

Stress

The stealthy assassin

Modern society places ever increasing demands upon us and therefore elevating levels of anxiety and stress. These demands can be real or perceived i.e. you *believe* that they are real. It has been reported that life today is, on average, 44% more difficult than it was 30 years ago.

The purpose of this article is to summarise the content of my recently published ebook: **Stress, the stealthy assassin**. In this article I shall help you to identify some of these areas of stress, detail what stress is and offer some practical steps you can take to reduce its debilitating effects.

You should be aware that in the long term, **stress is a killer**, or at best, can provide terrible debilitation. It can be insidious as the effects are cumulative affecting us both mentally and physically with the real possibility of taking people to breaking point. In my ebook, I tell you a true story of a man that I once worked with. He reached this point and his story both shocked me and ensured that I took stress far more seriously than I had done before. As a Psychotherapist, I see the results of stress far too often.

For many, the stress condition is something that has been with them a long time and now accepted as the norm. This is far from healthy. Many will convince themselves that they 'thrive on stress'. Again this is a very unhealthy and potentially dangerous attitude to have and we shall be looking at the health problems created by stress a little later. For now though, you need to read this article and you will **need to accept responsibility for taking action to make change happen**.

By ACCEPTING that you have a problemyou take OWNERSHIP of itif you OWN it you can then take CONTROL of it.

General Background

Before we start to look in depth at stress, let's think about some background issues.

Stress is an important and **natural** human condition essential for our survival and is part of our basic "fight or flight" responses. It can be good, for example a romantic encounter or the anticipation of a reward or getting yourself 'hyped up' before an athletic event. However, stress that causes depression or debilitation is clearly something to be avoided.

In my opinion, one of the main causes for the increase in the anxiety and stress related condition is the need for constant change. This 'requirement' of society in general, and for individuals in particular, is ever

increasing and practically inescapable. Our personal freedoms are becoming increasingly eroded with technology spearheading this situation. For hundreds of years life had large elements of predictability. In the seventeenth century for example, if your dad was a shoemaker then you, as his son, and in their turn, your sons, became shoemakers.

Today, it is very likely that an individual has many career or job changes with umpteen courses and re-training needs or opportunities. Increasingly common is the change to the concept of the nuclear family. High divorce rates result in changes to the family structure and lifestyle affecting both the current and future generations. Jobs are requiring higher qualifications, perhaps unnecessarily so.

Areas such as communication mean that we are presented with an ever increasing volume of information to experience and assimilate. Armed with the internet, email, mobile phones etc, we are able, and therefore often expected, to react quickly to external demands. There is no escape from the intrusion of technology which also extends into the high street with cctv, government agency bureaucracy, police surveillance methods, identity cards etc.

National and local government offices and agencies, prying, scrutinizing and demanding an increasing amount of information. Our every action seems somehow subject to regulation. I could go on of course, but the point I'm trying to make is that we are becoming increasingly dependent for outside agencies to control, or at least influence, our lives and make decisions for us or force us to make decisions that we do not wish to make. I suggest that this is making us 'weak' from the point of view of decision making, no longer believing that we are in control as we invariably have to compromise. This can give rise to feelings of helplessness and uncertainty with the attendant increase in levels of stress.

So, generally what are the areas where stress can come from?

The points discussed in the previous paragraph can be considered to be 'background' *stressors* which is the description given to stress making events. The potential causes of stress depend on a wide range of factors which include your personality, general outlook on life, your ability to deal with and solve problems. Daily exposure to stressors can be described under the following headings:

- Environmental.
The places where you live and/or work. Are they unsafe, overcrowded, uncomfortable, threatening, polluted, excessively noisy etc.?
- Family and Relationships
Marital problems, difficulty in finding a supportive relationship, rebellious teenagers, caring for the aged or a special needs child for example can cause severe stress.

- Work

In our career/money/social standing driven society, our work (or lack of) can offer high levels of stress. This can be caused by job dissatisfaction, low pay, office politics, resentment or conflicts with the boss or co-workers that could include sexual harassment.

