

HOW TO CHILL WITHOUT A PILL

Despite our busy, overloaded lives, we can learn how not to let pressure turn into stress, says Christchurch psychologist Derek Roger. **by JANE TOLERTON**

If you make one New Year's resolution, let it be to leave 2013 behind. Don't replay the year's worst moments in your head. Don't think about what went wrong. No what ifs or if onlys. Just move on.

This is the advice of psychologist Derek Roger, a world leader in resilience, who lives on Banks Peninsula. He has developed a pragmatic programme for dealing with stress, based on some heavy-duty scientific research he did at the University of York.

When you ruminate (the term used in psychology for dwelling on emotional upset), you keep your cortisol levels high, says Roger. Because this compromises the body's ability to produce new white blood cells, it impairs your immune system.

Roger's message is simple: stress results in a short miserable life – "or, if you have very good genes, a long miserable life". The saying "Shit happens; misery is optional" encapsulates the idea – as does Mark Twain's comment that

some of the worst things in his life never happened.

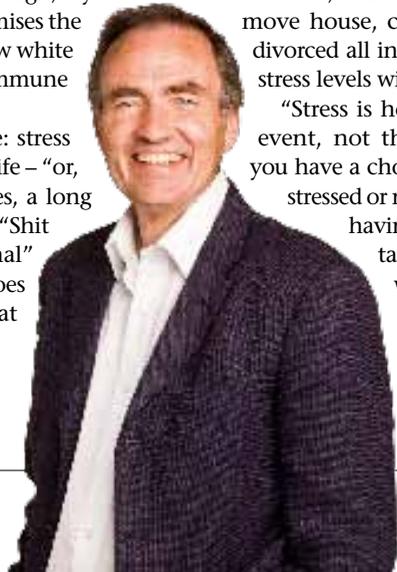
Roger says the terminology developed by psychologists can give the wrong idea about stress. Too much work or a bad relationship cause pressure, but such factors don't result in stress unless you let them.

"If you talk about pressure as stress, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. You end up stressed. Psychologists have developed the word 'eustress', which is supposed to be good stress, while 'distress' is supposed to be bad for you, but there is no good stress if you define it properly as rumination."

He advises people not to believe the life-events scale, which suggests that if you move house, change jobs and get divorced all in the same year, your stress levels will be sky-high.

"Stress is how you react to the event, not the event itself, and you have a choice whether you get stressed or not. People talk about having a stressful job, but take any job – some will find it stressful, but others will love it."

The author of *Managing Stress: Live Long and Prosper*,



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and an adjunct associate professor at the University of Canterbury, Roger became interested in resilience in the 1980s when as a neuroscientist at the University of York he started looking at the effects of disasters.

“It didn’t matter how intense the disaster, only some people suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. In any disaster, only about 5% will end up with that diagnosis.”

Those who are resilient have the ability not to turn pressure into stress, says Roger.

“When I do workshops, I get people to make the distinction between pressure and stress. I ask, ‘Who’s had a relatively small amount of stress in the past year? A fair bit? A lot?’ You get a bell curve. Most people are in the middle.

“Then you ask how many people have not had enough to do over the past year. Nobody puts a hand up. Everybody has too much to do – partly because there are fewer people doing more work, partly because of the speed of communication with things like email.

“People say, ‘Things are getting more stressful.’ But it is pressure that has increased. People are under huge pressure, but pressure is not stress.”

TOO MUCH RUMINATION

The research Roger initiated in York aimed to pinpoint the protective factor that made some people resilient. “We developed two psychometric scales – one measuring people’s tendency to ruminate about emotional upset and the other measuring the effects of inhibiting emotion rather than expressing it.

“We did experiments looking at the effect of these things on cardiovascular function and immune function. In one study we measured people’s blood pressure and heart rate. We got them to relax so we could get a resting level. Then we needed to stress them. So we gave them a set of little white geometric shapes and a target shape, a silhouette, and said, ‘Put this puzzle together so it looks like the shape.’ But we’d taken a piece out – so it couldn’t be done.

“Then we put on the pressure by saying, ‘The person in the next room has finished it, you’re extremely slow’, and then said it was an IQ test.”

Everybody showed an increase in heart rate and blood pressure as adrenalin levels rose, but the ruminators took significantly longer to recover.

“Adrenalin has been called ‘the stress hormone’. Actually, it is a hormone doing exactly what it is designed to do – which is prepare you for action. Your heart rate and blood pressure go up and you are ready for

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fight or flight. That’s an entirely appropriate response – but it’s got nothing to do with stress.”

Stress is a result of people sustaining adrenalin beyond its useful purpose – by ruminating on what has happened, says Roger. “Not expressing emotion also turned out to delay recovery. It wasn’t significant on its own, but when it was added to ruminating, the effect was even greater.”

He describes the way humans keep producing adrenalin when it is no longer useful by drawing a comparison with a sleeping cat. “When the cat suddenly realises someone is nearby, it leaps up, its hair standing on end, ready to fight or flee. But when it recognises its owner, it calms down again immediately.

“Your cat is physiologically identical to you, with the same glands secreting adrenalin. It comes back to a resting level very quickly. All that extra adrenalin is quickly metabolised – because what the cat doesn’t do is sit around thinking, ‘What if that had been the alsatian from next door? What if there are three more dogs I don’t even know about?’

“Think of the last time something really got to you. How often and for long afterwards did you go on thinking about it? While the thought is in your head, you continue to secrete adrenalin and you have cardio demand and strain.

“After doing our experiments, we defined stress as rumination – and understood that the effect was to make you miserable and potentially shorten your life.”

In an experiment with student nurses sitting a crucial exam, Roger demonstrated how ruminators damage their health.

