

STRESS ISN'T HARMFUL AFTER ALL

POISON, PANACEA AND PRACTICAL ADVICE

HARD
TALK



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ONE of contemporary management's best known anecdotes involves mice. Popularised in Spencer Johnson's best-selling book, *Who Moved My Cheese?* the story revolves around two mice living in a maze, when one day they realise that someone or something, has moved their cheese to an undisclosed location. The mice, after an initial struggle to discover the new location of the cheese, eventually figure out ways to get to the new cheese.

Also in this story are two miniature humans (don't ask us why miniature humans also live in a maze with rats) who, unlike the rats, struggle for a lot longer to adjust to their new cheese-less existence. Blame ensues between the little humans, and one of them continually reverts to his old habits, afraid of venturing into the unknown regions of the maze in search of the new cheese.

Humans do not live in mazes with cheese, of course, but the management tale provides a modern day parallel to our hectic, stressful environments, often characterised by constant flux and change.

We may one day awake to a landscape altered by economic or political upheaval, changing the very nature of our work and often, our sense of certainty and security. The cheese – our targets, goals and aspirations – change with our environment, forcing us to adapt in ways which initially arouse discomfort and stress.

This story is of mice seeking cheese, and – the somewhat unflattering comparison aside – mirrors much of the rat race in our own lives. Speaking of rats, they too have something to tell us about the nature of stress, change and discomfort.

THE ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY OF STRESS

Like many findings in science, the discovery of stress was a rather serendipitous one. Accidental, unexpected, but one that would ultimately change our understanding of how we respond to demands made of us.

The story of stress begins in the labora-

tory of one Hans Selye, who was examining the effects of oestrogen on rats. Selye would inject the lab rats with oestrogen, but, it was his poor handling of the rats that resulted in a most fortuitous discovery. Selye would accidentally drop the rats, be left chasing them around his lab, and trying to get them out from hiding behind sinks with a broom.

The rats, scurrying away from their lab-coat-wearing captor, experienced pain, stress and this consequently lowered their immune system.

Selye would then propose that this experience reflects much of our own body's response to stress – stress results in the wear and tear of daily life. Prolonged, recurrent experiences of unpleasant emotions wear us down, demotivate us, result in a host of physical illnesses and complications, and ultimately, make the rat race all the more unpleasant.

EUSTRESS: STRESS AS PANACEA

We have since moved on from viewing stress as a purely unpleasant, or negative experience. We've also (thankfully) improved on our rat-handling techniques in the laboratory.

Today, psychologists realise that stress is the body's response towards situational demands, and importantly, is *useful* in helping prime ourselves for action. Stress experiences are like your body's internal alarm system, readying you for decisive, immediate responses when the need arises.

Another parallel we can draw with regards to stress being a useful system is to see it as a smoke alarm. Having one in your home that sets off upon detection of smoke readies you for action – to either detect the source of the smoke and act upon it, or to flee to safety.

Stress can be good for us. This is why psychologists refer to these useful, adaptive stress as eustress (i.e. literally "good stress"). Too little of it, and we're left feeling unmotivated, uninterested and bored.

Stress can serve as a motivating drive for actions, giving us the buzz and enthusiasm to approach tasks head-on. The negative connotation and unpleasant experiences that accompany stress, however, lead us to view stress as a purely negative experience.

“MANAGING STRESS EFFECTIVELY IS LIKE FINE-TUNING OUR INTERNAL ALARM SYSTEM SO THAT WE ARE ABLE TO BALANCE BETWEEN RESPONDING TO EXTERNAL DEMANDS AND PREVENTING OURSELVES FROM BUCKLING UNDER THE DELETERIOUS EFFECTS OF OUR STRESS REACTIONS.”



Stress can obviously lead to deleterious psychological and health consequences – but that only happens when our internal smoke alarms are a little too sensitive. Much of the negative effects of stress are usually instances of chronic stress, or distress.

DISTRESS: STRESS AS POISON

Why did the rats fall ill when chased around the laboratory floor with a broom? Imagine if you had to make escape attempts every other day of your life. We whine, wallow in our ruminations, wish for better days ahead and wonder why our lives are wrapped up in such stressful experiences.

To some of us, the workplace sometimes may seem like a battlefield for promotions, awards, commissions and for some, survival. That impending budget cut looming over the next quarter's horizon rattles your sense of job security. Do you work harder, or start seeking another job? Repeated experience of such thoughts are the wears and tears of daily life.

Your body is primed to act, and channels its resources to systems requiring action and immediate response. Distress weakens the immune system, and explains why demanding, strenuous circumstances are associated with a host of psychological and physical maladies.

Physical symptoms such as headaches, hypertension, hyperglycaemia and heart attacks have all been linked with prolonged distress. The smoke alarm goes off at the slightest hint of smoke, whether an actual fire is present or otherwise. When our experience of stress exceeds our body and mind's capability of managing them, we experience negative, unpleasant distress.



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Take control of your mind and emotions.

STRESS: PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE

1. Individual Differences and the Experience of Stress

We need the right amount of stress to drive us forward, but too much of it overwhelms our ability to perform our jobs efficiently.

Managing stress effectively is like fine-tuning our internal alarm system so that we are able to balance between responding to external demands and preventing ourselves from buckling under the deleterious effects of our stress reactions.

