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Resilience: A Functional Approach to Stress¹

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"Aging is the sum total of all the stresses we place on our body throughout our life." Hans Selye

The goals of this paper are to 1) identify the motivational conflicts and difficulties of a stress management model, 2) define resilience as a more positive and motivationally unidirectional construct, and 3) identify nine components of this resilience model.

I have noted with dismay that one's awareness of being too stressed and its probable organismic damage, generally does not lead to a change in behavior. An important adaptive mechanism was causing harm due to its overuse, and it was being ignored.

This resistance needs to be addressed if healing and more optimal functioning is to occur.

Resistance to Stress Management

Table one presents the reasons for resisting stress management. First, our stress response makes us more alert, focused and capable of responding to events in our environment. In the short run, it gives us a boost or added

energy. Related to this is that the stress response is adaptive — a survival mechanism — preparing us for any threat to our lives or our perceived well-being. We don't take a chance with survival, thus we are loath to turn off the response. Another way of saying this is that we don't play dice with our lives. For this reason, the sympathetic nervous system and stress response hold dominance over the parasympathetic or recuperative part of our nervous system.

Figure 1 presents the relationship between stress and performance. As can be seen, with little stress, performance suffers, with no motivation or focus. As stress increases, there is an equivalent increase in performance... to a point! Beyond this point, performance and health deteriorate. But, the typical unconscious expectation is that if some stress is good, more stress is better. Furthermore,

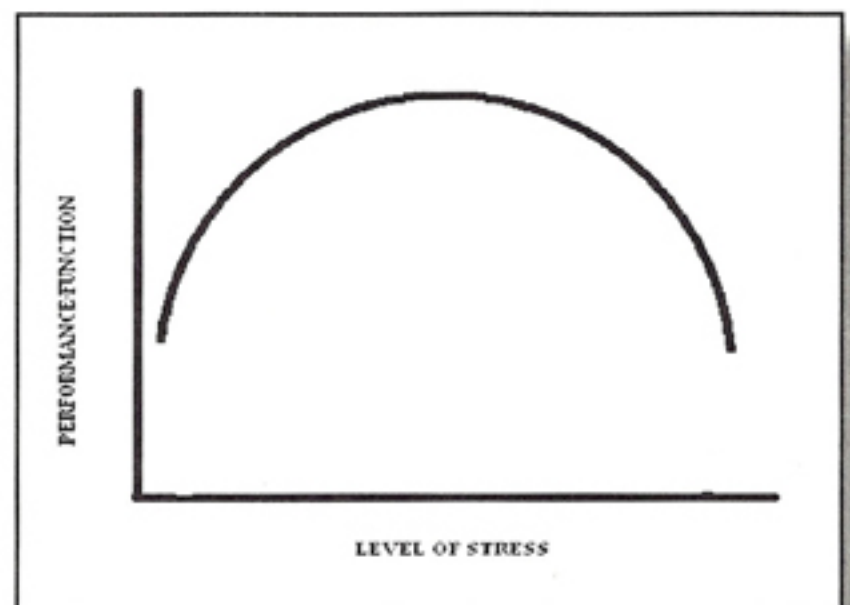


Figure 1. Performance — stress relationship

there is no clear-cut signal telling us when we are at that optimal level; and so we typically overshoot it.

Next on the list is one's reluctance to set any limit on something we feel is needed. Thus, the word "management" itself tends to turn people off. Frequently the client will voice their fear, that if they tried to relax they might become lazy, unproductive. Many believe there is a slippery slope — start relaxing a little and pretty soon you will find it difficult to do any work. For others, part of their stress is the fear of their life falling apart. Under these circumstances, they can only think of hanging on, even if it means maintaining high stress and tension levels. For these people, there is great discomfort with letting go and being vulnerable.

Some people are always getting themselves into very stressful circumstances. Oftentimes they get out of the stress, and before they feel relief, create other circumstances that get them right back into the fire. If you look deeper, the hidden cause is some early

Table 1: Resistance to Managing Stress

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Our stress response mobilizes the body's resources and within limits enhances performance. | 6. Unfinished business unconsciously drives stressful behavior. |
| 2. The stress response is adaptive; a survival mechanism. | 7. Adrenalin addiction and counteracting "deadness" or psychological numbing. |
| 3. "Management" itself, implies constraint, and limitation, which has a negative connotation. | 8. Habituation to higher levels of tension. |
| 4. Those who see things in black and white believe that if they let up a little, they will become lazy. | 9. Discomfort with vulnerability. |
| 5. Preoccupation with stress masks emotional pain and other uncomfortable issues. | 10. Sympathetic dominance of our nervous system. |
| | 11. Conditioned associations. |
| | 12. Two mismatches described in text. |

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wounding that is too uncomfortable to be addressed. Stress and ongoing crisis mask this pain.

John Sarno talks about this in his books on healing back pain. He coined the phrase, tension myositis syndrome, or TMS, to refer to physical tension and pain that serves as a distraction and masks a person's real, emotional pain.

