Overview

In this lesson, students consider the social and economic causes of stress as well as the health implications of living with stress.

Activities

Day One

1. Warm-up activity:
   Begin by asking the class questions that may indicate symptoms of stress, such as:
   - Do you have difficulty sleeping?
   - Do you get headaches?
   - Do you worry a lot?
   - Other similar questions

2. Guide students to think about specific situations that cause stress by working together to review and add to the following list:
   - Losing a job
   - Not having money to pay bills (financial problems)
   - Difficulties at work
   - Not having time to finish work/assignments
   - Conflicts in scheduling
   - Worrying about parents
   - Not having friends or feeling isolated
   - Not getting enough sleep
   - Living in another city or country, away from home
   - ____________________________
   - ____________________________

   Encourage students to think of other situations that can cause stress.

   Working in groups of four, ask students to identify situations that have caused them stress and to share how they coped. They should also think about how stress has affected their health.

3. Close reading and vocabulary exercise:
   a) Ask students to read the following statements on stress, selected from different episodes of *Unnatural Causes*.

   From Episode 1, “In Sickness and in Wealth”: [People] have high levels of cortisol circulating in their blood. It’s the same chemical that is released in human beings in response to stress. And when it is sustained at high levels, it starts having negative effects on cellular function and tissues. Those with less chronic stress caught fewer colds than those with more stress. While a cold virus may seem minor, it could signal more serious health problems.
From Episode 2, “When the Bough Breaks”: And if that stress is chronic, constant, and you just can’t escape it, over time that chronic stress, the chronic activation of that response, creates wear and tear on your body’s organs and systems so that you create this overload on these systems so that they don’t work very well.

From Episode 4, “Bad Sugar”: And when stress hormones remain high, they continue to trigger production of glucose. Glucose builds up in the bloodstream, leading to diabetes.

From Episode 5, “Place Matters”: When stress is chronic—when we’re endlessly worried about our bills, our job, our children’s safety—the body pumps out cortisol and adrenaline. But too much of these stress hormones over time can increase arterial plaque, raise blood pressure and weaken our immune system, increasing our risk for almost every chronic disease—including heart disease, ….

From Episode 7, “Not Just a Paycheck”: High levels of cortisol can trigger increases in blood pressure, blood sugar and even inflammation—all risk factors for disease.

b) Ask students to match these words with the definitions that follow them:

stress ___  cortisol ___  stressor ___  glucose ___  chronic disease ___
adrenaline ___  immune system ___  inflammation ___

1. System by which your body protects itself against disease
2. Things that give you stress
3. Continuous feelings of worry about your work or personal life
4. Disease that continues for a long time and cannot be cured
5. Blood sugar
6. Stress hormone
7. Chemical produced by the body that makes your heart beat faster
8. Swelling and soreness on or in a part of your body

4. Optional: Screen a clip from Unnatural Causes, Episode 2: “When the Bough Breaks,” and suggest students take notes on the episode.

5. Close reading and vocabulary exercise
Give students time to read the following paragraph carefully. Then have them work in groups of three or four to research the meaning and usage of the words listed in CHART A. They can use a dictionary if necessary.
Americans are obsessed with health. We spend more than twice what the average rich country spends per person on medical care, yet we have among the worst disease outcomes of any industrialized nation and the greatest health inequalities. It’s not just the poor who are sick. Even the middle classes die, on average, almost three years sooner than the rich. At every step down the socioeconomic ladder, African Americans and Native Americans often fare worse than their white counterparts. Interestingly, that’s not the case for most new groups of immigrants of color. Recent Latino immigrants, for example, though typically poorer than the average American, have better health. But the longer they live here, the more their health erodes. Those on the top have the most access to power, resources and opportunity and therefore the best health. Those on the bottom are faced with more stressors—such as unpaid bills, jobs that don’t pay enough, unsafe living conditions, exposure to environmental hazards, lack of control over work, worries over children—and [have] the fewest resources available to help them cope.

Source: From Unnatural Causes

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<th>Chart A</th>
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<td><strong>Word</strong></td>
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<td>discrimination</td>
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Working in the same groups, ask students to discuss and respond to the following questions:

1. What reasons can you give for the differences in health between the middle and upper classes?
2. Why do you think recent Latino immigrants have better health when they first come to America?
3. What changes can people make in the way they live to improve their health and life expectancy?

Have students share their answers with the class and write the responses on the board.

6. **Homework** — free writing exercise
   Have students write freely on what they have learned about the factors that affect their health.

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