

STRESS

IS YOURS A LIFE OF QUIET DESPERATION?



If you are old enough to remember, but not so old as to forget, there was a time not so long ago that we were led to believe the advent of new technology, in particular the computer, would make our lives so much simpler that we would have more leisure time to enjoy a much fuller life.

I didn't get the new memo – What happened?

I mean come on! We haven't gone to a simpler, gentler, more leisure filled life. Just the opposite has occurred. The velocity of our lives has reached breakneck speed! The new technology is overloading us. It's accessible everywhere! We have e-mails, cell phones that can contact us in every part of our lives, Facebook, LinkedIn, tweets. It goes on seven days a week, in a fully awake, twenty-four hour society. We no longer view time the same way. Oh, we still have the same number of hours in a day, but the expectations around what should or can be accomplished have gone through the roof – and we are paying a heavy price in terms of the quality and even length of our lives.

Translation, our lives are full of:

'STRESS'

Tell me: are you feeling as if your life has become one of quiet desperation?

If so, you are in good company! Just take a look at some of the latest statistics.

In the 2010 Canadian Community Health Survey, released a few months ago, 65,000 people were interviewed across Canada and the findings are quite disturbing;

- *17% of respondents aged 12 and over said they had been diagnosed with high blood pressure – a rate by the way that has steadily increased over the past decade. Men and women are now reporting the same rate of hypertension. Prior to this time women led this category.*
- *24% of respondents aged 15 and over said that most days are extremely or quite stressful, up from 22% in 2008. Women were more likely to report stress. Interestingly, one-quarter of women reported that most days were quite or extremely stressful, compared with 22% of males.*
- *The 35 to 50 age group appears particularly vulnerable. Daily stress rates were highest in this age group, with 30% reporting stress.*
- *21% of the population aged 12 and over reported smoking either every day or occasionally.*

An incredibly staggering figure found in the survey was, that when you



combined overweight with obese, more than half or 52% of the population is in this classification according to the BMI (Body Mass Index).

In another related study that examined the ever-increasing prevalence of sleep deprivation, they found that sleeplessness has been implicated in a long list of afflictions including hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, memory loss, bipolar disorder, reduced immunity, mood swings, impaired carbohydrate metabolism, and increased heart rate variability. Let's not forget depression, substance abuse, the impairment of memory, self-expression, and the ability to read emotions in others (not good for those who pride themselves in their emotional intelligence). Finally, can you guess what is responsible for one hundred thousand car accidents a year?

Furthermore, and from other sources, at least one half of all workers are estimated, at the very least, to be unhappy in their jobs. **This is astounding!**

It's pretty safe to conclude then, that we have never been fatter, more out of shape, tired, and unhappy in our lives than we are right now.

WHAT IS STRESS?



First, stress is a highly subjective phenomenon. It's different for everyone which makes it difficult to define. But if you can't define it, how can you possibly measure it? Let's get an answer from the father of stress research, Hans Selye. The term "stress", as it was initially used by Hans Selye in 1936, is defined as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change". He later redefined stress as "The rate of wear and tear on the body."

Any definition of stress should also include good stress, or what Selye called eustress. Bad stress he called distress. For example, winning a race or an election can be just as stressful as losing. A passionate kiss and contemplating what might follow is stressful, but hardly the same as having a root canal procedure. So stress can be good, bad, and sometimes neither one.

A definition that I like is, "Stress is the body's reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental, or emotional adjustment or response."

Following this definition, let's focus on what each of us perceives as stressful and how we respond to it. Our reactions to stress are killing more of us than ever before. I mean, why do you think we eat too much, sleep too little, and are unhappy in our jobs? These are responses to what we perceive as distress or negative stress. They are, of course, maladaptive ways of coping and further compound our stress.

