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People prone to stress in new sociocultural surroundings learn faster how to adapt and fit in, according to a Singapore study.

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A nurse at Singapore General Hospital is treating a patient whose family speaks a dialect she doesn’t share, and she can’t quite read whether their silence means they understand her instructions or are too uncomfortable to say they don’t.

A fresh Singapore Management University graduate sits through her first week of meetings in a Raffles Place office without saying a word, unsure whether speaking up will look engaged or presumptuous.

A project manager in Tuas is in a Zoom meeting with colleagues from four countries, and what he’s struggling with isn’t the project at all; it’s whether the silence after his last comment means agreement or quiet disagreement nobody wants to voice.

Three different social situations. The same tight feeling in the chest.

It’s a feeling most people will recognise, especially in Singapore. Given our multicultural roots, navigating unfamiliar social situations isn’t uncommon in Singapore. We have nearly

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1.5 million foreign workers in Singapore, and thousands of Singaporeans themselves work or study abroad at some point.

So why does an unfamiliar social situation produce stress in the first place? At root, the discomfort isn’t really about the unwritten rules themselves. It’s about what a faux pas might cost. A fumbled greeting can mean an awkward moment, but it can also mean a colleague concludes you’re hard to work with, a client decides not to come back, or a boss quietly reassesses whether you’re suited for the role.

Most of us have been told the same thing about feeling stressed: calm down, don’t overthink it, project confidence even if you don’t feel it. Often, this well-meaning advice goes even further, and we are told to actively avoid situations that make us uncomfortable in the first place. However, recent evidence suggests that avoidance may not be the best strategy. Our research shows that these bursts of stress don’t just have to be endured – they may actually help us learn.

Across five studies with Singaporean and American participants, we examined how easily people became stressed and whether that affected how quickly they picked up the nuances of interacting with others in new social situations.

We measured stress reactivity using genetic markers linked to the body’s stress hormone system, cortisol levels after exposure to a stressful task, and psychological scales capturing how people typically respond to everyday pressures.

Then we asked participants to learn the social norms of an unfamiliar culture through trial and error, with feedback after each attempt.

The findings were consistent across all studies, whether we measured stress reactivity via genetic markers, cortisol, or self-report questionnaires. Participants who got stressed out more consistently learnt faster.

What seems to happen is that the discomfort of getting things wrong makes these individuals experience greater stress early on and this leads them to pay closer attention to what’s going on around them. They pick up on feedback that less reactive participants may not register, small signals like how a person’s expression shifts after a greeting, or whether a particular response gets a nod or a frown.

And here’s the most important part: As the more stressed-out participants got better at reading the new norms, their stress dropped.

Stress as a survival tool
Interestingly, it’s not just humans. During a brutal El Nino drought in Costa Rica, many wild capuchin monkeys starved. The ones that pulled through weren’t the calmest animals in the troop.

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A recent study found they were the ones whose stress system reacted most intensely. Their cortisol spiked hard enough to push them out of familiar territory and into areas where they found food the others didn’t look for.

Of course, the jump from monkeys to office life is a big one. But what we kept seeing in our own data tracks with that finding: People who react strongly to stress are more motivated to figure out the solution to avoid feeling even more stressed. And that’s how they learn.

What does reacting strongly to stress actually look like? Imagine two colleagues sitting through the same difficult meeting. Their manager publicly disagrees with both of their proposals. By that evening, one of them has already moved on, watching Netflix without a second thought. The other is still turning the conversation over in her head, replaying what she said, wondering whether she came across as unprepared, mentally drafting the response she should have given.

Or picture two new hires in their first week at work. Both make the same small mistake in front of the team during a presentation. One brushes it off, jokes about it at lunch, and forgets it by Friday. The other lies awake that night reviewing what went wrong and questioning whether she’s cut out for the role.

The second person in each pair is what psychologists call high in stress reactivity. Her body and mind register social discomfort more sharply than other people’s do.

You may think: Isn’t the second person just more emotional and frail? Isn’t it better to tell them to just stay calm? Indeed, when the rules are already known and the challenge is execution, whether that’s delivering a rehearsed presentation or driving a car, composure helps.

Our research addresses a different problem: What happens when you don’t yet know the rules and have to figure them out in real time. In that situation, the people who don’t stay perfectly calm may be the people who are actively picking up on the cues they need.

And learning the norms of a new social environment doesn’t mean surrendering your own perspective. You can understand how things work in a new situation and still choose to ask the difficult question. But you’ll be more effective at it when you know what you’re pushing against. As they say, you must know the rules of the game to play it well.

Importantly, our findings don’t imply that we should wave away the risks of stress.

For one thing, leaders must acknowledge that feeling unsettled in new social situations is part of the process, rather than a red flag. Then, managers must focus on early feedback. Our research shows that learning happens through trial and error, and the faster people find out what works and what doesn’t, the quicker their stress becomes manageable and starts to decline.

To that end, pairing newcomers with mentors who’ve been through similar transitions may help with both – normalising early stress and providing early feedback. As well, managers

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must learn to distinguish between adaptive stress that rises at the start and falls as competence builds, and chronic stress that stays high for weeks and leads to burnout and withdrawal.

Stress won’t ever feel pleasant. But the next time you find yourself in an unfamiliar social situation, take a step back before you try to suppress it. The knot in your stomach isn’t necessarily holding you back. With the right support, stress does what a good teacher does. It makes the lesson stick.

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