

# Stress: The Bigger Picture

## AIM

To have students gain an understanding of how they can try to control the amount of stress in their lives and live a healthier life as a result.

## OBJECTIVES

At the end of the session, students will be able to:

- Discuss the social factors that impact ill-health.
- Examine the health implications of stress arising from specific situations.
- Read, interpret and analyze short paragraphs on health inequality.
- Learn new health related vocabulary.

## TARGET GROUP

Intermediate to high-level ESL students, level 5 to level 9  
 Some of the activities in this lesson are suitable for level 5, but for the most part this lesson targets ESL learners at the advanced levels (levels 7 to 9). (For the purpose of this lesson, the target group levels range from 1 through 8, with the following guidelines: 1 = beginning, 5 = intermediate, 8 = advanced.)  
 Lessons can also be adapted for 8<sup>th</sup>-through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students on health and health education programs.

## LENGTH

Two 50-minute class periods

## MATERIALS

- ***Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?*** (DVD); video clips and resources available at [www.unnaturalcauses.org](http://www.unnaturalcauses.org)

## 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

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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:

- 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*

**Chart A**

Word	Meaning	Example or Usage
discrimination		
environmental		
erode		
exposure		
hazard		
inequality		
obsess		
socioeconomic		

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.