

# STRESS CAN KILL YOU EARLY

By heart health consultant Adam Shaw

In all of my years of nursing there was one recurrent theme with everyone who had serious illnesses: They had all been experiencing above average amounts of stress in their lives for at least several months, sometimes several years.

One common symptom was people caught in relationships where their partner had become lazy, complacent, critical, inattentive and/or abusive. Despite this, the recipient of this behaviour would often stay in the relationship, using children or the fear of a split as their reason for staying. It is a very common symptom and really emphasises that many people accept the "better the devil you know" approach to life.

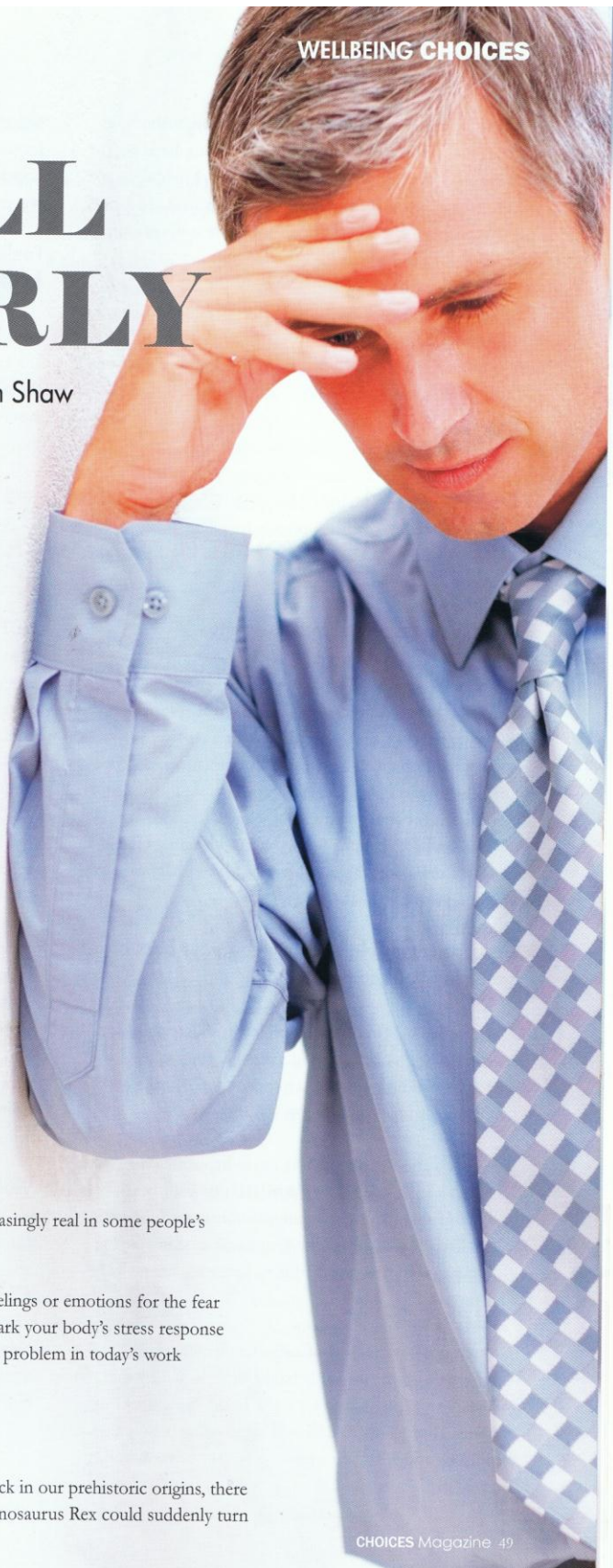
## **There is another common and equally deadly cause of stress**

People in jobs that they hate, with bosses who intimidate or abuse them regularly was another all too common symptom that I came across during my nursing days. The need to pay bills and the economic depression has elevated fear amongst employees and self-employed business people of late. Fear of not being able to pay bills and the increasingly common fear in the UK of not being able to even eat has raised the stakes in this department. Because there is a reticence in many people asking for help, this problem has become increasingly real in some people's daily lives.

All too often people hold back from expressing their true feelings or emotions for the fear of losing their jobs or business. This internal conflict can spark your body's stress response and put you into fight or flight mode. This is the root of the problem in today's work environment.

## **What is the stress response?**

As a species, we have been evolving for millions of years. Back in our prehistoric origins, there was a very real danger that a hungry and unreasonable Tyrannosaurus Rex could suddenly turn up for dinner. This would trigger a stress response.