- Social Stressors

A person's social situation can have a major influence as a stressor. Poverty, financial pressures, racial, age and sexual discrimination, unemployment, isolation or a lack of social support can all provide fertile ground for stress.

Not all stress is derived from external sources, it can also be *self generated*. The following give a few examples:

- Uncertainty or worries
- Pessimistic attitude
- Self-criticism (that nagging, critical voice inside your head)
- Unrealistic expectations or beliefs
- Perfectionism
- Low self esteem
- Excessive or unexpressed anger
- Lack of assertiveness

Perhaps you are even now beginning to realise that stress can be developed by a combination of things. Each little irritation helping to cause stress in other areas i.e. having a 'knock on' effect.

What is stress and how does it affect us?

Feelings of stress come from any situation in which we feel frustrated, angry or anxious.

For many, the source of the stress is known. Or is it? It may not be as simple as that. Already you have seen the many avenues that stress can travel to get to you many of these are quietly working away in the 'background'.

Stress is a normal, natural state with fear at the base of it.

Stress is more prevalent in women than in men as highlighted in the Roper Starch survey in 1999. Certainly from this report, working women with young children (under 13) seem particularly vulnerable.

The role of women has changed massively over the last 100 years or so. These days, a woman often has many roles: wife, mother, 'father', daughter, carer, earner, housekeeper, educator and bills payer. One very important role though that's usually forgotten: that of taking care of *herself*.

Women in general though, do have an advantage over men when it comes to dealing with emotional problems. Women are far more ready to openly discuss their emotional issues which can be very helpful in the healing process. Men on the other hand are often brought up with nonsensical sentiments such as "big boys don't cry", "keep a stiff upper lip", "real men don't show their emotions". These sentiments can cause real damage as men can find it very difficult to open up and express strong emotion which leads to stress. If you can relate to this, there is a very important exercise detailed in my ebook that you should do.

There are hundreds of factors that contribute to stress but most can be categorized by therapists into six types, which underlines the fact that stress is not a simple condition.

People react differently to stress stimuli and we can categorize the reasons why an individual may become stressed. Perhaps you can identify with one of these? Getting to know where your stress comes from is a great start in dealing with it. Here are a few examples:

a) An 'inherited' tendency for stress.

We learn how to react to potentially tense situations from parents, or other significant people. Are you teaching your children how to become stressed when they become adults, perhaps the same way that you were taught?

b) Type 'A' Personality:

Those that fall into this type definition exhibit traits which include:

- Prone to overachievement
- In the habit of forcing themselves to work toward unrealistic goals
- Consistently competitive
- Constantly aware of time and prone to rushing
- Quick to exhibit anger
- Cynical

This group is particularly susceptible to stress related conditions such as heart attacks because they are *addicted* to stress. Two key factors that contribute to their propensity are the hostility factor and cynicism.

c) Having a negative view of the world.

People that focus on the negative aspects of situations e.g. focusing on the nightmares of life or worrying about the worst possible outcomes (glass half empty).

d) People that repress or deny important feelings such as hurt, anger or sadness.

As an example, imagine a situation where a man has an unsatisfying job and his wife is very career focused. When they are together, she always talks about her progress in her latest project, the politics and characters at work, how inspirational her manager is etc. The husband is supportive and pleased that she can find such fulfilment in her work. BUT, he feels resentment at playing 'second fiddle' for her attention, for needing the additional income that she provides, perhaps she has more in common with the males that she works with and finds them attractive, etc. This is a very dangerous type of stress/anger that can fester and eventually manifest in rage.

e) Needing to please everyone (i.e. unable to say NO so always saying YES).

The 'takers' of the world seem to know where all the 'givers' are how to manipulate them. If you have been brought up to be 'nice' and to put other people's needs before your own, you will be stressed because you will always have internal conflict. This comes about when your mouth says 'yes' and your heart says 'no'. I suggest that you are easily swayed by emotional blackmail.

Stress also comes from not saying to people what you really want to say because you don't want *them* to feel bad.