“We tested for cortisol, which has also wrongly been called a stress hormone. Like the synthetic drug cortisone, it is an anti-inflammatory, and part of what it does is to ensure that inflammation is kept in check; uncontrolled inflammation can hinder rather than aid healing.

“Cortisol also regulates energy. It does this by releasing stored glucose, which provides the rush of energy to fight or flee, and it conserves energy for dealing with the immediate threat by putting on hold

temporarily things the body can come back to later. These include producing new white blood cells. If you keep cortisol levels high experimentally, white blood cell counts go steadily down – which will compromise your immunity.”

The researchers tested the students’ cortisol levels immediately after the exam and again after they got their exam results.

“We found that the people with high levels of rumination had an exaggerated and prolonged cortisol response. We then did further studies looking directly at immune function and found that the chronic ruminators did indeed have compromised immunity.

“That’s the link between stress and health. If you want to mount a direct assault on your cardiovascular system and compromise your immunity, just ruminate.”

Roger believes the link between stress and cancer has been overstated. “Stress doesn’t cause cancer, which is primarily a genetic disease. But when you take out genetic and environmental factors and just look at stress, it does have an impact because it can compromise immune function and cancer may then spread more quickly. That’s why I say all that stress offers you is a short miserable life.”

Roger had no plans to offer people advice on stress management when he was conducting the experiments. The North Yorkshire police forced that link.

“They got in touch because they’d seen some of the papers we’d published. They’d been using conventional stress management based on life events and trying to diagnose stress for a long time – to no avail.

“They’d spent all this time talking about their symptoms. You get miserable talking about symptoms, and they’re just effects, not causes. There’s no point in talking about the effects. We worked with the police and ended up with a training programme.

“It’s a real challenge for an academic to take fundamental lab-based neuroscience research and turn it into something people can use. I realised we had to entertain people. I now describe myself as an entertainer,” says Roger.

The Challenge of Change programme he developed was widely used in the UK – including in the BBC and the National Health Service, and now has its headquarters with his Work Skills Consultancy on Banks Peninsula.

“YOU’VE ONLY GOT ONE LIFE”

Roger arrived to spend a semester at the University of Canterbury in 2002. He and wife Gwen drove to Barry’s Bay. “You go up

this endless hill, then you get to the top and a breathtaking view opens up. When we woke up in our B&B next morning, it was still there, and after our second breakfast we bought the house – not as a B&B but as our future home.

“New Zealand is such a dangerous place to visit,” he says, laughing. “Actually, you’ve

see me the next time I was there to say he had been able to come off cardio medication. Another man resigned the week after the programme, saying it had given him the courage to make a necessary move. Before that, every time he thought about it, he’d catastrophise about it.”

It doesn’t work for everyone. “Some want

Usually, you’re thinking about the past or the future. In fact, no one knows what’s coming next, so the future is fantasy. And the past is also a fantasy because everything that has happened to you comes through your screen of conditioned attitudes.

“So you have a choice: you can live an imagined life in the past or the future. Or you can live the real thing. Now is really all there is.

“Waking sleep is one thing, but when you add the negative emotion and waking sleep becomes rumination, it’s no longer a daydream, it’s a nightmare. You create this virtual reality in your mind, and your body acts accordingly.”

TAKING CONTROL

The way to change things is to wake up and take control, he says. He asks people to listen to his voice and any other sounds.

“There’s a subtle change in the room. They have woken up and taken control of their attention, which they are now giving intentionally to the sounds.”

Being able to control attention has huge implications in the workplace, says Roger.

“When a piece of work arrives on your desk, you need to go into the past to solve the problem, but you are doing it intentionally, from a detached, objective perspective. You give your attention – and work gets done.

“There may be pressure to get it done, and your adrenalin levels go up. But to bring in stress, you need to add negative emotion. If your boss says, ‘Make sure you do a better job this time’, and you go home and think about how it’s all going to happen again tomorrow, you get miserable. That’s why all stress is rumination – and why being a good boss means not giving your staff anything to ruminate about.”

The aim of the programme is to help people catch themselves as they start to ruminate – and learn to let go and get on with their real lives.

Roger uses a scene from a *Star Wars* movie to illustrate. “Luke Skywalker has to bomb the Death Star. It’s really tricky; he has the last bomb and has to drop it down a shaft. He starts ruminating – thinking ‘what if’ and ‘if only’. When you get into that state of mind, you’re going to miss.

“A voice comes into his head. It’s Obi-Wan Kenobi, and we all know what he says: ‘Use the Force, Luke.’ The Force is attention.

“That scene is such a good analogy for the programme. You can’t use the Force when it is contaminated. You have to let go of all the things that contaminate it – and that frees your mind to do the job properly. ■



only got one life. People have all these opportunities and then regret it if they don’t take them. We thought, ‘What the hell, have a go!’”

Roger now spends a lot of his time planting trees on his property, but he also continues to do training in recognising pressure and not turning it into stress. Trainees include staff of The Warehouse, scientists at Crown research institutes and junior doctors in the Canterbury District Health Board.

The response is usually very positive. “Most people say, ‘At last. This makes so much sense. It helps me put things in perspective.’ In one company a man came to

to hold on to the idea that stress is the event, people who may well have had something very tough happen but are determined to keep on feeling sorry for themselves and blaming other people.”

Some are shocked to discover how much time they spend in what he calls waking sleep, a concept he illustrates with “the Chatham Islands effect” – when you’re listening to the weather forecast on the radio and waiting for your own region’s weather, but end up only registering the announcer saying “... and the Chatham Islands” without having heard the rest.

“The question is ‘Where were you?’