

Strengthening Resources for Uncertain Times

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During times of stress, anxiety and perceived threat to our welfare, we devalue ourselves, lose confidence, and our hope dissipates. There is ample research which shows that humans and animals react to distress by retreating from healthy behaviors. We tend to isolate ourselves, focus on the negatives and look for pleasure in deviant ways. During these times we are more prone to use alcohol and drugs (both legal and illicit) “to escape.” Just as animals at the lower end of the pecking order try to find solace in the corners and hidden recesses of pens, embattled humans retreat from our usual social engagements (e.g., church, social gatherings, recreational events) and are more prone to such self-defeating behaviors as gambling and excessive work. We try to find positive experiences that stimulate the pleasure center of the brain.

What happens physiologically during stress? Dr. Hans Selye indicated that we deal with threatening situations by avoiding the stress or confronting it. He called this the “Flight or Fight Response.” When confronted with a threat, our bodies release adrenaline, which causes our muscles to tense up, our pupils to dilate, our heart rate and blood pressure to increase and our breathing to become more rapid. Eventually, however, our bodies tire and we begin to secrete cortisol, which slows our heart down, relaxes our muscles but makes us feel exhausted. This depletion part of the cycle enables us to slow down and to recuperate for the next episode of stress. Repeated episodes of the arousal-depletion cycle leads to deficiencies of neurotransmitters normally associated with well-being, chiefly serotonin and norepinephrine. Multiple stressors wear down our ability to cope physiologically and psychologically, resulting in exhaustion, depression and even compromise to the immune system’s capacity to ward off disease.

What can we do to manage our behavior during stressful times, such as when we are losing money producing livestock? We can’t always control the conditions that lead to economic shortcomings, such as harsh weather conditions, low market prices, high costs of inputs such as feed and transportation. But, we can insulate ourselves from stress through careful management of our behavior.

Instead of retreating from social situations during stressful times, we need to seek out positive social opportunities. We can invite our friends and neighbors to our house for lunch, card playing, attend meetings, church and seminars on behavior management. We can participate in recreational events such as sports, fishing, hunting, attend ball games, anything that puts us in the company of positive people who can bolster our spirits and allows us to think about optimistic circumstances. We can spend more time with our children and families instead of working extra long hours and wearing ourselves out even more. Physical contact with our spouses is especially healthful. In short, we humans are social animals who need social contact to help heal our wounded self-perceptions.

We must be careful to not deprive ourselves of sleep during stressful times. Working harder seldom solves the problem and instead creates sleep debt. Sleep deprivation

increases the risks of making mistakes, injuries, illness and depression. Chronic sleep deprivation is associated with shortened life span.

Sometimes the only positive experiences we can muster are in our own minds. And that's okay, because retreat into fantasy and acceptable forms of pleasure is an effective self-management tool. Reading particularly enjoyable literature, listening to our favorite music, engaging in positive day-dreaming can be ways to stimulate the production of beneficial hormones and to decrease the production of adrenaline and its damaging accompanying hormone, cortisol. Prayer is a powerful antidote to negative thoughts, for it places our problems in the hands of another source and helps us to achieve a degree of self-acceptance.

What it comes down to is not working harder but behaving smarter. When animals at the lower end of the pecking order are removed from their stressful circumstances and do not feel threatened, the number of liver abscesses that they develop decreases and their sleep and eating behaviors improve. Retreats into social, behavioral and psychological circumstances that allow us for even brief moments to change our body chemistry all help us immensely. Our openness to positive alternative ideas, to the possibility of accepting help, and to viable solutions increases. We can manage our behavior in a positive fashion during stressful, anxious and threatening times.