

## COPING WITH BURN-OUT



# Breathe in ... and relax

Consultant psychologist **Dr Michael Sinclair** invites you to explore the ways that you may usually respond to your own stress experience and to take a pragmatic approach in considering whether these 'coping strategies' are working well for you, or not



SOME OF the very real stressors that come with working as a medical consultant I highlighted in last's month's article. Unfortunately, many doctors don't own up to feeling stressed or, worse still, that they aren't coping too well.

This is understandable; however, this is also a real problem. Attempting to hide and suppress our stress is likely to exacerbate it.

Research from an arm of psychology called contextual behavioural science, shows us that engaging in behaviour that functions as a means of experiential avoidance is likely to lead to more suffering in life.

In this article, I invite you to explore the ways you may usually respond to your own stress experience and to take a pragmatic approach in considering whether these coping strategies are working or not.

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In this protective state of high alert, our minds will produce a plethora of interpretations and assumptions about our stressful circumstances, in the form of judging, evaluating, criticising ourselves or others, perhaps regretting what has happened and/or worrying about the terrible things that might go wrong.

#### Avoidance strategy

All this thinking serves an experiential avoidance function; it's our super-charged problem-solving mind trying its best to protect us from any nasty eventualities and even more stress.

It's therefore all too easy to get caught up in these compelling products of our mind. We tend to become single-minded, persisting in our attempts to suppress, eliminate and control away any stress and associated emotional pain,

like failure, not being good enough, the rejection that comes with others' disapproval of us and all the underlying vulnerability of this.

Along with worrying and/or beating ourselves up to avoid more distress, we might do this in any number of other ways, too, such as:

- Drinking alcohol or taking drugs to feel less stressed;
- Avoiding certain meetings or people to feel less anxious;
- Working longer and harder even when unwell to avoid the guilt of letting others down;
- Not seeking help or self-prescribing to avoid the shame, embarrassment and sense of failure that will come with disclosing to another professional that you may not be coping so well.

Perhaps you have tried some of these strategies or maybe others that also function to eradicate

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stress and avoid these painful and unwanted experiences.

This is usually not a good idea. But don't take my word for it. How does all this work for you? If the strategies you use to avoid your stress work just fine, keep doing them; I'm not here to mess with anything that is working for you.

However, I would encourage you to take a pragmatic approach and ask yourself three questions about each of the 'coping' strategies that you use:

**1** How effective is this strategy in helping me feel better in the short term? **A:** Probably, or you wouldn't persist in doing it.

**2** How effective is it in helping me feel better in the long term? **A:** Usually not; it's unlikely to eradicate stress ultimately, because that is impossible and probably makes it worse.

**3** How effective is it in moving me closer towards being the kind of doctor/colleague/partner/parent I want to be? Or, living the life I truly want? **A:** Probably not so effective, in both cases.

### What we try to resist often persists

Your experience may tell you – as it often does for most of us – that this struggle of trying to eradicate and control stress often proves to be a futile endeavour and, what's more, it usually makes the stress even more intense.

If you worry and beat yourself up to avoid the worst happening and to improve your performance, you are likely to feel less confident, become anxious and agitated and therefore ineffective on the job.

If you use alcohol and/or drugs to avoid your stress, you might become more stressed around your health or relationships and perhaps have difficulty sleeping, which stresses you out even more.

If you avoid certain places or people to not feel anxious, you're likely to become more anxious about missing out on important relationships, learning opportunities and career development.

Working harder and longer hours to avoid the guilt of letting others down might result in becoming tired and exhausted and having to take time off from work and then an even greater sense of guilt to deal with.



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Self-prescribing medication and delaying seeking professional help to avoid the embarrassment and shame of not coping may result in feeling increasingly overwhelmed, further psychological problems and a greater sense of failure.

We seem to forget that stress and these associated emotions such as failure and shame are a condition of life and not a problem to be solved.

While we remain stuck in the loop of struggling with our unwanted emotions, our ability to fully attend to the present moment is diminished.

Consequently, we fail to take in new information about the circumstances around us and lose sight of what is important and what we might otherwise really care about.

Altogether, we become behaviourally ineffective, as our range of coping responses becomes limited and restricted as we focus on eliminating the threat (our stress) as we see it.

Consequently, we fail to adapt in a fluid manner and in a more meaningful way to the demands of any stressful situation we may find ourselves in. In other words, we become stuck in our ways and psychologically rigid.

### So, what can you do?

If the ways that you are responding to your stress are not working out too well for you, would you then be willing to consider some alternative ways of responding to it when it shows up?

You probably know of and have tried all the common stress man-



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agement techniques before, such as keeping active and taking regular exercise, eating well and ensuring you get adequate rest and sleep, relaxation, positive thinking, distraction, challenging yourself with new hobbies, working smarter rather than longer or harder. You have probably given this kind of advice to patients yourself.

These strategies really can work and can be extremely helpful in certain contexts and certain times. Do them if they work for you.

I'm not knocking these techniques at all and you should add them to your toolkit for stress management. If you don't know them, take a look online or read any stress management self-help book to refresh. However, what do we do when they don't work?

I'm interested in sharing and getting you to try something new. Over the next two articles, I will highlight a number of interesting and effective alternatives which are not necessarily focused on the eradication of stress, but more to do with changing our response to it and to be used alongside, and in the presence of stress.

When we 'open up' to stress, and lessen our pre-occupation with trying to eradicate it, we may find that life becomes fuller and that, paradoxically, stress becomes less of a problem. ■

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*He is the author of a range of self-help books, including Mindfulness for Busy People, Working with Mindfulness, The Little ACT Workbook, The Little CBT Workbook, and Fear and Self-Loathing in the City.*

*He provides effective, evidence-based psychological interventions to individuals of all ages, couples and families experiencing a range of psychological problems such as stress, anxiety and depression and adjustment to physical health conditions.*

*He provides training to medical and other health practitioners, consultation to a growing number of corporate occupational health departments and delivers psychological interventions to large firms to improve employees' health and performance*

