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caveat that we must act now. Consider the viewpoint of cell biologist and philosopher Bruce Lipton. In his book *Spontaneous Evolution*, he states: "Society is beginning to realize that our current beliefs are detrimental and that our world is in a very precarious position. The new science (the nexus of quantum physics, psychology and biology) paves a way into a hopeful story of humanity's potential future, one that promotes planetary healing." Lipton uses the model of holism (in which all parts are respected and come together for a greater purpose) as the template for his optimism. Lipton is among a growing group of social luminaries, including Barbara Marx-Hubbard, Jean Houston, Christine Page, Edgar Mitchell, Elizabeth Sartoris, and Gregg Braden, who share this optimistic paradigm of humanity's shifting consciousness (Schlitz, 2010). In the words of the rock musician Sting, "Yes we are in an appalling environmental crisis, but I think as a species, we evolve through crises. That's the only glimmer of hope, really" (Richter, 2010).

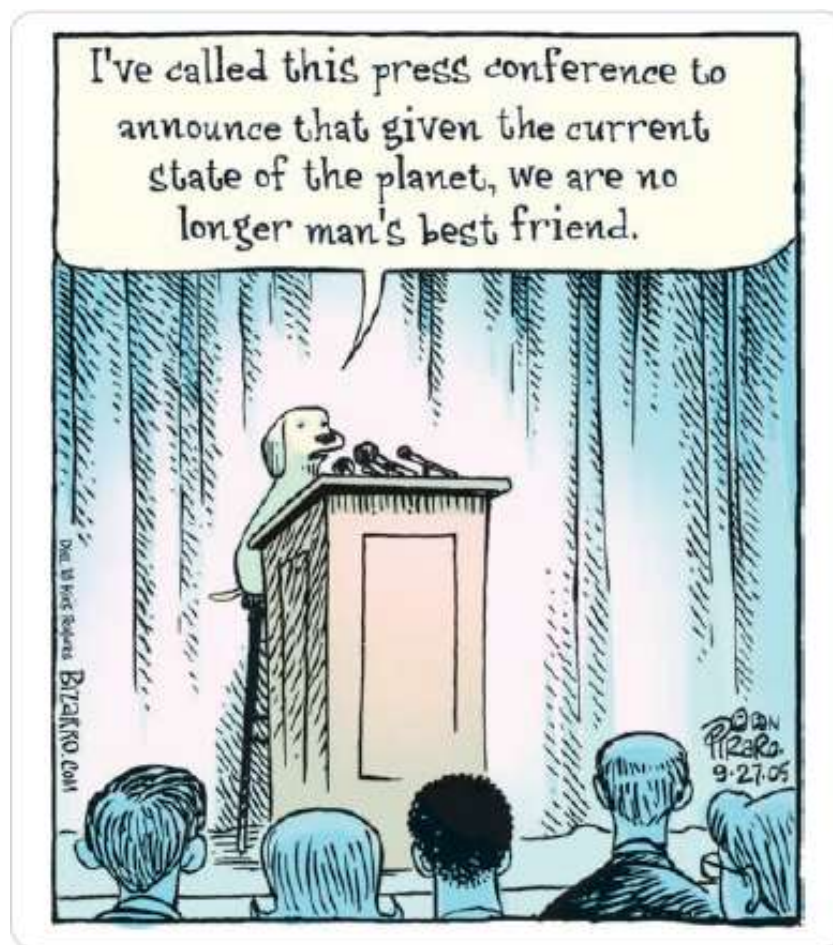


FIGURE 2.6 In every generation, there are people who predict humanity's demise. The world is not coming to an end, but our future will certainly depend on how we act now.

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When technostress, incivility (mixed with political instability), and environmental disconnect combine, they form a "perfect storm of stress." How do these aspects of the sociology of stress affect you directly? Consider this: As climate changes create more droughts, food prices will increase. As chemicals from discarded technology (smartphones, flat screen TVs, etc.) pollute water supplies, environmental stressors increase. As oil reserves decrease, increasing the price of a barrel of oil, all things tied to gasoline (food distribution, travel, consumer products) will increase in price, adding to an ever-growing sense of economic anxiety. The importance of learning and using effective stress management skills becomes even more essential in the twenty-first century.

Occupational Stress

Sociologists suggest that one's family is the first and often the most important social structure, providing social support, but also stress. Coming in a close second in both aspects is one's work environment. While ideally providing professional fulfillment, a creative outlet, and a path to wealth, work is also cited as a source of significant stress by a great many employees. Paul Rosch, M.D., director of the American Institute of Stress, notes that in American society today, **occupational stress**, or job stress, is at an all-time high (**FIG. 2.7**). He defines job stress as coming from "occupational duties in which the individual perceives having a great deal of responsibility, yet little or no authority or decision making latitude" (Rosch, 1991).

Occupational stress: Job-related stress, which often comes from occupational duties for which people perceive themselves as having a great deal of responsibility, yet little or no authority or decision-making latitude.



FIGURE 2.7 Worker burnout has reached epic proportions as people strive to personify the Puritan work ethic that deems that work equals worth.

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According to a 2013 Harris survey, 83 percent of American workers claim to be stressed out, a 10 percent rise from 2012. Reasons for the rise in stress are attributed to low pay, unreasonable workloads, annoying co-workers, poor work-life balance, and the fear of being laid off or fired (Perman, 2013). Few of these people take advantage of employee assistance programs offered at the worksite (Scott, 2007). One of the first signs of stress at the workplace is burnout, followed by absenteeism. The term *presenteeism* was coined to describe the related problem of going to work but being unproductive and unmotivated, there in body but not in mind.

