

# Coping Proactively In a Crazy World: Personal Adaptation Strategies.

By Carl Aspler

It's 3 PM and Bob is tired. He checks his appointments and realizes that he still has three more back-to-back meetings before heading home. Even when he gets home, there is no rest. He has a conference call scheduled for 8 PM with an overseas client. He's thinking of his family and how difficult it will be to spend any kind of time with them.

In another office, Miriam stares dispiritedly at all the emails that she still has to go through. She is almost afraid to look. She knows that while she has been stuck in meetings, there have been a number of messages from a difficult employee. As she sits back in her chair, she can almost visualize the employee's emotional and demanding encounter. She reaches for another Maalox.

Two floors away, Alex is trying to figure out how he is going to manage to put his presentation together in time for the VP's visit on Friday. He was supposed to meet with several key stakeholders on the project, but their own busy schedules have made it impossible. He sent emails, left messages, and is still missing some critical information that he will need for the presentation. He takes a deep breath and for a brief magic moment thinks about the recent vacation when the sum total of his cares was whether to lie on the beach or by the pool.

Although these are only illustrations, these scenarios strike a familiar note. For some of us, these types of situations have moved from

the realm of occasional acquaintance to that of common, nagging familiarity.



Bob, Miriam and Alex have one thing in common. They are all victims of stress. Each of them in their own way is realizing that their experiences are wearing them down and are starting to impact

their capacity to cope. Even while nature has supplied us with the mechanisms to adapt and cope under a wide range of conditions, there is only so much we can stand. In the 1936 film *Modern Times*, starring Charlie Chaplin and Paulette Goddard, we are amused by Charlie's antics in trying to tighten bolts on an assembly line. As long as the conveyor belt is moving at a moderate speed, the task of tightening bolts is manageable. But as the belt speeds up, Charlie starts to make mistakes. The whole thing speeds up to such a degree that Charlie's character can no longer keep up. He become helpless in the face of overwhelming demands and ends up in the hospital.

Comical as the film may be, it is a reflection of real life. If the pace of our tasks, decisions and experiences are accelerated beyond our capacity, we begin to lose our effectiveness. At some point the body can break down.

The way the mind and body responds to these demands is different for each of us.

Bob, in our example above has started to fizzle out. He used to look forward to engaging with customers and felt the adrenalin rush when he encountered difficult challenges. As the job has taken more and more of his personal time, he finds that he is becoming more and more detached, and while he still performs well, the excitement is starting to wane.

In contrast Miriam finds that he has less patience with some of her direct reports. She has become more edgy and tends to prejudge people more and more. Once known as an upbeat person, she is now regarded as more critical, liable to fly off the handle with little provocation.

### So, What is Stress?

Stress can mean many things to different people. In seminars on stress management, participants, when asked to define stress will often name the causes of stress or consequences of stress. Some people see stress as a constant nagging headache or muscle tension, while for others is it the frustration of getting projects completed on time. One of the difficulties in trying to deal with stress is that there are no general rules as to which common experiences are stressful and which ones are not. A divorce for one person may be extremely distressful yet for someone else it may be an immense relief.

If stress means so many different things, where can we begin to get a handle to manage it better? For one thing, despite the unique individual differences, there is a sequence of events that is common to all of us when perceiving threat or danger. Muscles tense up, palms get sweaty, blood pressure and heart rate goes up and the stomach gets queasy. These physiological changes all form part of the *stress reaction*; a response which originally helped our primitive ancestors react to external dangers. When the stress reaction switches on, we can run faster, hit harder and jump higher. This is

commonly referred to as the *fight or flight* response.

Although we have managed to eliminate many of the physical dangers which triggered the fight or flight response, new threats, such as economic uncertainty and interpersonal conflicts have emerged to take their place. Yet our body still maintains the same physical reactions, which were designed to help us combat the dangers of our primitive world. Our stomach still churns and our heart rate increases whether we have a close call on the highway or have received an urgent message to call home. The problem today is that the original fight or flight response may no longer be effective in dealing with the stresses of the modern world. Running around the block screaming and waving a spear might have been all right for fighting sabre-toothed tigers, but won't help much in coping with a report that should have been done yesterday. Moreover, these modern stressors are more insidious. Whereas the stress of a physical threat lessens soon after the body has managed to fight it, or escape from it, many of the psychological stressors tend to linger. Interpersonal conflicts, problems with a rebellious child and worry about finances tend to defy snap solutions and because of their constant loitering tend to keep the body and mind in a chronic state of anxiety.

