

Enjoying Stress

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We all know what stress is, right? It's about being anxious, especially too anxious for too long. It's what we feel when deadlines loom, when we suspect that we are not up to the next challenge at work, when we fear losing our job, when our child is ill. We agonise about what is going to happen, we cannot see anyway out, we even experience panic. Our bodies become aroused, and tense up. This is what anxiety is; it's the way that our brain interprets this bodily arousal and turns it into emotion.

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This being the case, we must also know in principle, how to treat stress – don't we? Surely we have to do so by finding a way of reducing our arousal, and with it our anxiety. If we can't remove the threat, at least we can learn not to over-react. More to the point we can learn to relax to get rid of all that supercharged arousal. All kinds of relaxation exercises are now available for us such as breathing exercises, muscle relaxation exercises, yoga and meditation. Of course if we are therapists or counselors, we can use such methods to help others.

Even more effectively (but dangerously) we can smoke, drink or take drugs, whether prescribed or recreational!

However, there is a totally different way of understanding and treating stress. In a sense, it involves doing exactly the opposite of what people normally do, or are encouraged to do by psychotherapists, athletic coaches, counselors and others. It is the kind of approach which has been identified and developed for practical use by a psychological theory known as 'Reversal Theory'.

However, to understand what this approach is and how it works we must do a short detour. What we need to recognise is that there are actually two opposite ways of experiencing arousal. The first way we have just seen: we experience it as anxiety. The anxiety is the name that we give to arousal when experienced in this 'bad' way - the higher the arousal the more intense the anxiety.

Now consider a different way of experiencing arousal. Here, the more intense it is, the better it feels. We are now talking about the sort of arousal that is experienced as excitement, thrill or euphoria. Examples would be sexual excitement, the tension one enjoys when watching a thriller movie, the feeling of being fully 'alive' that comes from engaging in a dangerous sport. If anxiety is bodily arousal experienced as 'bad', then excitement is the same arousal experienced as 'good'.

It should be obvious that these two ways of experiencing arousal – the very same arousal - are exactly

opposite. They are mirror images. In one case, the higher the arousal the worse it is. In the other case, the higher the arousal the better it is. In one case we want less, in the other we want more.

Now notice one further thing. At a given level of arousal it is possible to switch the way that it is experienced. This is what is called a 'reversal.'

Suppose that someone is excited, and then some threat is perceived, this may well cause a reversal into anxiety.

Also the higher the excitement before the reversal, the higher the anxiety immediately afterwards – because it is the same arousal, but just interpreted differently. Someone may be driving too fast and enjoying the thrill, then wonders if he has been spotted by a police car. The anxiety that he feels as a result, is as intense as the excitement he had been feeling immediately before.

If it is possible to reverse from excitement to anxiety, it is also possible to reverse the other way. Suppose that someone is making a parachute jump. As we know from interviews, as the person jumps from the aircraft they feel extreme anxiety, but as the parachute opens and they know that they are safe, the anxiety is converted into excitement. Indeed, this intense excitement is what makes the whole activity worthwhile; and the higher the anxiety before the parachute opens the greater the excitement afterwards.



This brings us to a whole new way of treating stress. Instead of trying to lower arousal, which is pretty much what everyone else until now has tried to do; we can attempt to switch the way that the arousal is experienced, instead converting anxiety into excitement.

How do we do this? Basically, we try to construct a 'protective frame' around the individual's perception of the world, like the parachute that converts danger into safety while arousal remains high. In this way, while still engaged in the tasks they have to do, people are less threatened by

them and can enjoy doing them for their own sake rather than for their serious consequences. We can do this in a variety of ways – through humour, association with safe situations, turning things into games, enjoying situations as a kind of drama and so on.

This now gives us two strategically different ways of dealing with stress instead of one. We do not lose the option of working to lower arousal, but we also have another option - of converting anxiety to excitement. This is the reversal option. If one strategy does not work, we can always try the other. If we cannot convert anxiety into relaxation using more traditional methods, we can attempt to convert it into excitement.

In fact in many cases, reversal from anxiety to excitement is the preferable thing to do. If a football team is about to go onto the pitch, the manager

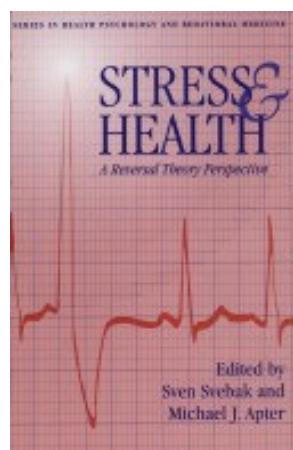
should not attempt to relax his players – they need to be highly energized and engaged, not peaceful and uncommitted. Encouraging them to relax is the last thing that he should do. So in this case the reversal strategy is definitely better. In general, wherever there is an unavoidable real life challenge to be faced up to, then reversal to good high arousal will be more suitable than relaxation. (If someone is facing redundancy for example, they will still have to deal with it, and will need to be energized to cope with the problems that arise).

One more twist in this story is worth mentioning... not only are there two alternative ways of treating stress but there are two opposite kinds of stress. We have been assuming so far that stress only arises in relation to high arousal. It can appear in low arousal situations too. Consider this situation. If someone is looking for excitement, but instead is experiencing low arousal, there will be a big gap between what they want and what they are experiencing – just as there is a big gap, (but in the opposite direction) for people who are in a state where they want low arousal but are experiencing high. In other words for some people, at least at certain times the problem is not that they are anxious but that they are bored. Research shows us that people who spend a lot of time looking for excitement report feeling stressed when they do not achieve it. These people often get into trouble through doing things that are highly risky (e.g.

gambling), being unhealthy (e.g. drug-taking) or doing something illegal (e.g. theft) in their desperate attempts to overcome low arousal stress and these risks further compound their problem.

Clearly this radical new way of looking at stress opens up all kinds of possibilities for helping people to deal with the pressures in their lives, and is one example of the way in which Reversal Theory challenges traditional assumptions in psychology, management consultancy, athletic coaching, health counseling and other fields.

Michael is Non-Executive Development Director of Apter International (apterinternational.com). Apter International has to date trained approximately 500 practitioners worldwide in techniques to incorporate the principles of Reversal Theory into their stress management or coaching practices.



Those who want to read more about *Reversal Theory* and stress, including relevant research, might find it useful to look at:

Svebak, S. & Apter, M.J. (Eds.) (1997) *Stress and Health: A Reversal Theory Perspective*.

Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis.