

Status and Stress

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The New York Times:

Although professionals may bemoan their long work hours and high-pressure careers, really, there's stress, and then there's Stress with a capital "S." The former can be considered a manageable if unpleasant part of life; in the right amount, it may even strengthen one's mettle. The latter kills.

What's the difference? Scientists have settled on an oddly subjective explanation: the more helpless one feels when facing a given stressor, they argue, the more toxic that stressor's effects.

That sense of control tends to decline as one descends the socioeconomic ladder, with potentially grave consequences. Those on the bottom are more than three times as likely to die prematurely as those at the top. They're also more likely to suffer from depression, heart disease and diabetes. Perhaps most devastating, the stress of poverty early in life can have consequences that last into adulthood.

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Bruce McEwen, a neuroscientist at Rockefeller University in New York, describes these relationships as one way that "poverty gets under the skin." He and others talk about the "biological embedding" of social status. Your parents' social standing and your stress level during early life change how your brain and body work, affecting your vulnerability to degenerative disease decades later. They may even alter your vulnerability to infection. In one study, scientists at Carnegie Mellon exposed volunteers to a common cold virus. Those who'd grown up poorer (measured by parental homeownership) not only resisted the virus less effectively, but also suffered more severe cold symptoms.

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One oft-cited study suggests that 3-year-olds from professional families have more than twice the vocabulary of children from families on welfare. The disparity may stem in part from different intensities of parental stimulation; poorer parents may simply speak less with their children.

But Martha Farah, a neuroscientist at the University of Pennsylvania, has also noted differences not just in the words absorbed but in the abilities that may help youngsters learn. Among children, she's found, socioeconomic status correlates with the ability to pay attention and ignore distractions. Others have observed differences in the function of the prefrontal cortex, a region associated with planning and self-control, in poorer children.

"You don't need a neuroscientist to tell you that less stress, more education, more support of all types for young families are needed," Dr. Farah told me in an e-mail. "But seeing an image of the brain with specific regions highlighted where financial disadvantage results in less growth reframes the problems of

childhood poverty as a public health issue, not just an equal opportunity issue.”

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“We’re going in the wrong direction in terms of greater inequality creating more of these pressures,” says Nancy Adler, the director of the Center for Health and Community at the University of California, San Francisco. As income disparities have increased, class mobility has declined. By some measures, you now have a better chance of living the American dream in Canada or Western Europe than in the United States. And while Americans generally gained longevity during the late 20th century, those gains have gone disproportionately to the better-off. Those without a high school education haven’t experienced much improvement in life span since the middle of the 20th century. Poorly educated whites have lost a few years of longevity in recent decades.

Read the whole story at [The New York Times](#).