

ONE NATION
UNDER STRESS

The Trouble with Stress as an Idea

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CHAPTER 1

Stress: The New Black Death?

Katy, who is going off to college as a freshman this fall, is “stressed out” because everything will be new and she doesn’t want to be separated from her boyfriend Brad, who is going to another college; her parents are stressed out because their adjustable rate mortgage just shot up and now they’re not sure they can pay it, take care of Katy’s tuition, and handle the expenses of raising their other three, especially when there could be layoffs at Katy’s dad’s company. Emily down the street is stressed waiting for the doctor’s office to call with the results of her breast biopsy. Sarah, who lives in the large home at the end of the cul de sac, doesn’t know why she agreed to host 15 kids and their parents for Josh’s fourth birthday, so she’s stressed out about whether the clown she hired is going to turn up on time. Across town, Maria, who has a new job with a 90-minute commute, is worried that her mother won’t be able to take care of her baby and her two-year-old because her mother has high blood pressure and the kids just stress her out too much. Maria’s niece, Tiffany, is stressed out because she was caught texting in math class yesterday. Two blocks away, John, home from Afghanistan for nearly a year, is still living with his parents because he hasn’t been up to looking for a job. He’s been drinking a lot—even more now that he’s begun having the flashbacks again. They’re saying he has posttraumatic stress disorder. Janet is telling her friend Charlene how stressed she is because her son Jerome is in trouble at school again, and she doesn’t know how she’s going to keep him away from the kids dealing drugs down the block when he starts high school next year. She’s short on money to pay the bills this month, and the big electric bill that’ll be coming any day now has her feeling stressed.

It doesn't take long to figure out that the common denominator among such different life stories is the concept of stress. People say they experience stress for all kinds of reasons. Thousands of academic articles are published every year examining the effects of stress on body and mind, and this number has been growing exponentially. From 1970 to 1980, there were 2,326 academic publications in the social sciences with the word *stress* in the title. In the decade between 2000 and 2010, there were 21,750.¹ The mass media have dined out on the wild popularity of the stress concept ever since 1976, when the *New York Times* published its first article about stress.

We are bombarded with frightening stories about the harm stress can do to our health and our emotional states and how we can manage stress or fight its effects. Over the past 60 years or so, and particularly over the last several decades, the concept of stress has been applied to nearly every condition or situation that people encounter. Stress is a protean concept that can represent a situation or event, a psychological or physiological state, or an emotion. This diffuseness gives the stress concept great versatility when it comes to explaining human dilemmas. Contemporary ideas about stress harken back to the nineteenth century when George Beard made an alarming connection between nervous illness and the stress of middle-class life, insisting that the amount and character of the stress that Americans experienced was exceptional. From a cultural standpoint, the middle-class American take on stress mingles a certain pride in the fast pace of life with worry about its effects. But some of these anxieties about stress take up more space in the public forum than others. For example, there is more public hand-wringing over the stresses of middle-class life than over the stresses of a life in poverty; there is more worry about the stressful nature of mothers' attempts to balance work and family life than there is about fathers.'

England's *Daily Mail* recently called stress the "Black Death of the 21st century."² Comparing stress to a plague that hit Europe in 1348 and eventually killed roughly 25 million people may sound extreme, but we don't seem able to go far enough in expressing our fears about what life can do to us. The "Black Death" article, accompanied by a picture of a man sitting in front of his laptop with his head in his hands, cites stress, particularly in the form of financial pressures and fears about layoffs, as the most common reason employees give for long absences

from work. Elevating stress to the status of an actual disease, the author of the article reports that stress has “eclipsed stroke, heart attack, cancer and back problems” as a reason for worker absenteeism, and Professor Cary Cooper, author of *The Science of Occupational Health*, says that symptoms of stress include behavior changes such as poor concentration, “losing your sense of humor or losing your temper more quickly than usual.”

