

SURVIVING THE MODERN DAY SABER-TOOTH

While our smartphones might have the latest software updates, our brains are still about 50,000 years out of date when it comes to dealing with stress. DREW KNOWLES, New Zealand's Expert on Stress, looks at ways for us to put worries into a modern perspective.



Scene One – Cavewoman Time: It's 50,000 years ago. You are crouched at a watering hole on a bright sunny day quenching your thirst, and your small and underdeveloped brain is focussed on nothing but the feeling of the replenishing water. Suddenly, you hear a rustle in the bushes just near the watering hole, and from the corner of your eye, you see something move. As you glance up to see what it is, a saber-toothed tiger leaps out of the bushes and starts running towards you. Without thinking, you explode into action and run as fast as you can to the tree 20 metres away and just as the tiger is closing in, you leap up to it and swing yourself up. Then, in a series of quick movements, you climb several metres up the tree. Knowing the saber-toothed tiger cannot climb trees, you perch yourself up there, safe, playing the waiting game. Your heart is racing, your legs and arms are pumped with blood, your breathing is heavy, and your mind is focussed on staying alive. As the threat of death subsides, your heart beat slows down, your breathing becomes calmer, and your mind and body start to relax as you see the saber-toothed tiger grow tired of waiting and give up on eating you for lunch.

What just happened in your brain and body, from the moment you caught a glimpse of the hungry beast, was a complex, intelligent and innate series of chemical reactions that allowed you to survive being attacked and likely killed. Without having to think, you were able to explode into action and run like an Olympic 100-metre sprinter, leap high into the air like an NBA basketball player, swing yourself up a tree like a gymnast and climb like a monkey – all to survive being something's lunch. This innate survival response is a product of everyday threats to our survival that existed tens of thousands of years ago. Coined as the fight/flight/freeze response, or human stress response, it is also known and most commonly recognised in modern day as simply stress. While the survival response of this cavewoman 50,000 years ago gave her the necessary mental and physical capacity to act against an immediate life threat, our stress response is not quite appropriate for the modern day. Today's "threats to survival" come in the form of overbearing bosses, work deadlines, or grumpy, unappreciative husbands and boyfriends.

Scene Two – Modern Day: Imagine you are sitting in your office at your desk, staring at the computer on a Friday evening around 6pm, struggling to think of what to say in an email to someone about a deadline you are not going to meet for the second time. This instantly elevates the feeling of mental pressure you are under from a long and busy week. Knowing you should have left already, you get a text from your husband asking what time you will be home as you are due to go for dinner at 7pm. Your attention is diverted by an immediate feeling of agitation and worry, as you know you will have to say you will be home later than promised, upsetting your husband. Then you hear a "ping" and get an instant message from your boss, asking if you can come and see him urgently about a report you submitted earlier that day, which immediately gives you a sense of worry about what he might say – increasing your agitation and feeling of being stressed. Then the phone rings on your DDI, which you pick up without thinking, because you are in an internal dialogue with yourself and not present. It is a client wanting to just run over some final changes to the big and important proposal you sent them for a high paying contract before they accept it, so you stop and speak to your client for fear of losing the contract if you don't handle it now. While you are trying to listen to your client and answer their questions, you are texting your husband that you will be late and messaging your boss to say you will be there in ten minutes. Then you get off the phone to the client, and quickly try and get back to the email about the deadline but feel like someone has now injected your conscious mind with tranquilliser as you struggle to even think coherently about what to say. You feel completely overwhelmed as the chatter in your head is now very loud and a whole committee of voices – having an argument with your husband ready to defend yourself saying, "Why doesn't he appreciate how hard I work, and understand I can't help it?", and preparing yourself for the criticism from your boss about your work, which makes you feel like you have disappointed him. Then you start a tirade of some very negative words to yourself about your performance and that you need to be better than this. The feeling of failure creeps in and being a disappointment comes on and in your heightened fight/flight state you feel like you just want to quit and not deal with all of this and go and get drunk.

While this may, for some of you, be an extreme picture to paint and not a usual day for you or the exact same scenario as what you deal with, the point is that in a normal business day, your mind has to process a vast amount of information coming at you in multiple forms, and cope with varying stressors or threats to the brain to have you survive. In this example in reality, it is just a series of events that happen and exchanges between people, however, it is the way they are perceived in the mind of this person that is what makes it so stressful and causes the high levels of stress.