Related to this are the people motivated by a neurotic emotional connection with a parent; where long-standing yet unmet needs are still driving behavior. I like to refer to this as our unfinished business because a part of our psyche remains devoted to achieving resolution without our awareness. This is a common aspect of Type A behavior, and perfectionism. Both are patterns that drive stress, as one tries harder and harder for the elusive love or acceptance, with no time to rest. A longer discussion of personality factors will be addressed in a subsequent article.

It's not possible to selectively and unconsciously suppress just our painful emotions or the emotions we are admonished not to express, such as anger and crying. The act of suppression involves physical holding patterns. These patterns, or psychic armoring, as Wilhelm Reich called them, are a major factor in depression. They tend to numb and constrict the flow of energy. For a person stuck in this pattern, the adrenalin rush may be the only way to really feel alive. The resulting addiction to the adrenalin is another source of resistance to modulating the stress response.

Unfinished business and our organismic need for completion is itself stressful. Our lives are filled with unresolved situations. When something is incomplete, it creates discomfort and tension as the body's warning signal. These warning signals may be experienced as anxiety, or emotional emptiness, additional sources of tension, and can lead to sleepless nights.

Awareness is a key ingredient in dealing with stress, or any other potential imbalance. We are hampered in this awareness by the process of habituation, in which we adapt to

higher and higher levels of muscle tension and autonomic arousal. Even when training in biofeedback and other relaxation techniques is begun, the physiological or muscle memory of elevated tension creates a physical resistance to recovery.

In addition to these sources of resistance, the "management" of stress is further impacted by the conditioned associations to the stresses in our lives. Stressful situations generalize to environmental cues, leading to an ever-growing assortment of stress related triggers. One's stress response can also become associated with achieving success, leading to the assumption that the stress is necessary for success.

Finally, the confusion between stress, stress triggers and the stress response leads to the projection of responsibility: "It's the thing out there that is causing my stress"; "Life is difficult, you can't get away from stress"; and "Everyone is stressed out."

The conditions for the expression of our stress/coping response include: danger, threat, fear, uncertainty, pain, illness, conflict, unfinished business, emotions, and novelty. At the same time, there are very few triggers of the opposite or recuperation response — that part of the nervous system's activity designed to restore depleted resources.

Two Mismatches

Our difficulty in dealing with stress is compounded by what I refer to as the "two mismatches". The first mismatch is between the environment in which our stress response evolved and our present environment. The dominant survival mechanism that evolved, prepares us for the classic "fight or flight" response; mobilizing to either defend or escape.

But if we analyze the range of stressful situations in the 21st Century, rarely is this the appropriate response — but it is the *only* response we have. (There are circumstances and people who demonstrate other stereotypic responses, such as the freezing response. But these are not as dominant as fight or flight.) Anger, uncertainty, and worry while triggering the stress response, don't offer us the opportunity to take action. This results in the build up of energy and tension without the

outlet for release. Furthermore, since this is our stereotypic response, when frustrated, we cope by intensifying this same response, even though it didn't help in the first place. This ongoing tension actually creates more stress.

The second mismatch is between the environment in which we learn to utilize our stress and coping mechanism, i.e., our childhood, and our present adult environment. Even if we experience a trauma-free childhood, there are universal issues that result in a handicap. As children we are always in a one down position — even physically, as we have to look up to most people. Our awkwardness and lack of experience leave us with an uncertainty and even a sense of inadequacy that we carry with us throughout our lives that increases the sheer number of situations that we interpret as dangerous. This affects the basic equation of demand versus capacity in that we are more likely to experience demand as greater than our capacity to handle it.

This is compounded by parents' unconscious needs and insecurities. Our own need to be the "good child" results in a heightened sensitivity to the emotional discomfort in our parents. Their subtle negative reinforcement of our emotions, and our need to take care of them leads to the sublimation of feelings, adding to our tension.

Furthermore, as a child, our survival is totally dependent on our caregivers. We learn to tune in very attentively for any sign of rejection, abandonment or loss of love that may signal a serious threat to getting our needs met. It is in this crucible of survival, learning how the world works and picking up on emotional content around us, that we develop the defense mechanisms that stay with us a lifetime and that leave us prone to stressful reactions. Childhood trauma adds another dimension as it sets up chronic guarding, hyperarousal and vigilance.

Resilience: A positive concept to deal with stress

Given these inherent difficulties, I wanted to find a model that is positively motivating and doesn't use the word "Stress"! One that shifts the focus from minimal damage, as noted in Selye's quote above, to one of renewal,

enhanced capacity and optimal functioning.

Resilience has been used in the area of social developmental to refer to children exposed to significant risk factors and trauma, while showing minimal developmental impairment. The resilience research is an attempt to determine why these children thrive while others with the same experience barely survive. What qualities distinguish these children and what are the family characteristics that foster resilience?

The findings from this research indicate the following important factors: active versus passive; engaging the environment; effectance motivation, or feeling of self-efficacy; adaptive distancing; positive self-esteem and an internal locus of control. Continuing with these factors we find persistence, cognitive skills, verbal communication skills and flexibility in choosing and using different skills, i.e., they are not automatic or rigid responders.