As I was reading this piece, it occurred to me that perhaps if the occupations themselves were “healthy” from an economic standpoint, Professor Cooper wouldn’t have to be talking about stress, but job growth obviously isn’t what he meant by “occupational health.” I spent more time than seemed reasonable mulling this over, thinking about what the stress concept conceals—a practice I’ve engaged in for some time as I’ve worked on this book. Whereas Professor Cooper is thinking about occupational health in terms of job stress, I’m thinking about “occupational health” in terms of an unhealthy economy. In the first case, getting people to do things on their own to relieve stress seems to make sense; in the second, tackling political, social, and economic problems that bring uncertainty and financial pressure seems logical. These days, “stress” often seems to stand in for people’s uncertainty and fear. The stress concept draws the outside in—and in such a way that we end up believing that we need to change ourselves so that we can adjust to societal conditions, rather than changing the conditions themselves. And the chameleon-like nature of the stress concept makes it possible to obscure or conceal social problems by individualizing them in ways that most disadvantage those who have the least to gain from the status quo—among them, women and the poor.

STRESS AS METAPHOR

Stress has had many different meanings over the centuries, and because of this, the way we talk about “stress” now bears only a shadow of a resemblance to the way people talked about stress long ago. At one time, stress was a name for “what was hard and had to be endured,” as Robert Kugelmann has noted.³ Stress demanded strength and fortitude. The image that was often invoked was that of a ship tossed about by the stress of bad weather, and in that image Kugelmann sees the difference between the stress of then and the stress of now. The storm-tossed ship

represented something that neither challenged the forces outside it nor was wholly separate from those forces. Stress was what “proved the strength, power, and virtue of ship and crew.”⁴ It was occasional, like the wintery blasts that assailed that metaphorical ship; stress signified hardship, and endurance was needed to deal with it. Now, particularly in the middle class, we “work” to overcome stress; we don’t suffer it. And stress is not considered a sometime thing in contemporary Western societies; it is believed to be constant.

Early engineering gave us the ideas of stress and strain, and from these followed the metaphor of the body as a machine with a finite store of energy and with parts that life could grind down.⁵ The 1949 edition of the *Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary* defined stress completely without reference to human beings, as the “action of external forces; especially to overstrain.” Today, the definition reads like this: “a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tensions and may be a factor in disease causation” and “a state resulting from a stress; especially one of bodily or mental tension resulting from factors that tend to alter an existent equilibrium.” Stress now derives from physics, where it refers to the force that can transform material in ways that cause it to change its form or to break. In our vernacular, stress can be both a cause (“It was stress that caused his heart attack”) and an effect (“When the plane was late I was so stressed out”). But although we refer to stress as both a force outside the person and an inner state, recently it is the inner state that has been getting the primary emphasis.

In Middle English, stress denoted “hardship or force exerted on a person for the purpose of compulsion,”⁶ suggesting that stress was someone else’s will forced on the individual rather than, as today, something we conceive of as integral to the “self.” Today’s stress concept owes a great deal to the dominant ideology of liberal individualism in which human beings are seen as free to act in accordance with their own judgment. It is an ideology that prizes not only individual freedom, but also individual success and self-actualization.⁷ The “self” has become something we can think and talk about—something we can even remake, if necessary.⁸ But individualism or no, the self is not separate from social expectations and norms; it can’t be considered apart from the way it is talked about and judged, as British psychologist Nikolas Rose has pointed out.⁹ Many of the events in our lives (marriage, unemployment, combat) are open

to judgments about how we have coped with or adjusted to them,¹⁰ and these judgments are steeped in a psychological language that has slipped its middle-class moorings to become the currency of our time. People say, “I’m a commitment-phobe” or “I didn’t used to have any self-esteem,” or “I’m pretty obsessive about it,” or, more to the purposes of this book, “I’m stressed out.” These statements and the language they’re couched in didn’t come out of thin air, a function merely of our unique personalities and family histories; these are the available terms through which many of us come to understand ourselves. As philosopher Ian Hacking has noted, certain ideas play a part in how we are “made up” as people.¹¹ They become part of who we are and what we do. And we are made up at a particular time in history and in a culture that subscribes to certain ideas and practices that themselves have a history.¹²

We can say that the concept of stress “makes up” or produces people who can act and think about themselves in certain ways and not in others. People who are “stressed” can feel in certain ways: they can be anxious, irritable, depressed. They can behave in certain ways: overeat or drink too much or not take care of themselves. They can develop illnesses because their immune systems are out of whack. They can see themselves as overwhelmed and/or out of control. Of course, this does not describe the entire universe of how “stressed” people can feel, behave, or perceive themselves, but you get the idea. I’m not saying here that experiences aren’t stressful or that people don’t experience something called stress. What I am saying is that at other times in our history, when the stress concept didn’t exist, we couldn’t experience ourselves in the way that stress both describes and delimits.

