

Stress, Stresses, and Learning

Change is the most basic definition of stress. Learning requires change, so learning is, by definition, stress. Educators and students think of learning as good stress. This is our subjective definition for learning. Depending on the person and the circumstance, this stress may be too much and quickly become bad stress.

Stress from the brain-body perspective looks a little different. According to researchers Kim and Diamond (2002), three elements combine to produce stress: physiological response, perception of aversion, feeling of control loss. Human brains and bodies are built to deal with stresses like this for a short time. Over long periods of time, these levels of stress will damage “virtually every level of cognition that exists” (Medina 2010).

Given this information, you can be sure that your students will not learn if you do not help them to address the change/stressor that has exercised their nervous systems and has changed their allostatic load. Acknowledging the stressor doesn't have to take a lot of time, but ignoring the stressor in favor of the schedule or because you're not sure what to say impacts the students' sense that the instructor knows and cares about what is happening for them in their worlds. This perception that the instructor neither knows nor cares significantly impacts the students' ability to learn and to pay attention.

Some suggestions:

- Have a minute of silence for people to breathe and to acknowledge what is happening.
- Give everyone five minutes to write down how they feel privately. You may or may not ask one or two students to share.
- Give students five minutes to write down questions that they have in the wake of the stressor.
- Acknowledge that you yourself are not sure how to respond and/or are still processing events.
- If you have time and are comfortable, link the stressor to the course content and discuss it. If you choose to do this, be sure to set or to remind everyone of the ground rules for discussion.
- Encourage strategies that focus on genuine hopefulness and give students agency. They may not be able to change the stressful event, but they can access resources including friends and mental health services.

References

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