

STRESS: SOCIETIES MISUNDERSTOOD BAD BOY

The pursuit of a balanced life, or at the very least a less stressed life is an oft quoted modern-day refrain. According to Gallup, 66% of people are doing well in at least one of the following domains: social, physical, community, financial or career wellbeing. But only 7% are thriving in all 5 domains! **Not a great strike rate, implying the balanced life is a rare, elusive experience for most. See infographic for some interesting factoids.**

Isn't stress, public enemy number 1?

Gallup World Poll researchers asked 125 000 people, from 121 countries, aged 15 plus: "Did you feel a great deal of stress yesterday". They then computed a national stress index. Worldwide, 33% said they felt stressed out yesterday. USA sat at 43%, with Mauritania at 5%. (IS THIS MOST RECENT)

Then they wondered if a nations stress index corresponded with other indexes of wellbeing, happiness, life expectancy and national GDP? Surprisingly, what they found was the higher the national stress index, the higher the wellbeing, GDP, life expectancy and happiness ratings. They have theorised that it was actually highly stressed people that were not depressed. They viewed their lives as close to ideal! This certainly seems to contradict the notion that stress is to be avoided at all costs.

Calhoun and Tedeschi pioneered the concept Posttraumatic Growth (PTG). It is a construct of positive psychological change that occurs as the result of one's struggle with a highly challenging, stressful and traumatic events. **In various studies a significant connection was found between symptoms of posttraumatic stress and growth, examples included: 83% of women with HIV/AIDS reported growth related to their diagnosis and illness, whilst 99% of emergency ambulance workers report growth as a result of trauma they are exposed to during work.**

Growth in highly stressful situations is not a rare phenomenon, reported only by exceptional people!!! Resilience, grit, fortitude, stress management..call it what you will, is crucial for the good life.

So what is resilience actually?

There are thousands of definitions of resilience, my definition is: "a proactive coping process aimed at thriving in both adverse conditions (daily hassles and major stressors), change and opportunities by fortifying and utilising your 4 key resilience reservoir pools i.e. mental, socio-emotional, physical and spiritual." That's a mouthful, lets break it down into it's constituent parts.

Firstly, lets explore the proactive coping concept. You don't go run a marathon to reveal how unfit you are, unless you are a sado-masochist! The same principle of preparation underpins resilience and a quality life, it requires proactive preparation in the 4 key areas of your life, so you can draw on viable alternatives when the chips are down. You cannot afford to wait for life to happen to you...research consistently shows that people whom are solution orientated as opposed to avoidant, deal significantly better with stress.

Secondly, my definition focusses on thriving, not purely surviving. As mentioned already, there is a new field of resilience that is exploring post-traumatic growth, the lesser known cousin of the debilitating condition, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It shows **empirically** we can become stronger from adversity.

Lastly, we need to build a multi-dimensional approach to resilience, to accommodate the complexity of life. If one option fails you need other options, e.g. when I slipped a disc, preventing me from exercising for 6 months, I needed other approaches to overcome the myriad of stressful challenges I still faced.

Life - the grand cliché

In 1998, 30 000 American adults were asked how much stress they had experienced in the last year. They were also asked whether they thought stress was harmful to their health.

Eight years later, the researchers scoured public records to find out who had died. High levels of stress increased the risk of dying by an incredible 43%!!

But the really interesting point, the increased risk applied only to those who believed that stress was harming their lives. Those that did not believe stress was harming their health, had a lower rate of death than even those whom were experiencing very little stress.

Thus it was NOT stress per se that was killing people, it was the BELIEF that stress was harmful.

In another study, conducted by Yale researchers followed middle aged adults for twenty years. Those that had a positive view of aging in midlife, lived on average 7.6 years longer than those that had a negative view. To put this in perspective, many things regarded as very protective such as exercise, not smoking, healthy BP and cholesterol, have been shown on average to add less than 4 years to one's life span!

As that well known, clichéd poster proclaims: "Your attitude really is your altitude!"

The work-life balance myth

The work-life balance concept has infiltrated pop psychology and is a holy grail for many people. Unfortunately, I think it unwittingly sends the wrong message, pushing people to feel ironically that they are not succeeding in life. Here is why I feel it emphasises the wrong message:

Work and life are not opposites, and actually do have something in common, they both impact hugely on our sense of purpose, fulfilment and happiness. For many of us we have great (and yes, bad ones as well) work experiences involving learning, interesting challenges, recognition, status, structure, belonging and connection, purpose etc.

A sense of achievement and fulfilment contributes to meaning in life. In trying to live in the "balanced" middle, it prevents us from extraordinary commitments to anything, as we try to attend to all things, everything gets short changed. Magic often happens in the extremes.

Think about what success often is – purpose, meaning, significance. These all require huge commitment, energy, and sacrifice. You will therefore have to cross the mid-line of balance as you pursue your priorities.

With this in mind, why not focus rather on an integrated life (where energy is deposited in your physical, mental, socio-emotional and spiritual quadrants) instead of a perfectly balanced life? Striving to live life fully, making conscious, deliberate choices at different stages of your life into fulfilment and excellence; whilst acknowledging you will not always be in perfect balance.

What do we really mean when we say we need more balance? I think we mean we need more of something else, as it is being crowded out/missing. The desire for balance makes sense in this context but it's illusory!! It also links to the following concept of workaholism.

Workaholism and the 55 hr threshold

In layman's terms, workaholism can be defined as "an over-compensation for a deficiency elsewhere in your life." In reality, this means workaholics live in opposition to our earlier definition of resilience and thriving.

So how many hours should I be spending working, you may ask?

Gallup's global data indicates that people can enjoy a full 40-hour work week, and for some cases up to 55 hrs. per week, while those who do not get to use their strengths get burned out after just 20 hours of work per week.

In a separate study, on more than 2000 Whitehall civil servants in the UK, those who worked more than 11 hrs. a day on average were more than 250% likely to suffer from depression, than those that worked 8 hrs. per day on average.

THE 55hr threshold is by no means a strict rule, but rather a useful threshold indicator. I suspect that when you go over 55 hrs. work per week, it does not leave a lot of time to invest in your health, relationships etc. Working long hours often becomes a habit. There are some billable hour's industries like consulting, accounting and law that obviously constantly breach this threshold. I wonder what it does for retention rates, wellbeing and creativity when people do this for an extended period of time?

Paradigms that build stress resilience

20-20

In conclusion:

Stress is not actually the enemy, how we negatively perceive stress and respond is the real issue. We need to alter our paradigms and recognise that for fulfilling and vital lives, stress if harnessed correctly primes us to achieve great things. We need to build integrated lives, that proactively create the conditions for thriving. This takes time and effort, silver bullets are reserved for werewolf movies.