When people believe that feeling “stressed” ruins their relationships, their work lives, and/or their health, they feel impelled to do something about it. The idea that people should constantly monitor themselves for signs of stress speaks to what Michel Foucault termed “technologies of the self,” practices that, as he put it, enable people to “operate on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”¹³ Of course, Foucault wasn’t referring to actual technology in the form of iPhone apps—though there are apps out there that purport to monitor stress. That’s right; one app asks you questions to determine how stressed out you are, and

you can repeat this ritual daily until you have a “progress report on your stress-reduction efforts.” Another requires you to put your finger on the smartphone’s camera lens so the camera can detect your pulse, turning the phone into a heart rate and blood-oxygen level monitor (of course, heart rate and blood-oxygen levels can vary for many reasons and are not reliable indicators of stress, but this did not deter the app developer). Depending on the reading, the application dispenses advice, generally of the not-so-profound variety: “Take a deep breath, a walk or a few deep breaths and slow down.”¹⁴ The media and their expert consultants—psychiatrists, psychologists, and other helping professionals—encourage people to maintain vigilance over their mental and physical states so they can transform those states when they judge they’re stressed out. They can avoid certain risks; take certain measures to monitor their health; use relaxation techniques, yoga, medication, meditation, psychotherapy, journaling, or organizing. These technologies, as I argue throughout the book, are middle-class answers to primarily middle-class problems. But, as generally happens, dominant cultural ideas eventually become more widely influential. And as people take in the prevailing ideas about stress and its effects, they become adept at monitoring themselves for signs of stress and selecting stress management strategies from the available cultural menu of options.

We understand stress primarily through the science that explains it to us, particularly neurobiology, neuropsychology, cognitive psychology, and psychoneuroimmunology. But I think there’s a case to be made, and I try to make it in this book, that although explanations about how stress affects the mind and body are located in the psychological and biological domains, we can also explain the stress concept with reference to the often-neglected moral domain. When we say, for example, that poverty is stressful (in fact, in the academic literature, poverty is often called a *stressor*), we’re saying that people subjectively experience poverty as stressful; one person’s stress is another’s challenge. But poverty is not merely—or mainly—a subjective experience. Unfortunately, the psychological, or “psy,”¹⁵ professions don’t give much weight to the kind of experience that makes subjectivity a *social* phenomenon, that is, the experience that derives from people’s positions in a specific culture and in both the smaller and larger political and economic worlds.¹⁶ The

stress concept often obscures injustices and inequalities by seducing us into viewing those injustices and inequalities as individual problems.

As I discuss throughout the book, more and more social phenomena are currently being transformed into disease entities through a process sociologists have termed *medicalization*. An unwavering faith in the power of scientific explanation from the nineteenth century¹⁷ onward has created a fertile ground in the United States for biomedical solutions to societal problems as dissimilar as working motherhood, poverty, and road rage. As the fields of neurobiology and psychoneuroimmunology have grown, increasingly emphasizing the deleterious effects of stress on the immune system, our attention is diverted from changing the social conditions that create stress toward the management of our own health. In what Rose calls the “age of susceptibility,” we are all theoretically at risk, no matter how healthy we are.¹⁸ As I’ll discuss in Chapter 3, the obligation to guard our health has become a significant ethical value, and we are encouraged to practice behaviors, adopt attitudes, and purchase products that will decrease our stress. What today’s stress concept obscures, however, are the social underpinnings of the “stresses” we bemoan. For example, in the National Geographic documentary *Stress: Portrait of a Killer*, we see the chief of cardiology at Kaiser Richmond Medical Center as he drives through a poverty-stricken urban neighborhood, looking through his windshield at poor people as he talks about how residents of this area “are living a more stressful life” in a “community that produces high stress hormones in people.”¹⁹ The context of poverty—the economic, political, and social forces that create it—is almost entirely blotted out when the focus is on communities as producers of stress hormones.

