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Heightened State of Anxiety Has Potential Physical Consequences

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Heightened State of Anxiety Has Potential Physical Consequences

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Terror alerts. Stock market gyrations. An impending war in Iraq. These topics dominate the headlines and, added to life's daily hassles, could have physical consequences, says John Ernst, assistant professor of psychology at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Among Ernst's research interests is the issue of the body's response to the threats and challenges that are present in everyday life — those daily hassles that come from waiting in line at the bank or having the computer crash in the middle of a major project.

"Studies show clearly changes in the cardiovascular system during these periods of stress," says Ernst. "If you feel threatened, your arteries clamp down and your heart speeds up in an effort to get blood to the heart faster. The problem is that blood doesn't move through like a car being steered down a street. It will come to a spot where the arteries divide, hit a wall with a lot of force and bounce off. That is the point at which various physical problems can begin to develop."

There is, Ernst explains, a significant difference between the reaction to stressful events that are seen as threats as opposed to those perceived as challenges.

"When confronted with a stressful event that is viewed as a challenge to be overcome, the arteries actually open up rather than clamp down as they do in response to a threat," says Ernst. "Approaching a task as a challenge to be met and overcome can be a beneficial way to avoid some of the impact of stress on the body."

Ernst suggests that one approach to mitigating the impact of a daily hassle such as standing in a long line is challenging yourself to make that time valuable. "For instance, you could be making a list of what you need to do later in the day instead of allowing yourself to feel threatened by the time you're spending in that line," Ernst said.

To discuss these issues with Ernst, contact Jeffery G. Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.