The problem gets worse if you dwell on the situation afterward and mentally rehearse all the things that you *should* have said. Of course, you *will* say how you truly feel next time (even though you know that you won't). It is likely that you were raised in an environment where you were ignored or perhaps your emotional needs were not met and you felt as though your feelings were not important.

Learning to say no at work can also be very important. Co-workers can be only too happy to dump some of their work into your IN tray or get you to work extra hours for no extra pay. Friends can 'dump' their children on you so they can organize their own, more important and very busy lives or you can be volunteered for that job on the committee that nobody else wants etc.

If this describes you then doing something about stress relief may give you difficulties. The reason is that you will have to do something for yourself and may have feelings of guilt in this 'indulgence'.

Don't! **You and your feelings are very, very important**. Not only to you but to the people that love you. In my ebook you will find a questionnaire that helps you to assess how assertive you are.

f) Being a Carer.

This role can be very stressful. On the one hand you are a compassionate and caring person making a major contribution to the quality of life of your charge. On the other hand, you may feel resentment that your life is on hold, feel the added pressures of the commitments in your own life, anger, perhaps at others for shirking their responsibilities and dumping it all on you, feelings of helplessness or frustration as the condition of your charge worsens etc.

There can be guilt on the part of the carer for having these 'selfish' feelings.

I suggest that there are three areas that you can focus on to relieve the stress associated with caring:

- 1). Plan in some YOU time. You need and deserve this. There are a lot of tips offered later in this article, but you must not feel guilty.
- 2). Open up your feelings to a friend or therapist. 'Bottling it all up' or accepting that 'we all have a cross to bear', will only make you ill and angry, possibly venting this anger on the person(s) that you care for.
- 3). Learn to say NO, see previous. All too often, carers are put upon to help those perfectly capable of helping themselves. There are only so many hours in the day and you only have so much physical and emotional energy.

g) Growing up/Schooled in a religious environment that controls by instilling guilt.

Individuals that belong to this group may well question and agonize over every thought and decision that they make.

If you do suffer from guilt and have internal conflicts regarding the Christian Church, drop me an email and I can recommend a very well written book that I believe, puts matters into perspective.

h) You suffer 'Self Defeating Behaviours'

This is a huge and important subject but far beyond the scope of this article and so can really only be touched upon. However, these are a rich source of stress and so you need to be aware if these relate to you. If you believe that these issues do indeed affect you then you would benefit greatly from seeing a therapist. But what are these issues about?

Self defeating behaviours are our *unhelpful* coping responses to situations. These behaviours are such that they will not support us to give a longer term positive outcome to the situation. In effect

the behaviour seems to work against our own best interests and is often described as self-sabotage. For this reason they seem paradoxical insofar as they appear to be flying in the face of logic and reason.

If we know of these behaviours in ourselves it's of little help in stopping them because we 'stubbornly' continue to use the same inappropriate responses time and time again.

A good example would be if you always picked the 'wrong' type of person for a relationship and it always ending the same way.

Perhaps you find yourself saying or doing something really stupid which ends the relationship. You knew that you would eventually.

Being so aware leads us to strong negative emotions such as anger, frustration, depression and stress. So what kinds of behaviours are included in these?

- A fear of failure/success. We 'try' to succeed at something and it always ends in failure which becomes stressful.
- We procrastinate i.e. find all sorts of reasons not to take action, even when avoiding action requires more effort than actually doing the task (teenagers take note). This common behaviour is linked to the fear of failure/success.
- We lie to ourselves. Do any of these sound familiar? "Well of course, I could do it if I really wanted to." Or "It's simply a part of my personality, I'll never change" etc. etc.
- We hide from reality. For example, someone with financial problems having a pile of unopened bills marked 'urgent' on his desk, perhaps to one side just out of view. Etc..

So, how does stress work?

On first sight the stress mechanism seems odd. Why should a natural process that is designed with our safety in mind have the potential to cause us so much harm? Well let's have a look at how it works in more detail.

