

Please Note:

Recommendations provided in this report are based on available literature. Implementation of these recommendations may be restricted by your funding source and/or funding agency's policies.

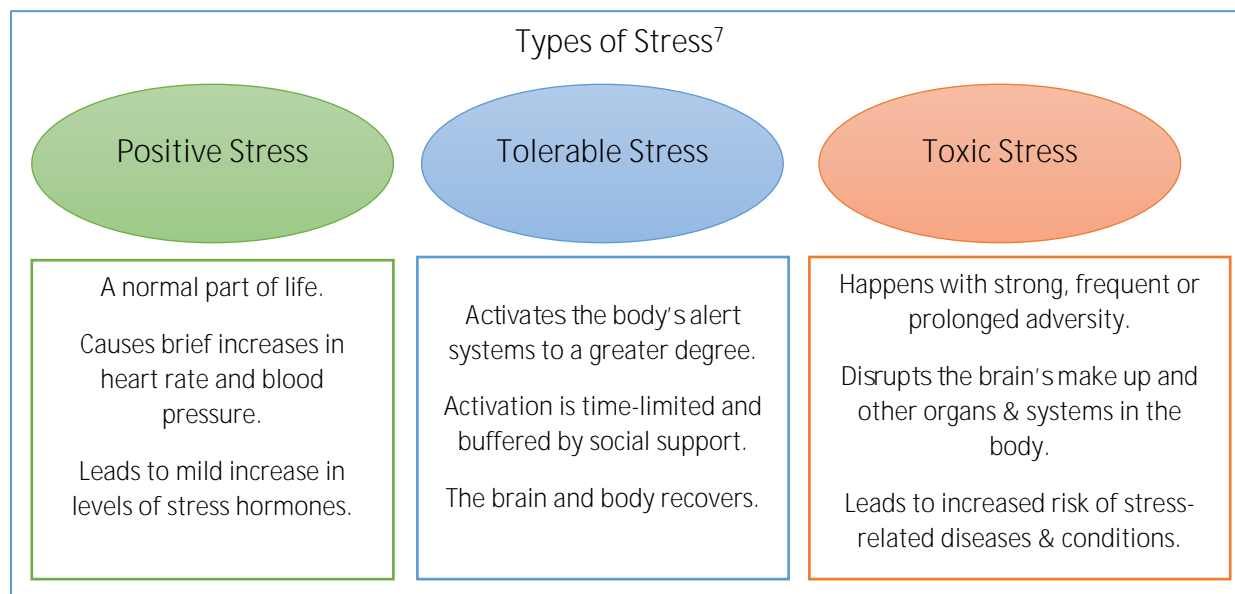
Toxic Stress.....6te..460p5525>B1M7BT1

What is "stress" ?.....5(T15.71 RG)x5(xi...)]TJETBT.1.0.0.1.5.13.46371 RG (.....)]TJE

How does stress become toxic?

Communities living in poverty are constantly facing challenges, from the concern of meeting their families' daily needs to obtaining health care and education. For minority population living in poverty, these challenges are made worse by social and political issues tied to their race, ethnicity, language, disability, or immigration status, among others. These challenges cause stress that impacts

Whatever comes our way, our stress response is there, like a reserve of energy that we draw upon when needed. This reserve can be depleted if used too often. For individuals who deal with stressful situations every day, or very often, these stress hormones and chemicals can be overused and our body begins to draw upon other resources in our body to make up for the extra energy needed to survive. When stress is constant, even when resulting from what might be considered “small problems,” it can become chronic stress, or the constant drawing from our stress energy account to deal with issues that are happening often. For example, a woman constantly having to worry about her safety because of an abusive partner; or one who is always worried about how she will be treated at work because she is the only woman, or the only person of color. These chronic stressful situations, if not addressed, become “toxic” to the body and lead to many physical, mental and emotional health problems.²⁻⁶



In general, the toxic effects of chronic stress lead to lower stress thresholds within the physical and psychological stress management systems, meaning the person becomes stressed very easily and quicker than normal. Lowered thresholds for responsiveness may persist over time and increase the risk of stress-related disease or disorders as well as mental impairment in the adult years.⁵ Toxic stress may affect the brain and the body in the following ways:^{4, 5, 8-12}

Experiencing chronic stress such as poverty, neglect or physical abuse early in life seems to change the parts of the brain that are important for learning, remembering and processing stress and emotion. Children whose brains are still developing are especially affected.

To cope with toxic stress, many turn to addictive behaviors that provide temporary relief from physical, emotional and psychological pain. Researchers have found a strong link between toxic stress and the overuse of alcohol, tobacco and other illicit drugs.

The more a particular part of the brain is activated through chronic stress, the more active and stronger it becomes. When a body's stress response reserved for dealing with threats is constantly triggered, individuals become over-sensitive, whether the situation is very threatening or not. This

Stress responses happen immediately, as soon as the threat appears, but the immune system takes longer to respond (hours, sometimes days). When the stress is short-lived, even if it is intense, the immune system is not affected because the stress reaction ends before the immune system gets the chance to react. However, with chronic, long-term stress, the chemicals released (cortisol, adrenaline) keeps being released in the body. Cortisol, for example, shuts down the ability of the immune cells to respond to foreign invaders (germs, for example). When cortisol is constantly released, the immune cells do not get the chance to recuperate. This means that when the body comes into contact with a virus or an infection, it does not have its full strength to fight them and the person becomes an easy target for diseases.

For women who are of reproductive age, chronic stress is also toxic not only to the woman, but to her pregnancy and her infant. Toxic stress impact mothers and children at all critical stages in reproductive life: before (preconception, Interconception), during (prenatal) and after (postpartum) pregnancy. Risk factors for toxic stress that have been examined include extreme

their child. In mice, research has shown that maternal toxic stress results in behavioral changes in offspring, including increased fear and stress reactivity.¹⁵ This suggests that maternal stress can change the mother's DNA and impact the infant. For example, research among women who developed PTSD (post-

strengthen the body and helps maintain healthy organs, but they are also known to increase the “feel-good” hormones (e.g., melatonin) that help to buffer the high levels of stress hormones.

For CHWs to address its consequences, it important they first understand the sources of the toxic stress. If stressors are current, the sources can be addressed directly. For example, with poverty related stressors related to basic needs of families, CHWs can work with families to identify the

opportunity to recover is key to reducing poor health outcomes. The simplest method for

Potential Signs of Toxic Stress: ⁷

Clingy/separation anxiety
Flat affect—

Biting, kicking, tantrums

University of Rochester Medical Center, NYS Maternal & Infant Health Center of Excellence

265 Crittenden Blvd, Rochester, NY 14642 – Tel: 585-276-7893 – Fax: 585-461-4532
mihcoe@urmc.rochester.edu – www.mihcoe.org