

Managing Tension in Tense Environments

By David Cross

David is the VP of Information Technology for his organization and the author of 'Mondays in the Middle East: The Lighter Side of Arabian Nights' (2006) and is a contributor to 'The Desert Is Alive: Streams of Living Water from Muscat to Marrakech', edited by David Lundy, Gary Corvin & Gail Martin (2007).

Abstract

Much of the remaining work of sharing the Gospel worldwide is in countries that are not friendly to the cause. That condition presents a situation where the tension of living abroad can unknowingly be compounded by the tension of the environment itself. Whether voiced or not, the assumption is that God may allow suffering at the hands of hostile governments or threats of others who would do us harm, but he will protect us from such menial threats as overwork, exhaustion and depression. This article will help readers identify some of those stressors by first noting the physiological impact of stress along with the cultural elements that lead to increased stress. This will be followed by a look at the dangers of stress beyond the typically-expected health concerns. Finally, strategies to mitigate those stressors and even cope with the added stresses of today's culture will be offered.

I'm a Type-A Personality. What's the Problem? A Culture of Stress

*Think of it, I hold the world in the palm of my hand
Run a comb through my hair, head on out for some new foreign land
And all this could seem like a dream out the door
With everyday people, face down on the floor
...The secret of my success is I'm living 25 hours a day.*

The lyrics of this popular Night Ranger song are nearly thirty years old, yet it seems that they aptly describe the lives of those in Christian ministry today. These people are focused on the task at hand – to take the Gospel to ends of the earth. On top of that, there are those whose calling is to 'finish the task' of the Great Commission and take the Gospel not to those lands well-acquainted with the Gospel, but to those who have never heard, to the least-reached, no matter where those people may be found or how difficult the challenge.

Of course, everyone begins this journey with fortitude and faith expecting to serve the Lord in these difficult places for decades to come. Despite those good

intentions, there are many career casualties along the way of people who for one reason or another have had their service cut short. Anecdotally, we hear of more and more people coming to some point of burnout even in doing a good work for the Lord. Whether voiced or not, the assumption is that God may allow suffering at the hands of hostile governments or threats of others who would do us harm, but he will protect us from such menial threats as overwork, exhaustion and depression. In reality, those are the more likely threats to the longevity of our service overseas.

Our Western society seems to exalt those who are buried in their work. We have created every sort of tool and system to maximize efficiency and eliminate wasted time. As William Powers (2010) poignantly summarizes, ‘The point is almost not to be thoughtful, not to pause and reflect. To eliminate the gaps’ (53). Our productivity is a sign of our hubris in that we think, whether consciously or not, that God cannot finish the task without our magnanimous efforts.

As our technology has become increasingly portable and accessible, we see our continuously working not only as a virtue but also as a necessity. It may not be that your boss requires your constant connectedness (or maybe she does!), but your neighbour requires that of you or your children or your mother or your friend you played hockey with as a 16-year-old. This sort of stress has become normal where we suddenly and regularly deal with horrific news of tragedies across the globe while also bearing the emotional burden of the personal losses and struggles of 700 ‘friends’ on Facebook.

For the overseas Christian worker, multiply this new baseline of stress by orders of magnitude. Even in a journal such as this one we read of the dangers of ‘threat actors’ who have all manner of ill designed for people like us. We receive training that warns us to always be in a state of alert, Condition Yellow, to anticipate danger before it strikes so that we can keep ourselves free of disaster. At any moment a simple lapse in judgement or gap in our security processes can overturn our world. Not only can people be detained, interrogated, and expelled, but lives and livelihoods depend on our actions. Indeed, even our work itself can bring stress. What if I don’t do this Bible study right? Will this person not be saved?

Granted, that last bit may be a caricature, but the point stands, namely, that we as a society have never before had the capacity, expectation and drive to busy ourselves with all manner of stressors.

The Physiological Impact

One author who has been heralding this cry for 20 years is Dr Archibald Hart. In his book *The Anxiety Cure* (1999), Dr Hart illustrates the connection between our physiology and our driven patterns of life. Without indulging in a medical treatise that explores all of the intricacies of human physiology, I will run the risk of oversimplification by dividing your world into two realms of brain-to-body

communication. The brain and the body communicate with each other through chemical messengers, namely, neurotransmitters. These chemicals pass messages through to brain to trigger responses throughout the body.