The problem is that these studies are all correlational while the labels are more descriptive than informative: e.g., ego resiliency versus ego brittle doesn't tell us much. The same is true of "resourceful under frustration".

It's my intention to translate this concept into one that has broader relevance in everyday life. Instead of a concept defining good recovery from trauma, to a construct that defines optimal behavior and functioning. A construct that indicates an optimal life pattern and stance in the world, thus minimizing the impact of stress.

Below I identify nine components of Resilience. They are divided into three areas: organismic balance and mastery, relationship and process.

THE NINE COMPONENTS OF RESILIENCE

Organismic Balance and Mastery: Physiological, emotional and cognitive

We can think of resilience in terms of running a marathon with periods of sprinting, where energy efficiency is important. That is, responding in proportion to the need. Using what is needed, but not more, along with full recuperation. There are three aspects of energy management: physiological, emotional and cognitive.

Physiological balance is the ability to relax, the deeper the better; to not overreact to stimuli; and to return to baseline rapidly. It is also not unnecessarily reacting. Since unexpressed or unaware emotions are accompanied by inappropriate reactivity as well as physical holding patterns, tension and stress, the second component involves awareness of one's feelings, the ability to appropriately express these emotions and the ability to let go of painful emotional experiences.

Cognitive balance starts with a positive attitude and expectation. It is also the ability to control one's thoughts, either to fall asleep, or to be focused and not distracted. Most important is being able to easily let go of stressful events and mistakes.

Most people have the misconception that an event automatically triggers a stress response. In fact, the event only triggers a stress reaction if we interpret it as dangerous. Thus, our accurate perception and cognitive evaluation will reduce the frequency of stressful experiences. Conversely, catastrophic expectations, in which we gear up for the worst possible outcome, greatly expand the situations that trigger stress.

Relationship: With oneself, with others, and with something greater

This is about connection, support and appropriate care of oneself. One half of the stress equation is a person's capacity, both subjective and objective. (The impact of stress is a function of the relationship between perceived demand and the capacity to meet that demand.) How we treat ourselves, how loving and supportive, as well as how firm, determines confidence and expectation. Self-love is reflected in level of entitlement and how well we take care of and nourish ourselves.

One's internal voice, or self-parenting is a critical component of our relationship with ourselves. If we are accepting, it fosters calmness. When we put ourselves down we impair our capacity. When we are hypercritical or overly demanding we create tension, uncertainty and low self-esteem. Marshall Rosenberg's "Nonviolent communication" gives helpful suggestions on how to talk to yourself as well as to others.

An important part of relationship with oneself is the ability to take in accomplishments, so that they contribute to self-esteem. People have a tendency to dismiss success as luck, coincidence or by saying, "it was easy". At the same time, these same people magnify their mistakes.

The next component involves the ability to communicate and establish close and intimate relationships, and receive support. It is also about setting appropriate boundaries – the balance between sensitivity to others and to oneself. A safe world is a less stressful world. Friends and other relationships in which positive affect is expressed enhances the sense of a safe world. Relationships serve to validate and reinforce a sense of being okay. This impacts confidence and capacity. The ability to be intimate involves a physiological opening that enhances the flow of energy.

Component six is a relationship with something greater. This can have a spiritual emphasis or it can be one's involvement with community, charity or other form of service. This component has two dimensions: perspective and connection. Involvement, meaning and belief in something greater than yourself - purpose - makes daily hassles less significant. It enhances a sense of security and hope and takes the focus away from one's problems. Perhaps most important, it lessens the sense of isolation and alienation typical in Western society, while giving meaning and direction. All these factors reduce uncertainty, a major source of stress.

Process: Presence, flexibility, and power

In Gestalt therapy, Perls et al. Identified the ability to interact with the environment to get one's needs met as a key measure of success. These three components, under the heading of "process", involve the ability to get one's needs met and to be satisfied. Component seven is "presence", your ability to be fully in the here and now and not distracted by worry about the future, unmet needs, or fears.

Most of the time people are operating on automatic. If you track a person's moment-by-moment awareness, it rarely moves in a straight path. Instead, there are frequent detours and

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distractions automatically triggered by fears, lack of confidence and other defense mechanisms. The result is less availability for optimal functioning or reaching desired goals.

I have identified flexibility as the eighth component because it is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances that minimizes frustration, anger and tension. Conversely, if we can only get satisfied within narrow boundaries, we are stuck. Flexibility also includes how we perceive and how we respond. It refers to the ability to adjust and change; to learn from experience in

order to appropriately meet current demands. Creativity is a part of this component of resilience as it enhances one's ability to shift perspective.

The last component of Resilience I have identified as "power". I define power as the ability to get things done. This includes courage to take action, persistence to continue with an action in the face of obstacles and frustration, focus in keeping the goal in view, and assertiveness in making your desires known. It also involves the ability to make decisions as well as planning and being strategic. This component enhances one's sense of control. It also fosters self-trust and confidence.

In future articles I will elucidate techniques to strengthen these nine

components of resilience.

¹Paper presented at the BSC 2003 annual conference

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