Despite the similarities that an angry partner or boss may share with a hungry saber-toothed tiger, they don't actually pose a threat to our immediate survival (most of the time). However, our minds and bodies still perceive these stressors in a similar way as the survival threats that existed in cavewoman times. Though our stressors now may not seem as threatening as those of our predecessors, they are constant, and our brains spend long periods of time in "stress response" mode.

If your brain did not have this innately intelligent threat response machine in it to detect and signal to us when we are in danger, or when there is a real or perceived threat to our survival, we would possibly not be alive today. However, in the 21st century modern day world, it is almost never a physical threat to our life that has us in a fight or flight state, it is the way we perceive what we are feeling threatened by that produces this heightened state of stress.

If you are someone committed to thriving in life, you may find, in this day in age, that there are times when stress negatively impacts your day-to-day performance and lifestyle, especially if you work in the business world. While human beings are very resilient and capable of coping with certain amounts of stress for long periods of time while still being productive, stress can eventually overcome us and have a very negative impact on our lives. We are often not aware of how high the stress levels are, and the prolonged exposure to stress will eventually lead to the decline in our performance, energy levels, ability to cope with everything we have to manage, and overall quality of life. Ultimately, this will result in long-term health challenges and breakdowns in our performance in life, both professionally and personally.

In the pursuit of peak performance, you may ignore and fail to understand the effects of stress, and find yourself not feeling in control of your state of mind or your reactions. Your overall capacity to be able to perform and function at your best can be affected, getting in the way of what you want to accomplish in life, or you will produce results in some areas by working under high levels of stress and pushing yourself to the limit, at the expense of balance and the experience of quality of life in other important areas.

WHAT IS STRESS AND WHAT ARE STRESSORS?

Most people I work with relate to stress as some "feeling" they get when they are under pressure, anxious, worried or not coping. The conscious feeling of stress is not actually what stress is – it is just your interpretation of the feeling that the physiological human stress response produces when it is triggered, otherwise known as the fight/flight/freeze response. A stressor is a chemical or biological agent, environmental condition, external stimulus or an event that causes stress to an organism. It is simply an event that triggers the fight/flight/freeze stress response. It could include environmental stressors, daily stress events, life changes, workplace stressors, or physical stressors that all cause a chemical reaction inside of the body. The chemical reaction inside the body and brain is very important to understand, as it was designed for life circumstances tens of thousands of years ago and helped our ancestors to survive real

threats to their survival. While it was an incredibly intelligent and innate response, it was designed to survive short-term threats to our lives and not intended to be constantly produced over long periods of time. Amongst all the different reactions that happen innately in the body and mind when the stress response occurs, one of the fascinating things I find is that chronically elevated stress hormones also lead to cravings for the energy required for the stress response – sugars and fats. So, if you are stressed and find yourself craving junk-food, you now know why – it is not because there is something wrong with you and your lack of willpower, you are responding to your body's natural instinct to provide you with the energy it thinks it needs!

The other important thing to understand about stress is something called your "allostatic load". The term allostatic load, coined by McEwen and Stellar in 1993, is defined as the physiological consequences of chronic exposure to fluctuating or heightened neural or neuroendocrine response that results from repeated or chronic stress. It is used to explain and measure how frequent activation of the body's stress response, essential for managing acute threats, can in fact damage the body in the long run. In terms of how this affects your life, the

higher your allostatic load over a period of time, the more your body and mind will have to adapt to deal with the levels of stress hormones and other chemicals the body produces in response to the stressors, eventually leading to declining levels in performance, productivity and overall wellness.

I find that, these days, the focus for health, wellness and improved

performance and productivity is to focus on diet, exercise and a positive, motivated state of mind, and improving your ability to manage time and get more done (multi-tasking) – which are all valid things to focus on. However, we often forget that a pursuit of health also includes reducing the everyday stressors. The real access to improved performance, productivity and overall wellness long-term is about removing, mitigating or reducing as many unnecessary negative stressors in your life as possible.

Understanding how you react to the stressors that come at you on a daily and weekly basis will allow you to learn how to have the right levels of stress for the right length of time to maximise your performance and productivity. When you are aware of stress and can deal with the stressors, you will discover and create new ways of managing and handling what you need to accomplish on a day-to-day basis and find a natural elevation in your performance, productivity and wellness.

