

Can stress save your life?

Advice Line

by Dr. Betty Phillips



The cover of *Newsweek* magazine (2-23-09) heralded that "Stress Could Save Your Life." My utter dismay was not reduced by the rest of the caption: "Or At Least It's Better For You Than You Think." Immediately I knew the subject of my April article for the *Chatham County Line*! Modern life is actually very stressful and the current recession/depression is certainly making difficult problems worse. Most of the information in the media is negatively toned, often sensational, and directly contributes to our current distress. As responsible commentators I feel we have an obligation to highlight some positive thoughts and suggestions. Toward this end I have been writing about ways to reduce stress and improve our lives.

The *Newsweek* headline, page 47, states: "Who says stress is bad for you? It can be, but it can be good for you, too — a fact scientists tend to ignore and regular folks don't appreciate." I won't spend too much time quoting the actual article which you can read if you want to. The most supportive statements about the value of stress were made by a professor who studies baboons and another who studies in-utero development of infants. The kernel of truth in this article is that the absence of stress does predict inadequate development. For example, when laboratory rats are given all the food and entertainment they want, they become fat, lazy and die early. In this respect it is true that stress-like circumstances are actually necessary for an animal or person to develop life skills. This knowledge is not all that valuable, however, since stress is ubiquitous and no one actually has the opportunity to grow up without experiencing stress.

There is a valid take-home message in this *Newsweek* article but not that stress is good for you. The message is

that stress management skills can be learned spontaneously or can be taught in order to help people cope with life problems. Several people quoted in the *Newsweek* article have attained success in helping people learn to cope with stress. Dr. Salvatore Maddi is the author of *Resilience at Work: How to Succeed No Matter What Life Throws At You* (Amacom, 2005). The importance of Maddi's work for today is his continuing research on the development of resilience, how to learn to cope with stress assertively instead of withdrawing into passivity, avoidance or despair. You may find this book quite helpful today. Dr. Judith Orloff is a psychiatrist whose career has focused on helping people use positive techniques to cope with stress. You might want to consult her latest book just published this spring, *Emotional Freedom: Liberate Yourself From Negative Emotions and Transform Your Life* (Harmony, 2009).

Although the *Newsweek* article gave some credence to traditional stress management techniques such as meditation or exercise, the author appeared fairly pessimistic about actually utilizing these techniques. Take for example, meditation. The article stated that "not all of us want to or can become monks; not all of us can spare even eight weeks for a course at the Center for Mindfulness." Here *Newsweek* is promulgating misinformation about



meditation which actually can be learned and practiced in many ways compatible with ordinary life experiences. My recent article on hemisync, for example, described enjoyable and practical approaches to meditation developed by the Monroe Institute which can be used even while engaging in regular life activities. Of course you can become a monk or use traditional meditation positions and techniques when they work for you, but many other stress management approaches have been developed that can easily be adapted to the time challenges of modern life.

To answer the *Newsweek* question as to who says stress is bad for you, my answer is: "I do." But stress does

give you an opportunity to rise to the challenge and thereby learn how to improve your coping skills and therefore your life. I had this type of opportunity when I had breast cancer almost 10 years ago. I believe I did rise to the challenge. However, if offered this opportunity again, I'd say "No thank you."

Today I do urge you to take advantage of whatever opportunities are available to you to learn more about stress and life improvement activities. You can utilize self-help opportunities such as the books mentioned in this article. The articles on my website provide summaries of many different types of stress management issues and coping strategies. Life coaches or therapists may be of assistance in individualizing these techniques to your needs. Yes, the media is hurling words such as recession and depression at us, but that does not mean our lives need to sink into a permanent depression of our own. April is the month of rebirth: enjoy the spring!

Need advice?

Send Dr. Betty Phillips questions about individual, relationship, marriage or family issues to BettyPhillips@BellSouth.net or 466 Eagle Point Road, Pittsboro 27312. Questions can be anonymous. Betty looks forward to hearing from you!

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