



Stress Management: Is Necessity The Mother of Good Inventions, Bad Inventions Or Whatever Gets You Through The Night?

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"Stress" and "stress management" are terms that roll off our tongues as if understanding them is second nature to us all. To make sure we are all on the same page lets start with a working definition of stress courtesy of Dictionary.com.

1) An applied force or system of forces that tend to strain or deform the body, 2) The resisting force set up in a body as a result of an extremely applied force and 3) A physical or psychological stimulus that can produce mental tension or physiological reactions that may lead to illness.

If you cant relate to the language used in these definitions just pay attention to the fact that all three definitions speak define stress in negative terms. This is as far from the truth as me telling you that coins have one side to them. Stress exists along a continuum. There is for each individual and each activity an optimum level of stress that enhances performance and stimulates growth producing adaptations. One person pushed to perform in school may respond with excellent test scores. Another may either become anxious and have difficulties concentrating, go blank or even worse get so anxious as to not to show up for the test. Due to the interplay of genetics, learning, and accidents of fate different people may respond very differently to levels of stress applied in different situations.

For instance, Tiger Woods is more likely than most professional golfers to perform at his best when internal and expectations rise during the major golf championships. He is now playing for his ranking in golfs pantheon of immortals. Many of his peers will be his equal for 1, 2, or maybe 3 rounds only to lose their cool on Sundays during the final rounds of major tournaments with victory on the line. If they are playing in The Hartford Open instead of The Masters many will manage the stress of the moment very differently. Others depending on their longevity on The PGA Tour might have identical degrees of difficulty no matter what the prestige level of the tournament. How Tiger Woods was trained by his

father to compete under pressure has been widely publicized. Was he blessed with extraordinary athletic gifts? This is probably a safe bet. Clearly, his competitive fires burn at just the right temperature. If Tiger and his peers get themselves worked up into a frenzy like football players getting ready to wage their proverbial Sunday wars, their fine motor skills that translate muscle memory to well executed shots might very well abandon them. They would not have the violent outlets to modulate and control their states of heightened readiness. Football players and golfers have different levels of optimum stress to ready themselves to perform at their bests.

Optimum levels of stress promote optimum performance. To illustrate this accepted notion lets take for example, aerobic exercise. This stressor to our systems is known to be a mood elevator, and an anxiety reducing activity. Whether your activity of choice is swimming, cycling running, dance or time on the step master in the gym, there are countless health benefits of a sensible exercise regimen. Your heart and lungs, bones and muscles will grow stronger if the stress to your body is such that during intervals of rest and repair, the organ systems responsible for physical performance grow stronger. This will translate to being able to perform more work at lower levels of exertion. Other benefits include being more resistant to muscular skeletal injuries. Studies have indicated that people who exercise regularly have healthier immune systems that are more resistant to illness, and a healthier cholesterol profile that points to a lesser likelihood of a premature build up of plaque in their arteries. Exercisers tend to lose excess weight as exercise burns calories during exercise and at a higher than normal rate for hours after the exercise has stopped. The rise in the blood sugar is also an appetite depressant. Im not just air brushing the warts on this profile of stress, I am emphasizing that optimum levels of stress are catalysts for growth and development. The complete absence of stress would severely curtail our abilities to succeed. We would not evolve and actualize our potential as people as quickly as we do if we would do so at all. Necessity is the mother of invention.

Too little stress on our bodies during exercise will not stimulate growth in our capacities to perform work. Too much stress may produce a host of negative consequences to our health and well being that are every bit as worrisome as the aforementioned benefits were wondrously encouraging. Too much exercise combined with and/or too little rest may strain our bodies and or minds setting off a cascading deterioration of mind/body level of functioning. I have been around enough runners in my time to have learned first hand that

this activity not unlike a pack of cigarettes should come with the warning: "Running may be hazardous to your health." If we are tired or sick and have become too dependent on the release of endorphins from the pleasure center of your brains to feel good, you may continue this activity long beyond the point of diminishing returns and become deaf to your bodies screaming to you that you need to rest.

Over use syndromes can lead to a host of muscular skeletal injuries, and fatigue syndromes that leave people feeling like they have the flu. A immune system compromised by physical exhaustion may lead to symptoms of depression which may in turn further compromise the immune system and leave the door open to a host of physical maladies. To feel compelled to exercise to discharge stress from our bodies and experience "the runners high" may leave runners anxious and over time depressed. When we feel out of control of ourselves the potential to lose our cool and engage in mindless and impulsive actions is a strong human tendency. Furthermore, in addition to the potentially shame producing, self esteem eroding reactions to losing control of ourselves, we may begin over time to feel hopeless and helpless to steer ourselves as we see fit unless, we can consciously connect with and exercise authority over these impulses, feelings and beliefs. Teaching people how to regain control of themselves is what psychotherapists like myself do.

Negative stress is compounded by an over reliance or unhealthy dependence on unhealthy stress management strategies; activities that may cause us to ignore our needs to address stressful problems in our lives. We call such unhealthy dependencies addictive relationships. If a loved one is pressuring us with expectations that feel overwhelming or are simply expectations we do not wish to meet we may choose to address the matter directly or we may seek to escape our dilemma and go for a long run or bike ride hoping to feel significantly different about the problem. We may "feel better" temporarily discharging tension in our bodies however, we will not have moved any closer toward the resolution of our problem. In fact, the more we run away from any problems the bigger the albatrosses they become around our necks. Look what happens to those of us who do everything they can to rationalize staying away from the dentists office. That intermittent tooth pain we wish to minimize may actually disappear for awhile and at some point resurface only to express itself one morning as a raging infection that blows one side of our face up to the size of a grapefruit. The more we minimize and deny the existence of the necessity to cope with rather than to pursue temporary band aids on problems, the less capable we feel to cope with the problem and the more stressful the problem becomes.

This is both due to allowing a small problem to become a larger problem due to neglect, and also because like muscles that go unused and are permitted to atrophy; stress management strategies that we don't use we lose.

Energy is neither created nor destroyed. It simply changes form. This concept of energy conservation elegantly explains why energies trapped in our bodies lead to illness. If we are able to think about emotional energies that may get trapped in our systems and make us sick then, we can channel these energies creatively and/or harmlessly discharge them like environmentally friendly steam by talking them out. "Go ahead and let some steam off responsibly" is far more desirable than holding it in so that you get a back ache or a stomach ache. The logic that explains why some peoples vulnerabilities to stress leave them anxious, depressed, substance dependent or headache sufferers is a complex and sometimes impossible mystery to unravel. We have learned nonetheless, that if the stress is discharged in constructive ways the symptoms will lessen if not disappear.

We know that energy dynamics is the physical principle that governs these processes. Whether or not an environmental pollutant stresses a body to the point that the inhabitant develops a form of cancer is determined by many factors some of which have to do with their willingness and ability to manage the impact of such a stress on their systems. If such a person is overweight, depressed, and sedentary he may be more vulnerable to an environmental toxin however, we don't know for sure why he will or will not develop a life threatening disease. We do know however, that how he manages or defends against the environmental toxin and other environmental stresses will have an impact on the body's vulnerabilities to disease producing processes.

If you take yourself seriously then, you will take stress in your life very seriously as the levels of stress in your life and how you manage them will go a long way to determine your health and welfare. Stress management strategies complement each other. After reading this article you may consider managing stress on your own and/or in combination with professionals like myself to modulate your levels of stress and learn to discharge stress in healthy ways so to keep your mind and body in balance and to have the energy available to achieve meaningful results in your lives.