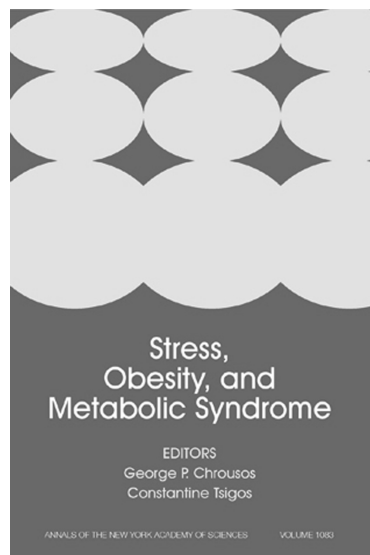


MNF Books



Stress, Obesity, and Metabolic Syndrome

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George P. Chrousos and Constantine Tsigos (Editors)
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I remember growing up in the early 1970ies when the word “stress” arrived at our small town in provincial Germany, almost overnight, much like the Martian starship landed at Grover’s Mill, New Jersey, in “War of the Worlds”. At first, everybody seemed slightly estranged dealing with this new and mysterious English word (not very commonplace in those days), and the initial reaction of the grown-ups was to make fun remarks about what it was like to be “stressed”, of course, without being quite able to define what “stress” exactly was supposed to be. Needless to say, everybody very quickly learned its meaning and proper use, and before we knew it, we were all stressed out on a daily basis. This new English word must have filled a gap in the German language for something “that was up in the air” but had not yet precipitated into one succinct term 30 or 40 years

ago. The word “stress” did this for us, and nowadays we can barely envision a world without it. Or if we could, we assume it could only be possible on a strange and distant planet, somewhere in outer space, much farther away than Mars even.

This describes a bit of the uneasiness I feel about the term “metabolic syndrome” now. Wasn’t this disease virtually unknown a dozen or so years ago? The earliest entry in PubMed when searching “metabolic syndrome” as a medical subject heading term (MeSH) dates from 1994, the next entry is from 1999, then there are about 30 hits in 2001, just over 140 in 2002, and as of today (October 31, 2007), there are a total of 5567 hits. Today “metabolic syndrome” is an epidemic with huge margins of the population being affected in the Western and developing world. What happened within these few years? Maybe the “metabolic syndrome” has been around for a long time, but the diagnosis of disparate, though well-known symptoms had not been connected previously and funneled into a succinct term, and therefore “metabolic syndrome” was essentially non-existing a dozen years ago? Or is “metabolic syndrome” just a self-replicating and self-propagating term that occupies space and ink in the commentary sections of medical journals and of the daily newspaper, because it lacks specificity such that it is suited to express our general uneasiness about what we suspect is a detrimental link between an unhealthy diet, lack of physical activity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes?

In any case, here we have a book on the topic, “Stress, Obesity, and Metabolic Syndrome”, or better put, a volume of conference proceedings from a meeting with the same title held in Greece in April of 2005. As is inherent with this type of proceedings, there is some lack of coherence as regards content, but the individual authors come from different

backgrounds and draw from their expertise each in their particular field. Nevertheless, about one third of the contributions are co-authored by the two editors. The volume is divided into three major sections covering “Stress through the life course”, “Central stress activity and peripheral tissue sensitivity in the genesis of obesity and the metabolic syndrome”, and “Targeting components of the stress system as potential therapies”. Within these sections, there are individual contributions that discuss fetal predisposition and programming toward obesity, the physiological basis for stress responses and insulin resistance, the involvement of the sympathetic nervous system, and the contribution of the glucocorticoid system, among others. Working one’s way through the volume the reader will gain an appreciation for the immense amount of research that has been performed during the last decade (each of the 21 contributions averages about 100 references) in order to understand the physiological basis of the “metabolic syndrome”.

Within the last 12–15 years, obesity has doubled in the United States. There is no doubt about the negative impact of widespread obesity on public health. But is the “metabolic syndrome” just a “civilization syndrome” as the late Per Björntorp once suspected, to the memory of whom the conference was dedicated? Before rash political, medical, or pharmacological measures are taken to combat this new epidemic, it is important to precisely define the physiological conditions that make up the “metabolic syndrome” – at least for the sake of making clear who in the population is at risk, who is sick, who needs treatment for which condition, and who does not. This book does its part in advancing this process.

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