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## Mammoths, Stress, and N.U.T.S. Do You Know What They Are?

Stress is bad...Stress is brought on by time pressures and demands that exceed our capabilities... These are statements that can be challenged, according to research on stress carried out by Sonia Lupien, Ph.D., Director of the Centre for Studies on Human Stress at the Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital in Montreal, and author of the book *Well Stressed: Manage Stress Before It Turns Toxic*.

### Stress is N.U.T.S.

What is stress? It is our body's response to a situation that our brain perceives as threatening. Our body produces stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, which lead us to react to the threat almost immediately. This is what has allowed humans to survive since prehistoric times when they had to fight or flee mammoths!

This acute reaction to stress is certainly useful when it comes to dangerous situations. For example: we brake when we spot a deer approaching the road out of the corner of our eye; we react and intervene when a child chokes during a meal. Stress, therefore, is not only bad...

Thanks to a certain amount of stress, we also take on new challenges at work and try out new experiences that bring us joy!

But what happens when we constantly feel surrounded by mammoths, when the physiological state of alert does not go

away, and when we cannot regain calm because stressful situations continue to accumulate one after the other? This is called chronic stress, which carries its share of physical and psychological problems. These include a weakened immune system that often leads to getting sick as soon as vacation begins, poor digestion, memory lapses, emotions running high, etc.

Science sheds light on our contemporary mammoths, that is, situations that are stressful to us. In effect, for the production of stress hormones to occur, one or more of the following 4 elements must be present:

**N**ovelty, **U**npredictability, **T**hreat to the ego, and **S**ense of low control, hence the acronym **N.U.T.S.**

### 1. Novelty

A new situation that you have never experienced presents itself.

- ✓ You are retiring and moving to your country house permanently.

## 2. Unpredictability

Something completely unexpected has happened, or you have no way of knowing what will happen in advance.

- ✓ Your child has behavioural problems and the school can call you at work at anytime to report wrongdoings.
- ✓ You must replace your boss on a moment's notice at a meeting for which you are not prepared.

## 3. Threat to the Ego

Your skills and ego are put to the test. You question yourself.

- ✓ A colleague questions a decision you made and does this in front of your employees.
- ✓ Your sister criticizes the way you handled an argument between her son and your son.

## 4. Sense of Low Control

You feel little or no control over a situation.

- ✓ A reorganization is announced at work and you have not been consulted about changes that will be made to your position.
- ✓ You learn that your father has Alzheimer's and must leave his home.

It is important to know that these four components of stress are cumulative. The more elements of N.U.T.S. a situation has, the more stressful the situation becomes and the more your body will produce stress hormones.

## N.U.T.S. and Stress Management Strategies

The good news about N.U.T.S. is that once you understand what is stressing you about a particular situation, you can reduce its impact, that is, literally reduce the production of stress hormones. Here are some proven strategies for stress management:

## 1. Deconstruct and Reconstruct Stressful Situations

Identify which features of N.U.T.S. are involved and come up with a plan B, C, or D for the situation. The mere feeling of understanding the source of stress and knowing that you can react otherwise reduces the production of stress hormones.

## 2. Flee...Temporarily

During acute stress, leaving the situation temporarily, when possible, can give you the necessary time to deconstruct the situation and find new solutions to deal with it more effectively.

## 3. Interact with Others

Studies show that social support can guard against stress through practical and emotional resources. Breaking isolation helps to fight stress.

## 4. Use Your Body

Deep breathing through the stomach, exercise, and laughter are all activities that allow the body to release itself from a state of alert and return to normal.

## In Conclusion

The stress we experience daily at work or at home is, first and foremost, a physiological reaction to situations that our brain perceives as threatening. Somewhere between this threat and the physiological reaction, lies an interpretation over which we have a certain amount of control. If you need support in learning how to better manage stress, your EAP can help you.

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Book title: *Well Stressed: Manage Stress Before It Turns Toxic*, Kindle Edition, 2012, Sonia Lupien, Ph.D., Director, The Centre for Studies on Human Stress.