



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

Vol. 38, No. 1

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, JANUARY 1957

Let's Avoid Stress

TOO MANY executives look upon life as the Norsemen did upon heaven: the time was to be passed in daily battles, with magical healing of wounds.

Everyone in our western civilization has to meet demands on his nervous energy that were not made in former years.

The farmer, looked upon as living the most tranquil of lives, has economic, social and political problems of which his grandfather was ignorant. The doctor and the lawyer have clients pressing at their office doors, and are conscious that others need them elsewhere. Teachers have the task of maintaining discipline in a brood more restless than ever before. Stenographers, typing so many words a minute; operators of calculating and accounting machines, with an unending flow of papers to process; factory hands engaged in countless operations; bank tellers meeting the wants of customers with flawless accuracy; everyone is working under conditions that strain the physical, mental and emotional structure built during ages of evolution.

Nor is our immediate environment all that counts. From radio reports that accompany breakfast to the late night news we are under the pressure of baffling world difficulties. We are exposed to tension, expecting some new crisis.

We need to take what precautions we can if we expect to keep mentally and physically fit. Our failure to do so will show itself with all its unfortunate consequences in the doctor's office or a hospital bed.

Keeping fit is not simply a matter of taking physical exercise, though that is important. It concerns both mind and body. It requires that we ease the stress of living.

What is stress?

Dr. Hans Selye, Director of the Institute of Experimental Medicine and Surgery at the University of Montreal, has put forward a concept of stress that has been called "the greatest single contribution to the realm of biology and medicine since Pasteur."

He suggests that every disease, every accident and every emotional upset produces stress in the victim. The body becomes alarmed by the stress and tries to defend itself. The endocrine glands pour out hormones, the heart beats faster, the liver increases its supply of glycogen, the blood pressure rises, and the activity of many internal organs is suspended so that their energy may be diverted to the external muscles. We, like our primitive ancestors, become tensed for fight or flight.

The physical wear-and-tear is of the same order in an executive when his accountant gives him a month-end statement in red figures as when his ages-ago forefather caught sight of a prowling wild-beast on the horizon.

When stress continues too long, or is too frequently repeated, or is too great, a break-down may occur in our defence system. Said Dr. Selye when explaining his ideas to the Canadian Club in Montreal three years ago: "Inadequate counter-measures in the face of serious attacks may be the cause of disease or death, but excessive defence reactions may likewise be harmful if they are quite out of proportion to a negligible threat."

The medical profession and those who are doing research in the subject cannot look upon stress as a simple concept. It is, indeed, complex to the point of being beyond adequate treatment in a short essay. In his book *The Stress of Life* published toward the end of 1956 (McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc.) Dr. Selye deals with the idea in five divisions: The Discovery of Stress; The Dissection of Stress; The Diseases of Adaptation; Sketch for a Unified Theory; and Implications and Applications. His closing chapters are on "Philosophic Implications" and "The Road Ahead".

Every year sees thousands of research papers prepared by endocrinologists who are, in all parts of the world, following up Dr. Selye's concept. The British Medical Journal remarked that no other theory in living memory has possessed to such an extent the power to stimulate research. Dr. Selye's work won for

the University of Montreal the first grant ever made to a Canadian university by the United States Government, and it is supported by grants from foundations, individuals, corporations and the Canadian government.

Some causes of stress

Improper mental states can cause trouble in our physical make-up. A publication of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company says that fifty per cent of all people seeking medical attention are suffering from ailments brought about or made worse by such emotional factors as prolonged worry, anxiety, or fear. In fact, out of a thousand diseases described in a textbook of medicine, it is said that emotionally induced illness is as common as all the other 999 put together.

How we think has a definite effect on how we feel. We translate our woes from the language of the mind into the language of the body.

Whatever we allow to affect our minds in the way of pain or pleasure, hope or fear, extends its influence to our hearts. Financial worries, a monotonous job, strain at the office, emotional upsets in the home: these, and many more, may show themselves physically as high blood pressure, digestive ailments such as peptic ulcer and colitis, headache, skin disorders and some allergies.

But you cannot go into a drug store and buy a bottle of psychosomatic medicine.

The first thing to do when you feel unwell is to have your doctor give you a thorough check-up. He will learn from his tests and his questions whether there is something organically wrong, and how much of your illness is derived from emotional sources. Finding the cause is the first step on the way to cure.

All emotions are not bad. Some are guides to protective action. Pleasurable emotion is conducive to health. An invigorating emotion unlocks new stores of energy and drives away fatigue. It provides the zest of pursuit, the joy of striving, intense interest in work, and renewed enthusiasm. As someone said, the Irish cheer may signify nothing in particular, but it is a mighty relief for the excited Celt.

Signs of stress

Modern invention and labour saving machinery have relieved us of much physical drudgery, but there are signs that they have increased our nervous strain.

