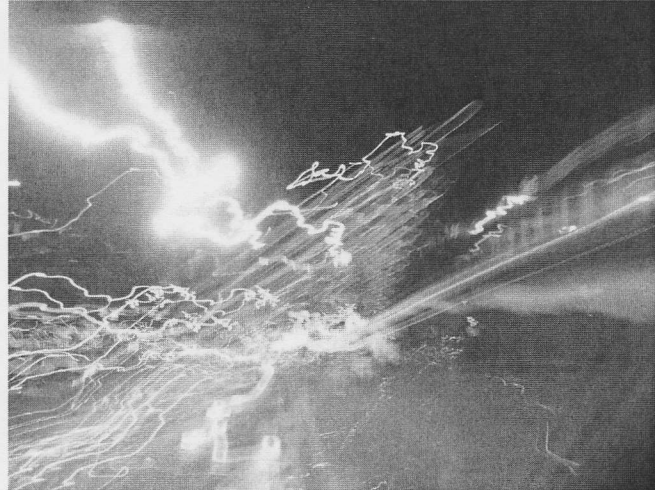


Stress: do we have a choice?

Stress is a normal and instinctive reaction to a physical or psychological threat. When facing stressful situation, the brain tells the body to increase the production of hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. An extra shot of those hormones gives us more energy, increases concentration, prepares the body for an eventual fight (or a quick escape), reduces our sensibility to pain and temporally boosts our immune response. A long time ago, when we had no choice other than hunting our food, a confrontation with predators, like a tiger or a bear, could happen quite often. In that case, a quick physical and mental response could be the difference between going back for dinner or becoming dinner.



Nowadays, the possibility of a bear attack in a city like Geneva is very remote (to say the least). On the other hand, the possibility of getting trapped in a traffic jam is extremely high. In spite of the present scarcity of bears and the excess of cars, our brain still doesn't manage to differentiate between a bear attack and a traffic jam, and uses the same defense mechanism in both situations. What will make the difference is how long the stressor will last and how you react to it.

In the eventuality of an encounter with a bear, your human brain would trigger a "red alert" and would get ready for one of the possibilities: fighting (that could provide the bear with a nice dinner) or running away (that could assure your presence in many other dinners). No matter what happens first, the situation would not last long and your stress level (or the bear's) would soon be back to normal.

Regarding the traffic jam, it may be very different. Rationally, you know that it is not a physical threat but it may cause your stress to last several hours after when you have, finally, parked your car. If situations like this start to happen too often, you may soon face chronic stress. It means your body will start functioning like you were running away from a bear 24/7. The problem is that we were not designed to operate in the "emergency mode" all the time and the consequences may be very serious. Anxiety, panic attacks, burn-out, depression and cardiac problems are only some of the health conditions you may develop due repeated exposure to stress.

Strangely, most of us would tremble just thinking about the stress of trying to survive a bear attack, but we would not question the stress of dealing with a hectic daily agenda, of seeing traffic jams like they were wars, or facing your boss or co-workers like enemies. Why sometimes do we act like this? The answer is very simple: because since an early age we hear that this is normal. We choose to live under stress. Everyday, our society shows us that being over competitive and being busy all the time are signs of efficiency and productivity. And we buy this idea without even questioning its validity. We learn that the right image of a successful person is the stressed executive, who wakes up in Paris and sleeps (when it happens) in Beijing, who talks with his kids and wife much more on the phone than in person and who never shows any sign of fatigue. We choose to be like that and then, after years pushing our bodies and minds beyond their limits, we get surprised when they start to fail.

The good news is that it is possible to change. It is even better when we manage to change before the anti-depressants and anxiolytics become part of our daily menu or before an emergency stop at a cardiac care unit or a psychiatrist.

The stress is not a sign that the world is hurting you, it is rather a sign that you should probably re-evaluate your view on life. Keep your sense of humor, keep your mind quiet, learn to laugh when things go wrong. Learn to accept the inevitable. Embrace life as it comes. Be happy now.