



When stress misbehaves

Stress is a very complex psycho-physiological process. The father of stress theory, Hans Selye described stress as a thing that can be experienced as a “non-specific response of the body to any demand for change”. But this is where it gets complicated. Stress, he explained, also causes stress making stress the result of itself.

A wheel within a wheel within a wheel or as Dr. Heidi Hanna explains, one phenomenon taking on one of three forms.

But to me this model sounds a lot like having the Stress-triplets in the classroom of your mind-body.

- There is **Tame Stress**, the quiet one that we hardly notice but which plays an important role to release hormones and regulate other bodily responses like blood pressure etc. She helps us adapt and adjust to our environment to maintain homeostasis and stay alive. She gets us out of the bed in the morning, keeps us alert while driving to school, reminds us to be aware of social distancing etc.
- Then there is **Tolerable Stress**. You are aware of her presence, every now and then she causes a bit of discomfort or irritation but it is bearable. We can't completely control how our mind-bodies react to Tolerable but we do know that we have the resources to regulate our response to her without too much effort. When we notice a learner or colleague not wearing a mask, Tolerable Stress steps forward alerting us to the fact that a minor change is required and that we have the ability to turn down another passage way to avoid that mask-less person. We can take control over the situation.

But as in every group, there is someone that you have to constantly keep your eye on. **Toxic Stress** is that one. She can turn any situation into a crisis, no matter how small or unimportant. She does this by exaggeration, catastrophising, feeding fear and expecting the worst. She disturbs one's body, mind and

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emotions and pushes you to the point of disease, depression and complete disintegration. When you are sick and tired, naturally your capacity to deal with even Tame Stress and Tolerable Stress is compromised.

It is clear that Toxic Stress has taken control and says Karyn Buxman in her book *What's So Funny About Stress: How to Use Healthy Humor to Build Radical Resilience*, the more Toxic Stress "sucks you in, the more you think about it, talk about it, obsess about it. It's more contagious than the flu, transmitting through a look, a sense, and all types technology".

Instead of acting as a protective response to a threat, Toxic Stress becomes a threat in itself.

So rather than helping us deal with changes and threats in our environment, she turns on us and if not curbed can push us over the edge and into the abyss of dysfunction:

- **Emotional signs and symptoms** like restlessness, moodiness and irritability, excessive worrying and fear that is disproportionate to actual event, feeling depressed and generally unhappy, feeling worthless and bad about yourself (low self-esteem) being anxious and agitated, being angry and feeling overwhelmed and not in control, unable to relax, being lonely and wanting to be alone.
- **Physical signs and symptoms** like changes in, low energy levels and constant tiredness no matter how long you sleep, headaches and other pain experiences not linked to specific injury or condition, sweating and shaking hands, ringing in the ear, dry mouth and difficulty swallowing, clenched jaw and grinding teeth, changes in bowel movement pattern (diarrhoea or constipation), experiencing nausea, muscle tightness, chest pain and rapid heartbeat, frequent colds and infections, loss of sexual desire and/or ability, high blood pressure, diabetes, dull skin and hair.
- **Cognitive signs and symptoms** like brain fog and inability to focus mental fatigue including inability to remember even basic things, rumination and racing thoughts, constant worrying, poor judgement, disorganisation, general pessimistic view of life, emphasising the negative side.
- **Behavioural signs and symptoms** including Changes in appetite -- either not eating or eating too much eating and sleeping habits (eating and sleeping more or less), increased cigarette smoking and use of alcohol and drugs including dagga, procrastinating and avoiding responsibilities, exhibiting nervous behaviours like pacing, fidgeting and nail biting.

Although stress is the result of autonomic nervous system responses over which we don't have much conscious control (most of us can't stop ourselves from getting a fright when hearing a loud bang for example), it is possible and very important to take action and set boundaries for Toxic Stress. Yet it might not be that easy. She has worn you down. A medical and/or psychological intervention might be required to expel Toxic Stress and to re-build a healthy relationship with Tame and Tolerable Stress for the sake of our own wellbeing.

But there are self-care choices we can make. Next time we look at ways to do that but until then, don't give Toxic Stress any airtime. She needs to be shown her place.

Keep well
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