

When is Stress Too Much to Handle? No One is Immune

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How is a physically fit, highly intelligent, experienced, and trained astronaut able to handle the stress of a high pressure occupation but not be able to handle the stress of her personal life? We read the recent news headlines and articles about the astronaut and wonder what pushed her over the edge. What led her to such uncharacteristic behavior, which has devastated her life and her family? Were the demands of her career too much for her? Did she crumble after the decline of her marriage? Or was it a combination of the stressors in her life? NASA officials are equally perplexed, which leaves us asking if there were any warning signs that may have prevented her mental collapse?

Unlike most professions, astronauts are put through rigorous mental and physical tests to determine their psychological and physical well-being and whether or not they are capable of coping effectively with the extreme stressors that are undoubtedly a part of their job. While not everyone is an astronaut, we can all agree that our jobs and personal lives are stressful in their own way. Stress is a fact of life. You cannot avoid it, and no one is immune. Stress can be cumulative such that events from two or three years ago may still affect you now. This leads us to wonder, if someone who has passed all these psychological and physical tests can crumble under the pressure of a job and personal life, how do you keep it happening to you? The key to prevention is being aware of the potential stressors in your life, paying attention to the warning signs, and knowing when to ask for help. There is no shame in seeking professional help to address your concerns, but for the astronaut in the news, the price to pay for not seeking help was extremely high.

Sources of Stress: Where does stress come from?

- *Environmental* Stressors- weather, traffic, noise, disasters
- *Social* Stressors- job, finances, relationships, loss of a loved one
- *Physiological* Stressors- health concerns, aging, accidents, lack of sleep, weight fluctuation
- *Mental* Stressors- your thoughts and perceptions, how you interpret and label the circumstances in your life

Ask yourself,

Do I experience stress in multiple areas of my life?

Do I have difficulty coping with some of my stressors?

Possible Warning Signs of Undue Stress:

Physical Signs-

- Headaches, Backaches, or Neckaches
- Muscle Tension or muscle spasms
- High blood pressure
- Chronic stomach aches, indigestion, ulcers, diarrhea, or constipation
- Fatigue or physical weakness
- Noticeable **changes in sleep** patterns including too much sleep or inability to sleep
- Noticeable **changes in eating** habits including eating more or less than is typical in the recent past resulting in decreased or increased weight gain

Emotional/Psychological Signs-

- Anxiety in specific situations (i.e. deadlines, interviews, presentations)
- Anxiety in personal relationships (i.e. with spouse, parents, children)
- General Anxiety (in most situations)
- Depression or feelings of sadness much of the time
- Low self-esteem
- Irritability or frequent changes in mood
- Anger and Hostility
- Unwanted thoughts
- General or Specific Fears (i.e. failure, accidents, illness, death)

Ask yourself,

Do I experience any of these physical or emotional signs on a regular basis?

Am I unable to “let it go” and relax my mind and body?

Are these signs interfering with my quality of life or daily living?

It is important to 1) be aware of the origin of your stressors and 2) recognize changes in your physical or emotional behavior that may indicate that the stressors you are experiencing have become too much for you to handle. If you answered “yes” to any of the questions above, you are encouraged to consult with your physician or a mental health professional. By seeking professional help, you will learn strategies and tactics to cope with and proactively manage the stressors in your life. You may contact Atlanta Psych Consultants at 404-847-9560 for a consultation. While many of the physical symptoms have a physical cause, others may be linked to stress. You will need to consult with your personal physician to eliminate the possibility of a physical cause.

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