



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

Why Stress is Contagious

“The truth is that stress doesn’t come from your boss, your kids, your spouse, traffic jams, health challenges, or other circumstances. It comes from your thoughts about these circumstances.”

~Andrew Bernstein

When the demands of life become overwhelming, and our minds interpret the situations around us as threatening, our bodies release chemicals and hormones that create the sensation of being “stressed.” In response to perceived danger, the human body prepares to fight, flight, freeze or faint. The circumstances are irrelevant because all your body knows is that you feel threatened. So it doesn’t matter if the stressor is a car cutting in front of you in traffic, finding the time to study for exams, balancing school and work, or that a family member needs surgery. If the event upsets or overwhelms the mind, the body will react with a stress response.

When we are stressed, several things happen. Our immune system becomes compromised, our thoughts become irrational, our decisions become illogical, and we react to our environment with emotions such as irritation, anger, rage, or sadness. Rather than being able to think and feel at the same time, we over rationalize or overthink things (analysis paralysis) or our emotions prevent us from thinking clearly. The effects of stress reach beyond our own experience because stress, like all emotions, is contagious.

When you are around people who are stressed, your body will respond by releasing the same type of chemicals, such as adrenaline, because your body senses the danger of another person’s stress response. When someone is stressed, their words and behavior can be unpredictable, irrational, hurtful, scary, and even dangerous. Think about the people you are around the most: professors, students/colleagues, spouse, partner, child, friends, etc. Do you often feel stressed and take it out on them? Or blame it on them? Are they often stressed and take it out on you?

It can be difficult to figure out whose stress it is that you are responding or reacting to. Is it yours or theirs? Are you verbally or emotionally abusive to those around you because you are stressed out? Or are those around you abusive? It is important to take a step back and examine the situation. Children in particular become stressed when their parents are fighting or exhibit signs of stress. Stress has a negative impact on our body and mind, and on the health and wellbeing of the people around us. Sometimes we want those around us to feel the anxiety or pain we are feeling when we are stressed because “misery loves company.” It is important to remember that spreading the pain of our stress around only compromises our relationships and careers.

There are many healthy ways to cope with stress, but the main one is to metaphorically take a step back and slow down. Slow your thoughts, your words, and your actions. Pay attention to what is going on around you. Take a break from the situation that is upsetting you! Remember that words and actions can be forgiven, but they cannot be forgotten. Don’t allow your stress to hurt others, and don’t allow others to project their stress onto you.

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Do you need help coping with your stressors and letting them go? Your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program provides free and confidential services for judges, lawyers, and law students. If you need resources for ANY issue that is compromising your ability to be a productive member of the legal community, or if there is someone you are concerned about, contact COLAP at (303) 986-3345. For more information about COLAP, please visit www.coloradolap.org.