

UNDERSTANDING TYPES OF STRESS

Dealing adaptively with stress often requires identifying and distinguishing among the types of stress helping professionals face: primary, secondary, systemic and moral. Any of these types can be **acute** or **chronic**.

Personal or Primary Stress is in reaction to situations of threat, trial or trauma that affect us and those close to us directly.

- **Acute** reactions range from strong reactions to major loss or trauma to less severe reactions to social dangers like dealing with an angry or demanding family member, patient or boss.
- **Chronic** personal/primary stress results from dealing with difficult, frustrating and/or threatening life situations that persist (without sufficient relief) for an extended period of time like caring for an ill partner while continuing to meet high expectations at work.

Secondary Stress is the kind that can come with caring “for others in need” (R. Wicks).

- **Acute** reactions range from the trauma care-givers can experience/absorb as a result of working with people in situations of trauma (“sometimes referred to as ‘vicarious posttraumatic stress disorder’” (Wicks) to less severe reactions to dealing with other people who are very needy, anxious, angry, hurt or otherwise in distress.
- **Chronic** secondary stress (sometimes labeled “compassion fatigue”) is the kind that results from working for extended periods of time (without sufficient support, relief and/or resources) with highly needy, infirm and/or distressed people

Systemic Stress is the kind that results from working with and/or within highly demanding, anxious, strained and/or unhealthy organizational or other work environments.

- **Acute** reactions range from reactions to organizational trauma like workplace violence or sudden lay-offs to less severe reactions to significant organizational change, conflict, increased demands, increased workplace hostility or anxiety.
- **Chronic** reactions result from working for extended periods of time (without sufficient support, reward, relief and/or resources) with or within stressful organizational or other work environments. Generally, the less power or authority one has to influence such systems the higher the stress.

Moral Stress is the kind that results from dealing with situations that seriously test or threaten our core values and sense of integrity.

- **Acute** reactions range from strong reactions to situations in which we choose or feel compelled or constrained to behave in ways that run strongly counter to our core values or sense of “the kind of person I am, should or want to be”. These reactions can range from traumatic guilt, shame, fear of causing harm and self-contempt to less intense levels of these affects.
- **Chronic** reactions result from working in on-going ‘de-moralizing’ situations or environments where the realities of “no-win” moral conflicts and the moral stress they induce are frequently denied, concealed, and left unattended. Reactions can include chronic feelings of guilt, shame, the felt erosion of core values and integrity, and/or a pathological split between soul and role.

Questions for Reflection:

- What are some of the big stresses in your life right now?
- What kinds are they?
- What *practices* are most important to you for bouncing back & bouncing forward?
- What *relationships* are most important to you for bouncing back and bouncing forward?
- What implications might this have for your Rules of Life

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