

October 31, 2015  
(October Letter)

Hi Samantha,

I'm sorry to hear that you have to cope with some of the physical manifestations of stress. My own experiences with this make clear how unsettling it can be since it feels like something that will never end. It might be good news to hear that although there is not a dramatic "cure", there will be moments of relief and, if one can go by my experience, these moments get longer and longer.

My strongest memories of this process occurred for a year or so around 1986. We had just returned from our European trip with Daegan and JP, I got pneumonia, my Grandfather died, we had a foster child stay with us who was very demanding, Daegan was graduating and moving from home, and JP was having trouble in school. It was a whole lot of stuff that accumulated to make me anxious, uncertain, and insecure. It manifested itself in an upset



stomach (actually relatively constant tension in my solar plexus), loss of appetite, sometimes a vague headache, and lack of energy for the things I was usually excited about. It recalled for me a period of time in my youth where I experienced similar symptoms, but interpreted them as something like the flu. In both cases the scariest part was not knowing what was going on and feeling like it may never end – or be a symptom of some impending disaster.

I did what you did (smart move, by the way!): check to see if any of these symptoms were physical in origin. This led to a number of tests and examinations, including ultrasound of my liver and gall bladder, angiogram of my heart, and esophagogastroduodenoscopy of my esophagus and stomach. All of the tests came back normal yet the symptoms continued more or less.

It was about this time that I began reading about research conducted on stressors. In those days it was in its infancy and there were several interesting findings that caught my attention. One was by a famous researcher, Hans Selye, who actually was the first to use the term with respect to what he called the "General Adaption Syndrome". He was a researcher at McGill and the Université de Montréal from 1931 until he died in 1982 which gave me extra motivation to explore it.

Through his experiments he came to believe that stressors could be "good" or "bad" and that over time they often produce similar results on the body. Others have confirmed these results and extended them to not just individuals, but to whole species of animals, and human groups as well. That is why clinical people point out that significant events as diverse as winning a lottery or losing a loved one can produce similar physiological demands and responses on the body.

I was particularly fascinated by a study of deer on an island in BC where for several years they had survived difficult winters and various predators without a significant loss in the size of their population. However, after one relatively mild winter with only a few predators around, the whole population collapsed – with only a few surviving. As researchers investigated the reason for the collapse, they concluded that the major factor was the slow increase in stressors over the preceding years. Each year, the stress went up, but the animals adapted to the new level of stress. This adaptation placed new demands on their bodies, their immune systems, and their level of anxiety. Unfortunately, their bodies were not able to return to the previous level of functioning before another slight increase in stressor occurred. Over a series of years like this, all their physical reserves had been diminished so the mild winter (the last stressor) was enough to finish them off.

For me, the lessons were 1) that stressors can be both positive and negative, 2) they often accumulate unnoticed since we are very good at adapting to them, 3) each adaptation places demands on our bodies that we may not recognize, and 3) that without finding ways to reduce the demands on our bodies, they can accumulate to a point where our physical reserves are depleted. I also discovered in my reading of the research, that the time taken to reduce the effects of stress to the pre-stress conditions is usually much longer than the time taken for the stress to emerge. This started to make sense to me when I thought about how it often takes me a week to recover from an exam, presentation, or other performance.

Reading about this research and seeing the parallels with my own experience got me looking at the more practical side of things – what does this suggest as a way to deal with it? Fortunately, I came upon studies showing how meditation and breathing control can be used to reduce stress. In fact, I had an introduction to this fact when I joined Fran at her childbirth classes in preparation for your mother and JP's births. At those classes, they taught a method of breathing and focus to deal with the pain of labour and (fortunately) insisted that the fathers and assistants learn the process as well. I had used it for dealing with dental work so know that it held some promise for managing pain and anxiety.

I began to try out a number of techniques for meditation that I read about in books (in those days the internet had not been developed). I tried quite a few, but was most impressed with the combined tools of meditation and biofeedback. The biofeedback part allowed me to not just do the meditation but to see immediately how it affected my body.

The biofeedback tool I used was a small unit that I bought at Radio Shack. It consists of a blue box with a strap with two electrodes that go around two fingers. It measured the galvanic skin response in my fingers. It turns out that as one's anxiety level goes up, we sweat a bit even though we don't know it. Sweat conducts electricity better than water and water conducts it better than dry. Thus, by measuring the ease with which electricity passes from one electrode to another it let me know



how stressed I was. The blue box would emit clicking sounds and the more my stress level increased, the faster the clicks came.

