

FAREWELL TO STRESS

The idea that stress is real and must be dealt with as an inevitability of responsible life is so pervasive that it shocks people to suggest otherwise.

We have so fallen under the spell of our prevailing notions of stress that we have even postulated stress could be positive. People talk about “good stress”, suggesting that it motivates people and induces high energy and dynamic tension that propel progress. There are theories of management that recommend generating consistent low-level stress to keep people on their toes and competitive.

Ask this question, though: Can you name anything important that you do much better or enjoy much more when you feel stressed than when you feel calm?

Ask any doctor this question: Can you tell me any organ in the body or any system in the body that thrives and improves or heals best under stress?

Ask any student this question: Can you tell me whether your academic performance is better or worse when you are stressed and experiencing all the symptoms of being stressed: worry, sleeplessness, anxiety, distraction, self-doubt, confusion, headaches, and/or the strong impulse to find something to help you calm down?

Ask anyone this question: If stress were by any means helpful to us, why is “stress management” and “stress reduction” a multi-billion dollar industry and why do people spend so much time complaining about stress and dealing with it?

Our current ideas about stress seem to me a lot like our ideas about smoking in the first half of the 20th century. It was a rite of passage into adulthood to smoke; everyone in the public eye smoked; it looked sophisticated and mature. When the Surgeon General’s report first came out in the 1960’s and the health risk factors of smoking were laid out as clear as black type on a white page, the habits of thought we had about smoking were so entrenched and widespread that people didn’t know how to take in this new information and make sense of it. It was too big of a leap to switch thoughts from “Smoking is a harmless and enjoyable adult activity” to “Smoking is slowly killing us, and the smoke from others’ smoking is killing us, too.” How could that be? One day, most people took smoking for granted as an innocuous part of everyday life. The next day, people were told to eradicate this fiendish activity immediately to save their own and others’ lives.

It has taken a generation or more for the message about smoking to penetrate the culture, and for new thinking to replace the old. Now, even people committed to smoking, who will go to their graves as smokers, would not say it’s a “harmless and enjoyable adult activity.” They smoke knowing the risks.

Recent studies of health care cost factors are unearthing some new ideas about stress with just as startling implications as the Surgeon General's first report about smoking. For example, the HERO report (issued by the Health Enhancement Research Organization in 1999) overturned the prevailing thinking about health risk factors that contribute most to the cost of medical care. HERO is a national, non-profit coalition of corporations, insurers, health-maintenance organizations, hospital systems, consultants and associations.

The HERO study showed that employees with untreated stress and depression incurred medical costs 147% higher than those without stress risk factors, regardless of their physical health status. It appears that stress is a "deeper" underlying contributor to lack of health and well-being. It exacerbates other problems.

This is not surprising, since it has always been common knowledge, for example, that people are more prone to catch colds or pick up viruses when they are stressed and "running on empty" or consumed with worry or negativity. We take it for granted that high stress taxes our immune system. Most physicians would say it is a given that patients who have a "good attitude" recover more quickly from procedures and have more well-being after recovery. Stress reduction techniques are often incorporated into healing processes. It is an undercurrent of most advertising for over-the-counter headache relievers, indigestion treatments, painkillers and mood improvers that stress is a fundamental cause of these maladies. People are shown in "hectic" life situations manifesting symptoms such as headaches or colds and fever while under pressure, then feeling soothed, quieted and relieved after they take the medication.

Looking at the accumulating evidence about the devastating impact of stress on the general public well-being, it is harder and harder to think of any stress as "good." But we still think of it as "inevitable" – a kind of mental pollution that comes with success and modern life and infuses itself into us, just as air pollution is breathed in whether we want it or not. So the focus is increasingly on "conquering" stress outcomes or "coping with" stressful circumstances.

Thus far, the score looks like Stress 3, People 0. Stress continues to increase health care costs, negatively impact our happiness, reduce our effectiveness. We continue to fight it and mostly lose the war while occasionally winning a battle.

But what if this is a "Wag the Dog" scenario? What if there really is no battle to fight, the war is fictional, and we're all scaring ourselves to death over an imaginary enemy? It would stop being puzzling that the more we fight, the less we win. There's no way to "win" a battle against something that doesn't exist. It's like shadow-boxing. How would we ever know if the "opponent" really went down for the count?