## WELLBEING CHOICES

When this happens your body will fill with adrenaline and divert all of your blood to your brain and peripheral organs, shutting down everything else. You become hyper alert, and feel a strong urge to either attack or run for your life. Under such circumstances things like digestion are not a priority, so blood is diverted elsewhere.

You would become hyper alert, highly motivated and be ready to fight or flight for your life. Clearly, this is a beneficial response when a hungry beast with 30 centimetre teeth and a bad attitude turns up expecting you to be on the menu.

trigger your stress response. This situation is usually motivated by fear of what would happen if you were more honest about how you really felt to those who were leading you to feel this way.

### **Feeling stuck in a bad relationship can eat you from within**

Unfortunately, it is a vicious circle when you start to feel stuck in a relationship that isn't working for you. The first thing to go is love. You may not love yourself enough to sustain you during the times where your partner does not

**"The best way to deal with stress is to get physically active when you feel your blood pressure rise."**

### **The flip side of your stress-response**

Unfortunately, your brain has not learned to tell the difference between a real or perceived stress-response. Since humanity has only been office based for a relative microsecond on our time-line, our current stressful, sedentary lifestyles are less than ideal for our general wellbeing. Things that can trigger your stress response include criticism, intimidation, anger, lack of respect, insults, unreasonable demands and a person's inability to listen or understand your point of view.

### **Have you ever felt like punching your boss or smashing your computer?**

The good news is that this is a perfectly understandable reaction when you are stressed. After all, you are filled with chemicals that have you ready to perform physical feats that could literally save your life if it was in danger.

The not so good news is that if this is happening regularly to you then it is putting unnecessary strain on your heart, body and life. If this status quo continues unmanaged then it is highly likely that it will lead to serious dis-ease in your life. Common manifestations of this response are heart attacks and strokes.

Because you have no way of offsetting the chemicals of this response when you are sat behind a desk, it is likely that you will just simmer with rage for a few hours, days, weeks or months. Your failure to deal with the conflict between what is happening and what you want to do or say can continually

appear to love you either. Honesty as to how you really feel will usually fall by the wayside from here. Mutual respect is often the next thing to exit the equation. From this point trust, happiness, confidence and belief will leave at various points.

### **Your body is resilient**

The human body has a remarkable ability to adapt. This is the good news. However, the stress response, if not used for real life fight or flight will take its toll on your body and heart over time.

Because this happens so slowly, you may have learned to live with the above symptoms, dealing with your stress by ignoring it. From here you may find your blood pressure rise. You could put on weight as your digestion suffers. Your stress response will continually divert the supply of blood from your stomach and bowel. Sleeplessness is common as fight or flight is designed to keep you awake.

### **Violence can result**

Continuous stress in any relationship will naturally lead to angry thoughts and feelings towards your boss, colleague, friend or partner. When Michael Douglas cracked in the film 'Falling Down' this may have been extreme, but many people have at least some empathy for his often extreme responses to stressful circumstances. This is a great example of fight or flight kicking in.



**WHAT CAN YOU DO TO REDUCE THE SYMPTOMS?**

The best way to deal with stress is to get physically active when you feel your blood pressure rise. Sport is a great outlet for stress. Walking may be a more appropriate alternative if you are working in a stressful office. Taking a 5-minute walk outside or once around the building can help. Deep breathing will also start to reduce the symptoms. This will stimulate your parasympathetic response and start to counter the stress and adrenaline in your body.

**GET HELP**

Ultimately, if you have been experiencing any of the above symptoms for an extended period of time then your health is at risk. If you are overweight or suffering with hypertension, diabetes, insomnia, indigestion or anger then get professional help.

If left unmanaged then this may well kill you early. Heart attacks and strokes were responsible for 23.6% of all deaths on the planet in 2008 according to the World Health Organisation. It has been proven that unmanaged stress is a major factor for both of these and many other illnesses.

**There is no gentle way to say it**

If you have identified any of these symptoms in your life then get help now or you will probably die sooner, rather than later. In 13 years of nursing, I have learned that being subtle does not work very often. I have seen enough people die younger than necessary to own this lesson. There are free resources available to help you to manage your stress but if you are struggling on your own, get professional help. Your life can be easier, happier and better when you understand how stress works, how your body responds to it and how to manage it more effectively.

**THE ULTIMATE PARADOX**

Your body's stress response is designed to keep you alive. It will also kill you early if you are not using it to run away or fight your corner. Speak up, be honest, get assertive and learn how to manage your stress better. Most importantly of all; get help.

Adam Shaw is a Heart Health Consultant who has worked with thousands of people with serious health issues over his 19 years in the industry. He offers free stress management tips on his website [www.adamshaw.co](http://www.adamshaw.co)



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