

Life at the Speed of Change

by Brian Luke Seaward, Ph.D.



Coping With Change in a Stress-Filled World

To say that Scott is a bit overwhelmed

these days is an overstatement. As a single father of two adolescent boys, his hands are constantly filled with parental responsibilities. But this doesn't compare to the workload he faces at the office each day. As the founder and CEO of his own software company, he finds the demands to keep up with the global marketplace pull at him from all directions. Scott is not alone with his daily perceptions of stress. In fact, if misery loves company, he's in great company – a cast of millions worldwide and growing.

A current research study reveals that over 70 percent of Americans cite stress as a major factor eroding their health and quality of life, with most people feeling the stress and strain of balancing their work responsibilities with their personal life. The casualties of this stress-induced imbalance include divorce, chronic health issues, insomnia, alcoholism, gambling addiction, and in some cases, suicide. Americans hold another dubious distinction. Not only do they spend more time at the office, averaging ten hours a day, they outrank all other nationalities with regard to unused vacation time. It appears the 17th-century Puritan ethic (worth equals work) is alive and well in the 21st-century. Perhaps comedian Lily Tomlin said it best: "Even if you win the rat race... you're still a rat."

Today, stress is considered *the* equal opportunity destroyer. It doesn't matter where you live, what you do for a living or how much money you make—stress affects everyone! Left unresolved, stress kills. Granted, stress has always been part of the human landscape; however, what makes stress so alarming now is the

rapid rate of change coming at people—from all directions. Technology, including cell phones, WiFi, BlackBerry devices, email and the addiction to it, is a huge factor, but certainly not the entire problem. Stock market pressures that trickle down through corporate America, from layoffs to bonuses, share top billing as well. One thing is for certain: people not only lack a proper reference point for the rate of change coming at them (whether it's in waves of digital information or mounting responsibilities), they lack the essential coping skills to successfully navigate the tides of change, "change" being synonymous with stress.

Just as you cannot live fathoms below the surface of water for any length of time, you cannot live under the pressures of stress without dire consequences to your health and well being. You cannot stay perpetually in the fight-or-flight mode. You will burn out and self-destruct. Left unresolved, stress kills. Deep-sea divers must learn to decompress. Freed hostages are required to decompress. Police officers and emergency first responders also know the merits of decompression. Simply stated, this is a skill we all need to master, because coming up for air in times of rapid change is essential for all aspects of health: mind, body, spirit and emotions. Ageless wisdom reminds us that being defined, and hence confined, by your job (or email address) is not being true to your authentic self.

Sensory Overload, Sensory Addiction

Increased workloads, overtime, commuter traffic, and scores of added personal responsibilities account for the lion's share of daily burdens, but there's more.

Today one cannot ignore societal pressures of an on-demand, 24/7 high-tech, information-based, consumer-driven society. Jokes may be made about being road kill on the information superhighway, but in truth, it's no joke. Cell phones, BlackBerry phones, text messaging, GPS, emails, faxes, video games, satellite radio, direct TV are all wonderful devices to help us manage this tsunami of information, yet people tend to become slaves to, rather than masters of, these devices. The corporate term "crack-berry" sums up the social addiction qualities nicely. Sociologists have another name for this phenomenon, cyber-psychosis: the addiction to technology and virtual living with an inability to cope well in the real world.

Stress and Compromised Health Status

What are the signs of 21st-century compression? They are the same signs as chronic stress and burnout. They include, but are not limited to the following: irritability, inability to focus, general fatigue, sarcasm, insomnia, poor eating habits, anxiety, frustration (also known as free-floating hostility), impatience, pessimism, headaches, GI-track problems, moodiness, weight gain, feelings of victimization, apathy, and depression. In typical American fashion, we turn to over-the-counter or prescribed medications for a quick fix, yet these only address the symptoms of a much bigger problem. Moreover, they don't solve the underlying issues that trigger these symptoms. In some cases, such as side effects, they can actually make related problems worse.

Coming Up for Air: The Art of Decompression

Breaking the surface of the stress pool and gasping for breath needn't be one more responsibility to add to your list of things to do each day. Rather, the steps for personal balance should be core habits for daily stability upon which everything else is built. Like any skills, however, these habits do require a sense of willpower and discipline. The following are some common tips for decompression that restore homeostasis to your mind, body and spirit. Even if you only adopt one of these habits, your life will be headed in the right direction.

1. Create Healthy Boundaries. There is a long-standing joke about Californians not wanting their space invaded, but these days, everyone's space (and privacy) is constantly invaded, whether you're from California or Vermont. Being inundated by thousands of emails, cell phone calls, and countless advertisements is a growing problem. Sociologists agree that people today have terrible boundaries, particularly with the use of high-tech gadgets. This problem also extends to eating habits, finances, and television watching. Take a moment to survey your life. If you claim victim to not having enough time for yourself and your family, there is a good chance that some personal boundaries are being violated. Remember that while boundaries can be violated by others, usually it's our own egos that leave the door wide open to victimization. Draw a line in the sand and honor it.

2. Exercise! Forget about losing weight for a moment. Exercise is essential to flush out the stress hormones produced and secreted in the course of a hectic day. Letting the toxic cocktail of cortisol, aldosterone, thyroxine, and vasopressin linger for days in your blood stream not only affects various target organs, it does a number on your immune system as well. Make a habit to walk, jog, swim, bike, or anything that keeps your target heart rate elevated for a 20- to 30-minute duration. Not only does cardiovascular exercise return your body to homeostasis, it also helps clear your mind. Finally, saying you don't have the time to exercise is an SOS distress call reminding you, in fact, that you must.

