

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 high at 43%, with Mauritania least at 5%.

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

Calhoun and Tedeschi pioneered the concept Post-Traumatic 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 numerous 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, are crucial for the good life.

So, what is resilience actually?

There are thousands of definitions of resilience, my own 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 its constituent parts.

Firstly, let's 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 if we apply a benefit finding paradigm.

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 their PARADIGM that stress was harmful.

In another study, Yale researchers followed a group of 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 accurately 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, it sends the wrong message, ironically pushing people to feel that they are failing in life. Let's unpack this flawed work-life balance premise.



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

Think about how we often define success, its rooted in meaning and significance. 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. .

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? Lets strive to live life fully, making conscious, deliberate choices at various stages of your life ito. 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 illusionary!! 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? Two interesting pieces of research seem to provide some insight on the matter.

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 by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and University of London, on 2123 Whitehall civil servants in the UK, those who worked more than 11 hrs. a day on average were 250% more likely to suffer from depression, than those that worked 8 hrs. per day on average.

THE 55hr threshold I am proposing, 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, relationships and creativity when people do this for an extended period?

Paradigms that build resilience

How we see the world impacts on how we respond to it. By adopting lenses that facilitate a healthy, integrated way of living, we boost our capabilities to thrive and be resilient. Here are 4 paradigms that do just that:

A "conquering the monkey" paradigm boosts socio-emotional wellbeing. One can't go forward positively until a person has learnt to let go of the baggage from our past, or at least come to terms with our past. The one constant in all relationships is ourselves, how we see ourselves impacts our relationships with others. Forgiveness of self and others is fundamental to healthy relationships, which in turn are crucial stress buffers.

A "20/20 vision" paradigm enhances our spiritual wellbeing. View your circumstances as objectively as possible, and make plans based on a realistic picture of reality, not fear. Ultimately, it helps you become aware of what is important to you; identifying your real mission, values and goals in life. Having wise counsel, mentors and coaches are not only the preserve of elite performers, all can assist in gaining a more accurate picture of our context.

A "turbo-boosters" paradigm increases our physical wellbeing. We all have limited time and energy. Avoid or minimise those things that drain your energy e.g. pointless meetings, junk mail, negative people, and rather surround yourself with empowering people, activities and environments that boost your vitality.

A "think like a kid" paradigm enriches our mental wellbeing. Children are geared for learning. They see a world full of fun learning possibilities, to be explored through their inquiring, enthusiastic minds, it's infectious. Find that spirit of curiosity you once had as child, it's your greatest antidote to career obsolescence and increased creativity.

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 remarkable 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.

Mark has a Ph.D. in Organisational Psychology, with a dissertation on how to build resilience in individuals. He has spent the last 20 years practically applying his resilience learnings in highly demanding environments from tech start-ups, to asset managers to NGO's.