



Stress – The Necessary Evil

In a perfect world, people would be happy and wanting for nothing, today would be an enjoyable blessing and every tomorrow an exciting prospect to look forward to. Sometimes that's the way it is, for a while, anyway. Then an unexpected eventuality occurs and the smile is replaced by a frown. Maybe the surprise will turn out to be beneficial and welcomed, in which case the tension will ease as a state of relaxation returns. If, however, the new situation is a matter to be concerned over, the frown will deepen as possible ramifications are considered and a suitable resolution is sought.

That's stress for you. Every living creature experiences it. Without stress, life would simply be the experiencing of predictable happenings that no-one thought twice about because nothing ever came back to bite. That might not be such a bad thing for a tomato plant or a tree, but without a certain amount of stress in our lives, we humans couldn't function the way nature intended. Stress keeps us on our toes, helping to sharpen awareness of what is going on around, primarily to ensure we aren't disadvantaged by it. The level of stress is dictated by the seriousness of the issue in question, how it is likely to impact on us personally and other unresolved matters still worrying us. This is normal, but if the tension isn't relieved, we suffer the consequences.

In the dim dark ages, easing stress was less of a problem because it was taken care of as a matter of course in the survival process. Tension built in preparation for the hunt, to launch an attack on a hostile enemy, or maintain the pecking-order within the tribe. The physical energy exerted during the chase and conflict released the stress and returned it to stand-by mode in readiness for next time. In a modern society, however, the classic hunter and warrior is a thing of the past and "defending one's castle" is rarely more than a poetic analogy. Yet, although the physical exertions of pre-history may be unnecessary in these days of civilised mollycoddling, when it comes down to a personal attack, whether by an unkind human or circumstance, the mind reacts in the same way it did with our stone-age cousins when they dug in to ward off an invading tribe. It prepares us to defend by tensing muscles, heightening senses and generally winding us up to face the forthcoming challenge.

The problem we have is that our battles are usually minus the physical exertion necessary to burn off the tension. Adrenalin is still produced, but the best we can do with it is clench fists and go red in the face while we blurt out verbal threats and abuses. At the end of the day, no-one really wins and both sides eventually retire mentally bruised, regretful and definitely the worse for wear. What both could do with is a run around the park or a challenging game of squash to release the remnants of that pent-up energy. Unfortunately, the remedy isn't always practical and usually gets a rain-check. The end result is an increase of bad vibes that cause an uncomfortable build up of agitation and anxiety. Most can take this in their stride, especially if the cause of major stress only comes along once in a while and can be dealt with rationally and without long-term repercussions. Unfortunately, there are those who can't seem to resolve one stressful issue before another pops up, adding to the burden. And humans, even the most phlegmatic and carefree, can react in ways that seem totally out-of-character when the internal, ever-increasing level of tension reaches crisis point.

Obviously, not getting stressed in the first place would be the ideal cure, but everyone does at some time, so it's a case of finding a way to cope until the reason for it can be de-fused. Admitting the presence of stress is the first step. Once it can be accepted that a particular situation is causing a degree of discomfort, the need for putting it right comes naturally. To deny being stressed even a little - or worse, not at all - is to invite the eventual overload we have talked about. The result is likely to be very damaging – mentally, physically and, as is sometimes the case, legally and financially.

Knowing when we are approaching this critical stage is important, and the signs will be there. Others may see them before we do – the deepening frown; facial muscles tensing; fingers drumming sub-consciously or fiddling with things; inability to focus; the list goes on. We,

however, may not be aware of our problem until we catch ourselves reacting in a way that is unusual for us. Patience begins to fray. We become irritable for little apparent reason. Sudden irrational outbursts of temper are more frequent. We growl at inanimate objects and sometimes take it out physically on them. And if anyone as much as hints that we seem a little testy and might need to get something off our chest, woe betide them - we are perfectly alright, thank you!

Sadly we are far from it. Even if we somehow manage to excuse or ignore our knee-jerk reactions of late, we can't deny the physical symptoms. Or can we? The fact that we are pretty tired most days, constantly fatigued if we are honest about it, that's because we have a lot on our plate. Which, in turn, explains the frequent, longer-lasting headaches and more migraines than usual. The skin thing – tenderness, especially on the scalp – can't be serious because there's nothing really visible. That's probably part of the reason we aren't sleeping too well and spend half the night thinking and worrying over matters that can't be resolved by lying on a bed staring into the dark. But we still do it. And when we are up and about, the security blanket for many is food. Quite often, this is the snack type which is laced with additives, the kind that induce and exacerbate mental changes, including stress. Our self-help cure is only making matters worse.

Unfortunately, there is no specific cure for stress, no medical or magical remedy. It is literally all in our minds, and we are the only ones who can fix it. As individuals, we react in different ways to situations, and our own set of standards dictate priorities. That's why it is hard for one person to fully appreciate another's mental state because they have no idea how much they are suffering, or why. I believe well-meant advice based on assumption has tipped many over the edge. Stress is, without doubt, a very dangerous ailment to play around with, even for medical professionals. However, they are the ones to seek advice from, preferably before it becomes so serious that the effects are irreversible. Early recognition, especially by the sufferer, can prevent it getting this far, and there are ways everyone can employ to relieve stress before it becomes a major complication.

Think of yourself like a wheelbarrow. Sounds stupid, I know, but go with me for a bit. You can carry small loads quite comfortably, and as long as you take out some of the weight before adding more, you can continue, well-balanced and without conscious effort. Leaving the first lot in there, then piling on extra makes it harder to push and less stable. More still, and the barrow begins tottering side to side. If care is not taken, it will tilt past the point of no return and there's little you can do to stop it. Now come back to reality. The barrow is your mind and the problems it has to deal with is the load. The more you leave unresolved, the heavier the weight and the less able you are to cope. The best way to relieve stress is to tackle and dispense with some of the left-over issues before new ones come along. Give your mind space to work as it was intended - rationally, logically and perhaps most importantly, selfishly. The only person who can truly look after number one is you.

Above all, you have to admit to yourself that you are not the person you were and would prefer to be. Take steps to address this by improving your attitude, not just with respect to your worrying situation, but also in consideration of the people around you who have to put up with your unpredictable moods. They aren't conspirators plotting against you. Your friends, family, work associates and your doctor only want to help and support you. At least try to cheer up a bit for their sake, and your own. And next time you use a wheelbarrow, be nice and it will serve you well for many a long year to come.

Next issue: You Only Cry For Yourself – understanding why crying is necessary

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