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Imagine waking up in a foreign country where you do not speak the language and have no understanding of social etiquette, much less the norms or expectations for engaging with others. This would surely be stressful. In fact, extensive research has found that people do experience stress when interacting with individuals from backgrounds that are different from their own.

But would the stress from being in an unfamiliar cultural setting leave you withdrawn, even feeling defeated, or could it motivate you to learn the relevant social conventions as swiftly as possible in order to adapt and thrive?

New research published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, led by Shilpa Madan, an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Singapore Management University (SMU), investigates how individual differences in stress reactivity affect sociocultural learning.

"Our research explores how individuals adapt to unfamiliar cultural environments, focusing on the role of stress reactivity—the degree to which a person responds to stress. We found that individuals who experience stronger stress responses tend to learn new sociocultural norms more quickly," Professor Madan says.

"Our research offers a fresh perspective on stress, traditionally viewed as a hindrance, by highlighting its potential benefits in sociocultural learning. This insight challenges the conventional belief that stress is solely detrimental, suggesting instead that it can serve as a catalyst for accelerated learning and adjustment in unfamiliar cultural settings."

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"We found that more stress-reactive people experience greater acute stress from the negative feedback they receive in sociocultural interactions, which leads them to learn the relevant norms faster to avoid additional negative feedback," Professor Madan says.

Inherent inclination

The researchers note that some people are more disposed to stress reactivity than others.

"People vary in their stress reactivity—meaning some people experience more intense responses to stressful events than others. That is, the amount of the stress evoked by the same stressful situation is larger for some individuals than others," Professor Madan says.

"Genetics and psychological tendencies can both affect individual differences in responses to stressful events."

To evaluate people's stress reactivity, the researchers used three measures. The first was a genetic profile score from analyzing participants' DNA. The second was cortisol reactivity.

"We exposed participants to a standardized physical stressor (they had to immerse their hand in ice-cold water) and measured their cortisol level—a hormone released in response to stress—before and after the stressor. The change in cortisol levels provided an objective measure of their physiological stress reactivity," Professor Madan says.

The third measure involved self-assessment, where participants completed validated questionnaires designed to assess their typical emotional and physical responses to stress.

"Employing these diverse methods not only allowed us to capture a comprehensive understanding of stress reactivity, but also increased confidence in the findings that replicated across all these multiple ways of measuring stress reactivity," Professor Madan says.

mulate real-world experiences where individuals must learn the nuances of social interactions in a new cultural environment," Professor Madan says.
"Building upon the pilot study, we developed a more generalized task for subsequent studies. Participants were introduced to greeting customs from Kyrgyzstan, a culture presumably unfamiliar to them. They were required to select appropriate greetings based on contextual cues, such as the setting of the interaction (indoors or outdoors)."
"After each selection, they received feedback indicating whether their choice was culturally appropriate, allowing them to adjust their responses in future trials."
"By employing these tasks, we were able to create controlled environments that closely mimic the challenges individuals face when adapting to new cultural norms," Professor Madan says.

Unfamiliar nuances
"Across all our studies, stress reactivity was measured before participants were asked to learn novel sociocultural norms. These measures were taken before the cultural learning task to ensure that the stress reactivity we were evaluating wasn't influenced by the task itself," Professor Madan says.

"What we found, in simple terms, is that participants who were high in stress reactivity experienced greater stress from the sociocultural learning task early on in the task, and this

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spurred greater learning. Importantly, once they had learnt the relevant sociocultural norms, the stress experienced declined toward the end of the task, indicating that they put their stress reactivity to good use."

So, what were some of the unfamiliar norms used to test participants, and how were they presented in the studies?

"In our pilot study, our Singaporean participants were presented with scenarios depicting social situations common in the US, a cultural context unfamiliar to them. They were asked to choose appropriate responses based on the given situations, receiving feedback after each choice to guide their learning process.

"This task was designed to simulate real-world experiences where individuals must learn the nuances of social interactions in a new cultural environment," Professor Madan says.

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Workplace narratives

"Our research offers valuable insights for organizations and professionals operating in multicultural environments. Understanding that individuals with higher stress reactivity may adapt more quickly to new cultural norms can inform strategies for international assignments, cross-cultural training, and team integration," she says.

"The dominant workplace narrative treats stress as the enemy—something to be avoided, minimized, or seen as a sign of weakness. Employees who show stress are often perceived as fragile or less capable, leading them to be passed over for high-stakes projects or leadership roles in favor of those who appear more composed."

"Our research shows that being stressed easily isn't always a liability. In many cases, it signals deep engagement, faster learning, and greater adaptability."

However, employees, managers, and leaders must recognize that while some stress may be good, chronic, long-term stress can lead to burnout and be highly detrimental to an individual's well-being.