The first realm of neurotransmitters is inhibitory, or happy, neurotransmitters. These are responsible for making the mind feel at ease, comfortable and enjoying a state of pleasure. Undoubtedly, you will recognize some of these happy neurotransmitters such as dopamine which triggers pleasure or reward, serotonin which triggers peacefulness and calm, and melatonin which triggers sleep and rest.

The other realm of neurotransmitters is the excitatory set, or those responsible for our fight/flight/freeze reflex. The most famous of these neurotransmitters is epinephrine, or adrenaline. Its close cousin, norepinephrine, is also well known and both are responsible for stress. These serve a very important purpose in times of danger when they bring all of our senses to heightened awareness and give us almost superhuman strength.

We are created with these two realms of neurotransmitters that have very clear purposes in and of themselves. However, our bodies were never created to be wholly saturated with one set or the other. If we expect our lives to be saturated only with happy neurotransmitters, we will be unprepared for the quick-thinking and wherewithal that is necessary to find our way through trying times. Those trying times could come in the form of a cut on a child's finger or they could be as severe as a mass shooting event at a shopping mall.

On the other hand, our bodies were never created to be wholly saturated with fight/flight/freeze neurotransmitters either. Rest and calm and pleasure and joy are all sensations and emotions that God, in his mercy, created for us. The very presence of happy neurotransmitters shows clearly that God did not intend for us to live '25 hours a day,' being carried along by an unending string of adrenalin and cortisol shots to our brain.

A Titanic Problem

On 14 April 1912, the world's largest and most prestigious ship, RMS Titanic, struck an iceberg which ripped open five of its sixteen watertight compartments that kept it afloat. Considered an unsinkable ship, RMS Titanic shocked the world when it went to the bottom of the sea with 1500 of its passengers. Perhaps if the iceberg had been more visible, the captain of the ship would have made some attempt to divert his course rather than challenge fate, but 90% of an iceberg's mass is under water.

When we think of the problems of overstress, we often associate it with physical effects like acid reflux, heart attack, high blood pressure and stroke. Certainly, overstress is a contributor to all of these, but these are similar to the visible portion of an iceberg. In fact, many, many other physical and psychological

effects are associated with overstress from inflammation and susceptibility to sickness to phobias, depression and uncharacteristic striking out. These are the hidden dangers that waylay Christian workers in far greater numbers than heart attacks or strokes.

Consider the cycle of overstress. You've decided that you and your family should take up the call to live and work overseas, so you spend a few years filling out the applications, taking theology tests, finishing Bible requirements, doing language and culture courses, getting any counselling, raising support, selling your home, packing up your belongings, buying very expensive plane tickets, and shipping your luggage overseas. Of course, all of this is done while you continue to hold down your day job, serve as husband/wife and father/mother (for those where this applies).

Normal life requires a normal balance of epinephrine (fight/flight/freeze messengers) during the day to 'take charge' of the things you need to handle intermingled with dopamine (happy messenger) triggered by such things as food, sex and reward. There are also moments of serotonin (happy messenger) that bring calm peaceful moments which are also triggered by food and exercise. Finally, your day ends with a flood of melatonin triggered by the darkness of night that brings on restful, restorative sleep. This normal cycle sets you up for another pattern of ups and downs to easily balance your day tomorrow.

Understanding this is the normal cycle, look back at each of the thirteen tasks or roles listed above. Each one of those takes shots and shots of adrenalin or even months of adrenalin to manage and coordinate all of those tasks. What that typically means is that your body is spending more and more time in the excited state that is driven by epinephrine, norepinephrine and cortisol and less and less time in a relaxed state that is driven by dopamine, serotonin and melatonin. The human brain, being a wonder of plasticity, will work with you and adapt to whatever state you habitually expect of it. In other words, if you move from the normal state of peaks and valleys of your neurotransmitters to an excited state of only peaks of fight/flight/freeze neurotransmitters, your brain will happily comply. It will adjust so that you will produce more and more excited neurotransmitters and you will lose your ability to produce happy neurotransmitters. The risk is that you will live in a continually excited state so that you can no longer relax, no longer sleep well and no longer get pleasure from things that you once did.