Aided by our gadgets, we live at high speed. "We are always", said Dr. J. B. Kirkpatrick, Director of the School of Physical Education at McGill University in an address a few years ago, "meeting deadlines, catching trains, grabbing a bite to eat. Our toes are tramped

on and our tempers are frayed as we fight to get on board a street-car. We have lost some of the amenities of living in this mad scramble."

These exasperations of the day get us keyed up. The tension accompanies us home and keeps us awake, unless we have worked out for ourselves an effective way of releasing it.

One evil result of our hasty living is that we so often fail to solve our problems adequately. Much of the time we are tangled up in the woolly words with which we clothe our thoughts rather than with facts themselves. The result is a state of anxiety.

It is wholesome to have fear when it is an alarm bell, a warning of impending danger, but some of us go around in a perpetual aura of anxiety, as if we still thought the world to be flat and that we might fall over its edge. This pervasive anxiety prevents us from relaxing, keeps us tense. The protective patterns set in motion by our bodies are overworked.

Moments of doubt

The best executives have moments of doubt and weariness, but rise from their depression by recurring to principles they have learned. One of life's most health-giving virtues is to be able to meet disappointment and frustration well.

An angry outburst is a poor response to disappointment, because it heals nothing, replaces nothing of what has been lost, and takes its toll of the body. An angry man is not one who is doing something, but one who is suffering something to be done to him. He is allowing his dignity to be lowered, and that is bad enough, but he is also interfering with his digestion, disrupting his circulation, and putting undue strain on his body's defensive organism.

Some people, instead of being disappointed after an event, forestall events. They wrench them of out their place in the future, and worry about them today. Dean Inge remarked that worry is interest paid on trouble before it falls due.

What is worry? It is with us when, as Mrs. Elizabeth Browning said so well in one of her poems, "we walk upon the shadow of hills across a level thrown, and pant like climbers."

In extreme cases worry turns into what is called "doubting folly", in which a person doubts whether he can trust his own senses. He is forever returning to see if he has locked his safe, expressed himself properly in a letter, told his secretary about an appointment, and the like.

There are many illustrative cases in *Psychosomatic Medicine*, a textbook by Weiss and English (W. B. Saunders Co., Philadelphia). Chronic worry can bring on dyspepsia, ulcers, common colds, arthritis, asthma, and a host of other diseases.

Most common, perhaps, is fatigue of one sort or another. There is nothing dramatic about fatigue. It creeps upon us, seeping through our bodies like poison. We consult a competent physician, who tells us we have no sign of tuberculosis, heart trouble, or any other demonstrable disease. There is nothing wrong with our body machinery, but we still feel tired. We get our wires crossed: the wrong messages come through to the brain.

Boredom sets up stresses that give us feelings of fatigue. Long hours at a desk, repeated day after day, result in muscular tension that can be more physically fatiguing than heavy manual labour. The small boy who has to sit through a ponderous sermon gets the wriggles because of static tenseness. Sherlock Holmes said to Dr. Watson: "I never remember feeling tired by work, though idleness exhausts me completely."

Fatigue may be brought on by too much conversation. Energy is wasted in unnecessary speech. Some people, like Voltaire, literally live on talk but most of us would gain something both physically and mentally by retreating into silence at periods during every day.

What to do about it

What can one do if one feels under stress, fatigued, run down? The first thing is to have an examination by a physician. Today's physicians do not look only for organic disease, but seek the cause of unfitness in social and personal factors.

There is danger in self-medication. At a meeting of the American Medical Association scientific section in November, members were told of the dangers revealed by research into the unscientific use of tranquillizing drugs. People do not react in the same way to pills that relieve stress. Some become depressed or develop psychoneurotic difficulties, while others feel so free of pain that they fail to take necessary medical measures, or are so energized that they neglect to take proper rest.

It goes without saying that good work conditions contribute to physical and mental well-being. In one office, efficiency was increased, errors were reduced, and absenteeism was lowered by decreasing the noise level from 75 to 50 decibels. Comfort, ability and health are added to by adequate ventilation assuring a sufficient supply of oxygen. Proper lighting contributes its share.

Some people may find it necessary to change employment, but many more can improve their health just by changing position. Stress in one area may be relieved by shifting part of the load to another, as when the man who is so unfortunate as to have to carry home a heavily laden brief case shifts it from hand to hand. To walk around one's office or home at

periods is a break that relieves physical and mental stress. There is stress-release value in the old rocking-chair.

We need not accept hurry and tension as unavoidable, allowing ourselves to be pressed down by the sheer weight of things to be done. Dr. William Osler, distinguished and beloved tutor of hundreds of medical students, the first man to win an international reputation for Canadian medicine, wrote: "the ordinary high-pressure business or professional man suffering from angina pectoris may find relief, or even cure, in the simple process of slowing the engines."

Too many men and women exceed what is necessary. They are not content to be eminent, but compromise their victories by extra effort. Success incites them to greater activity and more urgent endeavour. The only solution they know for their mounting need of self-expression is by way of working harder. They become tense and anxiety-ridden. They burn themselves out.

