

## Work in Progress

Published monthly by Michele Crawford

Work in Progress is an electronic newsletter intended to assist individuals seeking optimum well-being.

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Feature Article: Understanding Stress! The Physical and Emotional Components that Create Strain and Tension in our Lives. Part One.

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1) Note from Michele

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Dear Reader

What exactly is stress? My definition is simple: stress is about *problems outside and problems inside*. "Problems outside" refers to those obstacles in life we call *stressors*. Examples would be traffic, noisy neighbors, deadlines, headlines, timelines, tragedies, accidents, and so on. "Problems inside" alludes to your interpretations of the stressors that have the potential to create negative emotions and physical problems such as a knot in your stomach that eventually could lead to an ulcer.

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## 2) Understanding Stress! The Physical and Emotional Components that Create Strain and Tension in our Lives. Part One

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In this article, I will be employing a narrative approach, utilizing stories as a way to clarify research on our stress responses. Part Two follows next month.

Understanding Stress! The Physical and Emotional Components that Create Strain and Tension in our Lives. Part One.

### Introduction

The framework of this article, Understanding Stress, is divided into two components. First, I will discuss the physical aspects of stress and then, the mental aspects. Combining both aspects, I will write an illustrative story of a woman with a mouse phobia.

Finally, I will be providing helpful tips for alleviating stress. Some may sound simplistic and may seem too easy to be truly helpful, but their merit lies in the measurable results of calmness and well-being.

### Physical Dimension of Stress

Something I've done from time to time, because it always amuses me, is to sneak into my backyard when my dogs are not paying attention. I wait in a "scary" pose until they see me and it's hilarious to watch their response. They go crazy barking until they recognize me.

I love the way the fur stands up on the short coat of one dog. (It's actually the chemicals of the *fight or flight reactions* that cause his fur to react like that. There will be more on that later).

When they realize it's not an intruder after all, my dogs immediately shift gears and are hyper-playful; bouncing around like exploding popcorn. This is called the "discharge" period (which I'll discuss under the Arousal heading). They are now both very excited and happy, living in the moment. Neither holds a grudge, is mad, reproachful, pouting or blaming; (these being examples of possible human reactions of course).

### Arousal Explained

All animals share my dogs' cycle. Animals will go into an arousal state when they perceive danger... then, using physical activity, they will discharge all the excess energy of arousal... allowing them to calm down again, bearing no lingering effects of trauma. For example, zebras are chased around all the time by lions, cheetahs and leopards and they do not get ulcers.

*Arousal* is the physical reaction that energizes all animals' survival responses. It is also known as the *fight or flight or freeze* mechanism. Designed for a physical world ("physical" refers to the world of animals and prehistoric human beings), arousal either activates or shuts down certain physiological reactions that prepare the animal to fight danger, to run away from danger, or to numb the pain response if the danger actually injures or maims.

Human beings are animals and share the *fight or flight or freeze* reaction. These responses are so instinctive; they pre-date even the most primitive parts of the brain. There are hundreds of chemicals that dump out of the brain at this particular instant. One becomes a "walking talking chemistry experiment." (These chemicals, when too concentrated or left untreated, lead to cancer, heart disease, back pain, depression, panic attacks, etc., but that's another article.)

### The Story of the Baby Cheetahs

The first story is loosely based on a storyline from Peter Levine's book Waking the Tiger. Apparently, a naturalist was observing three baby cheetahs playing in a grotto area while their mother was away hunting. A lion showed up and unfortunately, lions eat baby cheetahs. Luck was on their side however. They ran up a tree and waited until the lion wandered away.

When they came back down, the babies were full of beans and apparently play-acted the sequence of events. One cheetah pretended to be the lion and chased the other two up the tree. Then they switched roles until their mother returned. Again, the babies showed her what they had learned.

When the lion appeared, the cheetahs reacted into arousal. Their arousal was discharged when they ran up the tree and again and again, reenacting the event. Then they felt safe, relaxed and without stress. I can imagine their acceptance of the reality of lions and gratefulness that they did not die that day. In fact, they learned an

awesome coping skill for the future that they would not know if it wasn't for the experience, scary as it was at the time.

Substituting human beings for the cheetah babies, I can imagine different inner dialogues and outcomes. Some people would stay in the tree, too afraid to come back down again. Others would be shadowed by fear, shaking at every rustle of grass. Others would be angry at the lion for disturbing their rest, denying reality and her right to be hungry. Still others would be depressed because they would be focused on the helplessness of life that could end so easily. And then there are the "idealists," who go back through the event, re-writing it in their minds: "I should have beaten up the lion!"

But this was not so for our baby cheetahs. The cycle of arousal, discharge and relaxation was at its best, with a potential lesson for us all.

#### Now the Lion Becomes a Car

Now, let's use a comparable example for human beings (also in Levine's book). I'm driving down the highway and suddenly a car swerves into my lane, leaving me with little time to react. I believe I'm going to die! At the last possible instant I swerve and end up in the ditch while the other vehicle drives safely away.

If I was true to the original purpose of the arousal cycle, I would playfully run around my car many times, ecstatic to be breathing. Then, I would encourage my friends to drive at me with their cars while I dodge at the last possible moment. Then we would all party ourselves into relaxation and calm, counting our blessings to be alive and feeling energized by the amazing and lucky outcome in spite of the danger.

OK, so it probably wouldn't happen that way. It would be more likely that after going into the arousal state, other consequences could occur:

- Fight: You may rage at the injustice and search for the car in parking lots, with your tire iron ready to smash a headlight... or worse;
- Flight: You may be fearful of driving because every time you sit behind the wheel of your car, you experience flashbacks and heart palpitations; or

- Freeze: You may become depressed with obsessive thoughts of hopelessness over the randomness of death.

Levine, Peter (1997) Waking the Tiger North Atlantic Books: Berkeley, CA

Part Two will follow next month!

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3) About Michele  
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Michele Crawford is a therapist who assists individuals who are struggling with trauma, anxiety or depression. Her passion for her work remains embedded in being able to connect with you in your suffering, helping you find real solutions no matter how complex the issue may be.

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4) Counselling Services  
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Are you prepared to live with more happiness, optimism, confidence, self-worth and hope? If your answer is "yes," then your next step is to contact me for a free 20-minute phone consultation. We can then discuss how I might best help you resolve your problems of Trauma, Depression and Anxiety.

The benefits of counselling with Michele include: significantly reduced stress levels, an optimistic outlook in life, increased confidence and hope.

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