

Wellbeing Essentials

Understanding Stress

“Stress is a chemical reaction in the body. And to be honest, it is not always a bad thing.”



resilientme

STRENGTH THROUGH UNDERSTANDING

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The first thing that you need to know about stress is that it is **NOT** an illness. Stress is a chemical reaction in the body that can lead to illness and this can be either physical or mental illness. You cannot be ill with 'stress' but you can have illness that is caused by stress – this is known as 'stress induced illness'.

Sadly, most people don't understand what stress actually is and there are lots of myths about what kind of people suffer with stress induced illness.

Let's just get that sorted out right now!

Dispelling the myths

Unfortunately, stress induced illness is often associated with being a weak person. There is a stigma attached to it which means that people are embarrassed to admit they are suffering.

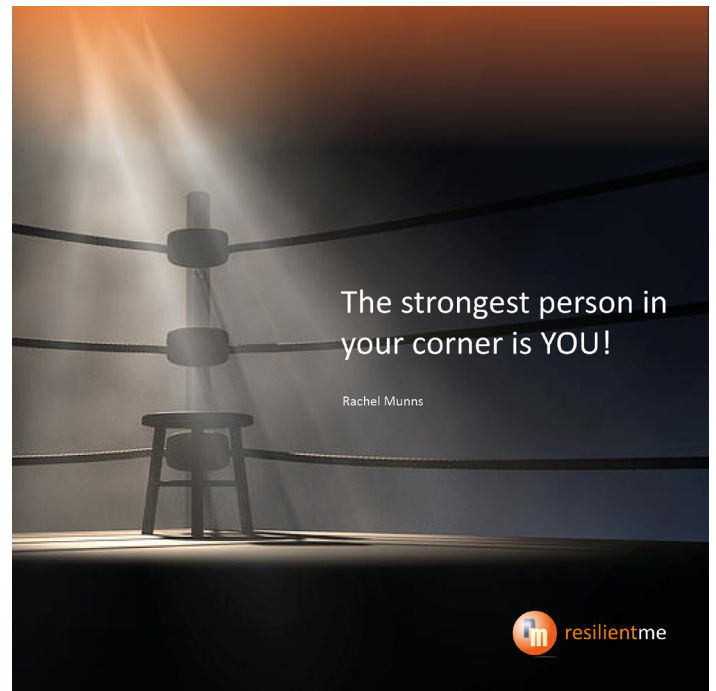
This is very sad because stress induced illness isn't caused by mental weakness. Only people who do not fully understand what stress is think this way. Unfortunately, that seems to be most people – especially in the business world. They are simply under-educated, and it is my aim to help them to see things differently.

Stress induced illness most often affects the best people. These are the people who try the hardest, who work the longest hours, who always want to do a good job, who always do their best, who care the most about their results and the people around them. They are life's 'doers' and 'copers' and 'givers'. But, ultimately, you cannot fight nature and nature has a way of forcing us to slow down and look after ourselves.

So, what exactly is stress then?

Well, as I have said already, stress is a chemical reaction in the body. And, to be honest, stress is not always a bad thing. In fact, a bit of pressure (stress) can be very motivating. The problems begin when we are stressed or put under pressure too often.

We can feel stressed by things that happen outside of our body (external) like a difficult or threatening situation, an event or maybe an incident at work or at home. We can also make ourselves feel stressed



(internal) simply through our own negative thought patterns or limiting beliefs e.g. "I'm not good enough", "I can't cope" etc.

It doesn't really matter whether our stress is external, internal, real or imagined; our brain and body respond in the same way..... fight or flight.

What is Fight or Flight?

Fight or flight is a natural human response to threats and it's been this way since we were cavemen.

All those years ago most threats were potentially fatal, for example the sabre-tooth tigers that roamed the lands. Our fight or flight response in this situation was, quite literally, a life-saver. Our bodies would flood with adrenaline and other stress hormones which gave us physical power and courage. Our brains bypassed our thinking skills, bypassed most of our emotions, and focussed entirely on fighting or running away from the threat.

Fast forward to the modern world, and our stress response is exactly the same even though most of today's threats are not potentially fatal: someone yelling at you, too much work – not enough time, sitting an exam, feeling too fat (or too thin!), relationship issues, social media pressures (you get the picture).

