Chronic Stress

**Background:** Turn on the stress response for five minutes and it can save your life. But as Stanford biologist Robert Sapolsky observes, turn on the stress response for 30 years, even at a low level, and it can increase your risk for every chronic disease.

Chronic stress, like other conditions that threaten or promote health, is distributed unevenly through society along class and racial lines. Our ability to manage the pressures that might upset our lives is not simply a matter of personality or character; it's tied to our access to power, resources, support networks and opportunities. Both exposures to stressors and access to the resources we need to manage them are tied to our class and social status.

We all experience stress. Our body's stress response is actually a way of protecting us from a perceived danger. In the face of peril, hormones like cortisol and epinephrine increase our heart rate and blood pressure to supply oxygen and glucose to muscles and the brain while shutting down "non-essential" functions like growth and reproduction.

Rockefeller University's Bruce McEwen and UCLA's Teresa Seeman are among those studying how long-term or chronic stress throws our body out of balance, especially our neuro-endocrine, immune and cardiovascular systems. McEwen calls the measurable wear and tear of persistent "micro-insults" to the body *allostatic load*. He and other researchers are demonstrating how chronic stress increases the risk of metabolic syndrome, obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart and artery disease, stroke, depression, auto-immune diseases, impaired memory, even failure to ovulate in females and erectile dysfunction in males.

There's also increasing evidence that repeated activation of the stress response early in life can literally affect the wiring of the brain, inhibit children's ability to develop "resilience," and increase the chances they will develop helplessness, anger and depression later in life and become more susceptible to obesity and illness.

All of us face pressures in our lives, but our ability to cope - and consequently stay healthy or not - depends on our position on the class pyramid. It's not CEOs who are dropping dead of heart attacks, it's their subordinates. Why? Because those with access to power, resources, support and opportunity have more control over the forces that impinge upon their lives and are better able to manage or escape the demands placed upon them.

People who are lower on the socioeconomic pyramid tend to be exposed to more formidable and ongoing stressors, e.g., job insecurity, unpaid bills, inadequate childcare, underperforming schools, and dangerous or toxic living conditions, crowded homes, even noisy streets. They are also less likely to have access to the money, power, status, knowledge, social connections and other resources they need to gain control over these many tempests that threaten to upset their lives.

But it's not only those at the bottom of the pyramid harmed by stress. So are many middle managers, working people and especially people of color, whose aspirations to succeed are often thwarted by interpersonal and institutional barriers over which they have little control,
including prejudice and racism. High demand / low control jobs are particularly stressful.

Today, chronic stress is widely recognized as a health threat. But suggested solutions usually are limited to individually based interventions like taking vitamin supplements, practicing yoga, or meditating. Although these are helpful, they aren't the whole picture. We also need strategies that challenge the underlying economic and social conditions that imperil our chances for health in the first place.

Social policies like living wage jobs, greater autonomy and control at work, safe, walkable neighborhoods, efficient public transportation, good schools, and quality, affordable housing and paid vacations are all effective ways to reduce stress, though they require a political commitment, not just a personal one. But political engagement is an effective remedy in more ways than one: while improving social conditions improves health, research suggests that the very act of engagement can also be empowering and thus stress reducing. That's a double victory.