



# FACT SHEET

## Stress and well-being

An important step towards maximizing personal well-being and life satisfaction is learning to cope with the daily stress in one’s life. Left unattended, stress can affect every part of well-being and even has implications for cognitive abilities such as problem solving, processing speed and attention.

Everyone experiences situations which cause them some stress, whether in a personal relationship or at work, home or school. Sometimes stress is caused by something that happens to a close friend or relative. Of course, which events are perceived as stressful and how stressful they feel is largely subjective; having an argument or disagreement may be a minor stressor to one person but very stressful to someone else. This is why our daily surveys on well-being ask several questions about both the number and severity of stressful events experienced during the day.

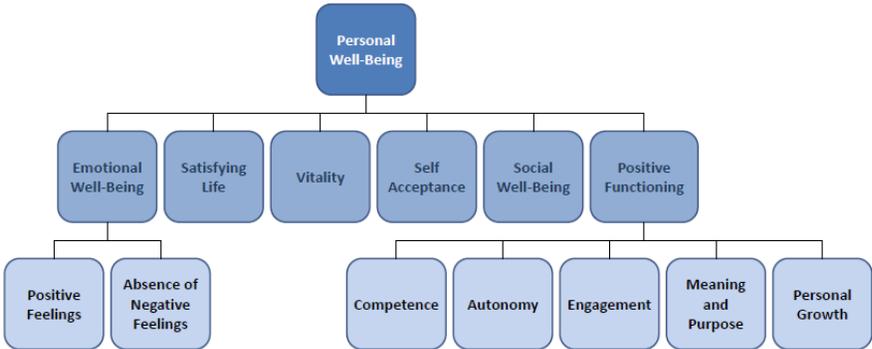
An example of a question designed to assess the frequency of stressors would be

**“In the last 24 hours, did anything happen that you could have argued about but decided to let pass to avoid disagreement?”**

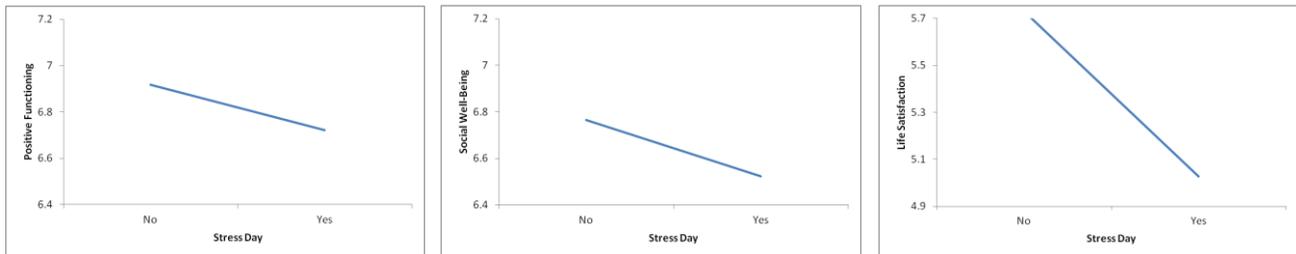
If the participant answered yes, we would ask a follow-up question to determine the perceived severity of stress, such as

**“How stressful was this experience for you?”**

In our work with University of Victoria undergraduate students, we have found that people who rated the severity of their daily stressors as high had lower levels of well-being compared to their peers who rated severity as low in the areas of vitality, self-acceptance, engagement, mindfulness, autonomy, life satisfaction, purpose and relatedness. The high stress severity group also reported experiencing fewer positive emotions and more negative emotions.



Other research in the Laboratory for Integrative Lifespan Research has found similar results with the frequency of stressful events. On days when participants report having some stress, as opposed to days when they are stress-free, they scored lower on measures of positive functioning, social well-being and life satisfaction.



As well, those who rate stressor frequency and/or severity as high do not perform as well as low-stress individuals on cognitive tests. This is because stress-induced intrusive thoughts compete for attentional resources in the brain, a problem called **cognitive interference**. This means that, when faced with a cognitive test or a problem to solve, a high-stress person has fewer resources to devote to completing the task. We see this in their behaviour as a slow reaction time or low accuracy. In contrast, a low-stress individual is able to devote maximal resources toward the task at hand and is generally faster and more accurate in completing it.

It's important to notice that it doesn't matter what causes the stress – as long as it felt stressful to the individual, it affected their well-being and cognition. This is why it's important to be aware of the things cause you stress, monitor your stress level throughout the day and before going to bed for the night and find positive ways to cope. Whether you feel stress relief by talking to someone about it, getting outside, keeping a journal or exercising, you can keep well-being levels high even on stressful days.

To learn more about stress, well-being and positive coping techniques, see the following resources:

- BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information: Here to Help.  
<http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/skills/module2>
- The Black Dog Institute *Hints to Avoid Harmful Stress*.  
<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/HintstoAvoidHarmfulStress.pdf>

- Canadian Mental Health Institution *Stress*. <http://www.cmha.ca/mental-health/your-mental-health/stress/>
- Sliwinski, M. J., Smyth, J., Hofer, S. M., & Stawski, R. (2006). Intraindividual coupling of stress and cognition. *Psychology and Aging, 21*(3), 545-557.
- Stawski, R. S., Sliwinski, M. J., & Smyth, J. M. (2006). Stress-related cognitive interference predicts cognitive function in old age. *Psychology and Aging, 21*(3), 434-544.