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Chapter 1:

Understanding stress

What is stress?

Stress is what happens to us when something demands more energy from us than we have at the moment. Because we lack the energy for coping realistically at the time, we react negatively and unproductively. These external events, as *we interpret them*, act like an alarm system against danger requiring immediate action and put us under physical and mental strain.

The stress response is our natural protection against damage and, ultimately, destruction. It is a survival mechanism, for our benefit. When we don't heed it, we are in trouble because we go against our nature. 'As we interpret the external events,' above, refers to our mental activities and depends on our personality. When these mental activities are negative, they produce stress.

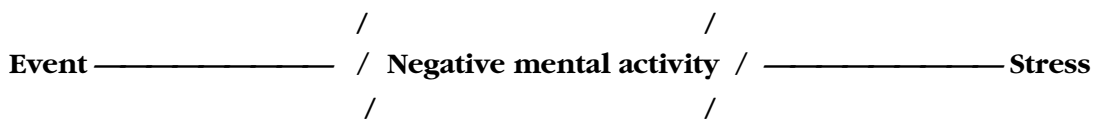
Briefly then, stress is the experience of physical and/or mental **danger** caused by our faulty reaction to *external events* and/or by our own *mental activities*.

External events, by themselves, do not cause stress; our mental activity about them does.

On the other hand, mental activities alone, without external events present, can also produce stress.

And external events alone, without our mental activity, in and of themselves, do not produce stress.

This can be a starting outline:



The event is like a statue at night and the mental activity is like a beam of light that can change colours, from red to yellow to blue, to any other colour.

Our mind is the key

We always can control our *mental activities* and this is the key to handling stress. Regarding the *external events*, what is dangerous for one is exciting for another.

What makes them demanding and straining is *our subjective perception and evaluation of them*. For instance:

- A forgotten deadline
- An unexpected and unavoidable phone call in the midst of a serious and delicate negotiation about an important account
- An urgent request from the Board of Directors for a Briefing on something that needs careful preparation, and
- Other similar situations.

On the other hand, the *mental activities* are:

- Either worries and fears about future happenings or regrets and
- Bad memories about things past, such as:
 - that upcoming meeting with a difficult but powerful customer
 - a joke I made during a presentation to a stiff audience of prospective clients that did not go over well
 - the worries created by a discussion of budgetary issues with my chief accountant
 - regrets about having fired someone privy to many company secrets, now working for a competitor, and so on.

All these are called 'stressors' because they usually produce stress in us.

To further clarify the terms, there are many distinctions to explain stress. Thus, anticipatory stress, residual stress, post-traumatic stress, physical, mental and emotional stress appear often on this topic.

For the time being we do not need to obfuscate things with many distinctions. The one we use is *external stress*, like weather conditions that we cannot change and *internal stress*, like negative thoughts that we must learn how to change. Hans Selye, one of the most acclaimed researcher on stress, referred to *these* two in the mid-fifties as *eustress* and *distress*, but the first of these two words never became popular. Because this is the case, this Briefing uses *stress* as damaging, and *energy* as constructive.

A working definition

Stress is always the result of the negative and unproductive individual interpretation of circumstances, situations, events, actions or omissions of others. What upsets us is not what happens to us but how we react to it. So that anything that bothers us produces stress. Or, if you want, stressors are very individualised and a *stressor always is anything that bothers the individual*. The secret, therefore, is to have the necessary mental skills not to allow outside things to upset us. Because stress is always damaging, we often realise it too late, when it becomes clearly upsetting. But when we do not realise the presence of stress cognitively, there are many symptoms 'telling' us of the presence of stress.

The mental skills needed to immunise ourselves from stress are related to our beliefs and expectations, our understandings and individual interpretations, our imagination and attitude and, most importantly, to our esteem, respect and mature love of self.

The distinction between events and our reaction to them is the key to understanding stress and how to transcend it.

Stress makes the body suffer

Stress affects both our body and our mind. Once we have 'created' stress, either by our mental reaction to a specific situation or by ignoring the warnings of our body, the physiological reactions to stress are inevitable. Very complex and the domain of medicine, they include the brain activating the pituitary gland, which triggers the release of adrenaline and other glucocorticoid hormones, causing the body to be fully ready for action. This is done by boosting circulation and unleashing the energy stored in our tissues as glucose. This stress response directly activates our brain chemistry and has almost immediate effects in many other bodily systems. This spontaneous response is necessary for surprise encounters with immediate danger, but to allow it to be on all the time because of our busy life style becomes self-destructive.

