on an organizational level. If stress is viewed as something that develops and is “fixed” on an individual level, the affected person typically develops new stress symptoms soon after returning to work.

Myth # 4: Stress is caused by issues in your personal life

Another common myth is that stress often springs from issues in our personal life. Recent studies have found that 90% of people who suffer from stress attribute their breakdown to job-related factors. That is not to say that the stress syndrome does not also involve a wide range of factors in our personal life, society at large and contemporary culture. Stress is a reaction to the larger picture.

However, when some managers assume that the main cause of stress should be found in an employee's personal life, they are misguided. In fact, employees will often attempt to stretch their personal energy farther and farther in an attempt to meet the demands that are made on them – despite shortcomings in resources and organizational factors – because they feel that their failure to make ends meet stems

from their own inadequacy. In fact the inadequacies are usually found in the organization.

Myth # 5: Stress is caused by working too much

90% of people on sick leave attribute their stress-related breakdown to issues on the job. But none of the factors they mention refers to the number of hours they put in. Still, many assume that the number of hours we work is the root cause of stress.

Many people work very long work hours without ever suffering from stress, and many people work only a few hours a week yet *still* develop stress symptoms.

Thus, stress is not a reflection of the number of hours we work. Unfortunately. If it were, the problems would be easy to solve. The real cause of work-related stress is far more complex and harder to define, let alone solve.

The main sources of unhealthy levels of stress in the workplace are unpredictability, lack of qualifications for the assigned task, lack of influence, interruptions, conflicts, complexity and change. To get to the root of the issue, these are the factors we need to address.

Myth # 6: Having a stress-related breakdown makes you more vulnerable to stress

Many believe that a stress-related breakdown leaves us permanently vulnerable to stress, and that we will never fully recover our former strength.

That is not usually true. When we suffer a stress-related breakdown it is always because we have been ignoring sustained signals from the body that we are headed in an unhealthy and harmful direction. In other words, we lose touch with ourselves and with our body in our effort to deliver, be productive and make ends meet.

At some point, burn-out is the natural consequence. A stress-related breakdown may be a blessing in disguise, as it forces us to recover our sense of self and become whole again after fragmenting our energy among too many purposes for too long.

After recovering from a stress-related breakdown – meaning that our body, mind and spirit are once again in perfect balance – we do not emerge more vulnerable to stress, as many assume. *“I can’t handle as much as I used to,”* they say.

But in fact this is the result of new learning and insight. They were never able to handle as much as they took on. They overdrew their energy account, ignored all the warning signs and gradually lost touch with themselves.

After undergoing a stress-related breakdown and reconnecting with ourselves and learning the important lesson: *sensing our body, being aware of the signals and caring for our own body and mind*, we naturally notice these signals more clearly and act accordingly.

A stress-related breakdown does not leave us weakened – but wiser and stronger.

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¹ Friedman, M. (1996). *Type A Behavior. Its Diagnosis and Treatment*. New York: Plenum Press (Kluwer Academic Press).