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In the past we needed this stress response to fight the tiger or to run away from it. Today though, that's just not the case. If someone yells at you it would be unwise to punch them, but you probably wouldn't want to just run away either. Likewise, if you have too much work to do you can't fight this at a physical level and the problem just gets worse if you run away.

So, why does this matter?

Well, let's look a little more closely at what happens to us in fight or flight mode...

Our bodies change dramatically. Among other things we begin to breathe faster, systems that our body sees as unnecessary for fight/flight are shut down (like our digestive system – so we lose our appetite), blood is redirected to our muscles, our sight gets sharper, our ability to feel pain lowers and our immune system is suppressed.

Changes also happen in our brain: we lose the ability to think clearly and rationally, we become less able to control our emotions and we cannot readily access our memory banks. No wonder then that we over-react to things and see danger everywhere.

Basically, we are on high alert and we see everything and everyone as a potential threat!

At this point we are in survival mode and positive thinking is almost impossible. Our hearts are closed, and our rational thought is gone. We make short term choices without thinking about the longer-term impact (perhaps we say things we regret later or lash out when we shouldn't have).

OK, but once the threat has passed, don't we just go back to normal?

Well, yes and no. Fight or flight is a natural response to threats and will happen to everyone from time to time. The real problem arises when this response is triggered too often – for teenagers this could be during an exam period or during sustained bullying. For adults it could be constant pressure at work or a failing marriage – we become increasingly unable to relax and begin to live life in crisis mode, stuck in 'fight or flight'.

As I mentioned earlier, every time the fight or flight response is triggered chemicals are released in to our body. Over time, these accumulate in the body and become toxic.

They start to attack our organs and, in the short to medium term, we begin to suffer one or more of the physical symptoms of stress induced illness: dizzy spells, blackouts, difficulty concentrating, teeth grinding, eye twitching, diarrhoea, constipation, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, sickness, constant colds and infections, panic attacks, headaches, low energy, aches, pains, tense muscles, shaking, seizures..... the list is very long and pretty scary.

Physical symptoms are not the only ones we suffer, there are also emotional symptoms: feeling overwhelmed, agitated, out of control, nervous, moody, low self-esteem, lonely, worthless, depressed, anxious, unable to relax, avoiding others.... an equally long and worrying list.

Left unattended, in the longer term, we can get permanently stuck in fight or flight mode and the hidden effects of this can be a lot more dangerous...

The Impact of a Stuck Fight or Flight Response	
Physical Reaction	Long-Term Impact
Blood pressure rises	Heart disease
Stress hormones rise	Anxiety, insomnia, addictions, weight gain
Digestive system slows	Gastro intestinal problems
Growth and sex hormones fall	Premature aging
Immune system weakens	Infections, cancer
Sticky blood platelets increase	Heart attacks

Source: Dr Robert Gonzalez, The Chopra Centre

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Help, I'm stuck! What happens now?

All of the chemicals flooding our body have begun to attack our organs. We've already discussed the short-term signs and symptoms but, over a longer time more serious things can begin to happen.

For those who believe it is possible to 'snap out' of stress induced illness it may be worth pointing out that the same chemical reactions that cause early symptoms, in the longer term can lead to heart disease or cancer – neither of which you would be expected to cure without a great deal of help and self-care.

The number one cause of illness in teenagers is stress. At any moment in time, one in four people in the UK is suffering with at least one clinically-diagnosed mental disorder.

For me, the most worrying thing about stress induced illness is that a lot of the time you don't realise you are suffering from it until it's too late. My own husband (a senior manager), never worried about anything, felt completely in control, had no obvious emotional symptoms at all and then, out of the blue, he nearly blacked out whilst driving home from work one day. An incident that could have had fatal consequences (but fortunately, didn't!)

If you have any of the physical or emotional symptoms listed above – get help, NOW! Go and see your doctor or speak to someone who can help you. Don't ignore it and don't assume you can just work through it.

So, now you understand stress, what causes it, and how it can lead to serious illnesses – both physical and mental.

Extract from the book 'The Circus of Life' written by Rachel Munns.



Resilient Me specialise in Mental Health Awareness, Resilience and Wellbeing training. We also offer confidence building, motivational and personal leadership workshops. We all have close, 'lived' experience of mental health issues, and this combined with our individual expertise has enabled us to produce training and coaching that genuinely makes a difference. **If you want to know more – just call us on 07967 276194 or email info@resilientme.co.uk**

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