

by Dr. Joseph Precker

There are two extreme ways of looking at stress. The first places responsibility on individual personal characteristics. One frequently hears of the man (or woman) who "just couldn't take it," as if there were, of necessity, some built-in flaw in the individual. A second and quite different approach places the burden on the situation and the problems—whether it's an impossibly demanding boss, an unyielding market, technological inadequacies or government restrictions.

Psychologists and others interested in the problems of executive stress usually find that there's a balance between individual susceptibility on the one hand and situational difficulties on the other. In most instances in which stress leads to diminished effectiveness, it is the interaction between individual and organization which makes the difference. Recent research tends to show the organization is usually much more responsible for stress response than other factors.

Many of the manifestations of stress do not take the form most laymen expect, and often, therefore, are not seen as responses to stress. What are the generally accepted manifestations of stress? A summary of recent intensive scientific studies of organizations and their technical, managerial and executive staff has identified five specific stress syndromes, each with its very special characteristics.

□ *Emotional distress.* This is easily understood by all managers and executives, since it's a rare bird who has never experienced pangs of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, anger, excessive competition, disappointment, jealousy, envy, neglect, unfair "setting aside," lack of promotion and so on.

□ *Medication use and hypochondria.* This category is wider than it's generally thought to be. Go to a man's home, open the medicine chest, and count the bottles of tranquilizers, sleeping pills, "waker-uppers," and other medications. Or count the number of visits to physicians, acupuncturists, *shatzu* experts—or even massage parlors! One can begin to develop an index not only of the extent to which a manager is concerned over his own health (which, in perspective, is quite proper) but also the extent to which he or she is overly concerned, and dependent on external "modulators" to keep in shape and to remain capable of proper action. In many a man's thinking, there is little clear-cut realization that he is manifesting stress reactions and that his responses tend not to be adaptive. In other words, he is not gaining headway in the race to control himself or others, but is falling behind and endangering both his own health and his chances of effective response by becoming controlled by external supports and pacifiers.

STRESS



In this day and age, the use of drugs like cannabis (marijuana) and more serious hard drugs is considered in some places a sign of sophistication, and being "in." This is particularly dangerous. Many a psychotherapist is aware of breakdowns among the talented, the well-placed, the respected and rich, as a result of drug abuse. Sadly enough, in this respect physicians have a particularly poor record in the United States and the United Kingdom where a larger proportion of physicians than others tend to become addicted to drugs.

Another form of drug abuse, which usually masks stress responses, as well as creating untold havoc in many a personal life, or family, or organization, is the relatively free use of alcohol. The one-drink-to-relax at lunch, or before dinner or sleep increasingly becomes two or three or four—or uncountable. And the earlier stages of control ("I can take it or leave it") are gradually abandoned until the individual becomes victim and slave.

□ *Cardiovascular disturbance.* High blood pressure, palpitations, migraine headaches, poor circulation, varicose veins, angina and all other cardiovascular symptoms frequently associated with and experienced by the aging executive are becoming increasingly widespread among younger people. The typical layman does not attribute these symptoms and disease-entities to stress, but thinks of them as physical, outside the realm of the tensions and pressures of life and work. Specialists in the field, however, have found rather clearcut evidence that some—indeed perhaps all—of the above are directly related to tension and stress, and the inability to relax. Dr. Benson at Harvard, among others, has developed relaxation techniques which can bring down high blood-pressure which had been shown to be beyond the reach of modern medication. Biofeedback approaches have also been successful, demonstrating that somehow the central nervous system can mediate and control functions of those parts of the body previously believed to be automatic and beyond personal control.

One of the dangers of the typical manager with cardiovascular symptoms—transient or lasting—is the usual refusal to see these symptoms as indicators of stress, and to seek medical intervention as the only way of dealing with the problem—and even then, the visit to the physician can be delayed too long.

□ *Gastro-intestinal disturbance.* Peptic ulcers, duodenal ulcers, stomach spasms and colitis are sometimes recognized as indicators of overwhelming stress, though more often than not they are primarily attributed to medical bad luck. Increasingly, psychosomatic research has demonstrated the relationship between conflict, incompatible roles at work or at home, anger and many other psychological needs and various gastro-intestinal disorders.

□ *Allergy and respiratory disturbance.* Here again, experts have shown that stress is a major factor behind these common disorders.

#### More than a medical problem

Thus, many people believe stress is primarily a medical problem. In part, it is. On the other hand Hans Selye, the pioneering physician and physiologist, has demonstrated that stress partly increases resistance to the so-called "stressor," whether physiological or psychological. But, if stress persists over long periods of time, the organism reaches a state of exhaustion. Much stress is psychological and organizational in origin. There seem to be four major causes of stress, experienced and manifested (consciously or unconsciously) by the manager:

□ *The maturity effect.* Putting someone without appropriate training and support into a position of excessive responsibility or demand can lead to stress, and eventually, in extreme cases, to breakdown—or at the very least to diminished effectiveness.

□ *The vulnerability effect.* This response depends somewhat more on an individual's personal makeup and background. For example, a manager may be very skilled in dealing with equals and subordinates, but unconsciously may develop strong stress responses to a demanding, angry, non-rational top executive, who may remind him (still outside of the realm of consciousness) of a difficult, irascible and cruel father.

□ *The bureaucratic effect.* Bureaucracies exist for good reasons. At best they automate decisions and the procedures involved are pre-determined and supposedly designed to deal with the problems in hand as effectively as possible. However, bureaucracy tends to turn men into machines, and often winds its way senselessly through a maze of activities which frequently become ineffective, and even serve as barriers to meaningful response and activity.

Bureaucracy tends to lead achievement-oriented men into stress reactions of all sorts, particularly as bureaucratic practices lead to feelings of helplessness, lack of control over events and vulnerability to nonrational forces. These are all precursors of anxiety, and many managers experience tremendous anxiety, upsetting them psychologically and physiologically, and preventing them from making their best efforts. While a rebellious American may be somewhat aware of the source of his anxiety, an Oriental or a European from a culture which places a high premium on hierarchy, acceptance of superiors, and willingness to function within the "establishment" may very well find him-or-herself in distress without recognition of the source and unable effectively to deal with it.

□ *The power effect.* This last of the four organizational elements is often given attention in films or on TV, in terms of "the power struggles in the executive suite." It is, however, far more prevalent than is commonly believed, and at every level of organization. It occurs in the typist-pool and among yayas, as well as within groups of ambitious young men and women hopefully destined to take on greater responsibility, greater rewards, and more prestige.

We humans are social animals and human interaction plays a major role in our enjoyment and interpretation of events. Organizations can play a major role using competition effectively to everyone's advantage, or they can create dilemmas which can only increase the stress reactions of the people they touch.

hypochondria

All stress is not bad. A reasonable amount can be very productive and some thrive on it. However, undue stress, or stress which cannot lead to positive action or resolution, or stress which remains unconscious both as to source and to form of expression, can lead to breakdown of men, of organizations, of plans, of hopes, of rewards.

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