

Let's get a life!...

It's a revolutionary idea that stress is self-inflicted. It's just there, we think. Something to be endured whenever life deals us a bad hand. But it's not. That's pressure. Stress is created by our reaction to those normal day-to-day events which shape our lives and create pressure. So it's very definitely not the same as stress.

Stress is created by our reaction to pressure - and it's something that we are able to control, if we wish a happy and longer life...

So says Dr Derek Roger, one of the world's leading researchers on stress, and currently an Adjunct Associate Professor at Canterbury University.

It's so simple when he talks about it. Let's create a scenario. You're faced with an unpleasant situation. At the time your body's response is a very natural 'fight or flight' caused by a sudden increase of high levels of hormones secreted by the adrenal glands, which include adrenalin and cortisol (sometimes called stress hormones). A quite normal reaction, says Derek. What's abnormal is when those hormones remain high for a prolonged period of time.

These levels remain high because you are 'ruminating' about the unpleasant event, either worrying about its effect, or fearing repetition. You're hanging onto a situation which no longer exists! - so creating a very real danger to your health. There's a direct strain on the cardiovascular system and the immune function is threatened by a decrease in the production of white blood cells. The familiar 'stress kills' syndrome.

Think of an analogy, says Dr Roger. There's your cat, lying peacefully on the hearth rug. Suddenly there's a loud bang from outside the room. The cat's fur stands on end, he leaps into the air with fright, his 'fight or flight' syndrome at full blast. Then quiet descends. The bad moment is over. The cat settles down. He's become calm outwardly through inner calm. The fur smooths. He doesn't ruminate by thinking "That might have been an Alsatian..." "I wonder if he's coming back..."

Think of your own response to these situations - the argument with someone, the bad news - how often, and for how long afterwards, do you go on and on ruminating

Wendy Christopher speaks to Dr Derek Roger about the ever present problem of stress - at which he is an acknowledged expert.

about it? The cat doesn't. He lives in the moment. He lives in the now.

Stress has been re-defined by Derek Roger as rumination about emotional upset. About past regrets and future disasters. All negative emotions which, in the form of rumination, promote a form of waking sleep, which accompanies you always and blights your life.

The only reality is now - this present moment. All else is a form of dreaming - you're preoccupied with scenarios which may never happen, or that have passed, neither of which you can do anything about.

Now is all that exists, anything else is an idea in your head or as Dr Roger puts it, a form of fantasy.

Centuries old

It's a mind set that has been taught throughout the centuries, by wise men and religious leaders, we say.

'Live for today', they say. Nothing else matters.

"I know," smiles Derek Roger. "We just need reminding, perhaps." Through a system which makes sense of it all.

If this rumination were harmless mental meandering, it would be just that. Harmless. But it's not. It's life threatening. And it's in our power to change our way of thinking. Which is a challenge. And which is why, perhaps, Dr Roger has called his programme, "The Challenge of Change."

He was engaged in research on the subject at York University when he was approached by the North Yorkshire police. They regarded their profession as a stressful one. They were not interested, however in a programme of research, they wanted a practical approach to their problems of stress and prospective absenteeism.

The programme is available through the Work Skills Centre, a consultancy directed by Derek Roger together with five associates.

He has worked with large organisations like the BBC, local government, education and health groups. "It's wonderful when it's done in groups," he says. "You find that it

has immense impact in a kind of cascade effect - where the participants all speak the same language and need only a buzz word for each other to comprehend what the other is speaking of."

Responding appropriately

We have to accept that we live in a climate of change. We will always have relationship worries, job and finance problems, but if we're not able to respond appropriately to change, fear creeps in. And with that, rumination and stress provoked by negative emotions.

There are steps to be taken in the pursuit of regaining the control which will lead you to a happier, healthier lifestyle and longer life.

Start by Waking Up. Address your attention to the NOW - what is happening at this moment. Deal with it, appreciate it. When you're watching a sunset, don't say to yourself, "I wonder if I will ever see such a marvellous sunset again..." or "I wish I could share this with..." Just enjoy the moment. Let no attention-wandering take you off on a train of negative thought.

Another example. If you're caught in a motorway queue, face the fact that you have options. You can fume and beat yourself up about it, or you can recognise you can do nothing about the situation, and not allow negative emotion in. For all your anger, what happens to the motorway queue? Doesn't move an inch. Rumination has no effect on the world, only on your well-being.

Next step. Become detached - see things for what they are, don't make molehills into mountains. This doesn't mean you're cold-hearted or uncaring or irresponsible. Just don't allow yourself to be ruled by negative emotion - by rumination. And final step, let go. Let go of negative emotion, and you're free.

If you don't you'll be choosing to be

stressed - to live a shorter life of misery - rather than Getting A Life.

To learn more about the Challenge of Change programme, telephone Dr Derek Roger (03) 304 5899; 021 034 9359 or Ali Jones PR (03) 356 0010; 027 247 3112.



Dr Derek Roger