Just as constantly driving a car at its peak tolerance will result in fatigue and breakdown, so too will the overdrive of the stress reaction begin to make demands on our own body. For air traffic controllers gastric ulcers are commonplace. The hard-driving executive may develop heart disease, while for others, insomnia, depression and irritability can become chronic. Because of the role that our hard-driving lifestyle has played in the etiology of these illnesses, they are referred to as the "diseases of civilization". From an organizational perspective the effects of



stress are seen in lowered engagement, absenteeism and turnover.

### **The Role of Change**

One of the major contributors to stress in recent years has been the accelerated nature of change. Prior to the industrial age, the flow of experiences and relationships remained routine, predictable and slow. However in recent times the stopwatch has replaced the calendar. Up until the mid 1980s or so, we used to expect that it would take about a week or so to get an answer to a mail request. Now, we expect an answer immediately. We have probably all seen people get irritable waiting for a reply to a Blackberry message sent an hour before.

Karl Albrecht, in a book written almost 30 years ago describes the constant velocity of change.<sup>1</sup> He aptly describes the extent of this phenomenon when he says, "This is the nature of our world...bewildering change, ever-increasing demands on us creatures to adapt to newness and a growing sense of awe and apprehension about what it all means and where it is leading us. Whether we like it or not, we are citizens of the exponential century". And he was referring to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And all that was before September 11 and the world global economic condition blasted us from our comfortable perch.

### **Finding Some Answers**

Given the magnitude of change and the resulting demands to adapt, where can we find the stamina to manage ourselves through this? Hans Selye, a pioneer in stress research has suggested that we all have a finite and non-renewable reservoir of 'adaptation energy'.<sup>2</sup> He suggests that the more we are taxed by new demanding situations, the more

our reservoir of energy becomes depleted. (3). This concept offers us a possible avenue for stress management. The question becomes: "How we can go through life minimizing the depletion of our 'energy account'". In other words, are there new ways of responding to the stressors of life that will somehow avoid triggering the stress reaction? Or given that some stressors are inevitable or unavoidable, how can we lower the intensity of the stress response and hence reduce the outward flow of energy?

### **Anticipating The Crazyiness**

One way to minimize our negative response to stress is to develop a view of a world that is full of surprises. Many of us have an expectation of a world where everything is orderly and predictable. The fact is that our world is like a match between two equally skilled wrestlers. One wrestler represents order and predictability. The other represents disorder and ambiguity. The match constantly shifts from one wrestler's advantage to the other. Sometimes order dominates the match; other times disorder. Our world experience is similar. We expect order, but we get served disorder. We exhort our teenage children to clean their rooms ("order"), and then notice what it looks like two days after they have cleaned it ("disorder"). Things will constantly shift, and just when we expected some predictability and order, something will come out of left field and surprise us. Taken aback, we hear ourselves saying, "That shouldn't happen" or "It's not fair!" We become frustrated, disappointed, and victimized.

Probably the first step to developing a more productive approach is to strive for a world that has order and makes sense, but to be constantly on guard for the surprises that get dished up. The key is not to feel victimized, but to reflect that the world is sometimes a crazy place, and that while we can't predict every outcome we can still roll with the punches. If we can see it coming, the stress is less, because often it is not the stressor that causes discomfort, but rather the novelty of it, the surprise factor that knocks off our equilibrium. By anticipating the crazyiness I am not suggesting that people get so vigilant

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Albrecht, *Stress and The Manager*, Prentice-Hall, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Selye, *Stress Without Distress*. Signet, 1974

that they are expecting everything to go wrong. That would be too extreme, and we would become even more stressed. I am suggesting something in the middle ground, where we prepare ourselves for surprises, so when it does hit, we are quick to adopt a flexible mode of response. Imagine if you had to stand in a gale force wind. You don't want to stand, rigid, upright. You want to be lower down, legs apart, ready to shift and move quickly with the wind.

