

CHAPTER 4

HYPER SENSITIVITY TO STRESS AND EMOTIONS

STRESS INFLAMES ALL HUMAN STRUGGLES, AND ALL HUMAN STRUGGLES INFLAME STRESS

It is crucial for Autistics to realize that most, if not all, of our struggles may simply be more severe variations of the same issues that everyone else struggles with. This understanding can lead to us integrating some of their countermeasures into our overall self-management strategy that may need to be more extensive than others. This may also enable some Autistics to eventually be weaned off of some of their needs for special accommodations.

Any strategy for dealing with any area of struggle must be at least two-pronged. If your stress management techniques are effective, then it will be easier to alleviate your other struggles. If your strategies for alleviating these other struggles are effective, then your stress will decline automatically. I cannot say that there is an effective countermeasure for every issue that Autistics struggle with. However, ***THERE ARE EFFECTIVE COUNTERMEASURES FOR MANY OF THESE ISSUES! ALTHOUGH POSITIVE THINKING DOES NOT GUARANTEE PERSONAL SUCCESS, NEGATIVE THINKING DOES GUARANTEE PERSONAL FAILURE!***

HOW OVERLOADS OF STRESS AND/OR EMOTIONS CAN AFFECT THE AUTISTIC BRAIN

Stress can trigger what some Autistics would describe as “Racing Brain.” It is when we have multiple thoughts, and/or variations of how we might express what we want to say, coming to the forefront of our mind and making it difficult for us to make up our minds as to what to do and/or say. “Racing Brain” is the direct connection to ADD/ADHD, which many Autistics are also diagnosed with and that many experts believe is an aspect of Autism. The 2nd & 3rd of the following attributes can also result in Autistics responding to highly emotional situations in a way that causes those around them to believe they lack empathy. The last three ways Autistics are affected by stress mimic the signs of aging, fatigue, etc.

1. **Melt Downs:** When Autistics lose it & start exhibiting are often viewed as “behavioral issues.” Although this may be the “headliner” response that non-Autistics talk about in regard to how Autistics respond to stress, there are other types of responses that non-autistics do not recognize or understand.
2. **Shut Downs:** When Autistics lose their ability to exhibit any functionality; this includes the loss of the ability of self-expression. This is the result of the Autistic being overwhelmed by a flood of stress and/or emotion beyond their ability to control.
3. **Paralysis by Analysis:** When Autistics over think a situation. This differs from “Shut Downs” because it has more to do with them being caught in a “spin cycle” of excessive analyzation. The Autistics may be driven less by their emotions & more by their by their lifetime of learning though experiences & instruction.
4. **Decrease of what may already be sub par motor coordination**
5. **Decrease of already sub par executive functioning:** This subject will be address in Chapter 6, *“Impaired Executive Functioning.”*
6. **Extreme Reliance on Procedures, Rigid Protocols and Rehearsed Solutions:** This subject will also be addressed in Chapter 6, *“Impaired Executive Functioning.”*

Preemptive Countermeasures^{*}

1. **Daily activities that reduce stress:** This is especially key in avoiding a loss of control of your stress & emotions.

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2. **Avoid or eliminate known agitants whenever possible:** This is especially key when dealing with sensory processing issues.
3. **Utilize strategies for dealing with situations that cannot be avoided or eliminated:** This is especially key when Autistics HAVE to deal with people & environments that are difficult for them.

CRISIS RESPONSE COUNTERMEASURES *

1. **Take a break:** This can range from taking a few seconds to take a slow deep breath, to stopping your task for a few minutes to clear your head. In many cases, the Autistic might think that they do not have time to take a break until they finish the task that they are struggling with. However, if the Autistic's brain is so overloaded that they cannot think straight, any time and effort that put into the project that they think they do not have time to take a break from will be wasted anyway.
2. **Don't take yourself so seriously, especially in causal situations:** Adults learn to suppress the "silly and juvenile" aspects of themselves because it is often "inappropriate" in adult situations. However, psychologists have conclusively proven what humans have known along, "laughter is the best medicine" and "we need to stop taking ourselves so seriously."
3. **Self-Acceptance:** *ALL YOU CAN DO IS ALL YOU CAN DO, AND ALL YOU CAN DO IS ENOUGH!*
4. **Have a "Personal Pep-rally":** Focus on special truth(s) that restores your self-confidence.
5. **Implement whichever situation-appropriate coping mechanism works for you.**
 - a. Use a primary focus point.

