

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 Two.

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1) Note from Michele

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Dear Reader

As outlined in Part One, my definition of stress 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, headlines, accidents, tragedies, 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.

In this feature, continuing with the physical aspects of stress, I outline the aftermath of going into a state of fight or flight, focusing on

attempts to try to avoid or control it. Have you heard stories of people lifting a car off of a person? Imagine lifting your own car. This is the power of fight or flight! It is also the power people try to control versus work with as a natural force that builds and then always wanes and ebbs.

Next month's feature will begin the emotional aspects of stress, including more stories!

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

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THE AFTERMATH OF AROUSAL

The role of emotion is easier to understand when its two components are separated. **Affect** is the physical component of emotion. The origins of *affect* lie in the older non-verbal part of the brain and are closely related to the fight, flight or freeze response. *Affect* explains the sensations in your body such as a racing heart, stomach feeling tight, faster breathing, a heavy sensation in your chest, shakiness, or a sense of jitteriness.

Affect is also associated with physical symptoms like insomnia, uncontrollable sobbing, heartburn or stomach ache. These responses, left untreated, eventually lead to ailments such as migraine headaches, chronic pain, heart disease, stroke, cancer and more.

Emotion refers to the meaning you assign to affect responses and originates in the language centre of the cognitive brain. For example, the physical sensation in your body may be described as anxiety. Your heart racing may be interpreted as rage or a reaction to another's poor driving habits. Your stomach ache may be understood to be fear or a phobic reaction to mice. Or your sleeplessness may be construed as worry about the future

As I've mentioned, arousal is a fight, flight or freeze response. The fight or flight reaction is known as "hyper-arousal" and the freeze response is called "hypo-arousal." The freeze response tends to be played down in our culture even though it may be the more common arousal outcome.

FREEZE AFFECT OR DISSOCIATION

In the freeze mode, you can disconnect from:

- your memories (usually childhood memories);
- your emotions (either being shut down emotionally or prone to being flooded by emotion);
- other people (lacking empathy or intuitiveness for others, or isolating);
- your body (unaware of body sensations or vibrations); or
- your own identity (you do not understand yourself, know what you want, experience chronic confusion and are easily pulled in different directions by other people or events, especially to please others).

In addition, there is a freeze-related disconnection that forms a duality (one side of the brain struggling with the other side). Illustrations of duality could be an on-going tussle between the cognitive and emotional sides of the brain or when you habitually conceptualize plans that never reach fruition (for example, a plan to exercise or stop smoking does not manifest in action).

Fortunately, these examples are based in the nervous system more so than personality characteristics! **That means that you can change these symptoms after all.**

Dissociation occurs on a continuum. On one end, (familiar to everyone), we eat a bag full of chips without tasting any or drive for a few blocks in "automatic pilot." On the other end of the scale, extreme forms of dissociation include multiple personality disorders.

The most common types of dissociation are located somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. Examples would be a racing or foggy mind, poor concentration and memory problems, being emotionally shut-down or cold, an inability to self-soothe, or a sense of feeling empty, lost and alone.

COPING WITH AROUSAL IN AN EMOTIONAL WORLD

We now live in an emotional world, not a physical one. When we do perceive danger, especially when it's emotional danger, our arousal response is instinctive and instantaneous. It is either being hyper-arousal (anger or anxiety) or hypo-arousal (shutting down). When we perceive or experience danger, we unfortunately, tend not to discharge like our friends in the animal world. This means we now have to learn ways of handling heightened arousal.

The inability to naturally discharge after arousal explains the reactions of many people who are driven off a road, into a ditch, and remain emotionally charged afterwards.

STYLES OF MANAGING AROUSAL

1.) Control:

- trying to directly *control* the affect response of fight or flight (e.g., trying to control shakiness or a racing heart with sheer will).
- trying to *control* the perceived source of the “danger” (e.g., if his yelling makes my heart race, I’ll do everything I can to calm and keep him from yelling; or if driving a car upsets my stomach, I’ll avoid driving).
- perfectionism is an attempt to *control* the world around you to lower your affect responses, so you can feel safer inside your body. (“Control freak” is a familiar term for the need to try to *control* everything in one’s environment.)

2.) Medicating:

- is based on a belief that the power to soothe uncomfortable affect lies in something external. You can medicate or “numb” yourself in order to calm arousal symptoms with alcohol, prescription or illegal drugs, gambling, relationships, food, work, and so on.

3.) Labelling:

- is either directly *labelling*, in a negative way, affect (e.g., “My hands are shaking, proving I’m weak,” “My stomach is upset because I’m not good enough.”), or
- indirectly *labelling*, in a negative way, affect with concepts like “phobias.” For example, you believe *your fear of flying* causes your hands to shake, your heart to race, your stomach to turn over. (The reality is you secretly tell yourself your plane is going to crash. Your body then responds with predictable affect such as a racing heart, shakiness, upset stomach, or headache.)

4.) Judging:

- is again, directly labelling affect, only here *judging* refers to using your imagination to presume the thoughts someone else is having about you. For example, imagining someone is *judging* your shakiness as evidence you're a weak person.
- in an attempt to feel better about yourself, *judging* can be a critical voice used to judge others. For example, using mean-spirited gossip in an attempt to "feel superior" and more in control of your own life.

5.) **"Over-the-top" affect:**

- is deliberately choosing adrenalin-related activities to override unresolved affect, and thereby feel in control again. This can include a range of pursuits from bungee-jumping or driving recklessly to dangerous lifestyles. (e.g., A 14 year old girl standing on the corner selling her body, or cutting herself with razor blades, chooses that pain as preferable to older, deeper, less assessable affect pain.)

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

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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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**Privacy Policy**  
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I want to reassure you that your e-mail address will never be shared or sold to anyone else.

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**Pass It Along**  
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