



The Stress of Life: Selye, Jung, Taylor & You

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If you are feeling stressed today, take comfort in the fact that you are not alone. The World Health Organization (2003) has described stress as “a global epidemic” (p. 7). Moreover, stress is the equal opportunity destroyer, affecting people in all demographics of our ever-shrinking global village. Rest assured, no one is immune to stress, nor should they be, because we all need some level of stress to function properly in this world. Gravity is stress that is essential for bone growth. Moreover, Lance Armstrong would never have won six Tour de France victories without stress as a motivational force. And the best actors will tell you they always get a little nervous before going on stage, and they use this adrenaline to do their best performance.

But where some stress is good, more is definitely not better. Experts in the field of Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) suggest that as much as 85% of all disease and illness is not only associated with stress, but there is a direct causal link, from the common cold to cancer (Kiecolt-Glaser, 1999; Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, Strain, & Stout, 1984; Seaward, 2005). And while muscle tension is the number one symptom of stress, stress is so much more than neural endings secreting catecholamines with a dose of hormonal activity thrown in for good (or bad) measure.

The western approach to stress management, due in large part to the lingering influence of René Descartes, has been primarily symptomatic relief. Remember that Edmond Jacobson (1929, 1978), the creator of the ever-popular Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR), was a western-trained physician. In contrast, wisdom keepers throughout the ages have spoken of health as the integration, balance, and harmony of mind, body, spirit, and emotions – where the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. This is the holistic approach to stress management – where the symptoms as well as the causes of stress are fully addressed...and resolved. The goal is inner peace, homeostasis, and balance.

While many stress management programs now include cognitive aspects (e.g., time management, social engineering), few address the spiritual issues of stress: relationships, values, and a meaningful purpose in life. In the words of Carl G. Jung (1959), “Every crisis... is a spiritual crisis. Spiritual crises require spiritual cures” (BBC interview). Spiritual cures include our best coping skills: patience, forgiveness, optimism, courage, and faith. I call these “muscles of the soul.”

Those returning home from what renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell called “The Hero’s Journey” (1968, 1988)

will tell you these are the inner resources needed to successfully confront all roadblocks. The days of being chased by a saber-toothed tiger have now become days of entitlements with unmet expectations, urban sprawl, corporate downsizing, information overload, electromagnetic pollution, unruly teenagers, global warming, elder-care, in-your-face marketing, e-mail avalanches, and the threat (real or imagined) of global terrorism. As renowned stress researcher Hans Selye (1976) warned us, the physical body, in all its wonders, cannot stay in a state of stressed arousal without dire consequences. Ultimately stress kills. For this reason, a holistic approach is in our best interest.

I offer these tips for achieving mind-body-spirit balance in our hectic world:

1. **Create a healthy boundary for solitude.** People today are suffering from information (sensory) overload. The effect may result in poor memory, poor processing skills, poor attention span, poor decision-making, as well as decreased productivity. Resolve the process-addiction habits of constant cell phone, e-mail, Ipad, and Internet accessibility. Declare high-tech free zones (in space and time) each day. In this solitude, take time for some simple relaxation techniques (e.g., breathing, yoga, tai chi, etc.) as an essential step in caring for the caregiver.
2. **Resolve issues of anger and fear.** Research is conclusive that chronic stress suppresses immune function (Kiecolt-Glaser, 1999). Energetically speaking, unresolved issues of anger and fear congest various aspects of subtle anatomy (e.g., chakras, meridians, and layers of the human energy field), thus affecting the integrity of various target organs. Making peace with our emotions (e.g., diplomatically confronting our fears and resolving anger issues through forgiveness) is essential for mind, body, and spirit. Additionally, joy, mirth, and gratitude are essential. Consider finding one humorous thing a day to lighten your heart.
3. **Make a daily practice of meditation.**

Sitting still to clear your mind of ego chitchat is essential for mind-body-spirit equilibrium. Insights from a clear mind lend support to the Chinese axiom, “When the student is ready, the teacher will come” (N. Cheng [author of *Life and Death in Shanghai*], personal communication, January 21, 2006), but this won’t happen until dedicated time and space is combined with the discipline to domesticate the ego.

4. **Engage in regular (daily) cardiovascular exercise.** Exercise is the fight-or-flight response, so it would make sense that if you are stressed, exercise (like a homeopathic remedy) would help restore homeostasis. The benefits of regular cardiovascular exercise are numerous, including parasympathetic rebound and the “flushing” of stress hormones (cortisol) out of the system.
5. **Maintain healthy eating habits.** The stress response depletes essential nutrients that often are not replaced with fast foods and comfort foods (empty calories). Moreover, many foods (e.g., caffeine, sugar, salt) act to increase the release of epinephrine and nor-epinephrine, hence throwing gasoline on the fire. Additionally, many foods contain significant traces of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides that overload the immune system. Organic foods are always the best choice.
6. **Nurture strong support groups.** Friends offer a buffering effect to personal and social stress. It is now known as the “tend and befriend effect” (Taylor, 2002; Taylor et al., 2000). While friends cannot always help solve our problems, they can offer emotional and spiritual support. Remember, it’s not the quantity of friends, but the quality of friends that matters.

The mind-body-spirit connection is far more complex than today’s science has yet to validate, yet when stress is left unresolved, we know this: ultimately the body becomes the battlefield for the war games of the mind. Where there is chronic stress, there are ego control

issues at hand – every time. The ego makes a great bodyguard. Conversely, it makes a lousy CEO. Holistic stress management finds the balance between the ego and the soul.

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