



Stress in Perspective

Since the only cure for stress is death, we should try to understand this force that is always within us. To cope with it and turn it to our advantage, we must think of others as well as ourselves . . .

□ In engineering terminology, stress is the force exerted when one body or part of a body presses, pulls, pushes or twists another. It is crucial to construction and mechanics. Without it, buildings could not be made to stand, or machines to run.

So it is with stress in the more modern sense of the word: little if anything could be accomplished without it. But as in engineering, the right balance of stresses must be struck to achieve the desired creative tension. Too little, and nothing holds together; too much, and everything flies apart.

When people think of stress today, they are usually thinking of the effects of having more than enough of it. They talk about it in the same spirit, and in much the same language, as an engineer discussing stress tolerances. They will say that they are overloaded, pressed for time, being pushed to do too much.

There is, however, a vital difference between stress among inanimate and animate things. Among the inanimate, it is produced by external pressure. Among the animate, it can be generated internally, because living creatures can feel.

The peculiar creature known generically as man can not only feel, but speculate and imagine. Thus much of the stress he encounters emanates from his own emotions and mind.

Strictly speaking, all stress is internal, since it is the reaction of the body to any force that acts on it. It is not, as is frequently assumed, the force itself.

The latter is called the "stressor," which evokes a programmed reaction within our physical systems. If, for example, the temperature suddenly

drops, we shiver. If we smell our Sunday dinner cooking, we salivate. The cold and the aroma are stressors. The shivers and the salivation are stress.

We are under the influence of stressors every minute of every day, but we normally only become aware of stress when we feel tense and edgy. We are particularly conscious of it when we sense that the stressor concerned could do us harm.

According to Dr. Hans Selye, the Austrian-born Montrealer who was the great authority on stress, we tend to misuse the term in common parlance. "Any kind of normal activity — a game of chess or even a passionate embrace — can produce considerable stress without causing harmful effects. Damaging or unpleasant stress is 'distress,'" he wrote.

Distress occurs when we undergo what Walter B. Cannon of the Harvard Medical School termed the "fight or flight response." In his groundbreaking studies during the 1920s, Dr. Cannon noted that, when faced with danger, animals instinctively prepare either to stand their ground or run.

Their reaction to potential harm triggers changes within their bodies. Hormone production, respiration, the heart rate and blood pressure all increase to provide the needed boost in energy. Muscles tighten, including in the stomach, which is affected by a sudden stoppage in digestion to divert more blood to the brain, arms, legs and shoulders. Bowels and bladder loosen in preparation for lightening the body for running. All the senses go on the alert.

This happens in an animal when there is a clear and present threat to his or her life or territory. Man also experiences the fight or flight response, and there is a good case for saying that without this bio-

logical alarm system, he never would have survived or progressed. But as human society has grown more complex, the reaction has been extended beyond direct physical menaces. It now applies not only to the danger of death or injury, but to the danger of emotional or material loss.

Often there is no stressor in the air at all: it exists only as a conjecture about what might happen. Our habit of speculating on events makes us prey to anxiety — the “anticipatory tension or vague dread persisting in the absence of any specific threat.”

“How much pain the evils cost us that have never happened!” Thomas Jefferson remarked. Yet it is futile to tell people in a state of distress not to worry because their fears are probably exaggerated. The most we can do is try to see the stressor clearly for what it is — to find out what it consists of, and to assess to what extent it is actual or imaginary. And perhaps to keep in mind the old joke: “Don’t tell me that worry does no good. Why, the things I worry about never happen!”

Alone among the earth’s creatures, man has a sense of time, and thus of urgency. In the world he has built around himself, time and necessity go hand in hand. A waitress has so many minutes to set the tables before the lunch-time rush; a truck driver so many hours to move a shipment from one place to the next; a farmer so many days to get his crop in. Whether they are on the board of directors or the cleaning staff, workers who fail to meet deadlines put themselves in danger of losing their jobs or status. This brings on a fight or flight response.

Man can change his condition, and thus control distress

The man-made world is full of incidental stressors which exacerbate the tension we already feel — noise, crowds, traffic and other vexations. The pressure is also heightened by our society’s system of responsibility, which places demands on people to worry about what happens to others.