Many people continue to hang on to the now-discredited belief that stress actually causes cancer. Increasingly, the way stress operates on the body is explained as a chain of events propelled by emotional distress, leading to a physiological response. For example, a recent radio report about a local nonprofit agency offering psychological services to cancer patients explained that cancer can result in “overwhelming emotions”; that these emotions can lead to stress; that stress can result in sleep problems; and that sleep problems can interfere with recovery from cancer. In her 1977 essay, *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag asserted that “Disease imagery is used to express concern for social order, and health

is something everyone is presumed to know about.”²⁰ Unlike cancer, of course, stress isn’t a disease, but I believe that the stress concept has become a new metaphor for social and moral tensions and ills at this time in our history.

STRESS AND THE PRESS

Fear of Stress or Fear of Life? Stress in the News

In 1963, at a symposium on stress, Stanley J. Sarnoff of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) was quoted as saying, “Stress is the process of living.” At the same symposium, Hans Selye, the principal architect of the stress concept as we know it, remarked: “One cannot be cured of stress, but can only learn to enjoy it.”²¹ Further, a neurophysiologist at the symposium was reported to have said that “mental stress” was “good for the mind.” I can hardly imagine experts saying these things today. Although a Harvard psychiatrist who was present *did* make the point that “intolerable stress leading to suicide will kill more than 19,000 in the U.S. this year,” it was clear to everyone attending the symposium that the level of stress had to be astronomical in order to be considered “intolerable.”

Fast-forward 46 years, to 2009, when Mary Carmichael, a journalist for *Newsweek*, began asking researchers about “good stress.” She reported that “many of them said it essentially didn’t exist.” According to Carmichael, one researcher said, “We never tell people stress is good for them...” Another allowed that it might be, but only in small ways, in the short term.²² When Carmichael asked whether this was also true for ER doctors, air traffic controllers, and others who seem to feel they do well in high-stress environments, this is what she got by way of response: “No, those people are unhealthy. This business of people saying they ‘thrive on stress? It’s nuts.” This comment was made by Bruce Rabin, a psychoneuroimmunologist whom Carmichael then asked whether he thought these people actually had a disease: “You can absolutely say that. Yes, you can say that,” Rabin replied, after taking a minute to think about it. Carmichael said she could see Selye, the man who viewed stress as “the salt of life” that makes us fully human, tossing in his grave.

A piece on MSNBC's website entitled "Can Stress Actually Be Good for You?" also tells us something about the gulf between Selye's ideas about stress and our own:

Stress can be positive, but get too much of it—when the flood of hormones bombards your body longer than 24 hours, doctors say—and all kinds of bad things start to happen [high blood pressure; heart disease; exhaustion; depression]. 'Over time, if you're constantly in fight-or-flight, if your heart muscles and valves are awash in epinephrine, it causes changes in the arteries...', says Dr. [Lynne] Tan. The problem is, it's difficult to shut off the onslaught of stress hormones when they become harmful. People can't control how high their hormones go when they experience a difficult situation. 'What we can do is change the way our brains respond to [stress] with coping techniques such as deep breathing, meditation and exercise,' says Dr. Bruce Rabin. The goal isn't an absence of stress. It's an unavoidable reality. Besides, without it, life would be a pretty dull existence. The key is channeling stress energy into productive action instead of feeling overwhelmed, experts say."²³

We've come to recognize this language and these themes in many media reports on stress. Here's the reference to the bowdlerized version of Walter Cannon's original ideas about how the body responds to fear (I'll say more about Cannon and his "fight or flight" theory in Chapter 2). Here's the concern that too much stress (here it's stress that lasts even for one day; elsewhere it's "too much" or "chronic," often without an reference to how much this is) can destroy the body, and there's the war rhetoric that goes with it ("bombards"; "onslaught"). Add to this the theme of vulnerability and lack of control, and humans seem to be at the mercy of physiological and psychological forces ("flood of hormones"; "overwhelmed"). And there's the insistence on how we have to take charge of stress and conquer it ("people can't control how high their hormones go," but they can take the "stress energy" and use it in "productive" ways). Naturally, a list of stress-reducing technologies to help in these endeavors follows ("deep breathing, meditation and exercise"). And here come the experts, including the ubiquitous Dr. Rabin. As we read a posting about how stress can be *good* for us, we get the message that we're in physiological and psychological jeopardy if

we don't act to combat the potentially corrosive effects of stress. When we hear someone like neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky, who has been studying the stress responses of baboons for decades, say that we are "marinating in stress hormones," or when we hear talk of how stress can be "lethal," how it can "shrink our brains," "kill brain cells," and "unravel chromosomes,"²⁴ we know we're in the land of fear.