### **Managing The Demands: Being Perfect Doesn't Always Work**

We would like to think that we have to master every situation. We go to work expecting that we should be able to do it all, and do it well. It may be the same in our role as parents. When the demands exceed our capacity, and we have difficulty in closing the gap, we often turn on ourselves and feel the frustration of not being able to deliver the goods.

We will always be challenged to accomplish everything, rather than trying to do everything, ask yourself whether you are doing the really important things. We are seduced by tasks and activities that are not necessarily the most important, but which may be enjoyable, or make us feel important or on top of things. When I worked at General Electric, I was involved in a continuous improvement initiative where I learned that probably 20-30% of any given job could be stopped tomorrow, without any loss of quality. The challenge therefore is to put before yourself all that you do, and ask yourself what tasks you can shed or streamline. We have a hard time saying 'no'. Maybe we should be saying 'no thanks' more often, especially if it is something that we don't regard as critical.

The other way we can become our own worst enemy is a tendency among some to feel that they need to be perfect. I'm not suggesting that we water down quality, but rather look seriously at the effort you are putting in and ask yourself if it is worth the extra 10 hours of work to get things to 99%, when in fact, the world will be a happy place with 85%.

Ego can also play an important part. If you hear yourself saying that only you know how to do it, and that only you can get it right, then be prepared for extra stress. Before you adopt a view where you think of yourself as indispensable to the world order, think of this: if you were hospitalized tomorrow and couldn't work for the next year, how do you think the world would respond? Would it come to a crashing halt? Probably not. People are adaptive. They would of course be concerned about your welfare, but the adaptive nature of the universe would be such that your work for the organization would not be missed for very long. People would move on and fill the gaps left by your hospitalization. The cemeteries are filled with indispensable people, and somehow the world has carried on. Naturally I am referring here to the world of work, as opposed to personal and family life.

### **Developing A Positive Orientation**

How much stress we experience depends on how we perceive the situation. In fact how we feel about a particular problem or event is a major factor in deciding whether it is stressful or not. The more we feel that we are in control, the less we are bothered by stress. Researchers at the University of Chicago found that people who engage life and try to turn situations to their advantage were more stress resistant than those who responded passively to events around them.<sup>3</sup>

The key then is to appraise events as opportunities rather than threats. By engaging problems creatively in ways that force you to ask, "What is the real problem here" or "What is the worst thing that can happen?" a person might be able to shut off the catastrophizing that we seem ready to embrace. Brendan Behan, the Irish writer recounts in "Borstal Boy" how he was sitting in a jail cell in a courthouse when he noticed a message scratched on the wall. The message read:

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<sup>3</sup> Maya Pines, Psychological Hardiness: The Role of Challenge In Health, Psychology Today, December, 1980.

“Today’s the morrow that yesterday you feared...and nothing happened”. How often have you become worried or upset over things, which in the end, never really amounted to anything? Yet we somehow have a knack to see the worst in any situation, getting ourselves stressed for little reason.

Look at the situation, and ask yourself if you can find something positive. Does the experience give you an opportunity to learn something? Will the worst really happen? A bit more positive can’t hurt. I remember a few years jogging with a friend, and while we complaining about the world in general, we passed a group of severely disabled children,

all of them in wheelchairs. My friend, who has had his share of hard times, commented that these kids were angels here to teach us how lucky we are.

It’s hard to feel sorry

for yourself over trivial matters, when you discover, that in the grand scheme of things, things may not so bad.



I don’t want to give the impression that worry is bad and that we should deny all problems. Worry is natural and adaptive. It forces us to think about our situations and predicaments and to hopefully think through options. There will be lots of legitimate things to worry about - health challenges, family problems, and difficult relationships, among others. But for many things we worry too much, and the anxiety spirals and develops into a life of its own.

