

Coping With Stress Is a Matter of Attitude

BY JAN RUTKOWSKI

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A research psychologist tells an audience at the Phoenix Culture Center that our perceptions dictate how we handle everyday stress.

“Do you have some kind of stress?” That’s how a seminar on health and stress started at the Phoenix Culture Center today. The audience response was a roar of laughter. And SGI members and guests laughed for the next hour. Of course stress does not always make people laugh, but Dr. Kimio Hashimoto’s cheerful presentation gave both an informative and humorous perspective on our perception of stress in daily life.

“Our perception is the key factor in our experience of stress,” said Dr. Hashimoto. “*Stress* is a neutral word. We *experience* stress as negative or positive.”

Dr. Hashimoto, a professor at Kyushu University in Japan, is studying psychology at Arizona State University. He is also a member of the Soka Gakkai scholars division and is in the United States to set up a joint project between Kyushu University and ASU. He agreed to present some of his research at the culture center before he returns to Japan in June.

Dr. Hashimoto focuses on stress and health rather than stress and disease. One aspect of his talk was what to do with accumulated stress. According to Dr. Hashimoto’s research, people in different cultures deal with stress differently, as do men and women. American men, for example, talk a lot more than Japanese men to cope with stress, he said.

“Actually, the mechanics of stress in our daily lives is something with which everyone is familiar,” Dr. Hashimoto explained. “Our whole environment can be considered a collection of stressors in the form of not-so-good human relationships, accidents or an illness. Again, it’s our perception of these events that is significant. If we perceive those events as negative, the effect can be revealed physically as well as emotionally.”

A chart clarified the process of stress perception. If a life event or stressor is big, then our cognitive appraisal will be big, and consequently our experience of stress is big. Also, a small stressor is interpreted cognitively as small, and the resultant stress is small. However, there are individuals who sometimes perceive small stressors as big stressors. (Many of the audience laughed self-consciously at this point.)

Conversely, there are some who are so spaced out that the really big stressors are interpreted as small. Dr. Hashimoto joked that “some of these people may be leaving us soon.”

Dr. Hashimoto also covered stress and peak performance. He showed that there is an optimal level of stress that our lives can handle.

“If the experience of stress becomes extreme we may become emotionally shaky, have various mishaps or even an accident,” Dr. Hashimoto said. “On the other hand, if our stress is too low, we may feel bored and not able to perform well either. It is important for each of us to understand the balance and to bring out our inherent strengths to perform at the optimal level.”

How can people deal with stress? The professor showed three main coping mechanisms: First people can eliminate the stressor.

For example, if someone is making a loud noise you can move away from them. However, if your boss is the source of the stress, you cannot easily move to a different job. “The problem with this coping response is that it is totally dependent on external factors,” he said.

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The second coping mechanism also uses externals. Activities such as eating, shopping, drinking, even exercising do not fundamentally relieve stress.

“We’re like a mouse chased by a cat,” he said. “We are always running away from the stress.”

So how can we change the way we perceive stress? “Positive or forward thinking can help,” he said. “Some companies offer training classes to help people become more positive in their thinking, but it is difficult to become forward-looking or positive. If a serious life event occurs, you can be positive temporarily. For example, you can tell yourself ‘I’m going to use this to grow,’ or ‘I’m going to handle this.’”

But Dr. Hashimoto said that the attitude to use stress positively needs to be felt from within. “This is possible with a life philosophy that enables us to actually live like this,” he said. “The Buddhist concept of good friends and the process of chanting allows people to deal with any stressors in life as growth opportunities. Daimoku allows us to strengthen our life determination.”

He proposed to the audience that by having a big dream in life they could eliminate a lot of stress. He likened this to surfing. The surfer is exhilarated by the biggest waves. “Take advantage of the waves and have a good time,” he said. “Have the attitude that you want to challenge your big life stressors.”

Dr. Hashimoto closed by saying, “Let’s encourage one another to overcome stress in our lives so we can experience life like high-flying eagles.” He emphasized SGI President Ikeda’s view of problems: Suffering is there for us to overcome; problems are there for us to become strong; and faith is there for us to create victory.

Dr. Hashimoto talked informally with some participants after the seminar. Someone expressed appreciation for the good laughs the professor’s talk generated. Another joked about the old folk remedy, “Laughter is the best medicine.”

Everyone laughed.

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