Although many people probably aren't familiar with the growing field of psychoneuroimmunology, psychology has been fused with brain science and immunology in ways that many of us readily recognize from scores of media reports. We've become familiar with the talk of "stress hormones" and, as I discuss in Chapter 3, middle-class Americans are practically on speaking terms with their immune systems. The drumbeat of personal responsibility strikes an oddly discordant note in the suggestion that people can control their own neurobiological processes, as when seniors are first warned that "excess cortisol, [experts] suspect, may suppress neurogenesis, the brain's ability to create and support new brain cells," and are then asked: "So how can you turn off the cortisol [a.k.a. the stress hormone]?"²⁵ Steven Brown has theorized that the more people think of their lives in terms of stress, the more they see themselves as needing to "cope" effectively with it; and the more they make changes in their everyday lives to reduce or eliminate stress, the more they need explanations about what causes stress in order to justify the changes they've made.²⁶ And the media are happy to oblige.

Stress Inflation

There are certainly viable connections to be made between physical disease and what we now call stress, but the media often create a closer association between stress and its purported effects on body and mind than research evidence supports, creating unnecessary panic. The narrowest academic studies can be springboards for making the most general conclusions about and prescriptions for human behavior. That many research studies on stress have used primates and rodents rather than human beings as their subjects has not deterred either researchers or members of the press from this practice. Although primate research

has been incredibly useful in its medical applications, the business of making inferences about psychological states, whether from studying human brains or monkey brains, is pretty dicey. To give an example of the monkey-to-human inferential process, we have only to look at a piece in the women's magazine *Elle* that asks, "Is the best way to raise resilient kids protecting them from stress or allowing them to deal with limited amounts of it?" It cites a Stanford University study in which monkeys removed from their family group were compared with monkeys who had not been removed. The journalist, explaining the Stanford study, writes, "By and large, the young monkeys exposed to intermittent stress [by being taken from their family group] explored more gamely. (Their stress hormone levels were also lower)." Karen Parker, Ph.D., the Stanford researcher who had performed the study, was invited by the reporter to make inferences about parenting that were well beyond the scope of her research. "I do think it's important to allow kids to learn to cope with challenges and changes," she said, while at the same time warning that "all animal research should be interpreted with caution."²⁷ But all the caveats in the world are pretty worthless when "KIDS AND STRESS" is the screaming headline and there's an expert on board.²⁸ It's a fair bet that in magazine and newspaper articles of this kind, interviewers will continue to ask the expert to apply her or his results to humans, and nothing will prevent the expert from gamely taking on that mission.

Stress inflation takes some strange forms. For example, the headline "Stress Ages Women Faster" seems to imply that stress ages women faster than men—yes? But if you went to read the research study on which it was based, "Accelerated Telomere Shortening in Response to Life Stress" (a journal article that you probably wouldn't want to find on your nightstand unless you were suffering from insomnia), you'd learn that all 58 participants in the study were women.²⁹ So, women are aging faster than *whom*?³⁰ There are dire warnings about the "toll" stress can take on teeth,³² how it can turn our hair gray,³¹ how it can prevent skin from healing,³³ and more. Of course, the connections between stress and aging, stress and dental problems, stress and _____ (fill in the blank) are only *associations*, not actual cause-and-effect relationships. But don't let *that* stress you out.

Stress Throughout the Life Span: A Cultural Phenomenon

Press coverage about stress is pre-womb to tomb, from stories about how women's stress can adversely affect their fertility³⁴ and how mothers' stress influences their babies' hormone levels in the womb³⁵ to the adverse effects of stress on brain growth in children,³⁶ to the stresses of a digital age that produces "Blackberry-toting toddlers"³⁷ and the "counterproductive stress" that pressures for academic achievement can place on children.³⁸ I think you get my drift. Here's an article in the *New York Times* about Lisa D'Annolfo Levey, who's on the phone with a parent coach, having told her two dueling sons only moments before, "This is stressing me out, guys. You can sword [fight], but I'm feeling compromised here."³⁹ And here's a *New York Times* report about a high school principal in Massachusetts who meets regularly with the school Stress Reduction Committee and has made yoga classes a requirement for all seniors.⁴⁰ Did you know that "more than 92 percent of students say they occasionally feel overwhelmed by all the tasks they have to perform,"⁴¹ or that there's a "quarterlife crisis" afflicting stressed-out twenty-somethings? As one journalist put it, "Forget waiting till midlife to panic. There's pressure enough halfway there."⁴²