Here is an exercise to try that you can work on for the next month:

Stress Reality Check – Getting Clear on Your Allostatic Load:

Write down all the negative stressors that you have in your life right now – as many as you can think of, small or big. Rate each on a scale of one to five. Five being they cause a high state of stress and one being they cause a mild to low state of stress. Now examine the impact or effect these stressors are having on your performance, productivity and overall ability to live a wellness lifestyle.

Between now and next month, try observing and examining yourself, and how you react and deal with these stressors. When you become aware of your stressors, you can start mitigating, reducing or removing the ones that cause the most amount of stress.

Performance, productivity and living a wellness lifestyle is about the right amount of stress at the right times, and knowing what state of arousal you need to be in to produce the performance and results you need. This includes being able to uncover and examine the habits, behaviours and patterns of thinking that contribute to how you react and deal with stressors that you encounter on a regular basis and being able to take positive actions to reduce them.

The fact is, whether or not you are consciously aware of the chronically high levels of stress in your life, your brain and fight/flight/freeze response is always aware. If your body is constantly under an elevated load of stress hormones, it will adapt by increasing its allostatic load, which will result in an even higher level of stress hormones in the body. Fatigue is the final stage of when the allostatic load has been too high for too long, and while we can resist this for some time, studies in the 1940s by Hans Selye – who discovered the “General Adaptation Syndrome” (G.A.S.) – show that eventually all animals and humans will become fatigued, and ultimately die, when stressors are not removed from their environment.

You may not be “feeling” stressed, but the feeling of stress is not what stress is. You may just hear yourself saying what I think is one of the most common catch phrases of the 21st century when asked “how are you?”, and you reply “busy” or some version of it. Stress is a physiological response the mind and body has to any mental, emotional, physical or environmental stressor that we encounter, where some threat is produced in the brain or the body that we either consciously or unconsciously deal with to attempt to get rid of the negative stressor. We are programmed to do this as human beings, and when stressors are not removed, reduced or mitigated sufficiently for the body to restore homeostasis (balance), which it is always at work on trying to maintain, then our body and mind will have to start making adaptations to deal with the stressor stimulating a stress response – these adaptations over time present themselves as health issues, burnout, adrenal fatigue, depression, anxiety, and all the symptoms that go with these common health issues.

The bottom line is, and I always feel the need to make this point clear, is that you must understand stressors and the nature of stress to prevent you from burning out your brain, and having your performance, productivity, and overall health of your state of mind at its best as you attempt to deal with the overload of things to manage and do and handle in your day-to-day busy and frantic life. You can do all you like to try and deal with the symptoms of chronic stress levels through your diet, exercise, affirmations, breathing techniques, medication and whatever other things we use to try and deal with stress, but you must fundamentally stop and look at the source of your stress and go to work on reducing, removing or mitigating those stressors – then you will find your techniques for reducing or lowering stress will be much more effective in the long term.

There are lots of great resources and apps out there to help you manage your stress levels if you do a little searching online, but the

“...you MUST UNDERSTAND STRESSORS and the nature of stress to prevent you from BURNING OUT YOUR BRAIN...”

best resource I have found to learn to have a healthy mind, and improve your ability to deal with the stress caused by modern day life is *The Healthy Mind Platter* by David Rock et.al.

HERE IS A SUMMARY OF THE SEVEN NEURO-COGNITIVE ACTIVITIES TO INCLUDE IN YOUR DAILY AND WEEKLY LIFE THAT NURTURE THE MIND FROM *THE HEALTHY MIND PLATTER* :

1.

SLEEP TIME

Refreshing mind and body, and consolidating memory.

2.

PLAY TIME

The joy of experimenting with life.

3.

DOWNTIME

Disconnecting for integration and insight.

4.

TIME-IN

Reflection, attunement, mindfulness.

5.

CONNECTING TIME

The healing power of relationships.

6.

PHYSICAL TIME

Improving the brain's plasticity through exercise.

7.

FOCUS TIME

Attention management for performance.

Whether you think you are completely on top of your stress and how you deal with managing your mind and brain, or you are at the other end of the spectrum and dealing with one of the conditions mentioned, we are now a brain-powered economy and the need to understand how to maximise the use of our brain is evermore important. If you learn about stress and how it affects the mind and brain, you will be well on your way to thriving in life as our world continues to speed up and demand more of us mentally. [M2W](#)

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