

OVERCOMING STRESS
Advice for People Who Give Too Much

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Introduction

'That's it, I definitely won't get there in time for my first patient now. I'm in so much trouble. She was cross with me last time I was 20 minutes late for her appointment. This time she'll be incandescent with rage when I don't turn up for goodness knows how long.' The object of my fear was Ethel, a formidable Surrey housewife who fed on errant workmen and tardy psychiatrists. 'But she'll hang on, just for the hell of it, so I'll never catch up and all the rest of my patients will be kept waiting too, even longer probably while she gives me what for. How could I have been so stupid as to come out without my mobile? I can't even let them know. If I try to get to the payphone the train will leave for sure. I'm such a fool, I knew this would happen. I could kick myself.'

My head sagged, my brow furrowed and my hands fidgeted, mirroring the posture of half of my fellow would-be passengers. The other half sat slumped, looking hopeless, defeated and miserable. I was sitting on the 4:15 at a London terminal, stationary, with no idea if we would move before doomsday, and if not why not. It was ten to five. The one exception in this sorry crew was my friend Steve, a New Yorker who has lived here for a while. He was hopping mad. 'Why don't any of you guys do anything? If this happened at Grand Central there would be a baying mob at the station manager's door threatening to string him up by his balls; that gets them moving. Anyway stuff like this doesn't happen there. People tell you what's going on, 'cuz if they don't, they know they'll get their asses kicked. You guys are so passive.' Then he was off to find the station manager. As he disappeared into the crowd, the train pulled away.

Two stressed nations divided by a common emotion, anger/fear/recrimination/self-recrimination/stress. Whatever you want to call it. It's all the same thing. It's only how we express it and then what we do with it that's different. Steve and I were both very stressed that day, and we exhibited why stress-related illness is so common in both our cultures. It's a near-inevitable emotion, but many factors influence how we experience it.

Stress is cultural. It isn't what is happening that causes stress. It's what we fear is going to happen in the future. What is most feared varies between cultures, because fear is a conditioned response. That is, we learn what to fear. Most of this learning happens early in our lives, a lot of it at the hands of our parents, though I learned fear from a horrid schoolteacher who thought children should be dealt with like army recruits. Steve, like many New Yorkers, has been taught to fear not being in control. Most of my fellow Englishmen, like me, fear being punished. Our culture favors punishment and many of us spend much of our lives fearing the loss that punishment is. In the past this loss of comfort involved being hit with a stick. Now it is the discomfort of being harangued by Ethel. When my mind is at its most catastrophic, I imagine that, in her rage, she will complain about my sloppy time-keeping to the General Medical Council and I'll lose my license, ending my days in poverty and degradation. This hypothetical future may be extremely unlikely, but if we hear a story just once of someone suffering a fate that has any vague similarity to our situation, we can convince ourselves that it is going to happen to us. Then we spend our whole lives running from this imaginary fear.

When bad things do happen, repeatedly, and we fail to influence the events, the result isn't fear, or stress, it is despair and resignation. That was the response of some of the occupants of my train. They had learned that trains are often late and nobody cares enough to tell you why or how long you may have to wait. It's not fair that these innocent would-be travelers should be the ones blamed by their spouse/children/boss/partner while the train operator worries not a jot, but that's just the way it is, always has been and always will be. I am powerless. The others, like me, predominantly feared being punished. A powerful cocktail for depression and stress. The depressed passengers were trapped in their miserable present, while the stressed ones were being tormented by an unpleasant future created in their own heads and blamed on past unforgivable mistakes. Ironically, it is the latter who end up getting sick with depressive illness, among other ailments, not the ones who look depressed. But more on that later.

The people who taught us to fear, to be stressed, weren't very kind. For their various reasons they taught us that the world is a

harsh place and the future is to be treated with trepidation. And we are still believing them. As I berated myself at Waterloo, I was doing the same to myself as the teacher-bully had done to me 40 years before.

Maybe there's another way. Maybe if stress is caused by unkindness and by living in the future, the answers may involve staying in the present and being kinder. To others, but even more, to ourselves.

