



Stress and the City

Modern life throws us daily challenges and how we process them is critical to our mental wellbeing. – By Prof Richard Fielding

Stress seems to be an inevitability in modern life. But the extent to which it becomes a problem is actually quite controllable. Let me explain.

The human brain has evolved to maintain a level of arousal that is, ideally, optimal for the performance of the tasks needed for survival: at the most basic level these are finding food, defence against attack, and reproduction. In contemporary life these tasks are embedded in a much wider array of activities. The body evolved to respond to the demands of the brain. To run, multiple changes in body activity occur to provide for the increased energy demands of muscles. Heart rate and respiration increase, blood supply is re-prioritised to muscle

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away from viscera and towards the skin to remove the excess heat generated, and glucose and fat stores are mobilised ready to provide energy. These

changes are triggered by both hormonal and nerve activity. The release of adrenaline and cortisol, key chemicals in activating the body, is controlled by the brain via hormones from the pituitary gland, while heart rate responds to both nerve, hormonal and chemical signals.

Running is one demand, but daily we face countless other demands, many of which are automatically met without much thought. For example, as adults we don't think about how to chew food while eating. We learn as babies how

to do this and it becomes habitual in the sense that it doesn't require much attention. Which is a good thing, because we have limited attention – of which, more later. While the body's responses to demands, often simplistically referred to as the "fight-flight response", evolved in environments where physical responses were very often involved, it is the brain's appraisal of situations that are the critical feature here.

When faced with a familiar situation, our past experience of navigating that experience provides a map for dealing with the present. If we successfully navigated that experience, we will likely repeat the same behaviour, a known solution that works. If we weren't successful last time we might try something different, depending on what we feel we have in the way of resources to allocate to navigating the experience. The successes and failures we have in early life strongly influence how we appraise each situation thereafter. If the demand is easily met, not a problem. If it is so great as to be impossible to meet, this, paradoxically, is also often not a problem as the person can resort to the "no-one could have solved that" response, so there is often little personal engagement, unless the threat is extreme and personal.

The key concept here is that of threat. Threat refers to anything considered undesirable and to be avoided by the person, usually a loss of some kind. The more significant the threat is to a person, the more demanding the situation is. These psychological demands can be managed provided sufficient resources are available. When a person perceives the demands of a situation as exceeding their perceived resources, and the consequences of that demand not being successfully met are

threatening—the process psychologists call primary appraisal—the brain anticipates harm and the same physical processes are activated as for running. However, we are not running. In modern life, we are usually sitting. Unsurprisingly, the effects of these bodily changes are significant, commonly interpreted as, or attributed to anxiety, impending heart attack, fear or rising panic and a sense that everyday

control is slipping through your fingers or that you can't cope. Processes that evolved to energise the body for action are instead interpreted as health problems. The situation gets worse because, unlike demands for physical action, the demands of modern life create low control situational threats that are often drawn out – too tight work deadlines, social conflict, underemployment, decision-making under uncertainty, declining business performance, work-

home conflict, or childrens' school performance, for example.

Our responses to both the situations and the feelings they generate will follow our past patterns of behaviour. If we have good resources, education, social support, financial security, problem-solving skills, self-confidence and esteem, adaptability, creativity, past experience of mastery, for example,

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then we might perceive that the situation is potentially controllable, and engage with the demand to seek an effective solution. Alternatively, the perception may be that the situation is not controllable, and so effort will be shifted to managing the emotional responses to the situation. Sometimes these are successful, often they are stop-gap measures that involve avoidance, minimisation, trivialisation or denial of the situation, resulting in putting off dealing with the situation, or reverting to comfort behaviours, such as excessive eating, alcohol or other drug use. These are not “wrong” responses, but they can become maladaptive if they become established and can interfere with more appropriate adaptive responses that help us grow. And, of course, the demands tend to remain unresolved.

When we act to deal with either the situation or the emotions, we evaluate how effective our efforts have been, what psychologists call secondary appraisal. Perceiving failure to deal effectively with the situation or emotional responses can result in behavioural difficulties, such as irritability or anger outbursts, sleep disruption, inattention, memory and learning difficulties, and eventually more serious consequences, such as relationship breakdown or work performance deficits, and increased risk for several important health problems, including high blood pressure, increased risk of stroke and heart disease. Prolonged stress may also be a risk factor for dementia in later life.

Knowing this, how you perceive the world becomes critical to how you experience it. If, for example, due to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as growing up with an alcoholic parent, a person has low self-esteem, feels emotionally insecure and has developed a set of survival behaviours suited to their home environment, they may find these do not work well in other settings, such as work. Demands may be disproportionately threatening and responses may be “locked in” to those of one’s family of origin.

There are very few people who are perfect at handling demands. We all face things that challenge us, and in most cases, we meet those challenges day in day out without difficulty. When we do find ourselves starting to feel ‘stress’, then we are approaching the limits of our ability to cope. Again, with city living in Hong Kong, this is something we all recognise.

Winding back to reduce stress involves multiple approaches to re-appraise situations, problem-solve, build

resources and effectively manage emotions and the feelings accompanying stress. At its most simple, when it all starts getting on top of you, take time out, find ways to relax fully, stay focused on the present as much as possible, reconsider if what you perceive as threat really is that important – usually it isn’t. Vigorous activity is one of the most effective remedies for when you are feeling stressed, so go for a run, ideally in the countryside, or failing that have sex, though probably not in the countryside. If all else fails find a good psychologist. 



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Asia Medical Specialists (AMS) bring sub-specialisation to Hong Kong private healthcare. AMS is a team of medical practitioners who are sub-specialised and together provide comprehensive care. We have offices in Central and Tsimshatsui and also consult in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