If we pay attention, we realise some of the bodily changes produced by stress. Other alterations may go undetected until it is too late for our own good. The following is a very incomplete list; but, even so, go over it and notice how many of these changes you may not notice when you are under stress.

- Alterations in my immune system
- My skin feels different
- Changes in the function of the heart, my vessels and the chemical composition of the blood
- My muscles tense up

- My lungs seem to change gears and start operating differently than normally
- My digestive system acts up
- My body temperature is changed
- The function of all my senses becomes generally sharper.

If you cannot truly say that you are aware of all of these effects of the stress response, you are not alone. By reading this Briefing and concerning yourself with stress you are protecting yourself from the damage that chronic stress can do to you as an individual and to the organisation as a group.

All these physiological changes are controlled by the autonomic nervous system without any conscious doing on your part and take place in just a few seconds, once the brain has perceived danger. Psychologists call it the 'fight or flight response.' And, it is worth emphasising that the perception of danger may be completely wrong. But regardless of its truth, the body reacts this way to the danger the mind perceives.

Don't push yourself!

A practical important point for the Senior Executive is that pushing oneself creates stress. The body has its limits but the mind can ignore tiredness and believe that the body can last longer working on this urgent project for another couple of hours or continuing to drive overnight to make it for that important breakfast meeting at 8am.

In these cases, the mind is playing tricks on us again and later we pay dearly with illness. If we don't listen to our body when it tells us that it needs attention and caring, that it is not at ease, we find dis-ease sooner or later. An important aspect of transforming stress into energy is to take care of our body.

The body speaks to us through symptoms, as we mentioned. We listen to our body when we pay attention to symptoms such as:

- My stiff neck or shoulder
- A nagging, unexplained headache
- A queasy stomach or my clammy hands
- A dull back pain that I've been ignoring
- The inability to take a deep breath or my rapid, shallow breathing
- My tight throat, weak knees or pounding heart.

These are some of the most common physical signs of stress. There are many more, all warnings that we are pushing ourselves. They are reminders that we need a break and change of pace. To ignore these symptoms is to ask for trouble, allowing stress to take over and ultimately destroy us.

Take a minute now to reflect on YOUR physical symptoms of stress. You may find them in the list above or they may be different. Be truthful and admit that they are related to stress and that you must and can do something to relieve your body of this burden.

Stress kills

What comes out very clearly when one considers the nature of stress is what new scientific evidence tells us about the intimate connection between what we think and how our body behaves.

We act because of the way we feel and we feel because of the way we *think*, most frequently, not consciously. That is, our beliefs (the *things* in our mind) affect our feelings which, in turn, affect our conduct. Now we have evidence of previously unknown connections between the brain and the immune system, more specifically, the limbic system in the brain and specialised organs that control the immune system like the thymus, the spleen and others.

Afflictions of civilisation

Cancer, arthritis, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases have been labelled *the four afflictions of civilisation*. Reaching epidemic proportions in countries like the USA, these four are greatly influenced by stress. In other words, when we do not cope with the changes, we run the risk of becoming sick.

This theory encourages us to find productive ways of coping with stress. If stress is always dangerous and even damaging, it makes sense to spend time and energy doing something constructive about it. Instead of waiting to become sick in order to protect us from the madness of adaptation, we may develop our own personal techniques to immunise ourselves from this stress.

Points to remember

- The body follows the mind.
- Perception of DANGER has the same effects as real danger.
- The body's alarm system acts in seconds.
- Monitoring our body is healthy; ignoring it leads to disease.

Stress harms the mind

However, there is still more. Stress also affects us psychologically, as if we were changing our personality. Others may say behind our back that we have been acting differently lately. Close friends may even ask us if everything is all right. We notice it too and, in moments of honesty, admit to ourselves that:

- Our threshold of tolerance is lowered
- The slightest thing makes us irritable and quick to anger
- We feel generally more anxious than we normally do and, thus
- We are more forgetful, accident-prone or depressed.

Other psychological signs are:

- Sleep and eating problems (more drinking than normal?)
- Changes in sexual drive
- Difficulties in concentration with increased distractions affecting our behaviour in many areas, from driving the car to following a social conversation
- In general, we feel very little joy in living.

As a consequence, we find ourselves neglecting important relations, arguing about nothing, starting arguments and fights with strangers as well as with those close to us and communicating poorly. In the nature of stress is the ability to take over our entire life.

