

SECRET # 8 - STRESS

*“My private measure of success is daily.
If this were to be the last day of my life
would I be content with it? To live in a
harmonious balance of commitments and
pleasures is what I strive for.”*

Jane Rule

You are walking along and all of a sudden you see a startled bird fly away. What caused the bird to make its hasty exit? You watch a nature show and without seeming provocation a bear attacks. What is the cause of this? In nature there is a phenomenon known as the ‘fight or flight’ syndrome. When an animal sense that it is being threatened it has an automatic instinctive reaction to either fight or flee. It is this instinctual behaviour that allows it to survive attacks from predators and other harm.

Back in the hunting and gathering stage of human evolution this fight or flight syndrome was how we as human beings also survived life on this planet. From generation to generation this has been passed on. However, in today’s urban society this need for fight or flight is greatly reduced. Unfortunately, the instinct to use this behaviour is still with us. So how does this response manifest itself in today’s world where we no longer require this instinct to be able to function on a daily basis?

Today we do not need to go into battle and so this instinct is no longer required yet works within us every day. **STRESS** is the wear and tear on the body generated by events that challenge the body’s natural balance and the flow of the chemicals in our body.

In order for humans or animals to respond to a threat it requires an elevation of adrenalin. This occurs naturally any time a threat is presented. The body is injected with additional adrenalin to cope and provide the energy required to fight or flee. The adrenaline results in an elevated heart rate. This is the same energy that let’s someone who is a relatively small person handle someone who is far greater in size or strength.

However a sustained and constant flow of adrenalin is harmful to the body. It is the equivalent to pushing the gas pedal to the floor of a car and going full speed all the time. Eventually something will break or you will crash as the automobile is pushed beyond its capabilities. Dr. Peter Hanson suggests the following physical re-actions can occur. Stress can trigger the over production of glandular secretions like cortisone which wards off infection and could result in a reduction of the body’s ability to ward off infections. It can also decrease the stomach’s resistance to acid, which results in ulcers.

In addition, in fight or flight responses, secretion of the thyroid hormone brings about an increase in metabolism. If metabolism continues to increase distressing physical symptoms

such as nervousness and insomnia can occur. Sporadic stress, Hanson notes, stimulates the release of endorphin, the body's natural painkiller. But over do it and the endorphin no longer works. Fight or flight increases the sugar content of blood, thereby providing a short burst of energy. The pancreas must produce insulin to balance this sugar. Extended overwork of the pancreas can lead to permanent impairment and diabetes. When diabetics respond to stressful situations by gorging on sweets, they place themselves in a life-threatening situation. Normally an immediate increase in cholesterol provides the body with fuel. With the extended elevation, cholesterol adheres to vessel walls. Long-term effects of this include heart attacks and strokes. The same can occur from thickened blood, which carries a greater oxygen supply to our body's organs in fight or flight situations. When our bodies respond in any of the above ways on a continuing basis, dangerous health hazards develop.

It has been stated that stress can be both positive and negative. Stress allows us to achieve positive things in life and is therefore considered positive. Stressful events that can be looked at as positive can include getting married, having a child, or getting a promotion at work.

Wherein there is a long term sustained stress environment or situation this is considered to be negative stress. Negative stress events can look like getting a divorce or being fired or laid off at work. An example of negative stress expressing itself today is the proliferation of road rage.

So what is the success secret here. The secret is that unless you can understand what stress is and how it is affecting your life it can result in burnout or health problems. Ultimately this will destroy your chance for sustained long-term success.

Awareness is the key to the unlocking of understanding and dealing with stress.

Finding out what the stressors are in your life is the first step to this awareness. What things trigger negative thoughts in you? How do you handle stress and does the coping mechanism you use lead to more stress. As an example when I am typically stressed out I will eat snack foods. The subsequent weight gain then places further stress on my body.

How can I reduce stress? Limit the number of activities you plan to do in a day or at any given time to an amount you can comfortably handle. Realize that depending on the type of job or activities you perform you will only complete 60 to 80 percent of what you plan at the start of the day. Other things will come up during the day that will require immediate handling.

Be organized in your life and create an organized environment that will be conducive to your success. Looking for misplaced keys, files etc. will only lead to frustration and unnecessary stress. Take breaks during the day. Prolonged times at a keyboard or any event without a timeout will lead to and increase stress. In conjunction with taking breaks realize that the timely elimination functions of our bodies will reduce stress. If you delay going to the bathroom you are doing harm to your body. Your body knows when to go, do not

ignore signals or delay going to the bathroom. The stress you create by doing so will only increase and lead to irreparable damage to your health later in life.

Do not leave things until the last moment. Allow plenty of time to arrive for appointments realizing that arriving in a relaxed, unhurried manner is much healthier and note there could always be an unexpected traffic delay or some other thing that you can handle calmly if you have left ample time for getting to your appointment.

