

# Strategies for reducing stress contagion

When one person's stress becomes another person's stress

By Sophie Massé and Marie-France Blais, IUJD

## How can stress spread?

**By empathy**  
for a stressed or  
suffering person

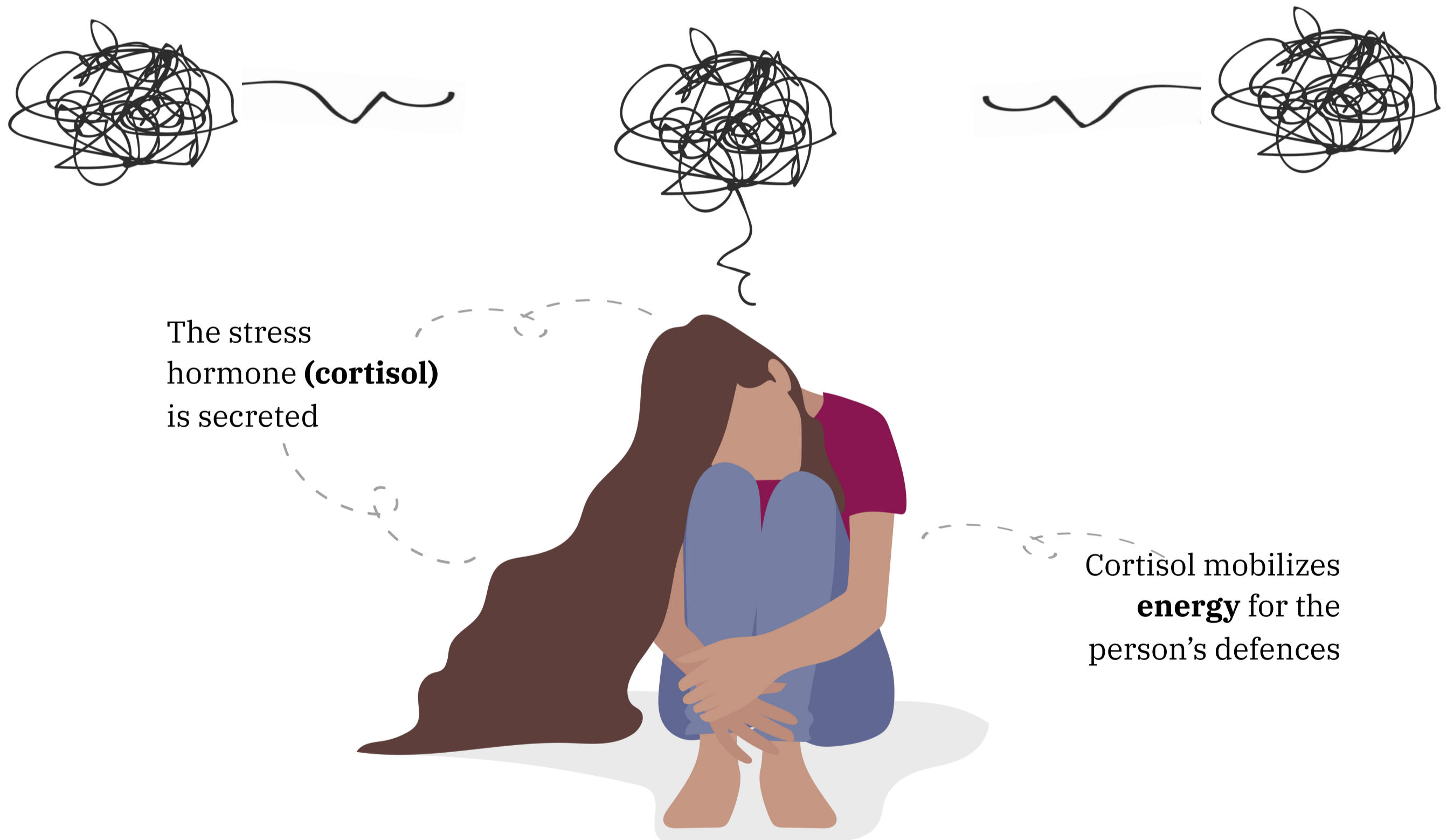
Especially when we want  
to alleviate this stress and  
suffering

**By exposure to the  
stress reactions**  
of another person

One person's stress management strategies can  
become another's stress triggers (e.g., raising your  
voice, leaving, taking control, attacking the ego,  
acting unpredictably, etc.).\*

**By the spillover**  
of stress from one  
environment to another

When stress experienced  
at work affects life at home  
or vice versa



**Finding solutions to sources of stress is essential to prevent this stress  
from increasing in frequency and intensity and becoming chronic,  
which could lead to mental health problems**

*Depression, burnout, hypervigilance ...*

# How can stress contagion be reduced?

It's important to support each other to reduce everyone's stress.

**Therefore, by increasing social support,** we decrease the possibility of being personally affected and spreading stress to others.



## Adopting a compassionate approach

Go beyond empathizing with someone who is stressed or suffering...

- Focus on the person's **well-being** and keep a **positive outlook**.
- Act **kindly** toward the person (e.g., listen, provide aid, make simple gestures, etc.) to reduce both your stress and the individual's.
- Remember to respect your **limits!**

## Supporting stressed individuals

When exposed to the stress reactions of others ...

- Use strategies to **calm yourself** first before helping others to calm down.
- Once you are calmer, identify **the sources of stress**. They are sometimes common to all the people involved. Use the acronym NUTS\*.
- Negotiate **solutions and strategies to reduce everyone's stress**. One person's strategies should not become a source of stress for others!

\*Sources of stress

**n**ovelty

**u**npredictability

**t**hreatened ego

losing your **s**ense of control

## Calm yourself before changing environments

When stress spills over from one environment to another ...

- **Release the energy** mobilized by stress before or after arriving from home or work (e.g., sports, creative activity, deep breathing, etc.).
- If you talk about the source of stress with your loved ones, **avoid ruminating** and focus on **solutions**.



References:

- Centre for Studies on Human Stress (CESH, 2020). Website: <https://www.stresshumain.ca/>
- Thibeault, R. (2020). Résilience psychologique, occupations, régulation émotionnelle et stratégies collectives : leçons récentes des neurosciences