Basic Stress Mechanism

Stress is a psychological and physiological response to events/thoughts/feelings that upset our personal balance in some way. When faced with a threat (real or perceived), our bodies rapidly go automatically into the "fight or flight" mode. This involves a cascade of biological changes that prepare us for emergency action. The sympathetic nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones which include adrenaline. These hormones race through the bloodstream, preparing us for combat or a quick escape. This preparation includes: the increase of heart rate and blood flow to the muscles, constriction of the blood vessels under the skin (to reduce blood loss if we are injured) and dilation of the pupils to improve sight. The blood sugar levels are also increased to give an energy boost and decrease reaction time. Functions not essential to this immediate survival need, such as the digestive system, are suppressed. When the threat has passed or been dealt with, the systems return to a normal operating condition ie *our hormone levels stabilize*.

This survival mechanism worked well for our ancestors facing dangers such as wild animals or battles. In the modern world however, most of the stress that we feel is in response to psychological rather than physical threats.

The mind though cannot differentiate between the potential attack of an animal or an anticipated confrontation with your boss for example. As a caveman, if you suddenly met a hungry looking sabre tooth tiger you would run away (fairly quickly I would imagine). If you are being bawled out by your boss, you can't really run away and definitely not stick him with a spear! In both examples the response is the same except the stress hormones will not dissipate as quickly in the latter. If you have a lot of worries or concerns, then it is highly likely that you are running on stress much of the time which makes it difficult to shut off. Instead of dissipating, or at least levelling off once the threat has passed, the heart rate, hormone levels and blood pressure remain elevated. Long term exposure to this has a detrimental effect by way of its contribution to heart disease, cancers, obesity as well as emotional problems such as anxiety, depression, irritability, panic attacks and sexual dysfunction. One of the 'by-products' of stress is the release of cholesterol from the liver. Maybe this accounts for the relationship between stress and heart conditions, at least in part.

Health Problems Caused By Stress

Over a million people a year are diagnosed with stress related problems in the USA. However, a consultation with a doctor is usually about a physical problem that has arisen due to stress. What are some of these problems? Well these can include:

Headaches	Sleep problems
Tiredness and fatigue	Overeating or Loss of appetite
Aches or pains in the back, neck or jaw	Panic Attacks
Anger	Depression
Blood Pressure	Heart Disease
Raised Cholesterol	Erectile Dysfunction

It is at this point in my ebook that I relate a true story of a man that I once worked with. His encounter with long term stress had a terrible effect on him and his family. I then took stress far more seriously than I had done previously. The ebook includes a test to enable you to determine how stressed you may *actually* be at this time.

You are then asked to undertake a **stress inventory** by checking the statements that apply to you.

Unfortunately, the publication of these exercises is beyond the scope of this summary article.

Ok, I now know how bad it is so how do I deal with it?

Firstly, we need to understand that stress is a normal part of life. In fact to a certain degree, it is desirable. How boring (stressful) would a life be that was without challenges?

A very useful way to analyse the stress in your life is to keep a daily stress diary. In this you should make notes on any event that gives rise to negative feelings. The notes should include time, location (eg kitchen) the event that has (is) taken place, your feelings associated with it and a number from 1-10 that tells you how intense the stress level is. In my ebook I show examples which build case for further study. One such entry is:

Monday 14th February

07:30 In the kitchen making breakfast. No sign of a card from Jim, bet he's forgotten! Again!! Peter still in bed, he'll be late for school and make me late again for work. And I need to fill the car with petrol!

I feel angry and resentful that Jim just seems to take me for granted and feel Peter should be old enough to sort himself out.

Stress level 9.

Keeping such a diary for a week or so will highlight the types of situations that you are subjected to that make you stressed or anxious and the feelings associated with these events. You are then better able to evaluate and deal with matters. For instance, in the above example she could plan her life better, i.e. get up earlier to wake up Peter and filled the car with fuel the previous day. With regard to feelings, she starts off the day angry convinced that Jim has forgotten her card, that Peter is the cause of her being late for work and the car is inconsiderate for needing fuel when she is running late! You get the idea. One thing you will notice is how the little annoyances in life build up throughout the day.

One source of stress for many people is work. In the ebook you can see a table of professions giving their relative stress factors. Have a look and see where your job fits in.