Preparing ahead of time for things will also reduce stress. For example, you have a meeting on Monday that is very important. The day prior you could double check the address of where you are going, consult a map to outline the route you plan to take. Choose the suit and shoes that you will be wearing ensuring that they are clean and in good repair. (No missing buttons or stains etc.) Do you think that being prepared will reduce the stress on the following morning when you have to leave? Absolutely!

In addition, be aware that eating healthily and on a regular schedule is also very important. Your body is your temple. Treat it with disrespect and it will not be performing to its full potential. Exercise of some type is also vital. In addition, to the health benefits exercise forces you to take time away from the stresses that are present in your life. Enjoy time with friends. See a movie. There is a well-documented beneficial affect that comes with laughter. The more we laugh the more relaxed we are. Read the comics; see a comedy on TV or at the movie show.

As well, take regular vacations. There is nothing like getting away from it all and clearing some space in your mind for fun and play. When I hear people say that they have not had a vacation for years, I picture a ticking time bomb waiting to go off. They are a case of burnout waiting to happen and the next vacation they will most likely be on is one that looks like a visit to the hospital.

What if I am stressed out? One of the best things to do in a moment of stress is to stop whatever you are doing and get away from it. Say you are having a run in with a fellow employee, or what you are doing is not working out and you are getting frustrated, take a break, go for a stroll, talk to a friend. Then return to what you were doing and you will be surprised how different and refreshed you will feel.

If you cannot get away at that moment become very conscious of your breathing. When we become anxious we tend to breathe very shallow, short breathes. The best technique that works for me is to take a deep breath, hold it for a count of three, release the breath to a count of three, and pause for a count of three and then inhale to a count of three and repeat the process. It is suggested that you do this at least ten times. That age old technique of counting to ten when you have reached the boiling point is also something to hold in your repertoire.

Another indicator of stress is “urgency addiction”. Like any addiction this is one that slowly creeps upon you. I know having had a personal experience with this and having a constant battle to overcome it in my daily living I am a good example of this syndrome. So what is “urgency addiction”? It is when you make every thing in your life a priority. What

ever comes up at that moment is what rules you for that moment. Here is an example of what I am speaking about. You start your day with a 'to do' list and you have highlighted what is a priority on the list. Your goal is at the very least to complete what the priority items are.

As you walk out the door you run into a neighbour whose car is not working, the next thing you know your car is hooked up to theirs to boost the battery. This is urgent because you know your neighbour has to get to work. Of course it turns out that this is not the problem and now being a good neighbour you wait until the tow truck arrives half an hour later. This of course was important to do, as you wanted to show your neighbour that you care and of course it was urgent.

Then, just as you are about to leave the cell phone rings, it is your mother. She needs your help right away and would you be a dear and pick up some milk on your way to her place. You do this because of course she is your mother? You get the milk and when you get there she needs your assistance to hang up some drapes. This is urgent as she is inviting some guests over and you would not want your mother to be seen as a sloppy housekeeper. No problem that only took an hour.

Time for lunch, however as you are now running late you decide to go through the drive through at the local fast food place as it is importantly urgent to gain a meal. Unfortunately just as you get into the line up you realize that this is the busiest you have ever seen it and it turns into a half hour wait. No problem, it was urgent to get this out of the way to allow you to catch up for the lost time.

As you head out of the driveway the phone rings again. This time it is the people at your work. Though they apologize for calling you on your day off they were just wondering if you could drop by and show them something on the project you are working on. Of course this is urgent and it will just take a minute. Unfortunately on the way over the traffic is worse than you thought. You meander your way through traffic and once you find yourself at the office the item that would just take a minute, turns into a two-hours.

The phone rings and it is your child's school. Your son or daughter is feeling ill and you are requested to pick them up. This is urgent because you do not want to have your child ill and at school. No problem, you head into rush hour traffic to pick up your child. You get there just as school finishes and drive your child with a slight cough home and tuck them into bed. A little TLC and cookies and juice and your child is resting comfortably.

Now if you start on dinner you will just complete it in time for the arrival of the family to come home. Of course this is now urgent as the time has flown by and the family will soon be home and so on it goes. The things that are on your priority list which were important but not urgent do not get done. This is urgency addiction; you make everything that comes up in your day an urgent item. You are so busy doing the urgent things every day that you never complete the tasks that have priority and are truly important. A great book which assists in examining urgency addiction is called "First Things First" and subtitled "to Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy" written by Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill and

Rebecca R. Merrill. It deals with important versus urgent and how to distinguish between the two. If you want to break out of urgency addiction this book is a good read.

Urgency addiction is another huge stress creator. So become stress smart. Reduce as much stress as you can in your life and you will be amazed at how much simpler and more positive your life will become. This new found void will lead to an opportunity for even greater successes.