In western countries, at least, conditions are always changing, and many of these changes seriously affect our working and personal lives. As if that were not enough, the media constantly carry news of new troubles and hazards. All this gives rise to negative stress.

The presence of too many stressors can keep some people in a more or less constant state of fight

or flight, and the consequences of living in this state can be brutal. Heart and arterial disease, strokes, chronic indigestion, stomach ulcers and migraine headaches are only some of the more familiar ailments associated with distress.

People who try to evade or relieve it let themselves in for ancillary conditions such as alcoholism and drug addiction. On the psychological side, it can bring about depression and paranoia, with side effects like impotence and obesity. A few years ago *The New York Times* surveyed a number of physicians who reported that up to 80 per cent of all the patients they treated suffered from stress-related ills.

Doctors make the point that stress-related ailments do not usually stem directly from stress as such. You can take two people under the same amount of pressure, and one will be healthy while the other is sick. Our accommodation of stress depends partly on what type of personalities we have: broadly speaking, those who are highly competitive, insecure, materialistic and abrasive are more likely to succumb to the effects of stress than those who are less prickly. It also depends on the kind of lives we lead. In a recent article on the ravages of distress in American business, *Newsweek* magazine reported: “Some psychiatrists believe that baby boomers are especially vulnerable. They are more mobile, marry later, and have fewer children — all factors that weaken the support systems that helped earlier generations cope with stress.”

In every case, however, the question of whether or not stress takes a heavy toll on our physical or mental health ultimately depends on how we handle it. Of all the characteristics that humans have and animals do not, the one that stands out most is man’s ability to do something about his condition. We can control our thoughts, feelings and actions. We are thus capable of exercising control over the impact on us of stress.

“Learn to ignore what you can’t control and learn to control what you can,” writes Dr. Peter G. Hanson, author of the commendable *The Joy of Stress*, a recent best-seller. “Take an active role in your own management; do not be just a passive tourist through life.”

When we turn our minds to dealing with stress, however, we should be careful to make the distinc-

tion between controlling it and trying to escape from it. People who believe that they can hide away from the pressures of life by "doing nothing" may find that inactivity is very stressful. People subject to stress underload are liable to be wakeful, withdrawn, and have poor appetites. If they work, they tend to be accident-prone, have a high absentee rate, and lack judgment. What they are missing, clearly, is the energizing tension which stress exerts.

Unfitness is a major source of distress in its own right

Experts in the field speak of a "stress comfort zone" in which there is neither strain nor slack on a particular person. The dimensions of the zone vary with personalities. The threshold seems higher for some hardy souls than it is for the majority. But on close observation, you may find that these cool-headed individuals are able to adapt to pressure better than others because of their positive attitudes.

"Complete freedom from stress is death," Dr. Selye wrote. Still, if it cannot be avoided, it can be neutralized and even turned to your advantage. Where work is concerned, the first step in neutralizing stress is to learn the difference between hurry and haste.

Hurry is precipitate and disorderly; haste is calm and methodical. A good deal of negative stress could be obviated simply by making a routine of having everything in its proper place, lined up and ready for any contingency.

In general, any effort to deal with stress will be reinforced by considering what steps you can take to make yourself physically fitter. Unfitness is a major source of distress in its own right. The traditional ways of alleviating tension fly in the face of keeping fit: smoking, drinking and perhaps eating too much, taking tranquilizers. By merely following a healthful diet and exercising a little, you can use physical stress to fight mental distress. The first line of defence against pressure is the confidence that comes from feeling vibrantly alive.

Fighting distress with stress is a standard technique. Athletes do it when they "psyche themselves up" before a competition. In this way, they increase their adrenalin supply so that they can perform at peak capacity.

People in time-sensitive jobs such as journalists will deliberately hold off until deadlines are staring them in the face on the theory that the rush will sharpen their creativity and make their work better. Many executives actively court stress by loading on work as a spur to higher productivity.

This recognizes the American theologian Tyron Edwards' view that "there is nothing so elastic as the human mind. Like imprisoned steam, the more it is pressed the more it rises to meet the pressure." To exploit this phenomenon, it is necessary to see stress not as a challenge, not a threat.