Much of this book will be familiar to those who have read other books on stress, but there is a thread running through this one that, I hope, will form the main take-away message.

Kindness keeps you well.

Before you read further, though, I should tell you what this book is and isn't. It isn't a comprehensive review of the medical literature on the conditions caused by stress, the psychological theories or treatments in vogue at present or the research on the workings of the brain. Nor is it a cognitive therapy book (one seeking to improve health purely by changing thinking style). There are plenty of excellent books of these kinds available and there's no need for another. It has a bit on some of these things; enough to make sense of our experience of stress and what we need to do to combat it. Mostly, though, it is a distillation of what I have learned from my patients – their experiences, mistakes and accumulated wisdom. I hope it will help you to get better, stay well and get happy.

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What Is Stress?

Any linguistic pedants among you will be used to tut-tutting when this subject comes up and will no doubt be doing so now. 'He's not talking about stress; it's *strain* that he's describing.' Well, you're sort of right, as the word 'stress' comes from the science of engineering. It refers to a line of force on a structure that is in a different direction or of a different degree from that for which the structure was designed. Strain refers to the response of the structure to that stress. So a bridge is not put under stress by its normal loads, but if heavier traffic than that for which it was designed starts using it, or if heavy winds and tidal waters push it sideways, stressing its weakest joints, it will suffer strain, maybe with disastrous results.

But language is forever shifting and so many people have used the word 'stress' to refer to a reaction to an outside stressor that it has come to have this new meaning. So if this loose use of language makes you stressed, I'm sorry, but that's the way this book is going to be. The stress you may suffer will be caused by my literary laxity conflicting with your love of precision, for which I apologize.

This, then, is how I see it. Stress is experienced when a person is pulled or pushed in a direction that they would not naturally take, or at a pace at which they would not normally proceed, or with an impetus that they would not normally experience. They are enduring a force for which they are not designed.

It isn't just nasty things or excessive demands that can cause stress. Some years ago, when money was worth more than it is now, all the winners of big lottery jackpots over a period of a few years were followed up for a year after their life-changing win. Over 50 percent of them developed a stress-induced illness during the course of that year. How could that be? 'I could cope with a stress like that', I hear you say. I'm sure you could, emotionally, but that doesn't mean that your body, including your nervous system, can.

Types of Stress

Most of us feel stress when confronted with danger, extreme demands or rapid changes. But some people, in contrast, experience stress when their natural inclination to live on the edge is thwarted. So a newly retired soldier would be under stress from being forced into a routine office job and might become ill, having coped with being shot at with aplomb. It's the force stopping you from moving the way you would choose to that creates stress. What we would normally choose varies from person to person, depending on personality, experience and a host of other personal factors. So it isn't just what you face that causes stress, it's also you. Here is a way into the problem then. Whatever ghastliness you face in your life, there is probably something that you can do to suffer less stress, because you can change most things about yourself. Yes, even your personality. I'll show you how to do that later.

Stress isn't always harmful and in any case it's unthinkable that any of us should enjoy a completely stress-free life. I suppose you could be born to wonderful parents, be bright, popular and gorgeous and then be killed suddenly by being hit on the head by an asteroid at the age of 25. My American wife says that in her next life she's going to be born 'cute and dumb', as then everyone loves you and provides for you and you don't see the problems before someone else fixes them. But even then, you'd have to be very stupid indeed not to find something to be stressed about. No, let's be real, we all have stress in our lives. But this doesn't necessarily make us ill. In fact, most of us need a bit of stress to feel really alive and function at our best. It's why people play games. I play golf. It's an infuriating game, it's impossible to master (I've been trying for 35 years and I haven't managed it yet, though I always think I'm close) and it often puts you under stress. I love it. Why? Well, it's partly the context – nobody is going to be harmed if I have a bad round, it's pointless and silly. It's also that there is an end to it. The stress ends on the 18th green and is put into perspective back in the clubhouse.