In fact, the risk is even a greater than that. When your body is not able to relax or receive reward from pleasurable things, your brain will naturally seek out that stimulus through whatever will give it that shot of dopamine or serotonin. Usually, this entails something of greater and greater risk or something of more direct pleasure-seeking. Pardon the candour of the discussion, but something that seems to illustrate this well is one of the greatest pleasures we have, namely, sex. Sex is one of

our greatest triggers of dopamine followed by one of the greatest triggers of serotonin with the relaxing euphoria afterward. If your body cannot get dopamine or serotonin through normal functions, you will seek the extreme. This response describes why many people who lead 'driven' lives end up uncharacteristically striking out in addictions to pornography or illicit sexual liaisons. In short, it is one of the only ways left for the body to get pleasure and calm.

Similarly, another form of this uncharacteristic striking out is thrill seeking. In order to get the sense of pleasure or calm, people resort to intense highs that come from dangerous activities like skydiving or driving at reckless speeds or cliff jumping. It is no exaggeration when they say they are addicted to the thrill. They are literally addicted to the cocktail of adrenalin, dopamine and serotonin that is triggered by the events.

A final prong of this forked response of our bodies is phobias. A phobia often comes about from running our bodies at extreme pace with high levels of the fight/flight/freeze neurotransmitters. When we are not able to achieve normal calm, we put ourselves at risk of some negative event that triggers a sickening shot of our stress hormones far greater than even the excited state the body was already maintaining. For example, you might be running at a continually excited state of mind while living in the Middle East. Then, you do something as simple as move a piece of furniture and you see a scorpion. Your body triggers a squirt of epinephrine and norepinephrine to handle this dangerous situation, but your mind, then, fixes on this event so that you become terrified of scorpions. Not just that, but you become terrified of the possibility of scorpions so that you are obsessed that there might be a scorpion in the bathroom or in the cupboards or in the oven or in the refrigerator. This phobia, or intense fear, of scorpions makes some sense because scorpions have some danger, but your mind has made the phobia far greater than the actual likelihood of encountering the danger or far greater than the danger itself even if you would encounter it.

Tactics and Strategies

The security situation of living in a sensitive part of the world certainly adds to the challenges of avoiding the three-pronged responses above. Even so, this is not to say that all is lost and that this is the inevitable result of every overseas Christian worker. That being said, it is important to recognize that there are risks with a driven lifestyle that is continually in an excited state. In response to this, here are some safeguards that can help you prevent this type of burnout and restore a healthy, balanced state of emotional response to both the stresses and pleasures of serving the Lord abroad.

Get adequate sleep. Without the restorative rebuilding of melatonin (the sleep hormone), your body can not adequately produce serotonin through your

waking hours. Parents may need to alternate nights with earplugs so that children's needs do not prevent adequate sleep, for example.

Get adequate exercise. Your body needs exercise for three reasons. First, exercise produces serotonin which is why people have such a pleasant, relaxed feeling after finishing. Second, exercise during the first half of the day prepares your body for restorative sleep at the end of the day. Finally, the deep breathing of exercise has the same physiological effect as the deep breathing of meditation and worship. Even a regular walk each day can slow the pace of life and allow your body an opportunity to be restored.

Meditation and deep breathing. Archibald Hart in *The Anxiety Cure* says of Christian meditation and deep breathing that they alone would prevent half of the visits to emergency rooms for panic attacks. Slow, deep breathing floods the body with needed oxygen and reduces stress hormones such as cortisol. Imagine a gazelle being chased by a cheetah. Does the gazelle run with long, slow, intentional breaths or does it panic with rapid, shallow, high-alert breaths? Meditation and deep breathing is the opposite reaction of stress. Keep in mind that this sort of meditation is a far cry from the type of Eastern meditation in Hinduism and Buddhism. Whereas they have the goal of emptying the mind, the goal of Christian meditation is to fill your mind with all of the riches and wonder of the Saviour and his work in your life. Regular exercise of deep breathing and meditation can be one of life's most pleasurable experiences as you gain deep pleasure from the sensation of breathing while focusing your mind and spirit on the Lord.

