

Stress and Anxiety (Excerpt from “Creative Thinking:A coach’s perspective”)
By Dr. Andre Walton

In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.

Albert Einstein

Contemporary life is seldom free from stress, and in the world of business, increasing levels of competition have increased the importance (and therefore stress) of decision-making. This stress is likely to ‘trickle down’ from leadership to lower levels of every (particularly small) business, impacting much of society. Stress plays an important role in influencing the creative process, but not always in the way that you might imagine.

In the context of life and business coaching, we are rarely presented with a client who is not in some way, anxious or stressed, and I think we would all agree that both of these states of mind play tricks on our ability to make decisions or think with clarity. To be clear, stress is a natural reaction to any demand that is made on your mind or body, and in the extreme, can lead to burnout if you do not have the resources to meet the demand. Stress is not necessarily associated with anything adverse as long as it is not extreme and the resources to deal with the stressor are available. In other words, lifting a heavy weight is necessarily stressful, but it is only if we are required to lift a weight that is beyond our carrying capacity that we suffer an injury or extreme pain. In a cognitive context, if we are presented with a problem that is not readily solvable with the resources or data that is available, that can create excessive stress, sometimes to a level that can be problematic. Having to solve a problem that simply requires us to concentrate hard, however, will cause stress but not such that persists and interferes with our normal functioning.

Unlike stress, which is associated with a specific cause, anxiety can be brought on, or persist, without any obvious trigger. For instance, we can become anxious about a specific challenge, ‘If I don’t get this job, I won’t have the money to pay the mortgage’. Even if you get the job, elements of discomfort, i.e. anxiety, may persist.

A threat, such as news of a higher-than-usual possibility of a terrorist attack, and having to take extra precautions, for example, avoiding crowds, will reasonably cause concern and may alter our behavior. It can cause us to be temporarily stressed, or it may also be accompanied by anxiety that persists after the threat has vanished. From a coaching perspective, whereas with stress, there is a specific root cause, that is not always the case with anxiety. We may need to be clear about which of these two a client is suffering from. Anxiety may show up with any or all of the symptoms of stress, but in addition, there can be feelings of paranoia, impending doom, a ‘foggy brain’, or nerve issues such as tingling or numbness. Note that many symptoms of PTSD and anxiety overlap, including excessive worry, negative thinking, and difficulty sleeping. PTSD and anxiety disorders are also similar in how they are diagnosed and treated. Coaching may be inappropriate for a client with a high level of anxiety or stress who may need psychiatric help.

Clients with either stress or anxiety are likely to benefit from relaxation techniques such as mindfulness, breathing exercises, or meditation. Those clients with anxiety may need more generalized help than those needing stress management, such as coping skills or the need to feel safe and supported. In the context of using creativity as a coaching tool, I am not distinguishing between anxiety and stress, simply referring to ‘stress’.

In what way can stress interfere with our lives? In many ways! Including, negatively influencing sleep patterns, eating habits, appetite and digestive system, temper, relationships, stamina, our emotional intelligence in general, and feelings of overwhelm. But there is one very specific negative

impact of stress that I want to zero in on because it seriously undermines our decision-making processes.

Seizing and Freezing is a phenomenon whereby we grasp the first solution to a problem and stop searching for other options. I liken it to putting blinders (also known as blinkers) on a racehorse, whereby its field of vision is restricted to 'straight ahead'. Sound familiar? It is almost inevitable that stress will bring on seizing and freezing, and that seeing fewer options will result and seriously undermine our perception of the available choices and our decision-making ability.

In the context of career coaching, for instance, it is not uncommon for a client to freeze on one course of action and fail to see other choices, even though it is obvious (to us) that those actions are not working. Perhaps the client has been unexpectedly fired from their job. The bills mount up quickly along with the stress, and the need for employment escalates to near panic. Without seizing and freezing, the client might have been able to step back, take stock of where they are in life, look at their strengths and weaknesses, and figure out what would make maximum use of their skills and experience. They could reassess whether the old job was really what they wanted, reevaluate their career path, and look at a broader range of employment possibilities, maybe still with urgency, but with a clearer, open mind. Our stressed client, however, can think of nothing but littering the world with résumés to HR personnel in similar businesses to the one from which they just got fired. It is an understandable reaction but often unproductive and may even lead to a reluctance to open their Inbox for fear of receiving yet another rejection.

Choices that we make under stress often follow logic-driven thinking processes leading to deductive choices (I'll run short of money, so I must get a job quickly, so I must send my résumé to anyone with a pulse!) This, of course, excludes the possibility of intuitive and creative thinking. If we can help clients widen their field of vision to include these processes it broadens the possibilities from which to make their decisions. Our priorities, as coaches, may then become a combination of stress reduction and broadening their field of vision.

