

THE CHANGING FACE OF STRESS

“The Times They Are A- Changing” - Bob Dylan

I was recently asked if stress has changed since I got into the field in 1982. It got me to thinking. In the early 80's, the main sources of stress were work, relationships and money. I call them “the big three”. But, over the years, trends evolved and new sources of stress emerged.

In the 90's, it was change. Change was everywhere. In the workplace it was re-engineering, downsizing and merger-mania. In the economy, we had a major recession, wage freezes and stock market gyrations. And then there was technology and the advent of faxes, computers, Y2K and voice mail all morphing relentlessly into today's plague of email. For several years, most of my speech invitations were about how to manage change – resulting in my second book, “Staying Afloat when the Water Gets Rough”.

In the late 90's, a new issue bubbled up to the top of workplace stresses: work-life balance (or, actually, *imbalance*). Head counts were down and work volumes were up. The pace got faster and deadlines tighter until then they became unrealistic and, finally, impossible. Jobs became open-ended. Frazzled employees tried to keep up by taking work home. Boundaries got blurred. From 1999 to 2002, I was asked to give more presentations on work-life balance than on all other subjects combined.

Then came 9/11, 2001. Fear about physical safety became an added and dominant worry for many people. And, it wasn't just the fear of terrorism. The outbreak of SARS in 2002, West Nile Virus, E. Coli and even one Mad Cow led to fear of contagion. We became wary of other people, our water and our food – *as well as* airplanes.

This is where we are today. We're still dealing with change and uncertainty, work-life issues and fears for personal safety. And, that's all on top of “the big three” (work, relationships and money) which continue to be major stressors for most people.

That's what I've seen over the past 20 years. What have I learned?

A lot of stress is self-generated. We create our own stress by:

- *The way we think.* We take things personally, we're self-critical, we have unrealistic expectations, we worry about the future.
- *The way we behave.* Perfectionists are meticulous about everything, Type A people are always rushing around, pleasers can never say no.
- *The lifestyle choices we make.* We overload our schedules, drink too much caffeine, don't get enough sleep, live beyond our means.
- *The situations we get into or put up with.* We tolerate and continue in lousy jobs, long commutes, unrewarding relationships.

This observation led to my first book, “Always Change a Losing Game” about all the ways we create stress for ourselves and what to do about them.

The number one cause of stress is the little voice in our heads – especially “negative self-talk”. Dr. Hans Selye said “It’s not so much what happens that matters, it’s how you take it”. Dr. Albert Ellis showed us that irrational thoughts create anxiety. Dr. Aaron Beck taught us that we can change the way we *feel* by changing the way we *think*. This is the basis of Cognitive Therapy.

A key to stress mastery is control. Control and stress are like two elevators on one cable. When one is up, the other is usually down. If you want to reduce your stress, find ways to increase your feelings of control. And the good news is: *we have more control than we think*.

We can change old habits. And not just things like smoking, nail biting and overeating. Pleasers can become more assertive, perfectionists can ease up a little. All-or-nothing thinkers can start to see the gray area between the black and the white. Type-A people can slow down a bit.

It’s never too late to start. I’ve had patients make meaningful changes in their 60’s! People in their 80’s are learning to use the Internet.

Caffeine is a common and potent cause of stress. We drink far more than we can tolerate. Coffee, tea, cola drinks and chocolate create a stress reaction in the body. I call coffee “Stress in a Cup”!

We’re a sleep-deprived society – to the tune of about 60-90 minutes a night – and it’s costing us. All the symptoms of sleep deprivation, such as fatigue, decreased concentration, impaired short-term memory, irritability, feeling depressed, lowered resistance to infection, are also symptoms of *stress*.

Power naps (5-20 minutes) are amazingly restorative – especially when you’re dragging your tail and wondering if you’ll ever get through the day. I finally gave myself permission to start taking power naps in 1989 and they made a world of difference.

Relaxation techniques (such as meditation) are powerful stress reducers. I was a real skeptic until I learned the techniques and started using them regularly. They’ve made a profound difference in the way I feel and the way I function.

People are complex and fascinating. They’re resilient, adaptable and courageous. I’ve watched patients deal with adversity and make changes that have turned their lives around.

We all need to be lifelong learners. The world is changing – we need to keep learning in order to keep up.

Golf is more fun if you don’t keep score. At least it is for me!

We can live without NHL hockey after all!

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