One of the best and immediate indicators of how well we are doing in our lives, on a day-to-day basis, is to measure our stress symptoms and the level at which we experience them at any particular time (**see stress symptoms questionnaires on my website**). The greater the level of stress experienced, physically, cognitively, and/or behaviourally, the greater the likelihood that we are not living in congruence with who we are and what we need in our lives.

Our level of stress can be determined by measuring the distance between our authentic values and needs, and how we live our lives.

This could result from the circumstances we find ourselves in – circumstances over which we may or may not have control, or because we have little self-awareness. We may have no idea of who we are, what we believe in, or what we need. We are disconnected from the essential essence of our being because of

ignorance or because of deliberate yet mis-guided decisions.

CONTROL



Without a doubt, lack of control or 'perceived' lack of control in our personal and/or professional lives is the most significant stressor that we all face. It also impacts our health. It doesn't matter whether it's control at work, control in our everyday life, or even control of our destiny, it stands out from all other types of stress.

Using work as an example, let's look at a well known and ongoing study, **The Whitehall Studies** of British Civil Servants. This study has shown that it is not the high-powered executives, sitting in their big offices, shouting orders and jumping on jets, who drop dead. It is the people below them – the people who work for them, who have been told what to do, and they have little leeway in deciding how to do it.

In two other studies, both in the United States and in Sweden, they have found that people who have demanding jobs and little latitude in dealing with those demands also have the highest rates of disease.

So you can see, when we attempt to assess the effect of job status on our health, understand that it is not stress per se that is having an adverse effect on health or life expectancy. Rather, it is working in a job where there are typically high demands accompanied by a lack of control. Lack of control in a job often translates into a person having considerable responsibility, but not the necessary power and/or authority to carry it out. People in high demand jobs who had influence and control were found to show no correlation between stress and health.

FEAR

"Fear is the emotional response to the perception of an alternating loss of control and regaining of control." (*David R. Saliba*)



Previously, I mentioned a perceived lack of control. A few words are necessary to explain a lack of control and the fear that sometimes surrounds our inability to act!

When our perceptions tell us that we do not have control, sometimes it is outright fear that gets in the way of actually seeing the reality of our situation, and how much control we really do have, if we choose to take it.

For example, imagine you are in an untenable job that brings with it a domineering boss, unreasonable

demands, long hours, and you just cannot get a handle on any of it.

The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another. ~William James

I am sure you know what kind of job I am talking about. Most of you have been there or are there right now (50%)! You feel overwhelmed that you have no control... but wait! You just might have more control than you realize. You could quit and find another job. But fear overtakes you and prevents you from making what could be the most rational and best decision. "What if I can't find a job? How will I survive without a paycheck? I will be seen as a failure. What if leaving turns out to be a mistake?" Self-doubt creeps in and you begin to feel hopeless. Fear paralyzes you and you are unable to act in your best interests, according to your values and needs.

VALUES & NEEDS

My repeated experiences with coaching stress management over the years has led me to explore the subtly of stress in more depth. What I discovered was "congruence", or rather a lack of it, and something called "need tension." When the cause of a stress symptom jumps up and hits you in the face like a 2-by-4, (i.e. loss of a loved one), you know what you are dealing with. Accordingly, you can act to address it. But what if it relates to not living your life congruently with

what it is you value, and/or not living your life according to your personality style? And, finally, perhaps you are not able to meet your "perceived" needs at any particular point in time? What then?

Just what is it you value? If you do not know, how do you find out? Do you know what your personality style is and how it affects your daily living? What about your needs – are they different than wants? Do they change over time, or are they the same no matter what? If there are symptoms of stress creeping into your life and you feel a '**dis-ease**' with yourself, can you flag the reason(s) for it?

If you cannot, then perhaps you need to find out what anchors you, what you live for, what you believe in and would even die for – in other words your life purpose. Then determine why you get up each day, go out into the world, and do what you do. If you are successful, you may be surprised at what you find and how much control you really can have.