The Worry-Rut

Stress and anxiety often intertwine when we dwell on past or potential future negative events, and it is all too easy to get trapped in a repetitive cycle of worry. Simply put, this is an anxiety-induced habit whereby a repetitive cycle of thoughts and sometimes actions, causes a negative activity. The negative pattern may continue even when the original cause is absent or the event never occurred (perseveration psychologists call it). For our unemployed client, getting on the computer and firing off a barrage of résumés triggered a negative frame of mind associated with getting fired and subsequently receiving rejection emails. Even if it was not their intention to send another résumé, simply sitting in front of the computer can then trigger memories of the whole miserable, 'being fired', then 'getting rejected' sequence. In other words, working at the computer became associated with the negative event 'sending résumés that result in rejection emails' causing our unfortunate client to spiral down a 'repeated pattern of despondency' rabbit hole just by sitting at their desk!

Stress-relieving practices are helpful to clients in situations such as this, but may not resolve all negative trigger issues. Taking a leaf out of the NLP book can help the client anchor a positive thought or memory to the negative activity. For our unemployed client this might mean thinking of a time when turning on the computer and opening Word was associated with a positive emotion – perhaps writing a love letter, journaling, or doing something creative. Perhaps writing to an old friend might be the positive activity that is needed, but once the fun or positive task is completed, revisiting the computer to send another résumé may not have such negative consequences.

Taking this route also has the benefit of being able to incorporate a creative exercise into the client's program, and doing something creative is associated with a positive mood as well as seeing more options.

Circle the wagons!

As creativity has this double benefit in terms of mitigating the effects of stress, so stress is associated with a double whammy in undermining creativity. As well as causing us to fail to see all available options by seizing and freezing, it also causes us to retreat into our family, friends, and institutions. This, while having the benefit of providing comfort, as we saw in Chapter 5, tends to undermine creative thinking because of our increased affinity towards the goals and thinking patterns of our group of friends or family.

In the current global communication era, stress can often result from events that do not have an immediate impact on us or our immediate family. Nonetheless, this somewhat remote source of stress can have a powerful impact on us and can similarly cause us to seek the comfort of our groups. Research shows that attendance at religious services increased in the initial period after the 9/11 terrorist attacks which were doubly stressful for most Americans since they came with the expectation of more attacks. As a result of the stress and increased desire to strengthen the bond with their groups, students reported feeling more connected with their school or college, families were more likely to plan vacations together and, of course, the Stars and Stripes started showing up on peoples' front porches, car antennas, even on clothing, demonstrating to all the connection with the group 'Americans'. These were all clear signs of the increased desire for connectedness with groups under threat.

Even in prehistory, a neighboring warrior tribe, or pride of cave lions approaching would have caused our bear-skin-clad predecessors to 'circle the wagons' (had they been invented) or otherwise retreat into a 'safety in numbers' posture. This increased groupiness is an innate instinct. As you might expect from the post-9/11 increase in group affiliation, measures of creativity simultaneously decreased. One example of this is that following terrorist attacks in general, fewer patents are filed.

Teen years

From my earlier observations of my granddaughters as they started school and the focus of their 'making sense of the world' changed from their physical surroundings to their relationship with other students and adults, you might imagine that it is a time when many tensions begin to grow, including those which begin to erode the desire to be creative. If you coach teens, you are probably going to recognize the tension between conformity and exploring individuality, and that tension can, for some, be very stressful. The teen years are not only when we are gliding smoothly, or stumbling blindly, into adulthood, they are also when we are at the crucial transition from behaving according to the norms of our parents, to becoming socialized as an adult.

But which adult? For a highly creative person that may require a high degree of acceptance and flexibility in their parents, and a willingness to cater to their offspring's creative needs, or at least, not to dissuade them from pursuing creative activities.

For some other creatives, the tension between their innate desires and established norms can cause these years to be challenging, as it can be for those at the edges of the social bell curve. This is particularly the case if their parents are not aware of this tension and are inflexible in their attitudes and behaviors. Once again, creativity-oriented coaching can come to the rescue. The good old garage band came to my rescue, as did the school theater. They were my escape routes into the

acceptable side of creativity (well, the garage band was not that acceptable to the neighbors, but a bit of anarchy can be expected in a teen, right?)

Of course, not every teen has the urge to do something creative, for some it is seen as a source of stigmatization even before it can take root. The school jock might not want to be seen in public with a box of watercolor paints! But for those whose eyes light up when creative activities are mentioned, their coach can guide them in the direction of a creative outlet to great benefit.

Digital cameras hadn't been invented when I was a teen, and developing film was a costly business, but now you can click away on your phone until its memory is full. That is an easy and socially acceptable introduction to the visual arts.

