

# FESTIVAL OF US

## Stress – The Importance of Creating Balance

Stress seems to be everywhere. In 2019, 12.8 million\* working days a year were lost, in the U.K., due to stress, anxiety or depression; and when one considers that, since the turn of the century, the estimated costs associated with workplace stress across Europe have increased by over 3000% \*\*, I think it is fair to say that the stress epidemic is rampant! And it is potentially an epidemic that will be hard to defeat, unless we increase the understanding around the word and create a more balanced view.

If people are asked to define stress, they often use negative language: an inability to cope, being out of control, anxious and overloaded are typical words and phrases that are regularly used. They will talk about the detrimental impact to their health and many will admit a change in their day to day behaviour. Some people become louder, whilst others become more introverted; some will eat more, whilst others can't bear the thought of food; and for many there is greater interaction and dependence on alcohol or recreational drugs.

As friendships are often built on typical behaviours, these changes can create tension and put strain on the social bonds, which can falter or possibly even break.

And there is one other relationship that can suffer; for when we are stressed it is not just the ability to be nice to others that dissipates – many people will find it hard to be nice to themselves.

However, if the same people who have given the negative responses already listed, are asked whether stress can be good, the majority suggest that the answer is yes – not too much, but there is a general acknowledgement that a certain degree of stress is useful when it comes to effectively functioning in life.

Both views are correct, but it is an interesting observation on human nature that, when thinking about the word stress, the majority default to a negative mindset.

One of the challenges that exists is to create a more balanced view to the word and with that in mind I lean towards a definition that simply states that ***stress is a response to demand***. The response could be good, it could be bad: it may be physical, psychological, emotional or behavioural, extreme or minimal, but it is simply a response to the load that is going through our body and brain at a moment in time.

The other factor we need to consider when creating a more balanced dialogue around the word stress, is the concept of cause and effect. Too often this is simplified, and we assume that the same stressor will lead to the same response. Due to the complexity of human beings and our ever-changing moods this just simply does not happen. For example, if you are stuck in a traffic jam, it may result in you ranting and raving, honking your horn and slapping the dashboard in

frustration whilst the same event, at another time may not be a problem at all. The stressor is the same but

## FESTIVAL OF US

due to your emotional volatility, your response can vary massively. This inconsistency in response is what makes stress so complex.

### **The Physiology of Stress:**

Whilst there is a variation in what stresses one person to another, or indeed the same person on one day compared to another, if we do feel stressed the physiological response will be consistent for all. Whether the danger is tangible e.g. being confronted by a snake or generated in your own psyche e.g. walking down a dark alley late at night, the response is the rapid release of adrenaline and noradrenaline. Adrenaline will dilate the tubes in our lungs, accelerate heart rate and elevate blood pressure meaning that greater amounts of oxygen can be pumped through the body. Noradrenaline inhibits the activity of the parasympathetic nervous system resulting in the pupil of the eye becoming dilated, something that will enhance vision, and the volume of blood flowing to the gut will be reduced and diverted to muscles. We are instantly preparing for 'fight or flight'.

In emergencies, thanks to the speed of release in adrenaline and noradrenaline, we have an instantaneous ability to respond. Of equal note is the fact that these chemicals have a half-life of two to three minutes, meaning that shortly after the stressor is removed, the physiological changes to blood pressure, heart rate, etc are reversed.

In summary, a sudden burst of adrenaline is fine, in fact many people enjoy the buzz that it can provide. However, if stress becomes excessive, then the short-term gain is replaced by a longer-term health risk.

### **Stress in excess**

So, if stress can be good for us why does it seem to be at the root of so many problems? The answer is that there is a 'tipping point'; a point where the loads that are placed on our bodies and brains outweigh the coping mechanisms that we may have at our disposal. In simple terms, our systems become fatigued; physical and mental capability diminishes and, in many cases, poor health can be the end result. If someone is placed under a one off but significant load, such as a bereavement or being made redundant, they may hurtle towards the tipping point. At other times the tipping point slowly creeps up on us, as a multitude of low level stressors slowly build up, gradually increasing the strain on our system before, one day, the final straw is placed upon the camel's back and, boom, we break.

A useful analogy to use is a physics experiment that I remember doing at school. The task was to gradually increase the load placed on a spring, observe what happened to the spring and draw a graph – appropriately called a stress/strain curve. Low level loads made no difference and the

spring did not budge; then, as the load increased, the spring started to stretch, before eventually the load became too much, and it broke.

## FESTIVAL OF US

The other point that we had to make a note of, was when the load had permanently affected the recoil property of the spring. Between each incremental increase in load, all of the weights would be removed, and we had to observe whether the spring returned back to its previous position. If it did then the property of elastic recoil was still present, but there comes a moment, prior to breakage, when the load results in a permanent change known as plastic deformity.

In many ways human beings are similar to this. Initially, they can function perfectly well with a certain amount of load but, if the load exceeds their resilience capacity, more permanent scars can appear; and if the stress becomes excessive, people can break either in their performance or their health or both.

This analogy is simple and many people relate to it, however, as humans are so much more complicated than springs, we need to consider a couple of caveats. Firstly, the differences in DNA, learning experiences, environments and emotions are considerable – whereas the structure of a spring is constant there are too many variables in human beings. Secondly, the experiment features one type of load that pulls on the spring in one direction – if only life was as simple as this! Loads come at us from many directions and in many formats – from emotional, to intellectual, to physical, to environmental we are challenged in many ways.

Not only do we have to understand the varying loads of life, we need to understand the variations in 'the springs' that are being loaded and understand how bodies, brains and behaviours are influenced.

\* <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/dayslost>

\*\*

[https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/literature\\_reviews/calculating-the-cost-of-work-related-stress-and-psychosocial-risks](https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/literature_reviews/calculating-the-cost-of-work-related-stress-and-psychosocial-risks)