Stress and the "Psy" Professions

More and more experts seem to be needed to help Americans deal with stress. The graver the stressful situation or event, the more vigorously psychological remedies are urged upon the public. As I discuss in Chapter 6, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in September 2001, the first offer of help for ordinary citizens came from mental health professionals who warned that an epidemic of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was on its way. Human dramas provide an opportunity for the most well-intentioned of "psy" professionals to enlarge their sway. For example, in 2008 the house publication of the American Psychological Association (APA), *Monitor on Psychology*, titled a short article on APA's survey on stress in America "A Growth Area for Psychology." A 2011 issue of the *Monitor* reported that "America's workers are stressed by the continued economic turmoil," but that "psychologists are poised to help."⁴³ Territorial imperatives

in psychiatry, psychology, social work, and counseling have not only created and sustained a booming therapeutic industry in the United States but have helped shape a therapeutic culture that has gathered momentum in other Western countries. In Britain, whose embrace of popular psychology and psychotherapy has been slow relative to that of the United States, newspaper citations of the word “stress” rose from under 1,000 in 1993 to 24,000 in 2000.⁴⁴

Lifestyle and Stress: A Pairing Made for the Middle Class

The relationship between stress and “lifestyle” is an intimate one, since decreasing stress is often cited as the rationale for making lifestyle changes. Boom or bust—it doesn’t matter, when it comes to the ongoing discussion of how people must change their lifestyles in order to reduce stress. In 2004, when economic times were good, it was clear that “All This Progress Is Killing Us” (e.g., that high productivity leads to the loss of more jobs; increased car ownership causes people to walk less; and that these kinds of things can create severe health problems). Turn around, and in 2007, when the recession and middle-class job insecurity were just on the horizon, the theme was the same: that year we read, “America: A Toxic Lifestyle?”⁴⁵ You might not have known that “TLC” doesn’t stand for “tender loving care;” it’s now psycholinese for *therapeutic lifestyle change*. Moving beyond public health exhortations to change people’s lifestyles, the “psy” professions are now offering “lifestyle treatments.”⁴⁶

Public health campaigns targeted at reducing what is almost universally referred to as the “epidemic” of obesity in the U.S. offer examples of the lifestyle/stress connection: stress leads to overeating and overeating leads to obesity, which leads to diabetes and coronary heart disease. The public health goal is for Americans to achieve “healthy lifestyles.” But not all Americans have time to exercise or access to decent healthcare, fresh fruits and vegetables, and safe neighborhoods. The achievement of a “healthy lifestyle” requires more than individual “healthy choices.” When the “stressor” is poverty, we need to reckon with inequities that make the universal attainment of a healthy lifestyle so elusive.

In 2011, the American Psychological Association’s annual survey, “Stressed in America,” reported that the number one stressor

in America was money. Of course, money in itself is not stressful, although expressions like “financial stress”⁴⁷ appear to make it so. It is the lack of money that creates problems for people, and financial worries are big news in the dog days of a recession that affects the middle class. But money—the getting of it—has always been a problem for people on the bottom of the economic ladder. Managing “financial stress” by taking a hot bath or going for a brisk walk in the neighborhood is no solution to the problem of poverty. The idea of lifestyle is a middle-class development,⁴⁸ and the push to eliminate stress through lifestyle changes is only one of the middle-class adjustment strategies that have been promoted since the early twentieth century, as I discuss in Chapter 2. As Steven Brown notes, lifestyle advice on how to reduce stress creates a “product” in the form of a person’s newly “serviced” and “re-engineered” self.⁴⁹