Fifteen years ago, I was listening to a lecture about the connection between our thinking and our general well-being. The speaker offered a definition of stress that was entirely new to me. “Stress,” he said, “is nothing more than the weight of negative thinking taken seriously over time.” Earlier that very day, I had been sitting in a dentist’s office reading a popular magazine article that listed 40 life circumstances that “cause” stress. When I took the test at the end, I had experienced 36 of them in the preceding year and was labeled as “high stress.” I certainly felt that way. So how could this have anything to do with “negative thinking”? I deeply resented what I was hearing. I wanted something else to have caused my stress; I didn’t want to take any responsibility for it at all.

At the break, I asked about all these outside factors that were “known” to cause stress. And he said, “What if you hadn’t thought about them any more, once you had dealt with them the best you could?” That seemed pretty silly and irresponsible to me. Stop thinking about bad things that had happened? He might as well have advised me to stop scratching an itch, I thought. This memory is so clear to me it’s like it happened yesterday. I sat down, and I burst out laughing at myself. “Any good dermatologist would tell you to stop scratching an itch,” I thought to myself. “Otherwise you make it worse. He’s just telling you to stop scratching your mental itches.” My mind was boggled. I didn’t want to take responsibility for being stressed, but if I actually *could* be responsible for it, I could do something about it! I couldn’t change the 36 factors because all of them had already happened and were already facts of my life. But maybe I *could* change the way I used my thinking if I understood it better.

For the first time ever, I experienced hope that there might be a simple cure for my stress. And from that day forward, that hope gave me the courage to keep looking to learn something that was totally contradictory to everything I had ever thought before, and so simple it was offensive to my “educated” mind. In the subsequent 15 years, I have seen many thousands of people find this for themselves and change their lives dramatically. I, and hundreds of my colleagues, could tell a lot of stories. And those stories do inspire hope and arouse interest. But the real story, just like the HERO story, is told in research.

So here is just one hopeful and inspiring personal anecdote offered by someone responding to a research questionnaire distributed by a research team based at West Virginia University. I don’t know who this person is or where this person lives because this is a confidential study with all subjects’ identities known only to the computer. But six months after taking the second part of a course that was intended to teach the connection between our power to think, the way we hold and use our thinking, and what happens in our lives, this person responded to a follow-up survey and added, at the bottom, this comment:

I noticed a big change in my thinking after the second day of the first course. It was weird, like the world just got brighter. I recognized that it wasn’t outside influences that made me stressed out, upset, etc. I had a big problem with stress. Once I realized that I didn’t have to sweat every little thing, I was like a new person. My friends, my roommates, my boss all noticed a big change in

me for the better. I also noticed that this is learned, because later I noticed myself slipping with it. Then I saw that I was messing up, and I knew it was all me. I realized that people can change in a flash. All it takes is one thought for somebody to change their whole life. My drinking has decreased which also cuts down on stress, and I function better at work. I get along better with my peers and co-workers. I can't remember the last time I had a bad day – but even my bad days I can gain from, learn something from.

And here is the real story, as it is unfolding in an ongoing research project.

Six months after these seminars, following their own new understanding of how life works and their own insights into what they had seen for themselves, respondents thus far reported measureable *decreases* in the following:

- Getting sick
- Mind racing
- Pain interfering with normal work
- Job performance limited by health
- Anger and arguing with others
- Nervousness in the face of choices
- Conflicts with co-workers
- Thinking about quitting my job
- Complaining.

Six months later, respondents reported measureable *increases* in the following:

- Energy levels
- Knowing bad moods will pass
- Willingness to try new things
- Sense of calm
- Improving health.

Like the HERO study, the West Virginia University study is just getting started and it will be years before full results are clear. But, like the HERO study, the early findings are startling and tend to call into question many prevailing assumptions we make about stress.

But unlike any other study I know of, the West Virginia University study appears to offer hope that there is not just relief, not just temporary amelioration, not just coping, not just coming to terms but actually a cure for stress. It suggests that people have, within them, the power to discover an entirely new life without changing anything but their own understanding of how it all works.

What could be more thrilling than finding peace of mind in the midst of life as it is happening and enjoying what we really do have, rather than shadow-boxing eternally with something we really do not have?

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