### **Learning New Tricks**

Earlier I mentioned that our demands will often exceed our capacity to cope. I suggested that we review what things we can legitimately stop doing or doing differently. While this will cut down on the demands, there is another way we can start closing the gap. This is by increasing our capacity to

handle the various demands. Learning new skills is critical. I have often heard people under stress become immovable with change. They are unwilling to try new things. This is understandable. When we are surrounded by that which we know and are confident in our ability, we are in a comfort zone. To do something new, try a new technique or skill is to put ourselves on the line. We have left our comfort zone. What is we can’t do it? Will others judge us harshly? Will our lack of skills leave us exposed?

Throwing yourself out there to try to learn new things need not be so traumatic. It can start with some self-development, learning on your own time about developments in your field, or networking with others from whom you can learn. And even if you go for the big skills change, keep in mind that it’s by making mistakes that we learn. An expression I once heard sums up the importance of trying. It goes something like this: no one ever drowned from falling into a swimming pool. They only drowned when they forgot to get up. There will be falls. Think of these not as failures, but experiments.

### **Spreading Your Goodies Around**

When I think of Selye’s concept of adaptation energy. I think of a bank account, where you can only make withdrawals, but not deposits. However we can also use the analogy of investments when it comes to where we want to spend our time and effort. How much time goes into work versus family and self? To what degree are you able to save time for things that are devoted to your SELF – things that you are interested in doing that are not necessarily connected to any outside obligations, but which gives you interest and pleasure? The idea here is that we need to diversify our investments – work, family, community, and self. Smart financial advisors caution us not to put all our ‘eggs in one basket’, but to spread them around to guard against a total loss, in the event of a poor performing portfolio. We should achieve a similar balance in our lives so that if something negative was to happen in one

part of our 'portfolio', it will not be a catastrophic loss, since we have other areas from which we can draw our energy and comfort. It could be an interesting exercise to draw a pie chart, with the segments representing work, family, community and self and then analyze if more balance is possible.

### Feeling Your Way Out of Stress

In this article I have emphasized the *thinking* aspect of stress management. There is another, equally important element and that is the *physical* side of stress control. Problem solving and restructuring how we think about stress and the various problems we experience will of course lessen the physical impact. However, we need to remember that stress is a physical reaction to the mind and body's response to danger. It stands to reason that anything we can do to reduce the physiological reaction will also have a beneficial effect. Our mind and bodies are quite connected and adjustments made in one will affect the other. So anything we can do to either prevent or lower the intensity of the stress response will be beneficial. That means taking care of your health. Regular exercise and proper nutrition are of course important in making the body more stress-resistant. Various other approaches, including relaxation and meditation will also help reduce the stress response. They say that the body is a temple for the mind. All the smart thinking-your-way-out-of-stress techniques will not have much value if the body is crumbling.

### A Final Thought

For decades, Dr. Hans Selye investigated the origins of stress. He looked at the biological processes. He dissected countless mice examining endocrine glands for the effects of stress. Yet, when he wrote his seminal work, *Stress Without Distress*, one of his key points was as far from molecular biology and physiology as one could imagine. He taught us that one of the most important things we

could do was to act as an *altruistic egotist*. What he meant is that we should all act as though we are Number One, but act in ways that help other people be their Number One as well. Make this your way of life, and you will be all that you can be.

### A Summary of Strategies

- ☑ *Have a healthy regard for how the world operates. Be prepared for the surprises.*
- ☑ *Anticipate the future, plan and rehearse your responses.*
- ☑ *Ask yourself, "What is the real problem here?"*
- ☑ *Look for ways to increase your skills.*
- ☑ *Build a support network. Coping is always easier when you know someone is "in your corner".*
- ☑ *You can't do everything. Focus on the important stuff. Learn to say "no" (graciously).*
- ☑ *Ask yourself if you are spending enough time in the areas of your life that create meaning for you.*
- ☑ *Leading an abundant life means taking some risks.*
- ☑ *Ask yourself if your need for perfection is causing you undue stress.*

**Carl Aspler** is an organization change specialist with almost 30 years helping organizations improve their effectiveness. He has taught numerous courses in leadership and change management. For more information about the author and the services he provides contact Carl at [carl.aspler@sympatico.ca](mailto:carl.aspler@sympatico.ca) or visit the web site at: [www.carlaspler.com](http://www.carlaspler.com)