That picture is all too common. Yet the very men who are putting so great strain on their physical capacities know very well that it is in moments of relaxed and easy work that they are more efficient: that their most rewarding successes are scored when, having determined upon a course of action, they unclamp their intellectual and physical machinery and let it run free.

Relaxing little tensions

Our ability to relax is one of the surest symptoms of our mental health. After we have been keyed up to accomplish a task, we need to slacken off instead of whipping ourselves into new exertion. If we relax away the little tensions as they occur we stand a very good chance of preventing the accumulation of big tensions.

These small relaxations are simple. When listening to an uninteresting speaker, slacken your muscles; when commuting in train or street-car, close your eyes; when waiting for a caller to be ushered in, look out the window.

But don't make the resolve to become strenuously relaxed, cost what it will, for the rest of your life. When he was introducing *The Stress of Life* to the public in November, Dr. Selye warned that a vacation in Florida may not be the right thing for a busy executive. "Activity may be this man's way of relieving pressure. He may build up more internal pressure idling than if he were at work."

Every person must find out what his needs are in the way of relaxation just as everyone needs to estimate his needs in the way of sleep. The sleep requirement may range from an hour or two a day to twelve hours. We

should leave our troubles at the bedroom door, refrain from looking at our bank books late at night, abstain from talking politics after 9 p.m., and compose anger and tantrums before retiring. We may even, through sleep, escape for a while from our own company, and that escape is not a bad thing.

In between work and sleep come hobbies. Some people profess to regard "hobby" as a word to laugh at, but when it means a sincere interest in something outside our jobs it has a physical and mental value that is not at all ridiculous.

Wise use of our leisure holds the germ of survival in our complicated civilization. Play, fun and laughter are agents of health. They promote digestion, soothe our nerves, stimulate circulation, give power to the heart, and ward off the feeling of old age. Our leisure is a time to stretch our limbs and let go our tensions, to laugh and be cheerful.

William James gave a lecture entitled "The Gospel of Relaxation." It was in his series of talks to teachers on psychology in 1915. Here is his advice: "the sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness, if our spontaneous cheerfulness be lost, is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there."

The executive's job

The stresses associated with the management of a business, a class-room or a home can have a definite effect upon health. Leadership has its price: but its toll can be cut down.

What is the inescapable characteristic of the executive's role? Its tyrannical demands in terms of time and continuous mental and physical pressure. The top man can never escape responsibility. Weighty decisions expose him to frequent emotional strains. Advisory and administrative duties build tension. The man who, knowing these things, does nothing more about them than gnaw his nails is a major problem in his organization, a grade-A candidate for executive neurosis.

It is an attribute, not a fault, that the executive has so many things to think about. His alert mind finds ten things to be concerned about while the dullard worker can think of only one.

Such a man should not be content with keeping his belt in the same notch where it was five years ago. It is, of course, important to have firm abdominal muscles instead of flabby. To be a good executive you must first be a good animal.

But something more is needed if a man is to keep his equanimity in a world full of stress. It is when an executive has to lead his company or department under unusual strain that his qualities are actually tested. That demands the inner calm that follows a

frank facing of difficulty and fear and disappointment and even prospect of disaster.

Let's ease the pressure on ourselves by admitting the impossibility of being a success by every standard, of being always right, of never suffering a set-back. Many of our tensions stem from trying to act the role of supermen.

Well-balanced people of brilliant ability think little of admitting their failures. Such people conserve their power. They suffer injury every once in a while, but they recuperate from the wounds inflicted by "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" because they have a reserve of strength not used.

The best balanced people are not obsessively devoted to their jobs, but have a natural rhythm in work and rest, an answer in part at least to the stress of living, equalizing wear and tear on their bodies.

What to aim at

The end result of balanced living should be peace of mind, though it will be made up of different ingredients in different people. Peace of mind is within reach, but it requires thought and action. It is the one sure and abiding answer to the evil of stress and tension.

In the specialization required of most people today we have forgotten in part how to live. We are not well-rounded people with broad appreciation of life. Joy in sunlight, birds and flowers is left chiefly to the poets; delight in line and curve is left to the artist; drama and make-believe belong to the stage. But enjoyment of all these is the right and privilege of the whole human race, contributing to both mental and physical vigour.

Each of us has a ration of one body with one set of organs to last him for life. This body, if it is to fill out its span without unnecessary wear and break-down, must be treated with simple mechanical understanding. It is not a feeble, perishable weakling. It can be pushed far, very far, and find resources to recover. But why place strain upon it needlessly? We cannot avoid all the impacts of adversity, but if we permit the stress of them to continue without taking rational steps to relieve it, we suffer uncalled for damage.

The fit man can depend upon his body and mind to remain fresh through crowded days of work, through patience-trying conferences and through critical periods. But this fitness can only be maintained by mental alertness that detects stress and offsets it; that recognizes tension for a debilitating state, and releases it; that sees worry as a fruitless expenditure of energy, and conserves power by taking wise action about problems.

Perhaps, too, we should cease admiring jerk and snap and speed for their own sakes. It is what we accomplish that counts, not the fireworks of exhibitionism.