WHY TODAY’S STRESS ON STRESS?

Everyone seems to be talking about stress, because it’s costing industry billions of dollars. But coping is an individual matter.

By Ari Klev, M.D.

You hear about it in the media. You learn about it in courses. You release it through swimming, jogging, and a variety of other techniques. Why so much attention on this short word with six letters—s-t-r-e-s-s?

The reason is that stress affects all of our lives, daily. You cannot say that about very many other things.

What is stress? Stress is a non-specific automatic biological response to demands made upon an individual. When these demands occur suddenly, your body responds with a hormonal reaction called the fight-or-flight response, an adaptive mechanism that has been within all human beings since primitive times. It was once necessary for survival. And even though today you rarely have to literally fight or run away, the response is still triggered whenever your body meets a sudden stress.

The intensity and duration of the outside stress factor determines the amount of wear and tear your body experiences—especially if there is no release for the fight-or-flight response. The more often you experience this response and the greater the magnitude of the stress factors, the more vulnerable you become. Eventually, your adaptive mechanisms begin to break down.

In our fast-paced, high tech, production-oriented society, stress takes its toll on all of us. Heart disease, alcoholism, illness, and absenteeism are symptoms of our “adaptive mechanisms breaking down.” The following statistics are evidence of the costs of stress:

• An estimated 10 to 20 billion dollars is lost through absence, hospitalization, and early death among executives.
• About 32 million workdays and $8.6 billion in wages are lost annually to heart-related diseases.
• Alcoholism costs industry more than $100 billion annually due to absenteeism and medical costs.

Physiology of Stress

Medically, the stress response consists of increased activity of the hypothalamus, adrenal, and possibly thyroid systems. The increased activity of the hormonal system provides the adrenalin that human beings need to run from danger or defend themselves when attacked. It also works for us in nonemergency situations—enabling us to work fast under pressure or to summon extra physical strength in clutch situations.

In today’s world, people often seek out the stress response purposely, just because it makes them feel exhilarated or gives them a sense of mastery. Some individuals do this with real-life dangers such as mountain climbing or white water canoeing. Others increase their adrenalin vicariously through
Your body reacts (to stress) with a hormonal reaction called the fight-or-flight response.

riding roller coasters or watching horror films.

Unfortunately, many of us have little or no control over our reactions to stressful situations. When you become angry, your body gets ready to fight; when you are frightened, your system prepares for flight. In today’s society, however, you are rarely in a position to give vent to these feelings. You cannot clout someone for not following directions, or can you run away from crises. The stress hormones are coursing through your body, nevertheless, taxing your system and ultimately adding to your distress.

The causes of stress can be physical or psychological. We may react angrily when insulted or criticized. We may be frightened by sudden physical danger or live in fear of losing an important account. In either case, the body’s inner reaction is the same—an overtaxing of the system. If you cannot find ways to reduce or eliminate the wear and tear of the stress response on your central nervous system, your body will continue to suffer from being unable to discharge the tension—especially if the stressful events are intense, prolonged, or repeated.

While it is obvious to most of us that unhappy situations, such as a financial setback, the departure of an important coworker, or the loss of a loved one, are stressful; it is equally true that joyful events can produce a stress reaction. For example, marriage, a promotion, the birth of a child all involve change and new responsibilities.

The accumulative effects of the stress response can cause you to develop hypertension, depression, and other psychosomatic illnesses. Stress management techniques, however, can lessen the effects of stress by teaching you strategies to minimize your stressful reaction to events.

Handling Executive Stress

For the business executive, the main source of stress is psychological—how he manages his or her own feelings and attitudes in the face of potentially stressful situations. Many executives have the greatest difficulty in coping with strong emotions such as fear, anger, greed, hostility, and depression. Unfortunately, these emotions seem to be a natural outgrowth of a competi-
tive environment and are inherent in many human relationships. The greater an executive’s ability to manage his feelings and cope with internal discomfort, the larger his capacity will be to handle challenging situations with equanimity and intellectual control.

One’s attitude towards delegating responsibility is extremely important. The executive who attempts to make every important decision by himself and has difficulty designating others to execute plans is much more prone to experience excessive stress and strain. On the other hand, the person who is able to entrust “lieutenants” to supervise projects and make decisions has adopted a healthier management approach.

Good management techniques minimize individual and group stress and facilitate the maximum achievement of goals. Maladaptive management techniques, by contrast, increase anxiety and stress, thereby complicating situations to the point of impairing the success of the business enterprise itself.

Several theories of management which have evolved in recent years help mitigate stress in the workplace. These theories have developed in response to a need to reconcile the individual employee with the larger goals of the business or corporation, traditionally a source of conflict.

The assimilation of individual effort into the greater needs and objectives of the corporation is one of the marks of success in flourishing companies. One important strategy in achieving this is to establish a sense of teamwork among co-workers. In all organizations, whether they are military, athletic, or business, teamwork is an essential ingredient of their success. To work as an effective member of the team, the individual executive must be able to tailor his objective and the objectives of other “team members” to those sought by the organization. One of the major tasks of executives, then, is to set goals, policies, and directions. It is also important to give employees a sense of control by involving them in the decision making process.

The “management-by-objectives” system complements the teamwork strategy—it enables team members to work towards and derive fulfillment from common goals. This in turn creates a more positive and relaxed work environment. Many successful companies give their key executives considerable freedom in establishing objectives. Each person’s performance is evaluated based on his ability to accomplish these goals. This system encourages self-reliance and enables executives to achieve an integration between the goals of individuals and those of the corporation.

