

Stress and Locus of Control

By Dr Ed Feraco

Many of us hear the word stress all the time but often ignore the signs and symptoms in ourselves which can have a debilitating effect on our health, with our relationships, in our occupation, and in general.

There are many things in life that can either “cause” or influence the level of stress in a person such as our job, our relationship, finances, and our own traits/attitudes. For example, the following can significantly influence one’s level of stress: a) being a perfectionist, b) having a Type A personality, c) being a pessimist, d) addictive or unhealthy behaviors, e) poor anger management skill, f) rumination (think about something over and over non-stop) and obsessions, g) distorted thinking (irrational thinking), h) external locus of control, i) poor communication skill, etc.

People with an external locus of control do not deal well with stress compared to a person with an internal locus of control. The term ‘locus of control’ refers to whether you feel your life is controlled by you or by forces outside yourself. Those with an internal locus of control feel that they have choice in their lives and control over their circumstances; however, those with an external locus of control feel more at the mercy of external events. Those with a more internal locus of control tend to feel happier, more free, and less stress. They also enjoy better health (likely because they experience less of the damaging chronic stress that can come from feeling powerless), and are more satisfied with life in general. Those with an external locus of control are more susceptible to depression as well as other health problems, and tend to keep themselves in situations where they will experience additional stress, feeling powerless to change their own circumstances, which just adds to their stress load. Your locus of control can be shaped by events in your childhood or adulthood (whether you were able to have a strong impact on your environment can lead to a sense of empowerment or of learned helplessness) and spread by ongoing thinking patterns.

If you feel like your locus of control is causing you difficulty managing stress and/or your life, try these exercises as listed in the “Stress Management Guide”:

- 1) Realize you always have choices even if you do not like the available choices and even if the only change you can make is your attitude.
- 2) When you feel trapped, make a list of all possible courses of action. Just brainstorm, do not do anything without evaluating first.
- 3) You may also want to brainstorm with a friend or relative to see if there is an option you might not have considered. However, don’t shoot any down right away, just write them down.
- 4) When you have a list, evaluate each one and decide on the best course of action for you, and keep the others in the back of your mind as alternative options. You may end up with the same answer you had before the brainstorming session, but

this exercise can open your eyes to the amount of choices you have in a given situation. Seeing new possibilities will become more of a habit.

- 5) Repeat this practice when you feel trapped in frustrating situations in your life. In more casual, everyday situations, you can still expand your mind to new possibilities by doing this quickly and mentally.

If you find yourself struggling with this type of issue therapy can help you facilitate personal growth by learning how to replace any faulty thinking you may have known as cognitive restructuring. This is a process of recognizing, challenging, and changing negative thought patterns which a therapist can help you to learn the techniques necessary to accomplish this.