

How daily stressors take a toll on long-term health

September 19 2016, by Brandi Klingerman

Everyone experiences stress, but how a person responds varies. For some, stressors are viewed as challenges to overcome, whereas others may see them as threats and give up or shut down when faced with a stressful situation. How people react – both psychologically and physically – can have implications for a person's health and well-being, including how well they age.

Associate Vice President for Research (AVPR) and Professor of Psychology Cindy Bergeman is currently conducting a 10-year study based on how different people respond to stress, why they react the way they do, and the different ways people cope. From interviews to medical exams, the research team is looking to better understand how stress can affect someone over both a short and a long period of time and what the best coping strategies are in order to remain resilient against stress.

When speaking about her research, Bergeman explained, "When a zebra on the savannah is being hunted by a lion, the zebra's [blood pressure](#) rises, its body begins moving glucose to the muscles, and breathing increases, all in order to achieve peak performance. This primal survival response is caused by stress." She continued, "people have the same physical reaction to stress, but in today's world stressors don't require a fight or flee response. The body's reaction, however, is the same, even if stressors come from work pressures, complicated relationships, or financial problems."

When people are chronically stressed, these physical responses become

detrimental to the human body. For example, continuous [high blood pressure](#) can lead to hypertension and a constant increase of glucose levels can cause diabetes.

Bergeman's study is taking a comprehensive approach that uses both daily and yearly assessments as well as quantitative and qualitative data. By collecting information over a longer period of time, her lab is working to understand the varying effects of [daily stressors](#) as well as one-time, stressful events.

"What goes on in our day-to-day life is really important, but it may not affect a person's health for 10 or 15 years," said Bergeman. "My lab is looking broadly at the lifespan, because it may not be the major life events – like the loss of a loved one – that really get to you, but it may instead be the daily hassles, time pressures, and bad relationships that in the end have the most detrimental impact on health. Currently, we are in the final year of the study and we are hoping to extend it for another five years to get a broader picture of the impact [stress](#) has during a lifetime."

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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