Summary

It is important to remember that stress consists of our negative subjective reaction to our own experiences. These are either the things that happen to us and around us or the thoughts that bother us and we feel unable to control. Among 'our negative reactions to the things that happen to us' is the denial of stress. We deny stress when we refuse to heed the symptoms discussed earlier which are always warnings of stress from our body.

Next we shall consider the most ordinary manifestations of stress in our lives. By forcing ourselves to pay attention to the things that we consider stressful, as we shall do in the next section, we shall start to realise how much freer we could be if we did not have those stressors.

On the other hand, to become aware of stress helps us audit the level of stress we are enduring at any given moment. As we shall see more concretely in the exercise, *Stress on the job* (page 23), the four levels of stress are:

- Manageable
- Unmanageable
- Dangerous and
- Catastrophic.

Main causes of stress

Surge of violence

Face it and act on it

Prevention

The executive's responsibility

Think peace, speak peace

Inner peace

How the successful executive acts

Points to remember

chapter 4

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Chapter 4:

Main causes of stress

Every page so far has mentioned causes of stress, from the normal, unavoidable stress associated with the ordinary changes of human development since the moment of birth, to the stress produced by natural events that are part of human life; from the death of dear ones to catastrophic happenings, like accidents and fires. However, one of the most common and devastating causes of stress is *frustration*. This is the feeling of not getting one's due, rightly or wrongly, when one believes that there is nothing one can do to correct the situation.

Because of this, so called, 'learned helplessness' of frustration, stress is intimately connected with anger and violence in society at large. The person who is relaxed and content is slow to anger and not prone to violence. In the Western culture, accelerating everything exponentially, we are conditioned to expect immediate results and have lost all sense of patience. Waiting has become unacceptable.

- The slightest build-up of traffic annoys us
- A telephone that does not answer after the first ring becomes an insult to our busy selves
- Documents are sent via e-mail that could have waited weeks
- Fast food has invaded the most traditional and civilised cultures

If we don't get what we want now, immediately, we become irritated, angry and violent, in that predictable sequence.

Surge of violence

Recent Briefings from America on disgruntled workers unhappy with their superiors, as well as on traffic altercations (now called road rage) tell us of 'normal' people using handguns on each other. Family violence, child and spouse abuse, are on the increase in the Western world, not just the Briefing of it. The entertainment industry, abdicating its social responsibility, has kept pushing for years detailed, close-range violent scenes on audiences young and old. Violent movies sell. Even children's cartoons make violence funny and, thus, acceptable.

Many serious studies have shown that the more exposed we are to violence, the more we come to accept it as a viable means to handle frustration. We become desensitised to violence. But violence is stressful for the one who suffers it, as well as for the one who uses it. The one who watches it becomes used to it, accepts it, assimilating stress without noticing it – the neat vicious circle again!

Consequently, all this violence around us produces stress and, like it or not, living in an increasingly violent world, stress is escalating in all of us. It's unavoidable. We would have to become hermits to escape this condition.

Face it and act on it

The reason for stating in the Introduction that this Briefing takes a practical bent, is based on the belief that *we can't waste time with stress*. Once it's there, it has to be handled efficiently and pragmatically - like the fire in the sailboat.

Speculations and analyses about it may come later but never as a first reaction to stress. In other words, one can spend much time and energy talking about stress but this, in itself, may be a form of denying its existence. The wisest (and most urgent!) thing to do with stress is to handle it, control it and, as we shall discuss later, transform it into energy.

Prevention

This brings up the need for preventive measures against stress - the point with which Chapter 3 finished. Social scientists tell us about *primary prevention*, that condition in which things are what they are supposed to be so that people are at peace with themselves and the world around them, not inclined to overreact to ordinary inconveniences, unavoidable annoyances and normal deprivations.

In other words, primary prevention is the establishment of a *non-stressful environment* for humans in which to live, play, work and be productive. If the senior executive is convinced of the importance of this, she can do much in the area of primary prevention. With the five conditions listed at the end of Chapter 3, she can create a benign environment for the people working under her. But she shall never succeed if she is not convinced that stress is always toxic.

The executive's responsibility

The facts speak loudly enough. Stress is damaging to our physical and mental health as humans and also to our company of which we are the human component.

The highly industrialised Western culture has become a high-stress-producing culture. Violence is one of the triggers of stress and simultaneously a destructive manifestation of it. Our workplace, being a part of our culture, does not escape this contamination of stress. Because of it, many business enterprises lose much revenue. Only those who use violent entertainment gain from it.