The Stress That Makes You Ill

One of the most important aspects of what separates harmless stress from the stress that makes you ill is duration. We can cope

with a brief period of stress, so long as it isn't too traumatic or overwhelming. The problems arise when we stay stressed for long periods of time, because it's not what we're designed for. We are designed for life on the primordial plane millions of years ago. Natural selection adapted us very well for that environment. Our basic design hasn't moved on a lot since then because few things in our present lives threaten our ability to make it to child-bearing age. In those days life was mostly very dull, interspersed occasionally by short periods of extreme danger or opportunity. If an antelope passes your cave, you've got about 20 seconds to do something about it, or you and your family won't eat for a week. If, on the other hand, you emerge from your cave to be confronted by a sabre-tooth tiger, what you do over the next 20 seconds will determine whether you pass on your genes or not. So we got very good at dealing with short periods of stress. The hormone adrenaline was evolved to cause a range of changes to the body to occur very quickly when the need arises. It does a brilliant job, turning us into finely adapted machines able to fight or to run at the peak of our body's capacity.

Within a few heartbeats, adrenaline, released by the body in response to perceived threat, affects almost every bodily function. The heart beats faster, to pump more blood around the body, we become breathless so as to load up with more oxygen, the blood vessels to the muscles and the skin dilate, to allow greater muscular activity and to lose heat, which we are sure to generate in our flight from the beast that is chasing us and all our nerves become super-sensitive as we are going to need all possible acuity in the life or death struggle ahead. In addition, the bowels will tend to open up at both ends, as this can allow a rapid jettisoning of a few pounds of body weight, helpful in running faster and will lay a powerful scent trail. As most of our predators in those days relied heavily on their sense of smell, while we don't, the confusion that this causes gives us a few seconds to find a crevice to crawl into to avoid being eaten.

All highly adaptive if you're being pursued by a sabre-tooth tiger, but little use to you if you're sitting in an office, or a restaurant, or at home.



So adrenaline makes us well-adapted to short-term stresses. The problem is that that isn't the way our modern world is constructed. There are few wild animals threatening to eat us and most short-term threats to life and limb have been eradicated. The threats we face are more subtle, more subjective and much longer lasting. We aren't designed for that. So we suffer the effects of stress, rather than being enhanced by them and the same heightened arousal that protected our ancestors makes us ill. Natural selection doesn't care. Most of the physical effects of chronic stress don't threaten our lives until after the normal reproductive years, and as far as natural selection is concerned we are, by then, disposable.

The Continuum of Arousal

So to avoid the illnesses that stress causes, we have to change our perception. 'I know that it seems that there is a threat out there, but actually there isn't, so no need to fight or flee. Thanks very much,

adrenaline, but you're not needed – you can go home now. Don't call us, we'll call you.'

If you don't succeed in bringing down your level of arousal, it will drift upward and that's a problem too. It isn't just how long you are stressed for that matters, but also the degree to which that stress leads you to become over-aroused. By *arousal*, I'm not referring to a state of sexual excitement, though that is undoubtedly arousing, but to *how hot you are running*. You could call this your level of tension, alertness, excitement, enjoyment, exhilaration, fear, panic or whatever. But these words make a judgement about degree and whether the state is nice or nasty. They are all the same thing; if the arousal is nice we may call it enjoyment or excitement, if it is nasty, fear or panic. It's how we experience it that determines the label we give it. But as long-term or excessive over-arousal can cause harm whether it's nice or nasty, that's the term I will use here.

Arousal is a continuum, from zero (unconsciousness or deep sleep) to very high. Figure 1 shows a graph of arousal plotted against performance.

