

## “Taking a Positive Approach to Stress”

University lecturers and doctors have recently made the headlines as the latest victims of workplace stress. Cambridge University reports a 60% increase in the demand for stress counselling from its academic staff. Does this indicate that the air in the ivory tower is less rarefied and more stressful than some believe, or that lecturers are more stress prone as a group?

A recent 12 year study of 1200 doctors, which also indicated high levels of stress in the profession, found that many enter medical school with a tendency towards high levels of depression and mental health difficulties. Is stress just a disease of the stress-prone?

Stress in itself is a physiological response to a perceived threat. We are made to react swiftly and effectively to dangers and our bodies are programmed to create high levels of adrenaline and a host of other symptoms to maximize our ability to survive. These physical reactions give us additional power and energy short-term but can be exhausting if we keep calling on them.

If we react with the same crisis response to all the minor strains of our lives, our bodies cannot deal with the overload, and serious stress results. This is why harmful stress is surprisingly rare in situations where people deal effectively with challenging crises. Instead, most people feel the strongest stress reactions when they feel unable to deal with a mounting load of minor strains.

What is the solution? There is a simple four part strategy to most stress management. First address the sources of stress – can they be removed or reduced? If there really is a tiger in the bushes, can it be shot, tamed, or airlifted to another part of the forest? Do we need training, help or resources to address the source of stress?

Second, if the source is not one that requires a crisis response, the body has to learn from the brain that it is over-reacting. Thought management techniques are easy to learn and can be used to send a strong message to the body that its response is unnecessary. We can use these techniques to control thinking errors such as exaggerating a threat by “catastrophising” or asking unnecessary “what if?” questions – “what if I can’t find my keys and miss the train and am late for the meeting and my boss finds out and fires me....”

Third, relaxation techniques help calm the brain and the body, turning the battling caveman or cave woman into a calm, peaceful person back in full control of their reactions and their surroundings.

Finally, action planning helps the individual examine their environment for potential stressors and build defences. These may involve removing the stressful events, but are also likely to include learning coping and thinking techniques. It is very common for the same event to be seen as a major stress by one person and a very unimportant pin prick by another. Some people are far more prone to stress, but they can greatly reduce the dangers by accepting that their response is natural but that it can be managed.

In a recent exercise in a London hospital, one of our chartered psychologists ran a series of workshops for managers and staff in stress management techniques. Violent patients, life and death situations and crises in A&E were briefly mentioned as occasional stressors, but all said they could deal with these challenges. The biggest stressors were unanimously agreed as work overload, lack of resources, lack of autonomy and poor managers. Interestingly, all felt that their own stress would be much reduced if that the techniques described above were disseminated throughout the hospital so that all the other consultants, nurses, technical and administrative staff could be made aware of them and introduce them into their working teams.

In an imperfect world stress is part of life, but our reaction to it can be controlled to increase or reduce its dangers. The tiger in the bushes may be a man eating predator, but it could just be a great photo opportunity.