

THE TRUTH ABOUT STRESS

By Chantal Burns

We are living in an exciting world where choice and possibility is infinite. It's a world where success, particularly at work, is often evaluated on the results we achieve. People are focused on having, getting, achieving, doing.

We also live in a world where people are experiencing increasing levels of stress and anxiety. We only have to read the statistics and the raft of research that's done each year to see the impact that stress related illness is having on the business world. On average, it's reported to be the costliest of all work-related illnesses in terms of days lost per case.

As well as the costs of work absenteeism, there is another metric being used. It's called presenteesim. It points to the costs of low productivity caused by an unhealthy state of mind and poor quality of thinking. It's estimated to be double the cost of absenteeism.* And there are no signs of this decreasing.

In addition, there has been a reported increase of 43% for Prozac prescriptions.

The traditional approach to stress and anxiety disorders, rather like the typewriter, is out of date. Science and psychology have moved on, yet attitudes and approaches to this subject have stayed locked in an old paradigm.

We have an industry that's still focused on 'managing stress'. The description 'stress management' pre-supposes that stress is inevitable and the best we can do is just handle or control it. This year, on a website promoting an annual stress and wellbeing conference, on the opening page it said "We can't eliminate stress, all we can do is learn to manage it more effectively".

Whilst this might have made sense 20 years ago based on people's understanding about the subject, this is **the first fundamental misunderstanding** about stress. The truth



is that stress doesn't have to be managed. It simply has to be understood for what it really is.

If we take a typical definition of stress, it might read; "Stress occurs when pressure exceeds your perceived ability to cope" - S. Palmer 1999.

The key word in this description is 'perceived'. There is no doubt that there are physiological and biological processes that happen when we over-activate the arousal hormones. People experience a range of symptoms which cause everything from mild discomfort to a melt down of the immune system.

**Sainsburys centre for mental health*

“ We also live in a world where people are experiencing increasing levels of stress and anxiety ”

What if stress wasn't just a fact of life?

As a species, we've evolved over thousands of years to handle genuinely dangerous situations where our life was on the line. We know this as the fight or flight response.

It was evolved to save our lives (from a sabre-toothed tiger), yet many people are activating this response several times a day and not when their life is on the line but when their ego is on the line! This response wasn't designed for a 'bad day at the office'.

The secret is to understand what triggers the biological 'stress response'.

All the evidence so far, points to thought and perception as the driver of this process.

I do a lot of air travel. Sometimes, if the plane is experiencing severe turbulence, I've been known to get panicky and grab the arm of some unsuspecting passenger. I know that if not for my thinking, I would feel peaceful.

My visions of crashing, leaving my family behind and other such helpful thoughts, are giving rise to my experience in that moment. As soon as I remember where my experience is coming from (my thoughts) I instantly relax again. All is fine with the world, regardless of how bumpy the ride may be.

It is liberating to realise that whatever is on our mind in a given moment is what we experience in that moment. So that means that what isn't on our minds in a given moment is not our experience.

The traditional approaches to stress, anxiety or depression are primarily cognitive models of psychology. They are extremely helpful in showing people how they can respond differently and reorganise their thinking in such a way that new choices and possibilities become available to them. However, this cognitive model is operating from an *outside in* paradigm.

By this, I mean that it assumes that how we are feeling is based on the circumstances out there and so people are taught to get

better at managing how they deal with the circumstances. This serves to perpetuate the belief that our experience is driven by circumstance rather than our thinking.

The second fundamental misunderstanding about stress is about where our experience originates. If it were the circumstances that caused our stress, then we would all experience events in the same way. We would all have the same problems. But we don't.

How is it that something trivial can seem like a mountain on Monday and on Tuesday, the same thing looks like a minor inconvenience?

It's simply a fluctuation in mood or thought. The problem is never the circumstances per se. The problem is that we buy into our thinking and forget that it's just thought. It's like making scary faces in the mirror at yourself and then forgetting that you are the one making the scary faces.

To be able to more gracefully ride the waves of life we need to understand where our good feelings, happiness and peace of mind really come from – from within. This perspective and a deeper understanding is the greatest 'technique' we can have. It's the reason why the stress techniques work in the first place!

From an NLP and systems perspective, at the primary level of experience, all data is ambiguous. There is no judgement or negation. It is simply bits of sensory data. No meaning is made. Then the process of deleting, distorting and generalising moves us into a secondary level of experience, where data becomes information. This is also the domain of emotions. Through our amazing gift of thought we make meaning. We assign labels. Circumstances are data that we've made meaning of and therefore all circumstances are inherently neutral.

"Thought creates the world and says 'I didn't do it'" - David Bohm

When a person is feeling stressed out or anxious, it's simply an indicator of the quality of their thinking in any given moment. This leads us on to **the third fundamental misunderstanding** - what our feelings mean. Most people perceive 'bad' feelings as a signal that

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there is something wrong 'out there in the world'. They perceive their feelings as a reflection of reality, rather than just a function of thought. The impact of this is people making decisions or acting out of what we might call faulty thinking.

There's another way. We can choose to consider those feelings of anxiety or stress as a signal to pause and either question your thinking or simply leave it alone. Many people know this intellectually but the question is, are they living from this? By the reports and the huge increases in prescription drugs, it seems not. The truth is that we are always and only ever feeling our thinking, not the circumstances. Consider that conditions and circumstances don't exist as facts but as a product of thought, brought to life via conversations (with ourselves and others).

The more that people can see how they are always thinking up their experiences, the more access they will have to their default state – one of peace and mental wellbeing.

When it comes to mental wellbeing, contentment and peace of mind, it's not the content of our thinking that's important, it's the fact *that* we think. And we don't have to do anything. When we simply allow ourselves to notice where the source of our experience comes from, it will bring us home to our natural stillness and peace of mind.

The experience of stress is always an inside job. However real it seems, it's always

made of thought – our thought.

"We can't solve problems at the same level of thinking that created them" - Einstein

As Einstein said, we have to move beyond current thinking to see something new. We have to go beyond the comfort of what we already know and trust.

There was a time when people believed blood-letting was a cure for all illnesses. For almost 2000 years this was considered the remedy for all disease.

Great inventors understand that there is always something beyond what they already know and they create the conditions for those insights to occur. Those conditions are not a hectic, busy mind but a quiet, philosophical and reflective mind. That's where we access our greatest creativity and our deepest sense of peace.

If we want more joy or happiness and less stress and worry, the key is in how we relate to our thoughts. All we have to do is remember that they are transient and they're always creating our experience of reality in any given moment.

A thought doesn't hang around without your attention. If it knocks on the door, you don't have to let it in! You can acknowledge it and allow it to move on, as inevitably it will. As you do this more and more, you will re-connect with your natural wellbeing and peace of mind. This is available to every human being regardless of the circumstances.

I believe that a life fully lived is one where we experience the full range of emotions from anger and sadness to joy and euphoria. I also know that in those darkest moments, blue sky is always there behind the clouds and it's always and only a thought away. ■

Special offer to readers:

For a deeper exploration, you can download a complimentary copy of Chantal's recording 'The Truth Isn't Out There' at www.starconsultancy.com/truth (normally £55)



Chantal is a leading trainer, coach and speaker, working with organisations and individuals. The 'truth' of this article refers to a new paradigm in psychology. It's an expression of the discovery and work of the late and great Sydney Banks. Chantal's commitment is to ensure that business leaders are leveraging this profound new 'technology' so that individuals and organisations can truly flourish, independent of circumstances.

Chantal will be speaking at this year's NLP Conference. Contact: chantal@starconsultancy.com Tel 01727 757059