Examples:

- i. CONSTRUCTIVE self-talk that enables you to focus your thoughts on what you are trying to do, such as:
 - ❖ "Focus"
 - ❖ "Concentrate"
 - ❖ "Find a solution"
 - ❖ "Where have I not looked yet?"
 - ❖ "Look someplace else"
- ii. Using your hand as a "guide hand," this may enable you to block out excessive visual stimuli.
- b. Use "waypoints"/"bases."
- c. Running your hand along a wall or handrail. This can help the Autistic spatially orientate to the world around them by:
 - i. Eliminating the guess work out of which way oncoming traffic will veer off in order to avoid colliding with one another. Whichever hand the Autistic will run along the wall, the oncoming traffic automatically will veer to the opposite side.
 - ii. Creating a deep pressure means of self-relaxing.
 - iii. Walking your fingers along a wall can tap in to the previously mentioned "silly and juvenile" aspects of ourselves.
- d. **Withdraw:** This may be necessary for those Autistics who do not have effective coping mechanisms for handling certain situations. However, *ALL AUTISTICS & THEIR LOVED ONES NEED TO CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE AUTISTIC CAN EVENTUALLY DEVELOP THE COPING MECHANISMS NEEDED FOR THAT SITUATION.*

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POST CRISIS ASSESSMENT*

After a crisis has passed, you need to ask yourself the following questions:

1. **What exactly happened?** The stress and emotions that can taint our ability to assess what actually just happened, including:
 - a. Were those who gave us input being critical, judgmental, insulting, etc.; or were they actually understanding of our situation and just trying to be helpful.
 - b. Although you may have made mistakes, what did you also do that was right?
2. **How did it affect you personally?** You need to...
 - a. ...acknowledge what emotional impact it had on you.
 - b. ...not embellish long term consequences that you may face in your own mind.
3. **How did you respond?**
 - a. What was the long term effect of your response?
 - b. Was your overall response an improvement or regression from what happened on previous occasions?
4. **Do you need to apologize to someone for how your behavior affected them?**
5. **What led up to the situation that can be used in the future as an “early warning” that something negative might be looming.** This may enable you...
 - a. ...to take steps to avoid having the same problem(s) constantly repeating themselves.
 - b. ...persevere through future problems that cannot be avoided.

Assessing what happened before, during and after a crisis is an important first step to self-improvement. The effectiveness of the self-assessment process hinges on:

1. **Your willingness to be honest about your struggles.**
2. **Your ability to believe in your own ability to overcome these struggles.**
3. **The quality of your support system/network.** All human beings need older adults, including but not limited to their parents, to provide them with guidance throughout their lives. This is especially important when dealing with difficult situations in which provoke a strong emotional response in us. This system/network needs to be made up of:
 - a. A Mentor/Life Coach who shares the wisdom they have learned from...
 - i. ...their past struggles & mistakes.
 - ii. ...have personal experience “walking in your shoes.”
 - iii. ...someone who mentored them.
 - b. Friends who, along with your Mentor/Life Coach...,
 - i. ...understand...
 - ❖ ...that their job is to help you make informed decisions about what choices you should make, not run your life by pressuring you into making the choices that they think you should make.
 - ❖ ...just because a problem may seem insignificant to them, does not mean that it cannot be major to you.

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- ii. ...tell you what you need to hear, even if it is not what you want to hear.
- iii. ...do not tear you down when you fail and/or make mistakes.
- iv. ...cheer your victories.

Stages of Progress^{*}

Changes in how you function in your day-to-day life are not going to happen overnight. It is easy to learn theoretical book knowledge, but it is another thing altogether to apply the knowledge in your own personal real life situations. My main objective for drawing up this chart is to help you recognize the progress that you are making, even if you are still coming up short of your desired goals for being able to handle any situation that is thrown at you.

1. Mentor/Confidant helps you recognize how you could have handled a situation in a way that could have produced a better outcome after the fact.
2. You recognize on your own that that you could have handled a situation in a way that could have produced a better outcome after the fact.
3. You recognize during the situation that you are not handling it in a way that can result in the best possible outcome.
4. You learn how to change course in the middle of a situation when recognizing that your current course is detrimental to yourself and those around you.
5. You recognize from the start when you are in a situation that needs to be handled a certain way in order to have a positive outcome, and begin responding.
6. You develop basic principles that can be adapted to specific situations that are so effective that you do not worry about encountering them in the future.

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