



Stress: symptom of a modern age?

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A while ago I was at a prize giving ceremony at my son's school. Prizes were flying out all over the place for art, maths, sport, you name it. One prize sticks in my mind. The beaming teacher announced: 'And the prize for dealing with stress goes to...' What's this? The stress prize?

Now I'd really heard everything. As a bemused seven year-old wandered on to the stage, we all looked on sympathetically, wondering what had caused the stress this child had coped with so prize-winningly.

Everybody's doing it!

'Stress' is the modern pariah. It's a cover-all term. 'Stress' can make people physically sick, suicidal, depressed, unable to think clearly or learn new things, unable to digest food, less able to fight bacteria and disease, uninterested in sex and unable to work. In short, it can make life seem not worth living. Yet I can say I am 'stressed' if I'm late for work because I mislaid my keys and am therefore a little irked!

So how can 'stress' cause a person to suffer so much physically and emotionally?

Hungry lions and mortgage repayments

To be stressed, you need something to give you the stress; a stressor. The stressor will be real or imagined. If you react with stress to something real (a hungry lion coming towards you) you experience fear. Your adrenal glands pump your system full of adrenaline, speeding heart rate and breathing, you begin to sweat and basically things become set for exercise. Your body is primed for fight or flight (for me it's flight!). Safari so good, this is when you need your stress response.

But what if you merely imagine something stressful?

Producing stress from within

If you experience your stress response kicking in when merely imagining a lion might be around, you have anxiety.

- Fear is the response to something actual happening now.
- Anxiety is the response to something imagined and anticipated in the future.

Unfortunately your stress response can be triggered by stuff you make up in your head, which is why what you imagine is so important. Worry and anxiety fire off the stress response continuously, which leads to the physical consequences of stress.

But how does stress produce so many physical symptoms? There are good reasons why long term stress sufferers can develop lowered immune response, reduced digestive capacity, loss of sex drive, impaired thought, heart disease etc.

Major stress reaction: what you were designed for

In the first couple of minutes of you responding to a stressor – that lion again – your auto-response system makes rapid changes in your body, gearing you for flight (which might be a better idea if the lion is large and undomesticated!) or fight.

At the first press of the stress button (you see or hear the lion), your adrenaline starts to flow and continues to do so for about two minutes. Adrenaline is wonderful stuff and temporarily turns you into a survival machine. And that's just the start.

Turning into a survival machine

The lion is coming closer. Your breathing becomes short, high in the chest and rapid – just the way it needs to be for running at your fastest. Your skin produces sweat, and your palms become sweaty so that they will have better grip when the sweat dries off. Your heart beats faster to send more blood and oxygen surging around the body – again to help the anticipated exercise involved in fleeing a super feline attack.

This is all well and good, but your stress response doesn't just 'switch on' functions like quicker breathing. Any functions not crucial for fending off lions get automatically 'switched off' during the emergency.

Stress switches off some of your functions

Fleeing a lion is a short term survival crisis, so many of your long term survival functions are not required during the emergency. Stuff inside you that gets switched off includes:

- **Digestion and salivation** Eating is long term survival. You really don't need to be eating lunch whilst trying to avoid being lunch. Blood flow gets shunted away from your stomach and your mouth gets dry.
- **Sex drive** You don't need to be sexually excited when fleeing a lion (trust me it won't help!). So sex drive gets switched off during the stressful episode.
- **Immune response** You don't need to be fighting off little pathogens in your blood stream when fighting off a lion in your back garden, so your immune response takes a break.
- **Intelligence** You don't need to be a smart intellectual and learning new things when under attack, so the thinking brain takes a back seat.
- **Growth hormone** You don't need to be repairing damaged skin and bones whilst fighting off the unwanted advances of the super feline so, yes, you guessed it, growth hormone takes a back seat.

"Wait!" I hear you cry, "These adaptive and (in the short term) essential adaptive responses sound suspiciously like the very symptoms of long term stress!"

Now you're getting it.

Long term stress response symptoms

All this is great in the short term. However, if after two minutes either you or the lion has not cleared off – your adrenals will start producing the long term stress hormone cortisol, with the resulting stress symptoms. Cortisol continues to keep your breathing fast, your heart rate up, and your sex drive, digestion, immune system and clear thinking switched off. On top of that, your blood pressure will stay high, putting you at risk of possible hypertension and heart disease – in the long term.

No lions round here

The stressor may not be that hungry lion after all.

It may be an unhappy marriage, working life, financial situation, bereavement, etc. So the 'symptoms' of stress – raised blood pressure, exhaustion, loss of sex drive, digestive problems like IBS and so forth are actually adaptive and essential functions that are now out staying their welcome. On top of that raised blood pressure .

And the stress relief solution?

The ultimate stress reduction is relaxation – lots of it and regularly. Whether that's through hypnosis, yoga, diet, exercise, or making time to do the things you enjoy.

In fact, if you do anything you wouldn't dream of doing when confronted with a lion (such as reading for pleasure), the stress response will switch off and you'll start feeling and functioning better. The instant you relax, stress symptoms begin to recede: your immune function works better again, your blood pressure normalises, your sex drive gets a look in and clear thought raises its sensible head once more. This means you'll be more likely to manage the difficulties that had been causing the stress in the first place.

The symptoms of stress aren't mysterious – they are in fact functions which have evolved to serve us but which are now being over-used to the point of working against us.

And that little boy at prize giving sure was good at managing his stress levels. I noticed him snoozing contentedly throughout the second half of the award ceremony.

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