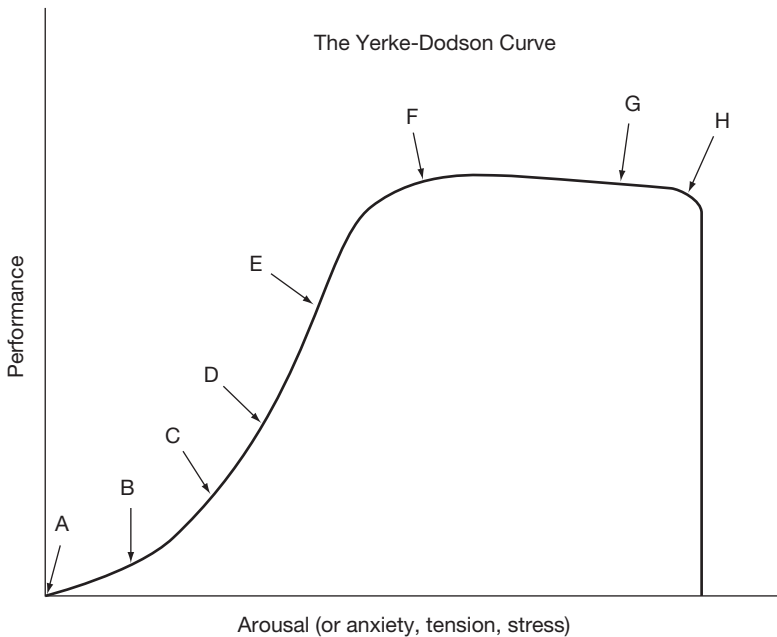


Figure 1 The Yerke-Dodson Curve

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This is the Yerke-Dodson curve, named after the two people who first described the relationship between these two variables.

At zero arousal (A) you are asleep, so you can't perform. At very low levels of arousal (B) you can only do very basic things, like making a cup of coffee and some toast. As you get fully awake (C) you can perform basic tasks of daily living but to manage complex procedures you have to be more alert (D), and to work in a demanding and competitive environment you have to be near your peak (E). Then you reach the plateau (F) and you're at your best, really flying, 100 percent. As your arousal level rises further, all seems to be well; nobody would know that there's a problem except you. This is the swan on the water; all serenity above, but paddling like hell underneath. By point G you're in trouble and you'll be feeling as if you're on the edge of a precipice. You are. It doesn't take much more than for you to reach the edge (H) and when the collapse occurs it is rapid. This can take several forms, such as panic attacks, temper loss or just dissembling.

The problem is that it's difficult to keep your arousal level where you want it. You don't often see people at the top of this curve, on the plateau, but you do in top-class sport. The champions don't just have great talent and dedication; they are able to get to the plateau at will. There are no shots or moves that the champion makes that others can't, but he/she is able to make them just when it's needed. If you try to play a tennis match at the top of the curve throughout, you will become exhausted and lose. Most players can have periods of brilliance, but they can't turn it on when it's needed, in the crucial points that decide the match. Anyone who has watched the greats in any sport will know the narrowing of the eyes, the change of posture and the fluidity of movement that comes over them at these times. You know they are going to win and so do they, because they can modulate their arousal level at will.

If you try to stay at the top of the plateau for too long, you will slowly drift up from point F to point G. That's very precarious and whenever anything winds you up, even a bit, you will be unable to function. But many of my patients spend most of their lives at this point on the curve. Eventually they go over the edge once too often and can't get back up again. That is the illness of clinical depression, of which I've written elsewhere and which I'll touch on later in this book.

The key, then, is going to be learning how to run your life from just below the plateau, at between points D and E, popping your arousal level up briefly to point F when you really need to. If you do that it will take a major thermonuclear attack to push you over the edge as you've got so much leeway. That isn't as easy as you would think, as there are a number of factors that are pushing you up the curve and more from your past that got you there in the first place.

I'll turn to these factors now, but before I do, I need to acknowledge the obvious: some people have such terrible and intractable adversity in their lives that there is nothing that I can write that will make things OK. I know that, but I can say this: I see far more people whose stress is at least to some degree chosen, than those for whom there are no answers. It may be worth reading on unless you are absolutely sure that your stress is 100 percent external, that you play no part in it and have no influence at all upon it. And in any case, have you really ever cared enough about yourself to think about running at a pace that you can comfortably and healthily sustain? I doubt it. If you haven't ever given it a thought, because you don't matter as much as others, you need the rest of this book.