If you are under huge pressure at work for instance, do you really want to be in that work/company? What is it that you get: status, fat paycheck, power, all the above? Is the acquisition of these things worth trading your health and possibly your relationships for? Do you honestly enjoy your work?

Imagine that at last, all your long hours, missed lunches, poor diet and weekend working have finally got their reward.....you die at your desk after a massive heart attack. Your boss and work colleagues go to your funeral. As you are lowered into the ground for a long sleep, what could be the topic of conversation?

How wonderfully hard working you were, your incredible work ethic, a real asset to the company, how on earth will they ever be able to replace you? Or, who is going to pick up on that project you didn't finish? Your family of course will be wondering how they are going to replace you.

Home is another source of stress with its demands and needs. Your partner will have stress as will your children. Try and be sensitive to the stress experienced by others around you. Our behaviour always affects others. Sometimes we forget that children have stress in their lives. How much fun was everyday at school for you? Can you remember the pressure of homework, projects, disputes between friends, hormones all over the place etc.? As adults, these now seem so trivial and manageable, but it was not so then.

Money, or rather the lack of it, is an area that many find stressful. I have a whole chapter on this but in essence you need to *accept* you have a problem and that a solution shall require unwanted but necessary changes. Simple things like starting a budget and monitoring all expenditure. Perhaps seeing a debt counsellor and re-scheduling payments to creditors. Do things to reduce outgoings. For instance, if you are practical and would like to improve your car fuel consumption by say 30-70% (petrol or diesel) have a look at this website: <http://tinyurl.com/qughbg>

Some Practical Advice.

Do try and get the stressor into perspective. Does this one thing really deserve your feeling this bad? Perhaps it's all the other irritations happening throughout the day that's 'wound you up' to this point?

If it's work, assess and think about a change of job with an attendant change in lifestyle perhaps.

If it is home and family, regularly sit down together at mealtimes say, and talk. Yes *communicate* which means turning off the TV (shock, horror) and *listening* to each other.

On a personal level, re-learn how to relax. A very good way is to listen to the 'Complete Relaxation' audio file that can be downloaded free from my website: <http://www.wessexwellbeing.com>

Try the following:

A weekend camping trip in the garden with the family. Forget the spiders and the creepy crawlies, it will be fun! You won't need a mobile (cell) phone, laptop or internet connection, just a can opener, sleeping bags and stove.

Playing hide and seek or cowboys and Indians with the family. Go on! Be a kid again! Or even better (my favourite): A family pillow fight (clear the room of breakables it will get crazy). Sounds silly? Try it and re-

discover fun.

How about: Meditation, Chi Kung, Tai Chi, Reading (books not reports), re-discovering your spirituality, family cycling trips or re-discovering how to laugh etc. These activities need not be expensive and can get you back together with those that you love for fun times that are memorable.

There are too many opportunities to list but I hope that I have stimulated some thought and **action**.

Concluding Comments

I have covered quite a lot of material in this summary article and I trust that you found it of value.

The pressures put upon by society will continue and in all probability increase. I hope though, that now you have a much better understanding of your stress in particular and the condition in general, you are in a far better position to cope. There is only so much control you can ever have over background stressors. What you do have complete control over is the way you *decide* to perceive these events.

Certainly the decision to change takes great courage because you have to accept that you have to take responsibility for your own life. So by reading and acting on the advice contained within these pages you have shown that courage and given yourself a precious gift: that of being able to lead a more fulfilling and enjoyable life.

External events will always affect us but it's the way that we view these events that can wreak so much emotional damage. I intend to write more books on subjects such as anger management, self confidence etc. during the middle/late of 2009. If you would like to be advised when these are available and get pre-launch discounted prices, visit my website and register.

Emotional Support

If you live in the Wiltshire area of UK and wish to contact the author regarding a consultation, then go to the website: <http://www.wessexwellbeing.com> to find contact details and other helping information, some of it free.

If you are concerned about any physical symptoms or feelings of depression, then it's important that you consult with your doctor.

I wish you well on your journey in life

David Carroll Dip CP Dip Hyp LHS