3. Meditate. Given the amount of contact we have with various forms of media, from *The Wall Street Journal* to YouTube, it's no exaggeration to say that much of the onslaught of sensory bombardment is from millions of advertisements: some estimates suggest 4,000-5,000 a day. This, in addition to the tsunami of bytes of digital information lapping the shores of our mind, is nothing less than toxic sensory overload. A mind oversaturated with information is a troubled mind indeed. Meditation is best described as "increased concentration that leads to increased awareness." It can also be described as a cleansing of the mind from all the seemingly unimportant thoughts and feelings that cloud our conscience. To use a contemporary metaphor, meditation is like deleting old emails for better memory capacity. Set a healthy boundary by allocating five to ten minutes a day of sitting quietly and focusing entirely on your breathing. Let all other thoughts go as you focus on your breathing. In this age of non-stop sensory bombardment, meditation is as essential for the mind as brushing and flossing is for your teeth. Take time out each day to quiet the mind. Meditation... it's not what you think!

4. Respond, Don't React. A sarcastic comment. A PG-17 hand gesture. Foul language. As personal pressures mount in the course of a day, it's easy to speak and act before thinking things through. While the immediate effect may seem gratifying, the long-term effects can be devastating. Some reactions can have unintended consequences. Oftentimes a reaction to stress only creates more problems. While reacting to physical danger can save your life, reacting to non-physical stressors usually causes more stress. Consider this bit of wisdom: the ego reacts, the soul responds. Take the high road by making a habit of learning to respond, rather than react, to your daily stress.

5. Turn Off the TV. Television may be a great form of entertainment (and even this fact is under considerable debate) but television watching is also regarded as a form of cognitive stress. Here's why: To keep your attention in the age of the "remote control mentality," television producers (and advertisers) have learned that they need to shift the camera position every couple of seconds. This camera shift triggers your fight-or-flight response, just enough to keep you

engaged (and not change the channel), regardless of the program content. Police dramas ratchet up the stress response even more. The result is a higher resting heart rate, blood pressure, and metabolic readiness. If you are watching news, undoubtedly your stress response is even higher, as news programming is often fear-based, also to keep your attention. Television programming is really nothing more than an IV tube for marketing. Ultimately, watching television is nothing less than a form of human kryptonite. Limit your television watching (healthy boundaries) and be sure not to fall asleep in front of the TV.

6. Practice the Art of Calm. We take in and process every bit of information through our five senses. We assimilate about 80 percent of this sensory stimulation through our eyes. Fifteen percent enters through the portal of our ears. The remaining five percent is absorbed through smell, taste, and touch. Sensory overload and its end result, burnout, is road kill personified. But you don't have to be a digital statistic. You can balance this by taking in through one or more of your five senses sensory stimulation that steers you back in the direction of homeostasis. Massage (touch), lavender (smell), chocolate (taste), Mozart (sound), or posters/postcards of Hawaii (sight) are prime "art of calm" examples. Consider making a list of ten pleasures experienced through each sense that helps restore you to a place of calm and tranquility.

7. Humor Therapy. One of the best ways to catch your breath is by exercising your funny bone. One of the best ways to exercise your funny bone is laugh at yourself (without sacrificing your self-esteem). You know you're headed in the right direction when you can say, "A year from now this will be pretty funny." The word "humor" literally means fluid or moisture, implying that we need to go with the flow. There are all types of humor that can bring a smile to your face. Incongruity works the best, while sarcasm only promotes more stress. If your funny bone has atrophied, try checking out the greeting card section in the nearest grocery store.

8. Get Back to Nature. One of the warnings passed on decades ago by science fiction writers who described the coming high-tech age was a disconnection from nature. Their prediction has come to pass, experienced by a great many people who don't even get enough daily natural sunlight exposure (hence, Vitamin D) moving from apartment to car to underground parking garage without touching the natural elements. Technology is great, but we are not machines, nor should we spend all of our time with them. We are a part of nature; balance is restored when we fully engage in the natural world. Taking walks in the park, listening to the ocean waves crash into the shore, planting and tending a garden, or hiking in the nearest open space or forest are just some of many ways to reconnect with the natural world. In doing so, we not

only re-calibrate our own natural rhythms, we tend to put our problems in proper perspective.

9. Social Support: Friends in Need! Research shows that friends and family are as essential to the quality of life as food and water. We humans are social animals. Spending time (not virtual, but actual time) with those in our inner circle is essential for emotional and spiritual well being. Friends not only buffer us from the toxicity of stress, they help us balance the scales of emotions with humor and compassion.

10. Practice an Attitude of Gratitude. McMansions. SUV's. Credit cards. Plasma screen TVs. iPods. Second homes. Let's face it; we are a nation of spoiled brats. Sensory overload can often make us forget that we are living in the lap of luxury, particularly when compared to billions of less fortunate people on the planet. Now is the time for some perspective: Over half the world's population doesn't have direct access to clean drinking water. Over one third of the world population earns less than two dollars a day for eight to ten hours of manual labor. By comparison, we have it pretty darn good, yet you'd never know it the way Americans whine. While it's human nature to complain (even grieve), a proper perspective of our lifestyles is essential. Stop for a moment each day to take stock of what is going right in your life. Then give thanks for all you do have. It's mighty hard to be stressed and grateful at the same time. So give thanks for what you have rather than mourning what you don't have.

Taking time to re-prioritize your values about what is really important in life is your first step to adapting to the speed of change. Remember, you are not your job, your house, your marriage or your car. You are all of this and a whole lot more. In every case balance is required to reach your highest potential and attain inner peace. **AL**



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