

## **Controlling Stress and Tension: A Holistic Approach.**

**D. Girdano & G. Everly,**

Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979

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**Reviewed by**

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“Stress” has been implicated in the etiology of practically any physical or mental health problem. In the recent (1980) revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the American Psychiatric Association has explicitly recognized this: first, by devoting one of the five diagnostic “axes” to a general rating of the severity of life stressors, and second, by allowing that psychogenic factors can potentially play a part in the etiology of any “non-mental” medical disorder. Largely because of the work of such figures as Hans Selye and Richard S. Lazarus, “stress” figures prominently in contemporary accounts of health and illness, despite the fact that the concept of stress defies simple definition.

Girdano and Everly have provided essentially a self-help manual for recognizing and countering the effects of stressful stimuli in the context of a “holistic” approach: the view that stressors are many and varied, and can differ qualitatively from one another; that reactions to them are multiply determined; and that a comprehensive approach to understanding and managing stress reactions will include cognitive, behavioral, physical, interpersonal, and environmental modifications.

The text is divided into three broad sections: (1) body and mind in health and disease; (2) what causes stress and what is your stress profile? and (3) how to prevent and reduce stress: intervention and management techniques. The first section outlines a selective history of mind-body concepts, especially monistic (or mind-body unity) theories (the omission of any reference to Gilbert Ryle is disappointing); concepts of disease (organic, conversion, and psychosomatic); the holistic approach to psychosomatics; biological systems that control stress; and the body’s response to stress. Section two examines psychosocial, bioecological, and “personality” causes of stress, subsuming a variety of topics which include effects of frustration, “overload,” and deprivation; the importance of biological rhythms and diet; and the influence of self-perception, key behavior patterns, and the “anxious-reactive” personality. The final sec-

tion on prevention and stress-reduction outlines various practical approaches which involve "social engineering" (e.g., the "goal-alternative" system; time management), "personality engineering" (e.g. increasing self-esteem, reducing "Type A" behavior), altered states of consciousness, meditation, biofeedback, relaxation training, and a final chapter—on physical activity—contributed by Dorothy Dusek-Girdano. The book includes bibliography and index.

A valuable feature of the book is the inclusion of clear (sometimes perhaps over-simple) flow-diagrams of specific stress reactions, careful anatomical illustrations, line-drawings of postures used in relaxation training, and—most refreshing—self assessment exercises throughout the text. These inventories are completed by the reader before proceeding to the relevant sections which provide detailed rationale and explanation, and ultimately allow recording a composite "personal stress profile summary sheet". This enables one to pick out important areas of vulnerability to stress, and directs the attention to specific intervention strategies detailed in the final section of the book. As the authors note in the Preface, it is important for the reader to progress through all chapters in sequential order; the argument is developed cumulatively through the text.

Another strength of the book is the engaging way in which it is written. The text is not exclusively aimed at health professionals; rather, it is intended for anyone interested in controlling his or her stress reactions. The authors use an eclectic range of terms (from "repression" to "reinforcement" to "reticular formation"), consistent, perhaps, with their holistic approach to the subject-matter. Key words and their definitions are clearly displayed in "boxes" within the text. The authors manage to maintain the reader's interest without resorting to "trendy" language, and they show their cautious enthusiasm for the stress-control techniques presented while avoiding the hyperbole of some popular accounts. In the discussion of biofeedback procedures (Chapter 13), for example, the authors are careful to enter caveats about the sometimes overstated claims of advertising copy for commercially-available devices. Throughout the book, the authors' discussion of topics from neuroanatomy to meditation seems to reflect a relaxed competence that commands respect.

The authors do not, of course, cite experimental evidence to support the effectiveness of the various strategies described, such as relaxation training, meditation, and so forth—understandable in a book addressed to a general readership. However, not all of the procedures cited are supported by the professional literature (for example, self-directed thought-stopping), and *that* is a point of concern. In fact, the impact of a book like this is potentially very researchable; it has been noted recently (R. E. Glasgow & G. M. Rosen, *Clinical Behavior Therapy Review*, 1979, 1,

1-20) that there are three potential levels of validation for self-help programs: (1) at the minimal level of validation, that the manual is based on procedures that have generally fared well in previous research; (2) that the authors have done systematic work in the topic area and have developed a successful program (Girdano and Everly seem to be able to meet this criterion); and (3) at the most stringent level, that the book itself has been evaluated under the conditions of intended usage. There is scope here for a worthwhile experiment.

A particular criticism of the presentation is that sometimes correlational data seem to be adduced as evidence of cause-effect relationships. For example, in a section on "overcrowding" in Chapter 6 ("Psychosocial Causes of Stress"), a study of New York City commuters purports to show that, because commuters who board a train at the half-way point of the route show higher secretions of stress-related hormones than those who board earlier, then the greater crowding and failure to secure a seat influences the stress response. It is always a possibility, of course, that people who live nearer the city center are initially more prone to stress reactions, and that this predisposition somehow influenced their choice to live closer to the city. Similarly, the fact that higher death rates from heart disease, cancer, and accidents are found in "lonely" (e.g., single, divorced) people does not show that loneliness causes stress; it could be that initial high propensity for stress has an impact on divorce rates, for example.

These points lead naturally to a discussion of the general philosophy underlying the holistic approach. The central view is the contemporary one of reciprocal determinism: rather than emphasizing unitary cause-effect relationships, the concept is of a continuing interaction of causes and effects, sometimes leading to vicious circles, self-fulfilling prophecies, and the like. Many helpful examples are provided throughout the text (for example, the influence of "self-perception" on failure expectations in the chapter on "Personality Causes of Stress"). Perhaps a biased objection here is that the authors did not refer to contemporary social learning theory as an apt theoretical model. Bandura (*Social Learning Theory*, Prentice-Hall, 1977) has long advocated the reciprocal determinism view in which interactions of behavioral, cognitive, physiological, and environmental events are the focus. "Cognitive" is the key word here. Throughout the book "thoughts" and "attitudes" are mentioned more or less in passing, sometimes (unaccountably) as "personality" variables, sometimes as "psychosocial" influences; but these are only tantalizing glimpses. There is no reference to the explicit use of cognitive-behavioral procedures such as self-instructional training or stress-inoculation (D. H. Meichenbaum, *Cognitive-Behavior Modification*, Plenum, 1977), techniques in which one examines and

disputes unhelpful or negative self-statements and rehearses self-supportive and coping covert verbalizations. These procedures have been used successfully in anxiety management, pain control, and anger control (R. Novaco, *Anger Control*, Heath & Co., 1975).

A final criticism is that the reader might mistakenly conclude from chapters on relaxation, biofeedback, and meditation that one can self-diagnose and treat stress reactions that border on psychophysiological syndromes. Medical consultation, if not intervention, is necessary in any case in which there could be actual physiological damage. Lastly, one instruction in the section on relaxation exercises could be ambiguous for some readers: "Rotate your head clockwise three complete rotations. Repeat this counterclockwise three times" (p. 176)!

The authors give comprehensive and detailed coverage of their material. It is a valuable contribution to the self-help literature, readable and clear. Reading this book can be a sobering eye-opener even to those supposed to know better; at least one reader self-diagnosed the beginnings of a dangerous flirtation with Type A behavior as he gulped his tea and inhaled tobacco-smoke while trying to meet the deadline for this review. Happily, Girdano and Everly provide an array of practical methods for altering stressful life-styles and coping with stress responses. Missing a book-review deadline can be beneficial to your health!