The Dialogue about Difference: Gender and Stress

In 2009, quite a bit of dust was kicked up in the wake of a paper written by economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers. In “The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness,” documenting trends in men’s and women’s well-being over the past 35 years, Stevenson and Wolfers concluded that whereas women of the 1970s were more content than men, men were eclipsing women in subjective well-being.⁵⁰ The study gave fuel to those who blamed the women’s movement for sowing the seeds of discontent: women have too many choices; they’re overwhelmed; they’re stressed; they’re “liberated and unhappy.”⁵¹ On the other side of the debate, critics like Barbara Ehrenreich pooh-poohed Stevenson’s and Wolfers’s study, pointing out what an elusive phenomenon happiness is to measure.⁵² The banner headline on the website jezebel.com read, “Declining Female Happiness’ May Be Just Another Way to Sell S—t” to women.⁵³ When interviewed, Stevenson herself said that she didn’t hold the women’s liberation movement responsible for the happiness decline: “It’s not the women’s movement that’s made us so unhappy, but the failures of the women’s movement” like the persisting wage gap between men and women.⁵⁴

Early on in the life of the stress concept, men’s stress was of much greater public concern than women’s; after all, men were straining their

grey flannel suits against the bulwarks of capitalism every day. In 1957 one could read about “Colonel M.B., who worked for an unreasonable, hostile boss. His cholesterol level was high, but diet and exercise didn’t help. [But] when [his] boss was taken to the hospital. . . , Colonel M.B.’s cholesterol level showed a remarkable drop.”⁵⁵ Ever since the 1970s, when middle-class women began entering the paid workforce in larger numbers, however, the subject of women’s stress has moved front and center. Here’s Amber McCracken, director of communications for the National Women’s Health Resource Center, talking about women’s stress: “Women must manage not only their own health, but they are considered the health-care managers of their families. . . . [E]ach aspect of care brings stress. Unfortunately, too often women do not take the necessary steps to alleviate their stress, and their own physical health suffers.”⁵⁶ As I discuss in Chapter 5, these same themes are salient in much of what is said and written about women and stress: women must manage their stress so that they can continue to be the primary caregivers in our society; women are to blame for not taking good enough care of themselves. The fault lies in self-care, not in the burden of care that women assume on behalf of a society reluctant to look at gender inequality at the societal level.

As the largest consumers of self-help books and lifestyle magazines, women have become primary targets both for advice on how to manage stress and for advertisements for products holding out the promise of stress relief. Women are encouraged to “diagnose” their “stress type” (“Hyperdrive?” “Dash and Crash?” “Fried and Frazzled?”)⁵⁷ so they can formulate an individualized plan for managing stress. We hear that, unlike men, women overeat when “stressed,” bringing on a host of potential health problems:⁵⁸ “Packing a bit of a spare tire? It could be from cortisol, a stress-related hormone that makes you store belly fat. To help your body cope more efficiently, increase your intake of stress-easing B vitamins.”⁵⁹ And “High cortisol levels may also put a damper on feel-good neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and serotonin, moving you into a vicious bad mood/stressed-out cycle. Take a few minutes to ease the stress with deep breathing, a bit of music, and these relaxing stretches.”⁶⁰ Of course, there’s also a lot of talk about how mothers’ stress not only affects *them*; it affects their children as well (that old “vicious bad mood/stressed-out cycle”), particularly when women “juggle” paid work and motherhood. In Chapter 5 we’ll look

at how it's women's job to maintain the "balance" between paid work and home. In fact, warnings to middle-class mothers, particularly white middle-class mothers, about combining outside work and motherhood are so pervasive that mothers may find themselves having to work hard to resist feeling guilty about failing in one domain or the other. And it's difficult not to feel like a failure when white middle-class expectations for what constitutes good parenting have reached an all-time high.

In *Time* magazine's special issue, "The State of the American Woman," a poll showed that the majority of men and women believe the ideal family arrangement is to have a father at work and a mother at home.⁶¹ Self-help gurus like John Gray, the original *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* guy, argue in effect that innate differences between men and women ideally suit them for traditional roles, disregarding egregious flaws in the science of "brain differences" between men and women that render many of those differences questionable.⁶² I'll tackle some of the "difference" assumptions in Chapter 4, where I argue that the stress concept fuels a quasi-obsessional concern with difference that encourages women to keep their place in the domestic order. Perhaps a poll on traditional roles might have a different outcome if the work of caring were an overarching societal value that drove policies such as universal childcare and paid family leave for both men and women.