The cost of stress is not insignificant in terms of work productivity or the bottom line of corporate profits. Rosch noted that the fiscal consequences of occupational stress cost an average of \$200 billion each year. Moreover, between 60 and 80 percent of all industrial accidents are stress induced, as are over 80 percent of all office visits to primary care physicians. Perhaps most striking is that workers' compensation claims associated with stress are skyrocketing, with 90 percent of claims being awarded in settlements.

What are some reasons for job stress? Although perceptions will vary from person to person, the following is a list compiled by the National Safety Council (2011):

- Lack of job security
- Too much responsibility with little or no authority
- Unrealistic expectations, deadlines, and quotas
- Corporate downsizing, restructuring, or job relocation
- Inadequate training
- Lack of appreciation
- Inadequate time to complete job responsibilities

- Inability to voice concerns
- Lack of creativity and autonomy
- Too much to do with too few resources
- Lack of clear job descriptions
- Commuting and traffic difficulties
- Keeping pace with technology
- Inadequate child care
- Poor working conditions (lighting, ventilation, noise)
- Sexual harassment and racial discrimination
- Workplace violence

Rosch noted that the Public Health Service placed stress-management courses as its top priority in order to improve health standards at the worksite. However, Rosch, who surveyed several hundred existing stress-management programs in cooperation with the Office of Occupational Safety and Health, came to the conclusion that few stress-management programs currently taught in the corporate or industrial setting offer enough substance to make a positive influential change in lifestyle behaviors, because they are either too narrowly focused or too brief, or both. Those programs he did find to be effective showed reduced illness and absenteeism, higher morale, and increased productivity.

Unfortunately, stress in the workplace is not likely to decrease any time soon. In the next decade, more companies will merge, meaning more corporate restructuring. Companies looking to appease stockholders will look for ways to trim budgets, especially by letting go of senior employees and replacing them with a young and eager workforce, or by outsourcing jobs.

Race and Gender Stress

The United States, a nation of immigrants, has often been described as a melting pot, but recently another metaphor has been used to describe the make-up of her citizens: a tossed salad, where assimilation meets head on with cultural diversity. Race and ethnic issues currently make headline news, such as illegal alien issues nationwide, disenfranchised black voters in Florida, poverty in New Orleans, and Muslim Americans facing episodes of discrimination, to name a few issues. Race and gender tensions, however, are not new. It could be argued that they are as old as humanity itself. Since time began, people have felt threatened by other people of different skin color, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual preference. The 2008 election of the first African American president has helped jump-start a national discussion on race, but it hasn't resolved intolerance.

Stress, you will remember, is defined as a perceived threat, a threat generated by the ego. These threats manifest in a variety of ways, including stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and even physical harm. Race and gender stress may begin early in life; many children can attest to being bullied in grade school or excluded and teased by social cliques because of their race or gender. The emotional stress associated with this type of angst includes low self-esteem, alienation, and anxiety. Everybody wants to be accepted.

How can society help alleviate race and gender stress? Anti-bullying programs are being implemented in many schools nationwide, helping raise awareness among kids and parents of the dangers of bullying and cyber-bullying. On television, many shows have tried to better reflect the demographics of American society with casts of various ethnicities. Although these are steps in the right direction, school curricula and television shows alone cannot change the world overnight. They are a start, however. Remember that when people demonstrate a bias toward your race, gender, ethnic background, or anything related to these concepts, they are projecting their fears onto you. A common reaction is to meet stress with stress, but the best answer is to rise above it and take the high road.



FIGURE 2.8

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Experts remind us that the cultural fabric of society is in a tremendous transition, one unparalleled in recorded human history. Indeed, we are products of our society, and society is in a state of rapid flux regarding demographics, technology, economics, global warming, and several other factors that lead to an increasingly dynamic landscape. In the end, everyone will be affected. The best strategy for coping with these changes is to adapt to them.

SUMMARY



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- Sociology is described as the study of human social behavior within families, organizations, and institutions. Societal stress is a force to be reckoned with in today's culture. Once called *future shock*, the tsunami of social issues is now referred to as *superstress*—the inability to cope with an overwhelming amount of change.
- No one is exempt from the sociology of stress.
- *Technostress* is a term used to describe the overwhelming frustrations of sensory bombardment and poor boundaries that result from the plethora of technological gadgets. Technostress began with personal computers but has evolved with the advent of and addiction to social networking. The body's physiology wasn't designed to be "on" all the time. The result is burnout and physical health issues.
- Social stress includes a decline in social etiquette. A lack of civility (demonstrated by rude, impatient behavior) is on the rise.
- Experts suggest that one aspect of societal stress is an environmental disconnect: a growing disregard of the environment by humanity, such that dramatic changes, from dwindling supplies of fresh water to declining food quality to environmental pollution, will have a significant impact on each individual's lifestyle and health.
- *Nature deficit disorder* is a term describing people's absence from the natural world. One result is inadequate amounts of sunlight exposure, which produces a vitamin D deficiency.

- Most people garner their self-worth from their jobs or careers, yet many Americans cite their job as being stressful, thus impacting self-worth, self-esteem, family relationships, and many other aspects of their lives in negative ways.
- Race and gender issues have always been part of the social fabric and continue to contribute largely to stress, especially as people express themselves with reckless abandon in the digital age.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. How would you define the term *sociology*? How would you describe the concept of the sociology of stress?
2. How would you best explain the concept of technostress?
3. What factors are associated with technostress?
4. What explains the attraction of (or addiction to) being plugged in all the time?
5. What effect does information overload and sensory bombardment have on brain function and cognitive abilities?
6. How does stress affect our relationships with others, in terms of social etiquette?
7. What factors are associated with environmental disconnect?
8. Give examples of ways in which society can help alleviate race and gender stress.

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