Mature Individual Philosophy

Executives, managers, and other employees should realize that no group theory can replace the value of developing a mature individual philosophy. To achieve a balanced, harmonious attitude and approach to work, the individual must recognize that his job is but one part of his total being. He has another life which functions independently of his company. To this end, one should develop recrea-
tional activities outside work, so that one's satisfaction is not entirely dependent on one's career.

Ideally, your profession should take on meaning only in relationship to a broader philosophy of life and should be in harmony with your temperament, life-style, and goals, rather than something you engage in at the expense of these things. Work can provide you with the opportunity to realize hidden and untapped potentials through the expansion of self-reliance and the development of objective and purposeful activity. The more your personal objectives are compatible with the objectives of the organization as expressed through your particular job requirements, the more personal fulfillment you stand to derive from the job.

Ultimately, the satisfaction one derives from one's career or job is much more important than anything else. An executive who derives satisfaction from his work and is results-oriented is normally less affected by stress. Too often, however, one can become overwhelmed by the demands of the organization. When the individual's capacity to realize his potential is strained by the company's demands on him, he is likely to be more stressed than when the flow and the harmony of the work remain consistent with his basic needs, temperament, and abilities.

**Stressful emotions seem to be a natural outgrowth of a competitive environment.**

**Strategies to Combat Stress**

In our competitive society, it is important to understand and to use techniques that can empower one against debilitating stressful reactions.

Several stress reduction techniques are available, including visual imagery rehearsal, deep breathing, and deep muscle relaxation. These skills, when practiced regularly, can be used to minimize seemingly insurmountable psychological obstacles which produce fear and anxiety.

Listen and communicate your feelings so as to improve the quality of relationships which are too often stressful rather than a source of support. Focus on a variety of cognitive and attitudinal approaches to stress management and the enhancement of maximum performance.

Visualization facilitates relaxation and anxiety reduction, which are critical in helping individuals experience a greater sense of themselves. To achieve this, individuals close their eyes and relax, letting their minds wander for one minute. Then they open their eyes. Invariably they notice that thoughts and visual images arise continually and naturally in the mind. They can only focus on one thought or visual image at a time. One learns to shift the attention easily from a single image to another and to ultimately select which image to focus on. When an image is selected it becomes more distinct than all others and cancels out competing images. This technique helps people to realize that they are not at the mercy of the mind—we can actively pick and choose what we think.

The natural, unforced observation of our breathing is another technique which can help us to develop self-mastery. Rhythmic breathing is a standard relaxation technique in which participants close their eyes gently.
and breathe slowly and evenly, neither forcing or holding back the natural flow of air. Listening to the body’s own natural rhythm in this way is soothing.

Simple breathing exercises can then be linked with the visualization exercise. Once the breathing is regulated, one focuses on some pleasant place he has visited or has imagined visiting and practices visualizing it, taking in all its sights, smells, sounds, and feelings. One learns to accompany the tranquil visual images with relaxed breathing. When repeated they lead to the development of the capacity and skill to enter this relaxed state precisely at moments of intense stress—thereby calming the body’s physiological stress reaction.

**Importance of Listening**

Too often we are plagued by random thoughts, which are the source of fear, prejudice, and compulsion to repeat the mistakes of the past. It is important to realize that thinking is an automatic process. It is the brain which thinks, just as it is the heart which beats. Each process is based in some physiological function, automatic and uncontrolled by us. Too often we get fixated on a certain random thought and attach undue significance to it. By amplifying it, we can frighten ourselves unnecessarily. We should understand that such thoughts do occasionally and automatically occur to everyone. Instead of being alarmed by them, we need to learn to be with the thought and to let it pass. Relaxed breathing can help in this. All kinds of thoughts pop into our consciousness all the time, but by relaxing the system we can begin to choose what thoughts we want to place our attention on. It is possible to relax and to allow negative or frightening thoughts to drift away. You can begin, too, in a relaxed way, to shift thoughts.

Too often at work we are not capable of really listening to what our fellow executives or employees have to say. This is because we are so preoccupied with our own automatic thinking and prejudices that we cannot hear...
what is going on around us. Our own internal noise is blocking out what others have to say. We need to learn, however, to get past this style of functioning, which is often counterproductive.

Ultimately, it is important to become attuned to how we react to others and to potentially stressful situations. The stress response can trigger all sorts of physical and emotional reactions—a racing heart, shortness of breath, anxiety and fear. We may react by thinking “Oh my, something bad is going to happen” or “I’m going to really lose control now,” and this in turn aggravates the situation. We need to learn to accept fear, anger and other emotions, without suppressing them and without overreacting to them.

We should view such emotions as objectively as possible so that they do not interfere with our successful performance.

In today’s business climate, where people feel they must constantly look good, there is a tendency for all of us to cover up our feelings. We must recognize the human factor—that our feelings add quality to our lives. It is important to develop contexts where we can share our feelings about problems, tasks, or work relationships. After all, many of us spend more than half our lives on the job. We should be permitted at work to be ourselves as much as possible. Instead of wasting energy trying to cover up our feelings, we need to learn to express them constructively. One can then work towards solutions and spend energy in creative and productive ways.

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**To Sum Up**

In business, stress has taken a tremendous financial and human toll. Executives and managers are considering ways to combat stress in their companies. Numerous management strategies have developed in recent years to minimize stress in the work place. Two very effective ones establish the value of teamwork and the importance of working toward well-established and commonly shared goals (“management-by-objectives”).

You are ultimately responsible for your own reaction to stress. There are several methods which can help you to react more calmly in the face of challenges, including visualization techniques, deep breathing exercises, and workshops designed to attune us more closely to our own thinking processes and emotions. Ultimately, you can learn to live your life creatively and courageously in the face of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. Then your future will be unlimited.

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