Stressism: A Definition for Our Time

Over 20 years ago, Steven Brown argued that most types of suffering and "dis-ease" have been transformed into the experience of stress. While I agree, I'd add that now there is a tremendous emphasis not only on the *emotional* "dis-ease" of stress, but on the potential of stress to induce *actual* disease. The connection between external events and disease is now so well forged that sometimes an adverse event and its physiological effects are strangely comingled, as in this article on the tensions of the holiday season:

The holidays are hard on your amygdala, a primitive little part of your brain that gets activated whenever you experience a feeling. Emotions—both good and bad—give the amygdala such a workout this time of year

that your frontal lobe, a more recently evolved part of the brain that acts as a rational brake on your primal impulses, has to work extra hard to keep you on an even keel, says Ruben Gur, a University of Pennsylvania neuropsychology professor.⁶³

As emotions themselves are medicalized, and stress, emotion, and disease are fused in the public imagination, the stress concept has become an important means of thinking about life's difficulties and our personal vulnerability to risk, disaster, and death. In the documentary I mentioned earlier, one expert insisted that "[stress] is not an abstract concept." I beg to disagree. It is the thoroughly abstract and diffuse nature of the stress concept that makes it such a useful container for societal tensions and individual fears. Some ideas perform what Mary Poovey calls "ideological work," managing or containing contradictions in ways that make for the widespread acceptance of certain overarching ideas as common sense.⁶⁴ I believe that, among other things, the stress concept performs ideological work for us by managing much of our uneasiness about social change, whether in the pace of life in the wake of technological advancements, in gender arrangements as a result of the rise in dual-career marriages, or in the number and nature of uncontrollable external events such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Stress is "real" in the sense that people experience it and may suffer as a result of it, but it also can be said that the concept of stress has been created (and re-created) at certain places and times in our history⁶⁵ and that it performs certain functions for our society. Although I'm critical of the stress concept and of the degree to which the "psy" professions (of which I am a member) have fallen under its spell, I am mindful that there are many who experience stress and who suffer its effects, and also that there are many professionals who are there to help people in distress. I'm also mindful that it's very hard to talk about stress and trauma without invoking the words *stress* and *trauma* themselves, creating a sort of tautological thicket that can be difficult to avoid.

This book doesn't claim to be a comprehensive history of stress or stress research. Such histories are out there to be read.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, those histories don't have much to say about the meaning of our contemporary reliance on the stress concept. I've written this book, at least in part, to try to fill that gap.⁶⁷ I believe that in order to understand

stress as a bellwether cultural concept, we need to understand what accounts for its widespread appeal; what social purposes it serves; what social problems it solves; why stress sometimes appears to be owned by the white middle class. The anchoring frameworks from which I draw in grappling with these questions are social constructionism, critical psychology, and feminism. The disciplines from which I derive support for many of the ideas presented in this book include sociology, the history of medicine, and medical anthropology.

In the chapters that follow, I've chosen to highlight diverse aspects of the stress concept's cultural influence. Chapter 2 explores a particularly American attachment to ideas about how people can cope with the fast pace of life that progress brings with it. Chapter 3 explains how the stress concept offers protection from fear of disease and death through a mandate to reduce risks and manage our health, obscuring the problem of health inequalities arising from differences in social class. Chapters 4 and 5 aim to show how the stress concept helps keep traditional ideas about men's and women's natures and responsibilities from unraveling in ways that might create actual changes in social policy and in the division of care work. Chapter 6 lays out how, in a society allergic to existential doubt, the concept of traumatic stress helps stifle disturbing moral ambiguities, whether in relation to war, child abuse, terrorism, or male-to-female violence.

I've coined the word *stressism* to describe the current belief that the tensions of contemporary life are primarily individual lifestyle problems to be solved through managing stress, as opposed to the belief that these tensions are linked to social forces and need to be resolved primarily through social and political means. Analysis of stressism brings into sharp focus significant polarities in Western thought, principally the sharp divisions between mind and body, health and illness, public and private, social responsibility and individual self-actualization. Examining stress brings to light many of our cherished cultural preoccupations and predispositions, exposing existing tensions and inequities related to class and gender; and our increasing dependence on stress to explain our lives has consequences for the way we see ourselves and the world, the way we act, and the world we create as a consequence of that vision and those actions.