I then tried various methods of meditation and breathing to see which one was most effective in lowering the frequency of the clicks. I was very excited when I finally learned I could move the clicks from a rapid scream down to the occasional click just by my breathing and imagination. Not only was this an exciting thing to find for dealing with my stress, but it was a dramatic illustration of the way in which our mind is intimately connected to our body – not only through our voluntary nervous system but the autonomous one as well. The autonomous nervous system is the one that controls things like the heart, digestion, respiration, and sexual response. It is the one that controls our “fight or flight” response to danger as well. I found it very cool that I could control my heart rate by my mind.

It took a lot of practice, but I eventually got to the point where I could significantly relax and cool out with only a 10 minute break. Once I had learned from the biofeedback monitor how to slow down through breathing and meditation, I no longer needed it since I knew what it felt like from my body’s response. It was great, because I could do it on the bus, in my office, on a park bench, or in a nice chair at home.

For a long time, I still had the anxiety symptoms but they were no longer as frightening since I knew that I could get a few minutes relief from them by going through my meditation and breathing routine. Gradually, the few minutes’ relief became a half an hour, then an hour, and even days. I still feel the anxiety every so often, but it has become familiar now, I know what it is about, and have a toolkit to deal with it.

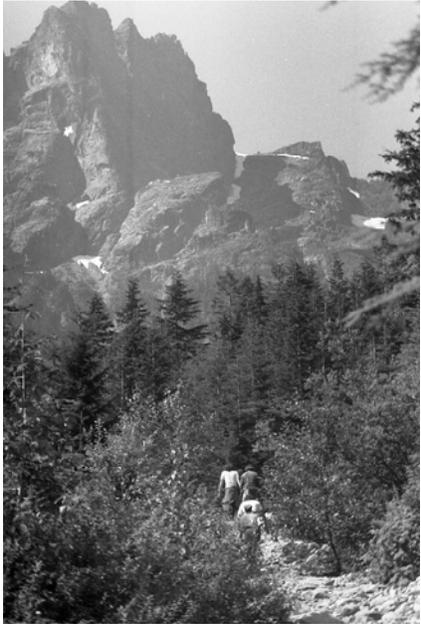
That is why I will find a quiet place a few minutes before a presentation, or take a 10-minute break when I feel the familiar tightening in my solar plexus, the tightening of the muscles in the back of my neck, or the beginning of a headache – which are the personal signs of stress that I have come to identify.

I don’t know if you will find this story comforting or not, but I hope it will inspire you to begin your own exploration of approaches and techniques for dealing with stress. Given the exciting things in which you get involved and your capacity and willingness to press beyond your limits, I expect that both the good and bad stressors will be a regular part of your life. This means you should find a way to make friends with stress. Perhaps this is one way.

I will bring a biofeedback unit when we come at Christmas. It’s actually one that was used by your Great-grandfather Jack (yes, he got excited about the technique when I told him about it) since I gave my unit to JP when he went through some similar experiences. So you see – you are part of a long tradition!

There are many approaches to meditation and many of them have elaborate interpretations of a semi-religious nature. You can take a look at these for clues about which of them might be most comfortable for you (e.g. <http://liveanddare.com/types-of-meditation/>). I found, however, that I came to rely on two or three that I would use on a regular basis.

The first was the focus on the sound of the biofeedback monitor. This is like the one called focused meditation where you focus on one thing (as long as you don't get stressed when your mind wanders from that focus).



The other one I used was a tape which gave instructions for guided meditation. I liked one that played nice music and invited me to imagine going down in an elevator which slowly descended while I thought about relaxing different muscles. Eventually, the door would open and I would imagine a lovely place (I actually thought of a river scene that I remember near Golden Ears park in BC – see photo of trail nearby). It was great, because once I had become familiar with it I would find my body relaxing just as I started going down in the elevator.

A quick look at the internet led to the following sites that you might like to explore.

<http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>

<http://www.meditationoasis.com/podcast/listen-to-podcast/>

<http://www.fragrantheart.com/cms/free-audio-meditations#relax>

I find that I steer away from the ones with all the ideological hype about particular people or styles of meditation but that still leaves plenty to choose from. Some days, it's just fun to try out different ones without any effort since they typically get me to relax no matter what the approach. I like to do it with earphones or earbuds since it helps to shut out other things and focus my attention.

I will give some of them a try since it's time for a "refresher course" for me. If you come across any that you particularly like, let me know – and I will do the same.

