

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 Three.

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1) Note from Michele

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Dear Reader

In Part One and Part Two of this series, I outlined the physical components of stress, related to our animal origins and natural fight or flight or freeze response. Part Three introduces the emotional aspects of stress.

It's important to remember that the sensations felt in the body are called affect, separate from emotion, and are part of the fight or flight continuum. Emotion is the meaning we assign to affect: either the words of description or the stories we associate with particular affect.

For example, FEAR is the word to describe sensations in the heart, stomach, muscles and the story may be "I'm afraid to be alone."

Prior to the beginning of the 1900's, people would get sick (pneumonia, tuberculosis, influenza), and then typically die. It was pretty straightforward. Now people erode to death from too much fight or flight reaction (stress). Over time, we call these reactions cancer, heart attacks, strokes, colitis, Crohns disease, asthma and so on. Even more minor reactions like ulcers, heartburn, kidney stones, chronic pain and fatigue, to name a few, can be debilitating.

Read on for the emotional element: using stories and examples, I hope to give a rough idea of the real cause of stress in our emotional world.

THE MENTAL DIMENSION OF STRESS

The basis of an exceedingly effective model of counselling (called cognitive behavioural) is fostered on the belief that **how we emotionally respond at any moment depends on our interpretations**... our views, our beliefs and our thoughts... of any situation, not the situation itself. In other words, the things we think and say to ourselves, not what actually happens to us, *cause* our positive or negative emotions and ultimately, our behaviour and other consequences.

This is a very old concept: *As a man thinketh, so he is.* -The Bible

In 1993, a brain scientist (Candace Pert) discovered a bio-chemical connection between our thoughts and our immune system. This proved a long-held belief that how we think directly affects how we feel. It goes a long way to explain when we go to a doctor, describing our aches, pains and ailments, and the doctor says "*There's nothing wrong. It must be stress.*" Going back to my definition of stress: "problems outside and problems inside," this clarifies why we say things like: "I was really stressed last winter, and man, did I ever get sick a lot!"

Since 1993, there has been an astronomical amount of research further proving the link between our thoughts and the chemical changes in our bodies. Even words like "*should*" and "*must*" create a fire-storm of chemicals in the primitive brain which are very toxic over time. (These words counter-indicate reality.) Apparently, people that use the "*should*" word will sometimes express it hundreds of times a

day. Imagine the build-up of poisonous toxins that are stored in the body just from employing that one word.

THE STORY OF THE "SHOULDING" MAN IN THE DRUGSTORE

One day, a man woke up feeling very ill. The night before, there had been a blizzard and the streets were covered in deep snow. Although he did not want to go outside, his doctor had phoned a prescription into a nearby drugstore to help him feel better.

On the drive over, his self-talk was upsetting him even more. He complained about the weather, the roads, his sickness, other drivers, and so on. He used the 'should' word many times... each time getting more upset. By the time he arrived at the store, he was especially angry that the parking lot was covered in heavy snow, making it hard to navigate.

Just outside the doorway, two parking spaces had been cleared of snow, but a single car was carelessly angled across both! Now he had to risk getting stuck by having to park in the deep snow.

In his mind, that was the final straw! He tore into the store with every intention of giving the driver a stern reprimand. But, due to the positioning of the doors, he could only shake his fist and give the other driver an extremely dirty look as he slipped out the exit.

His emotions continued to rise over the "injustice" of the entire situation and he then raged at the pharmacist about his snow-covered parking lot, the weather, and particularly, the inconsideration of his latest customer.

The pharmacist, a kindly older man, looked bewildered and asked if he was referring to the man who had just left the building. He then went on to explain that this man had picked up an anxiety-related prescription for his wife. She apparently wasn't doing very well after the recent death of their child.

You can imagine the remorse the man felt over his behaviour in the face of the other man's pain. In fact, every time he thought of what he did to him, his stomach turned over with guilt. That upsetting feeling continued for a longtime afterwards (of course, creating all those nasty chemicals).

All of this man's emotions were created by his interpretations of each circumstance, not by the circumstances themselves. **Like many people, he managed to create most of his own stress.**

ANOTHER PARKING LOT STORY

There was another man who waited until Christmas Eve to buy a gift for his brother-in-law, a man he cared for very much. Because the stores were exceptionally crowded, he found himself driving around and around looking for a parking space and getting more and more angry. He believed there *should* be space readily available for him.

He finally noticed the back-up lights on a car and turned on his signal light to alert his intentions of taking the space for himself. It was quite a long wait and he was not patient at all. Finally the car backed out. And you guessed it! Another car appeared out of nowhere and promptly stole the spot.

The man was so angry! After finally finding another parking space, he went into the store angry at the other driver, the crowds, having to go shopping, and even angry at his brother-in-law. Did you notice all his *shoulds*? In fact, he even felt justified in buying an ugly gift just so he could get out of there as fast as possible.

The next day, looking at his brother-in-law's anticipatory face as he was about to open his gift, this man had such buyer's remorse that he snatched the gift out of his brother-in-law's hands. He told him he had changed his mind and needed to go back to the store to get something nicer because he did not want his brother-in-law to see how thoughtless he had been.

We could easily get one hundred people in a room to all agree that it is normal, universal and common for individuals to get angry over the parking lot situation... someone stealing our space! But the important question to answer is "Is it healthy to be so angry?"

Reality tells us that people steal parking lot spaces. Those instances are not in our control. Our response to that reality **is** in our control! The man had so many other options he could have chosen that would have brought about different, more desired results. His anger was actually caused by his idealistic expectation of *what should have happened*. Although it was an intensely annoying experience, he did not have to become so disturbed by it.

By focusing on his "should," (i.e., his expectation, NOT reality), he paid attention to what he could not control, losing focus of what he could control: himself and his reaction.

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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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