

FROM FEAR TO ETERNITY: COPING WITH STRESS

One of my favorite movies is “Defending Your Life,” starring Albert Brooks and Meryl Streep. The premise suggests that after death, we spend a few days in "Judgment City," a kind of cosmic Disneyland in which other-worldly defense lawyers and prosecutors help us to evaluate the life we've just led according to a very simple standard: how much fear were we able to overcome? To what extent did we live in fear; to what extent did we embrace life with love and courage?

The movie was hilarious, yet it touched on an important theme. In my work as a holistic practitioner helping people deal with stress and pain, it's important to help clients understand that fear evolved as a survival mechanism intended to protect us from potentially life-threatening situations. This awareness is fundamental to understanding how stress affects our bodies and how our minds contribute to our feeling stressed. Some fear is actually a good thing, serving as a warning and a preparation for the fight-or-flight response when quick action is required. Too much fear, however, can interfere with our response to basic, life-affirming activities and everyday challenges. There are some priceless examples of fear in action in the movie, like Albert Brooks' character seeing himself in a past life, running frantically from a wild animal *he* was supposed to be hunting for dinner. Then, as an adult in modern times, he appeared almost equally terrified to ask a girl out or approach his boss for a raise. And that's just how it goes: we often use the same survival mechanism whether we're in real danger or just feeling challenged.

As simplistic as it might sound, the idea presented in “Defending Your Life” that we struggle between love and fear has been gaining ground. In his book *Love Is Letting Go of Fear*, Dr. Gerald Jampolsky discussed the idea that all emotions can be subsumed under the broader categories of love and fear. In his view, love, the recognition of our oneness with others and the feeling of compassion for them, gives rise to such related feelings as peace, joy, altruism, forgiveness, and so on. Fear, a response to the perception of threat or loss, gives rise to feelings like anxiety, anger, grief, disgust, revenge, and so on. Even if this model is a little too simplistic for most of us to accept readily, the urge to categorize life experience according to a binary system, an “either/or” polarity, must have its roots deep in the psyche, deep in the body, and perhaps even deep in the heart of creation itself.

After all, many philosophies and theories, including quantum physics, see duality as the nature of creation. To the Chinese, for example, there is the *yin-yang* polarity within the *Tao*. Western religions see the world as a battleground between good and evil. In theoretical physics, the Unified Field of pure, undifferentiated existence gives rise to the dual-natured building blocks of energy/matter called quanta that are *both* waves and particles and from which the entire cosmos

arises. Even our bodies, for all their miraculous complexity, can be said to operate on a binary system, similar to a computer.

This binary component is reflected in Dr. Hans Selye's recognition of how various stressors affect health. Selye was the father of the modern stress concept. Borrowing the term from engineering physics, he expanded "stress" to include the idea of cumulative "wear and tear" on our bodies and related it to a specific pattern of hormonal and other changes. There are two types of hormones in the body—that *binary* theme again! Although the endocrine system is extremely complex, hormones fall into two basic categories, generally speaking. Syntoxic hormones, like cortisone, tell various body functions to relax or turn off—in effect, to remain peaceful and in harmony with prevailing conditions. On the other hand, catatoxic hormones, like adrenalin, tell the body to gear up for activity.

All individual stressors, whether physical or psychological in nature, affect our bodies in three consistent ways, which Selye identified as the stress triad. In the early stages of stress, the adrenal glands produce extra adrenalin, the thymus gland produces extra immune factors, and the digestive process speeds up. But in the later stages of ongoing stress—if the stressors are prolonged or repeated—the adrenal and thymus glands atrophy, meaning there is less adrenalin available even when needed, and a weakened immune system leaves you open to illness. In addition, ulcers develop in the overtaxed digestive system. It's like your body has been on high alert for so long that the emergency system wears out and no longer reacts efficiently when you need it to.

The initial hyperactivity of the adrenal glands, thymus, and digestion are based on the fight-or-flight response, that ancient, fear-based survival response programmed into our endocrine systems. Increased adrenalin readies us to face a clear and present danger by preparing for action—fighting or running. We talk about “fight or flight,” but there's a third option nature has also endowed us with: freezing. Have you ever been frozen with fear, only to wonder later why you didn't say or do something? Think about it in terms of animals in the wild: sometimes immobility is the safest response to a threat, allowing the threatened creature to blend in with the surrounding camouflage, thus less vulnerable to attack. Increased immunity will fight infection if, in the course of fighting and running, the body should get cut or injured. So, too, with accelerated digestion: if there happens to be any food in the stomach, this process will allow us to spring into action more comfortably and effectively.

What Selye further demonstrated brings us back to the theme of “Defending Your Life”—too much fear is not a good thing! Selye showed that thoughts alone can trigger hormone release just as effectively as physical events. And the term "thoughts" includes attitudes, beliefs, words, images, and emotions. So being faced with physical danger like fire and being faced with psychological danger like worry about the future both trigger the same fight-or-flight stress

response in the body, wearing it out over time. It's like "the boy who cried wolf" in that prolonged stress literally makes your body unable to gear up for fight-or-flight when needed.

The psychological stressors get tricky, because whether we *perceive* an event or idea as dangerous will determine the body's response. A loss of income presents a real difficulty, but just how traumatic and dangerous it seems depends on a lot of factors, including how we project or imagine future events. Do we go with the flow and decide now is a good time to down-scale or get that new job we've been thinking about? Or do we become convinced that it won't be long until the bank forecloses on the house and we'll end up on the street? And just to make matters worse, do we imagine this painful scenario in vivid detail day after day, rehearsing a negative future in our minds until it starts to magnetize events? Even in a situation that is genuinely life-threatening, attitude can make a difference. For instance, with cancer, even when given a

poor prognosis by the doctor, some people maintain faith that they *can* be healed, despite statistics. If one out of ten people in their situation survive, they believe that they can be that one person. Their faith, along with visualizing a positive future, can trigger the release of syntoxic hormones, allowing the body to rest from stress for a time, minimizing the wear and tear on an already-taxed system.

Balance is the key for both physical and mental well-being. Whether we are talking about hormones or imagination, our responses must be grounded in a context. Your body and mind *must* be able to spring into action in a burning building. In that context, remaining too relaxed could cost you your life. Sometimes fear triggers the imagination so that we can take necessary precautions or avoid a situation that is not worth the inherent risks. We must be able to assess danger without going to the opposite extreme of always imagining the worst or creating a state of chronic, debilitating worry. Many tools can assist in finding this balance, from physical approaches like exercise and nutrition, which strengthen the body against stress, to comprehensive mind-body approaches like behavioral therapy or meditation.

There is a paradox to stress management. Dealing with fear comes in part from realistic assessment of life's situations, followed by taking appropriate actions. At the same time, it involves stretching the envelope of the possible, seeing a new vision of the limitless potential



that resides within each one of us when we are connected to the best within ourselves—
connected to that love that puts fear in its proper place.

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