"Don't hide from stresses," Dr. Hanson exhorts; "go out and challenge new ones. Take the *thrill* from stress, but leave the *threat* behind. . . See how gratifying the unbeatable combination of a properly maintained body and a well organized mind can be."

Defeating self-doubt is the key to stress management

"I have never known a man who died from overwork, but many who have died from doubt," wrote Dr. Charles Mayo of the famous Mayo Clinic. For the word "doubt" we might substitute "self-doubt." One of Sigmund Freud's most important discoveries was that fear of oneself and fear of the outside world are closely related, and that they often interact. As the psychologist Abraham Maslow has pointed out, we are naturally afraid of our own impulses, memories, capacities, potentialities and destinies. We tend to transfer such apprehension to real or anticipated external events which might test our inner strength.

In the stress management courses now given by many companies to enable employees to cope with stress and turn it to good use, heavy emphasis is placed on the self-defeating thought patterns which stem from a lack of self-confidence. Writing of these in a recent edition of the British magazine *Management Today*, management consultant Brian Simpson listed some typical examples: "Selective envy (the grass is always greener on the other side); catastrophic extrapolation, imagining that small problems will grow with catastrophic results; homogenizing, making a general judgment and systematically misinterpreting future events to support that judgment; and projection, basing your thoughts on the fatally flawed belief that other people think and feel as you do."

These tendencies may be countered by what is known as "positive re-evaluation." For instance, you can put selective envy behind you by running over all the reasons why the object of your envy might envy *you*. Catastrophic extrapolation can be dealt with by working out how you would defeat the dragon in your mind should it ever materialize, rather than assuming that you are bound to be beaten by it. Homogenization can be de-clawed by going over the reasons for your original judgment and re-interpreting them from a positive point of view.

Simply thinking positively is a great help in accommodating stress. It is no accident that the most cheerful characters in any group of people are also those who deal with life's tribulations most effectively. A century before anyone had ever heard of occupational stress, Thomas Carlyle wrote: "Oh, give us a man who sings at his work. . . Wondrous is the strength of cheerfulness, and the power of its endurance — the cheerful man will do more in the same time, do it better, will persevere in it longer, than the sad or sullen."

A philosophy of living according to nature's plan

Cheerfulness is not currently in fashion, which perhaps is why we hear so much about stress these days. No more, it seems, are perky popular songs written urging us to smile, to forget our cares and troubles. On the contrary, popular culture now appears to promote a psychological regime of fretfulness about the state of the world and ourselves.

Perhaps because the literature of stress is so couched in jargon, it often fails to get the basic message across that you should never take life, or yourself, too seriously. Fate has a way of playing jokes on the overly-earnest, and if you can't take a joke, you make an ideal target for distress.

In a cheerful, positive mind, stress becomes a positive force, a source of stimulation and enjoyment. The person who knows how to handle it knows enough to regularly exchange one form of stress for another: the frustrations of business, for instance, for the frustrations of golf.

Diversions are important, because they enable you to go back and tackle stressful situations with renewed energy, and perhaps overcome them by seeing them in a fresh perspective. And, of course, we all need to relax, both physically and mentally. The best forms of relaxation are those which compel you to put potentially negative stressors temporarily out of mind.

Only one form of diversion, however, provides a constant and permanent support for the successful management of stress. It has to do with the fact that much of the distress that afflicts people comes from being too wrapped up in themselves. Hence they take too desperate a view of their own problems, disappointments and fears.

After a lifetime of studying the medical aspects of stress, Dr. Selye concluded that the key to countering distress is to develop a philosophy of living which follows with nature's unbreakable pattern. He labelled his philosophical prescription, detailed in his 1974 book *Stress Without Distress*, "altruistic egoism." It takes account of the natural law that selfishness is central to all existence — that organisms will always look after their own interests first.

Altruistic egoism, he wrote, is "the selfish hoarding of the goodwill, respect, esteem, support and love of our neighbour [which] is the most efficient way to give vent to our pent-up energy and to create enjoyable, useful, and beautiful things." This is done by working to "earn thy neighbour's love." Anyone practising Selye's philosophy will have little time to dwell on the strictly self-centred problems that cause distress. It does not deny the presence of stress, but channels it into creative ways to play one's part as a member of society. It follows the eternal rule that by helping others, one helps oneself, whether in dealing with stress or anything else.