As you can see from this graph, teen suicide has increased at an alarming rate since the beginning of the millennium. I am not suggesting that there is any quick fix, but it has to be taken seriously and may only be mitigated by several 'small, slower fixes.' Whatever the reasons behind this trend, these tragic events may be caused by stress, or at least, are accompanied by it.

The tension between conformity and individuality mentioned above can be seen as a part of the desire to take control over one's own life. That's what growing up is about, right? However, our society does not always

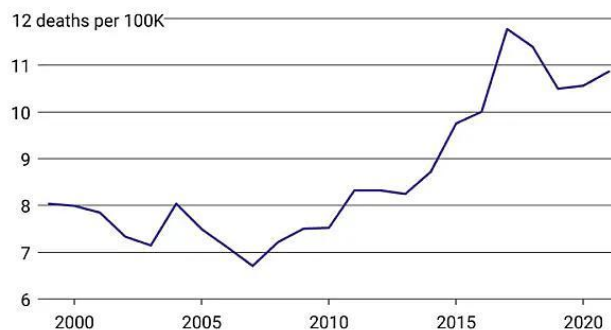
embrace that need. In the U.S., under Federal Law, and according to most states, having sex can only be legally indulged in once you are eighteen years old. According to Harvard Health Publishing that is typically a full six to eight years after the average onset of puberty for boys, and slightly more for girls. It is not my place to criticize the law, I am merely pointing out that for teens who are still minors, it is not legal for them to follow a natural drive dictated by their hormones. In many cases, parents are guided by the law regarding what they find acceptable behavior in their offspring.

Outside the domain of sex, there are many other ways in which we may not be allowed to mature as quickly as we may wish. A significant number of adolescents want to leave home, for any number of reasons, sooner than they can. Others may resent having a curfew when their friends do not. In general, particularly for teens who mature early (mentally as well as physically), not being able to make decisions about many aspects of their lives can be stressful. Understanding these frustrations is the first step in effectively coaching both teens and their parents, and that can be followed by seeking ways in which creativity can be expressed (hence the garage band or am-dram). The teen and early adult years are often the time for expression through poetry, writing, painting, or sketching. Any creative outlet can help the sometimes challenging transition to autonomy and adulthood.

Mitigating stress

As a 35-year meditator, no one has to convince me of the effectiveness of meditation as a natural medication-free way to mitigate stress. Unfortunately, it got rather a bad rap in the 1960s and 70s when a stoned entourage of pop culturists came trekking back from India having visited the Maharishi, extolling the virtues of psychedelics, psychotropics, and, oh yes, meditation. In recent times, however, it is treated with more respect and the gurus of mindfulness played a clever card in avoiding any reference to 'meditation' when they touted its values to the largely business community. In reality, the Maharishi's meditation (TM, which I happen to practice) is from the

Rate of teen deaths from suicide is up 35% from 1999



Note: Based on deaths categorized as self-harm among people ages 15-19.
Data source: CDC

Hindu tradition, and mindfulness is derived from Buddhism. Clinical studies do not show any reason to differentiate between the significant benefits that both, along with some other practices, have the potential to deliver.

I don't hesitate to suggest meditation to my clients to mitigate stress. Other stress-relieving activities such as prayer for those who are religious, or simply creating the habit of going for a walk are also positive mitigators of stress. Walking also has the interesting consequence of increasing activity between the two hemispheres of the brain which I discuss later. For me, complements to meditation include playing tennis and musical instruments, which help me regain some objectivity when viewing a stressful challenge. I find this particularly useful since one of my lifelong skills is to take a simple situation and turn it into a complicated one!

Often much of what stresses us out is not what is going on now, but what we fear for the future. Remember as a child if we had to go to the dentist in a few days, how anxiety would set in well before that? The chances are that any pain we had to undergo was less than we anticipated and stressed over. This is not surprising when you look back at how we may have become hardwired. Our predecessors are not corralling the kids or circling the wagons because of what is happening *at that moment* -it would be rather too late! No, it was what they feared *may* happen in the future (i.e., when the warring next-door tribe or pride of cave lions finished observing and made the decision to go in for the kill).

There is no shortage of reasons why, in today's complex world, we shouldn't be concerned for our future. But maybe our goal should be to help our clients recognize the real validity of their concerns while helping them minimize the associated stress. Stress-relieving practices and meditation can help clients stay in the present, minimize stress, and maintain clear thinking despite the mental paralysis and negative effects of worry.

Stress as a shared experience

More work is needed to clarify the role of stress in the creative process, but it seems that while extreme stress invokes negative phenomena (including mental paralysis) it is also important to note that stress as a shared experience is very different from being stressed on your own. There are times when a shared stressful experience can help forge social bonds and help one's sense of belonging (Ozbay et al. 2007). Although this is not something we would predict as being positive for creativity, (since it is a force in the direction of Groupiness rather than Individuality), any positive experience including connectedness with others. correlates positively with creativity.