Over a lifetime full of experiences, I have learned valuable lessons about congruence with values, need tension and personality. I can share them with you, with the objective of supporting you in your efforts to develop a strategic approach to managing or eliminating your stress. "Tell me, is it something that you think or feel you might need and see of value in your life?" **Coach Ladd**

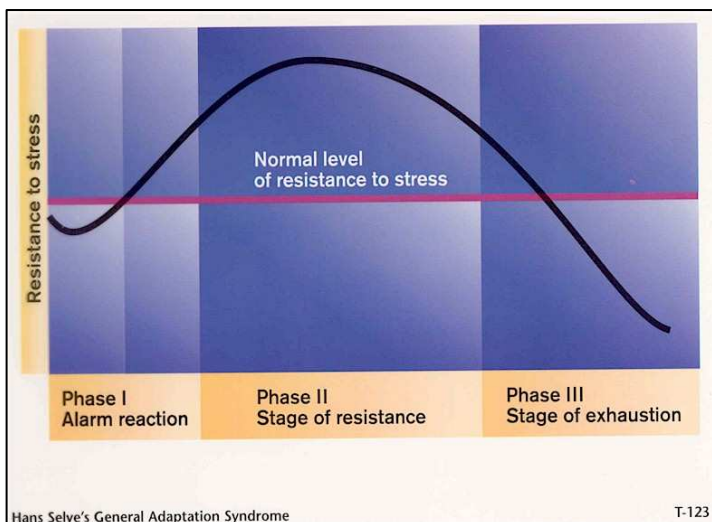
The General Adaptation Syndrome

The General Adaptation Syndrome describes the body's short-term and long-term reaction to stressors.

Let's suppose for a moment that you are experiencing symptoms of stress, but are hard pressed to identify the source of those stressors in spite of your best efforts. What then?

Many years ago, while managing the provincial governments Employee Assistance Program, I encountered people who were clearly experiencing symptoms of stress, but together we were unable to identify just what the stressor or stressors were. Of course, this proved problematic for both of us. This led to my discovery of Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome.

To understand this model of long-term stress and its impact on the body, I began to ask the question that logically comes out of the explanation of resistance: "Yes, but what if you are not living your life congruently with your values and needs? Can that produce resistance?" I had my answer. If you live in a constant state of resistance long enough, you may begin to lose touch with what normal used to feel like. In other words, lose yourself.



Originally described by Hans Selye in the 1920s, the General Adaptation Syndrome describes a three-stage reaction to stress. Stressors in humans include physical stressors, such as starvation, being hit by a car, or suffering through severe weather. Additionally, humans can suffer emotional or mental stress, such as the loss of a loved one, the inability to solve a problem, or even having a difficult day at work.

STAGE ONE (ALARM REACTION)

The first stage of the general adaptation stage, the alarm reaction, is the immediate reaction to a stressor. In the initial phase of stress, humans exhibit a "fight or flight" response, which causes one to be ready for physical activity. However, this initial response can also decrease the effectiveness of the immune system, making persons more susceptible to injury or illness during this brief phase.

STAGE TWO (RESISTANCE)

This stage might also be named the stage of adaptation, instead of the stage of resistance. If the stress continues during this phase, the body adapts to the stressors it is exposed to. Changes at many levels take place in order to reduce the effect of the stressor. For example, if the stressor is starvation (possibly due to anorexia), the person might

experience a reduced desire for physical activity to conserve energy, and the absorption of nutrients from food might be maximized.

STAGE THREE (EXHAUSTION)

At this stage, the stress has continued for some time. The body's resistance to the stress may gradually be reduced, or may collapse quickly. Generally, this means the immune system, and the body's ability to resist disease, may be almost totally eliminated. Patients who experience long-term stress may succumb to heart attacks or severe infection due to their reduced immunity. For example, a person who perceives their job as stressful may experience long-term stress that might lead to high blood pressure and an eventual heart attack. **Coach Ladd**