



One Nation Under Stress: The Trouble with Stress as an Idea

Dana Becker

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Stress. Everyone is talking about it, suffering from it, trying desperately to manage it-now more than ever. From 1970 to 1980, 2,326 academic articles appeared with the word "stress" in the title. In the decade between 2000 and 2010 that number jumped to 21,750. Has life become ten times more stressful, or is it the stress concept itself that has grown exponentially over the past 40 years?

In *One Nation Under Stress*, Dana Becker argues that our national infatuation with the therapeutic culture has created a middle-class moral imperative to manage the tensions of daily life by turning inward, ignoring the social and political realities that underlie those tensions. Becker shows that although stress is often associated with conditions over which people have little control-workplace policies unfavorable to family life, increasing economic inequality, war in the age of terrorism-the stress concept focuses most of our attention on how individuals react to stress. A proliferation of self-help books and dire medical warnings about the negative effects of stress on our physical and emotional health all place the responsibility for alleviating stress-though yoga, deep breathing, better diet, etc.-squarely on the individual. The stress concept has come of age in a period of tectonic social and political shifts. Nevertheless, we persist in the all-American belief that we can meet these changes by re-engineering ourselves rather than tackling the root causes of stress.

Examining both research and popular representations of stress in cultural terms, Becker traces the evolution of the social uses of the stress concept as it has been transformed into an all-purpose vehicle for defining, expressing, and containing middle-class anxieties about upheavals in American society.

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