Simply sharing a stressful event with others can also make you feel more connected to them, whereas avoiding that shared experience may make you feel isolated. You may also lose status and respect if you don't show that you are upset by a stressful event. A politician who fails to demonstrate empathy and resourcefulness at a disaster site, for instance, may lose the trust and respect of their electorate. Because of these variables, we can see that the effect of stress on creativity is complex.

A friend, family member, or coach can take some of the sting out of a stressful situation, and our job may be to help stressed clients maintain perspective and not blow things out of proportion, possibly leading to impulsive decision-making, all of which are helped through the introduction of creative thinking.

Although this shows us a way that emotions can bind people together, they can also have an ambiguous association with creativity. While weak emotions do not seem to influence creativity greatly, strong emotions can either facilitate or inhibit creative thinking in ways that are not always predictable. This is somewhat similar to the fine line that divides terror and excitement in 'high adrenaline' situations. In other words, and as we have seen, even though stress often inhibits creative thinking, that is not always the case.

The positive side of stress

Outside of extreme sports, in other words in general life, it is hard to find much in the way of a silver lining to situations of *extreme* stress. However, when the stress is *not* life or sanity-threatening, in other words, moderate, it can have a positive side. Let me give you an example at the 'micro' level.

Read the two excerpts from my first book (Embracing the New Era) below:

Just as generating creative ideas requires the knowledge that 'it is OK to make mistakes' so turning ideas into innovations also requires a sympathetic environment; one that is shaped by communication, leadership style, individual motivation and teamwork. Once these things are all in place we have a chance of being competitive in the new era ... the era of creativity!

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The first rendition uses the font 'Bodoni', and the second 'Ariel'. Both blocks contain the same text, and you might be tempted to conclude that there is no benefit in trying to read the Bodoni (generally considered a difficult font to parse), rather than the easier-to-read Ariel. You would be partly right in that the Bodoni will probably use more energy, take longer, and may irritate you! Contrary to initial expectations, a complex font, such as Bodoni can improve learning as it forces readers to process the information more thoroughly, resulting in greater retention. If you are on an email list that sends you emails that are a bit difficult to read (and probably sales-oriented), you now know why!

Times of war are stressful, particularly if you are closely involved with the conflict, but they can also be motivating. Many important, 'Big C', creations have been catalyzed by this kind of situation. The isolated, custom-built village of Los Alamos, New Mexico, that housed the team that created the atom bomb, had the original 'fake news' broadcast throughout the complex. The broadcasts falsely stated that the Germans were close to invading the East Coast of the US. The idea was that informing the team about the imminent threat would motivate them to use everything in their power to advance the creation of the atomic bomb as swiftly as possible. There were a great many problems solved very inventively during the design of this bomb. The speed with which it was accomplished was legendary, suggesting that stress-induced threats may have had a positive impact on resilience, determination, and problem-solving skills. From the jet engine and radar to superglue, the electronic computer, and the atom bomb, a great deal of innovation occurred during WWII, and innovation is, after all, the product of creative thinking. In this case, the threat-driven motivation outweighed the stress and team dynamics that typically hinder creative thinking.

As mentioned previously, there are ways in which stress can strengthen relationships. At every level of society, from family to the nation, research shows that people have tended to be closer together after terrorist attacks and in times of war. In my childhood, I can remember people fondly reminiscing about how they all came together during WWII.

A shared cause can help a couple in a troubled relationship, by bringing them together. A client of mine was on the brink of divorce until his wife was involved in a serious car accident. The traumatic event shook them both to the core and as she recovered, they found ways to resolve their differences. This phenomenon could stem from stress hormones activating caregiving systems fostering cooperation and compassion. Other possibilities include having a shared challenge highlighting similarities rather than differences, or from the new and severe experience catalyzing improved creative thinking facilitating conflict resolution.

Stress can also catalyze personal growth and development in several ways. Stressful situations can encourage people to confront challenges, step outside their comfort zone, and better understand their strengths and weaknesses. Also, the body's stress responses release hormones like adrenaline and dopamine that can increase energy, alertness, and focus. All these actions can provide opportunities for motivation and adopting a more creative approach to our lives and our decision-making. Psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (1996) demonstrated that trauma can facilitate growth, resulting in improved relationships, enhanced appreciation for life, and a heightened sense of agency.

In conclusion, beyond the well-documented physical risks of stress, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes, it also impairs decision-making and cognitive function through rigid thinking and anxiety-induced paralysis. There are also behavioral impacts to consider (often present in clients with burnout) such as changes in eating or sleeping patterns, social withdrawal, and the neglect of responsibilities. On the other hand, when not extreme, stress can strengthen relationships, promote personal growth, improve cognitive function, be a powerful motivator, and enhance problem-solving skills and decision-making. To better understand this dichotomy, let us take a closer look at how we think and make decisions.