Worship. Besides the obvious spiritual benefit of intimacy with the Saviour, worship has the physiological benefit of deep breathing. In a similar way to meditation, it affords an opportunity to connect with the Saviour with a physiological benefit.

Prayer. The Psalms record for us the deep anxiety of David in a very real way. There is nothing more appropriate than crying out to the Lord in prayer when dealing with anxiety or depression.

Solitude. Although solitude is not always recommended for severe depression or anxiety, solitude is definitely appropriate as a means of disconnecting from the constant interruptions of our busy lifestyles that can trigger a state of alert in our bodies.

Media check. Take consideration of what media you are absorbing considering that you are taking on the weight of what you read, see or hear. For example, if you are working in Bosnia and you read about a tragic landslide in Indonesia, it might never affect you, yet you've taken on the emotional weight of the 24-hour news feed that is being forced on you.

Monotask. The temptation is to make use of every waking moment by listening to podcasts and audiobooks while ‘multitasking’ other activities. The fact is, multitasking is a myth. Instead, those who are good at multitasking are actually good at task-switching, but you can only focus your attention on one task at a time. The constant switching from one task to another builds the high-alert state that leads to anxiety.

Use medicine if necessary. In the midst of an anxiety-induced panic attack, many developing-world doctors will turn to tranquilizers to forcefully control the symptoms. Tranquilizers are effective, but it is important to know that there are other options that have less of a devastating effect on a person’s ability to carry on normal functions. Selective Serotonin Re-Uptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) are a relatively new class of drugs that have a creative effect on rebuilding the body’s normal function. In short, they suppress the ability to absorb serotonin, so your body feels like it has no serotonin at all. Its response is to trigger more serotonin production until your body is restored to a normal state. Of course, any medications should only be used under the careful watch of a physician because of the risks of unintended effects, but they can be the key to getting people to a place where they can make the lifestyle changes for long-term recovery.

Nurture small pleasures. If the only things that give you pleasure are the extremes of sex and adrenalin-charged activities, you are missing out on the vast majority of pleasures. ‘Turn off your computer. You’re actually going to have to turn off your phone and discover all that is human around us. Nothing beats holding the hand of your grandchild as he walks his first steps.’ These words were spoken by someone who certainly understands the drive of today’s technology, but who also knows the power of small pleasures. The speaker was Eric Schmidt, then CEO of Google (Powers 76).

Conclusion

In conclusion, considering all of these things, the point is not to sit passively and never take any risk that will trigger a release of epinephrine. Rather, the point is to consider the activities and circumstances of your life that trigger an excited state and balance those with adequate restorative activities. This applies not only to happenstance events in your life, the totality of the pace of life you lead. If you have a dangerous, threatening or tragic event in your life, recognize the impact these events have on your body. Proportionate to your life activity, give yourself rest and recovery. Proportionate to your security context, give yourself rest and recovery.

Select Bibliography

- Carr, Nicholas G. 2008. *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google*. New York: W.W. Norton. Print.
- Carr, Nicholas G. 2014. *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us*. New York: W.W. Norton. Electronic.
- Carr, Nicholas G. 2010. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: W.W. Norton. Print.
- Greenwald, Glenn. 2014. *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State*. New York: Metropolitan. Electronic.
- Hart, Archibald D. 1999. *The Anxiety Cure: You Can Find Emotional Tranquillity and Wholeness*. Nashville, TN: Word Pub. Print.
- Hart, Archibald D. 1989. *Overcoming Anxiety*. Dallas: Word. Print.
- Hart, Archibald D. 2007. *Thrilled to Death: How the Endless Pursuit of Pleasure Is Leaving Us Numb*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson. Print.
- Horne, Patrick Van, and Jason A. Riley. 2014. *Left of Bang: How the Marine Corps' Combat Hunter Program Can Save Your Life*. New York: Black Irish Entertainment. Print.
- Powers, William. 2010. *Hamlet's Blackberry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age*. New York: Harper. Print.
- Rubens, Jim. 2009. *OverSuccess: Healing the American Obsession with Wealth, Fame, Power, and Perfection*. Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group. Print.