

The Huffington Post



Peggy Drexler

The End Of Normal: Stress is What You Make it

Posted January 12, 2009 | 01:52 PM (EST)

A textbook definition of stress is: "a condition or feeling experienced when an individual perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources he or she is able to mobilize."

A bumper sticker definition may be less clinical, but more topical: "Stress is what happens when the mind must override the body's natural desire to choke the hell out of somebody who richly deserves it."

Unless you happen to find yourself in the same prison cafeteria as Bernie Madoff - option two probably isn't going to happen.

So it's time to do some serious thinking about stress and how to deal with it. It looks like it's going to be a fact of life for many months to come. The best way to deal with it, is to get on top of it.

For some people, stress is the corollary of bad decisions - like signing a mortgage you know you can't afford or running up credit card debt that you planned to pay off with the promised (housing prices never fall) gains when you refinance. For most, life has been turned inside out by forces and people they had nothing do with, can't control, and still don't fully understand.

Compounding the wear and tear is the determined chorus of denial and avoidance: we didn't do it; we couldn't have seen it coming; it's not our job.

Since we can't go all primal on those who changed our lives - even if we could figure out exactly who they are - we must find a more civilized way of dealing with the eons of genetic programming that pumps out the hormones that tell us to fight or flee.

When you can't fight and you can't escape, how do we handle the toxic build-up?

A friend passed on some advice by a business professor who shared with his students the key to managing your way through a crisis. When things go wrong, he said: "Act like it's your fault."

It's useful advice for all who are trying to get a grip on events that have massively tested both comprehension and coping - even if it is counter-intuitive. For the great percentage of impacted lives, it's not their fault at all.

The key is to understand that stress, by itself, is not the enemy. In fact, few things worthwhile are accomplished without it. Canadian endocrinologist Hans Selye, credited with coining the term "stress", said that there are two kinds of stress: one debilitates; the other drives achievement.

The difference is largely about control. With global forces whipsawing lives, the levers of control become operational when we understand that we can't change the situation, but we can change ourselves.

When we accept responsibility for our stress, we have taken a big step toward dealing with it. Self-help lists are full of possibilities: breathe deeply, take up yoga, reduce caffeine, create a support group, work for a charity, reconnect with family, let go of hostility, start exercising.

There is not a magic bullet in the bunch.

But what's important is the one thing they all have in common: action. They all reflect a determination not to sit and stare out the window as gurgling stress hormones hurt the body and corrode the soul.

Anybody not stressed these days isn't paying attention. It's real. It's warranted. But there is a choice. When you accept responsibility for stress, you own it. And when you own it, it can't bring you down.