The ability to manage stressful demands and still thrive in a fast-paced environment is sometimes referred to as psychological resilience. Being a resilient individual is essentially your capability in bouncing back from adversity and challenges.

Effective management of stress essentially boils down to developing skills to be resilient in the face of everyday demands. The core of developing resilience starts with knowing oneself. This is important simply because the stress experience is subjective.

In terms of personality, are you an individual more susceptible to stress than others? Highly sensitive people, or individuals high on trait of neuroticism (that is, they are more susceptible to unpleasant emotions), or even Type D personality types may be more easily stressed by others.

In fact, several studies done by local researchers have shown that close to half of Malaysian students and executives sampled have Type D personality. Type D personality is a relatively new concept proposed by Dr Johan Denollet. Individuals categorised as Type D (for Distressed) possess the traits of Negative Affectivity (NA) and Social Inhibition (SI).

Research conducted in many countries suggest that around a

quarter of the population has type D personality, and this personality trait is associated with cardiovascular disease, depression, anxiety, and other symptoms of poor mental health.

It is important to note that while these traits are associated with heightened susceptibility to stress, they are not inherently bad. Some people simply have a more sensitive, "jumpy" internal alarm system than others.

2. Seeing Stress Differently – Control, Commitment and Challenge

What stresses you out might not upset your colleague very much. For that reason, pinpointing the exact reasons for why such events or circumstances trigger stress is another crucial step towards developing resilience.

Understanding when you feel most stressed about, how frequently such events occur, and any underlying reasons for your responses help clarify a pattern in your stress responses.

It is thus not so much how many distressing events you encounter that is the issue, but what is your attitude towards those events.

For example, you get a letter from the human resources department informing you of the company's cost-cutting programme, which includes terminating your employment in a few months. You may react with anger, fume your way to the manager's office or start feeling sorry for yourself.

Alternatively, you may choose to accept the predicament calmly or even tell yourself it is time to move on and get a job in a more financially stable company. Whether you see a situation as a threat or an opportunity makes a big difference, and therein lies one key aspect of stress – it is inherently subjective and personal. The threat is stressful only when you perceive them as such.

Studies have shown that executives under stress manifested lower symptoms of illness when they perceived their stressor as having three important qualities:

● **Control:** Believing that one has personal control over a situation rather than feeling powerless.

That is, we feel we have a choice over the situation rather than being dictated by external forces. For example, if you have to work late because your supervisor "made you," this is going to lead to higher levels of stress than you have chosen to put in the extra hours on your own.

● **Commitment:** Enjoying your work intrinsically and putting your best effort in serving your loved ones or a community's cause.

Seeing your job as a commitment to those important to you lowers your stress reactions and fosters a greater sense of meaning in what you do. Interestingly, those who consider their lives meaningful also tend to also have greater number of stressful life events.

● **Challenge:** Welcoming change with excitement, energy, and enthusiasm.

Viewing a situation as a catastrophe, calamity, or curse is certainly counterproductive compared to viewing our stress events as opportunities and challenges. As Louisa May Alcott of *Little Women* fame said, "I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship."

Learning opportunities are aplenty in every difficulty and great discoveries happen as a result of failures.

Conversely, feeling bored and disinterested in a project may signal that the task isn't seen as sufficiently challenging enough, requiring some adjustment of goals and targets.

Knowing this subtle, but crucial difference allows you to take steps towards identifying and adjusting behaviours to optimise your level of stress and ultimately perform optimally at work.

3. Responding to Stress

Resilience also involves responding effectively to stressful situations. Resilient indi-



Take some time off to rejuvenate.

viduals take steps towards replenishing their resources at the end of the work day.

Replenishing one's emotional and psychological resources may take the form of simply setting aside a dedicated time for rest and relaxation. Engaging in pleasurable hobbies and intrinsically pleasant activities may seem like an obvious suggestion, but often, we allow work to creep in, stealing away the time reserved for play.

How many times have you allowed a stray work e-mail to creep into your phone over the weekend? You may have noticed how quickly that e-mail disrupts the pleasant lull of your Sunday morning walk.

Deliberate disengagement from work is a necessary counter reaction to a world where technology ties us to our office desks. Unpleasant emotions synonymous with stress are meant to prompt immediate reactions.

The effects of pleasant, positive emotions, however, tend to accumulate over a longer period of time. Try giving your pleasant, positive emotions some additional breathing room through quality downtime.

We need to be a little more deliberate in how we use our non-work hours in order to maximise our body's replenish and recharge functions. Resilience is also developed

through how we spend our time when we are not working.

PARTING THOUGHTS

It isn't always the stress, or even the stressor that we are most concern about. We may think that it is, but there is something else that is ultimately the root cause of our stress experiences, and it comes down to how we perceive them.

Our reactions to stressors are a largely perceptual process. We feel stressed because we have *perceived* something as a threat. Knowing your own individual susceptibilities to stress, identifying the triggers and your interpretation of stressful events, along with deliberately setting aside time to replenish your resources are three simple pathways towards being a more resilient individual.

Stress is ultimately, part of our work and our lives, and how we respond to the challenges and demands of stress matters more than what it is that triggered the stress in the first place.

Balancing that fine line between having too little and too much stress is what being a resilient individual is all about. That sweet spot of having just enough stress is what propels us to our optimal, peak performance.



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At Leaderonomics, stress management is one of the many training programmes and courses that we provide. For more information, e-mail training@leaderonomics.com.

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