Stress and Personality: The Connection

In evolutionary terms, stress is a natural response to a potentially dangerous circumstance. We may no longer be threatened by wolves, but these mortal concerns have been replaced by other daunting challenges. A job interview, for example, or making a presentation before a large group of people.

Stress causes our hearts to beat faster, sending more blood to our extremities and putting us in a “fight or flight” state of readiness. In special circumstances, it can be as useful to us today as it was to our ancestors. But too much stress in our lives can also harm us by putting us at a higher risk for heart disease or stroke.

The level of response to stressful situations varies widely from one individual to the next. While some level of stress is innate, so too, to some extent, is one’s ability to cope with stressful situations. While some people dread speaking in public, for example, other people thrive on it. Some, including teachers, politicians, ministers, and talk show hosts, choose to do it for a living.

What causes people to experience greater or lesser levels of stress appears to be a combination of factors, including heredity, personality, and experience.
Most of us feel stress when confronted by the unknown or unfamiliar. Depending on our internal dialog, we can either magnify or mitigate those feelings. For example, if we tell ourselves “this is no big deal,” we are likely to have a better response than if we tell ourselves “I can’t handle this!”

For some people, an overwhelming fear of rejection could be deeply rooted in an especially painful memory. Similarly, people who have had past success with otherwise stressful situations may experience little or no stress in those circumstances.

Obviously, the value of choosing to embrace a more optimistic outlook cannot be overstated. In the short term, it can help get us through some stressful event. In the long term, it can help us live longer, healthier lives.

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References: