SURVIVING STRESS: WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE SO SUPERIOR?

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Stress is an inescapable consequence of life and comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Stress can stem from sources such as germs and pollution that cause diseases, natural disasters, accidents, wars and terrorist activities that threaten lives, major life change events like the loss of a spouse or a host of irritating hassles that challenge you several times a day. Over the past half century, scientists have steadily confirmed the diverse and deleterious consequences that stress can have on health. They have also increasingly uncovered the diverse mechanisms of action that may mediate this damage.

These effects of stress range from direct endocrine, immune and nervous system disruption to indirect influences on behavior that affect eating, drinking, smoking and sleeping habits. While everyone is subjected to stress our responses can be quite different depending on how we perceive or interpret the situation. Some people seem to be able to cope with certain types of stress much better than others. Why?

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Are some individuals more resistant or susceptible to stress because of genetic factors or do environmental influences play a greater role in shaping how we sense and react to stressful stimuli? As noted in a previous Newsletter, researchers recently identified what has been referred to as an "anxiety gene". It acts by influencing the transport of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that affects emotions and mood. People with a shortened version of this gene showed significantly greater physiologic responses to frightening stimuli. Sophisticated imaging studies confirm increased activity in the amygdala, a portion of the brain associated with palpitations, rapid breathing, sweaty palms and other "fight or flight" responses.

However, the amygdala is also influenced by early environmental exposure to stressful situations and activity is heightened in abused children regardless of their genes. Conversely, the more a mother rat licks and grooms her offspring, the less fearful they will be when confronted with challenges later in life compared to controls with less attentive mothers. Although how we respond to stress can depend upon both inherited and environmental factors, nurture appears to be more important than nature. In addition, while we can't control our genes or avoid stress, we can learn how to change the way we perceive and respond to threats to minimize their harmful effects. This is where the future of stress research lies.