The people responsible for business are in a unique position to remedy this situation and even to be instrumental in creating a stress-free environment to work in – with the end-result of increased productivity and multiplied revenues.

However, the only way to do this is by starting with oneself, as you are doing by reading this Briefing without practice, the preaching is like psychotic babble, it does not make any sense.

Think peace, speak peace

To practice what he preaches includes details that, at first sight may seem insignificant and unimportant.

The language we use is a good start. For instance, to refer to the competition as ‘sharks,’ and to dynamic marketing as ‘guerrilla marketing,’ or to describe the obtaining of an important business account as ‘making a killing’ creates images and attitudes of violence. It is curious that the West has become aware of and applied to the business world Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* and Musashi’s *Book of Five Rings*, written centuries before our era for warriors.

Quotations from these two classics appear often in modern books for managers. They emphasise that war is unavoidable and that cunning is the strategy for victory. But they miss the most important point of the teaching, that *inner peace* is the source of all the strategies and tactics described.

The senior executive must move away from war-like thinking so that the productive business effectiveness, resulting from lack of stress, will emanate from true inner peace, not merely from strategy.

Inner peace

Violence and lack of stress are antagonistic and opposites. Real power, in the individual or in nations, does not reside in sheer force. This is also true of organisations. Therefore an important step for the senior executive to take, when obsolete violent language and thoughts come to mind, is to ask himself what is truly the practical, non-violent meaning of the situation. Then he focuses on that meaning, trying to change in his mind the images of violence into images of growth and vitality.

Violence is avoided in the workplace, as in the world at large, by preventing stress. And, generally, to prevent stress one must be at peace with oneself. Avoiding stress like an infection which, untreated, can make us seriously ill and even kill us, is truly every civilised person’s responsibility.

This is especially so of the people in charge, from parents and teachers, to government officials and business leaders.

Senior executives, because of their position of honour and respect in their company, influence others not just by their deliberate decisions but by their opinions, preferences and values, by their language and behaviour. They have more power to prevent stress and energise the company than they know. What they say and how they say it (to one person or to a group of people at work) often spreads – it is repeated, enlarged and even distorted. Successful management takes place when the senior executive does not give any reason for those under him for interpreting anything he does or says as violent or producing stress.

How the successful executive acts

For instance, if there is a worrisome rumour circulating in the company, the senior executive will do well in ignoring it and, if confronted with it, firmly and unequivocally labelling it as rumour.

Another example might be a recently released negative projection about how business will be doing in the next quarter. The responsible executive, even if worried, will not show it, emphasising instead the projective aspect of the information, which is as reliable as weather forecasts. She may also light-heartedly refer to past negative financial projections that were not fulfilled.

Finally, the leaked announcement about a change in positions in the production department may have caused general alarm because the candidate mentioned is known for his hard work, inflexibility and urgent demands on those working under him. In an effort to prevent stress, the senior executive reminds everybody that no one who does his job responsibly has anything to worry about. At the same time, she might contact the person who makes appointment decisions in order to explain the need for the candidate in question to refine his management style and to listen to the input of those who will work under him.

These are simple, every day, examples which become opportunities for the top executive to prevent stress in the company. The general principle is that the same situation, viewed one way or another, can become more or less stressful. The consequence of this is that the senior executive, by her reaction to the situation, verbal and non-verbal, has the power to escalate or de-escalate the level of stress.

But the fundamental truth in this strategy on the part of the executive is that she must genuinely believe what she is trying to convey. The most important contribution of the executive to the company is not to lose her head. By remaining genuinely at peace with herself, she will project a sense of:

- Self-containment
- Order
- Predictability and
- Stability,

with the end of doing what is appropriate and convenient for the organisation. Only when the senior executive is anchored in this inner peace, will she be able to convey to those under her the non-stress message that her words proclaim.

Because stress is the result of a negative thinking attitude, by establishing inner peace as the first priority for oneself and for the company, the senior executive will be able to proceed to the next step of transforming stress into energy. The same event that can produce stress, chaos and general pandemonium, can also become a powerful energiser for the benefit of the corporation.

Points to remember

Never take angry words or actions lightly – they always increase stress.

Violence creates more problems than it solves,
it is a waste of effort in the long run.

Prevention of stress can only start from a realistic experience of inner peace.

Energy is incompatible with violent thoughts, words and behaviour.