

Stress: why are we anxious amid our plenty?

Far from calming us, wealth and technology have made us more stressed

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If your great-great-grandparents fell through a hole in time and landed here today, they would dance for joy to see the miraculous advances we have made in technology, healthcare and entertainment. But soon they would also begin to wonder why, amid all this amazing stuff, do we look so stressed, anxious and snippy?

Credit crunch notwithstanding, our society is technologically and materially far richer than ever before in human history. It is much safer, too. But our levels of stress, anxiety and depression are higher than ever. So, too, are our rates of stress-related physical illnesses such as hypertension. The insurer, Aviva UK Health, says that psychological stress was the primary cause of sickness claims last year. A Coventry University study, meanwhile, shows that in some parts of the country almost two-thirds of workers say they are suffering from stress-induced depression. The Health and Safety Executive calculates that in 2008 alone 13.5 million working days were lost to stress, depression and anxiety.

We are worrying ourselves sick. Along with all our marvellous technological toys we have created a cascade of vicious stress cycles. Not only have we created a giant social engine for accelerating our stress, we have also jettisoned many time-honoured ways for releasing the pressure. It is true that some people can thrive on stress. A combination of genes, life history and morale means that one person's total overload can be another's mere busyness. But relentless pressure is quite another matter, and has seriously damaging effects.

We have proved highly adept at using technology to stress ourselves. For example, we now create and consume such an unprecedented daily maelstrom of information — urgent e-mails, rolling news, celebrity scandal — that we become bewildered. So we try harder to suck in even more information, hoping somehow that we will find the one fact that makes sense of all the rest. Instead, we get more bewildered and stressed.

Much of the information simply intensifies our deeply primitive sense of status-anxiety. Everywhere we look a celebrity is flaunting his or her alpha status at us. Meanwhile, we're struggling financially just to stay anywhere near his or her apparently stratospheric social rank. Mass communication also spreads fear more rapidly than ever before: just think of the global panic over swine flu.

Unwittingly, we supercharge our ancient fear-spreading instincts with modern technology. Stress is something we catch from each other like a virus. It is an ancient tribal response that pre-dates the development of sophisticated language. Randolph Blake, of Vanderbilt University, says that historically, we had to stay alert to others' anxiety in case they spotted a predator in the grass. As soon as we spot another's stress, we prime our own panic response in case we have to fight or flee in an eyeblink.

Blake has co-authored a study that shows how the human brain spots fearful expressions faster than any other emotion. A dozen volunteers studied photos of scared, neutral and happy faces. They consciously recognised fearful expressions a half-second quicker than other images. Unconsciously we react faster: the amygdala — the brain's anxiety centre — spots signs of fear in less than two-hundredths of a second.

We also smell fear on each other. A Rutgers University study in the journal, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, asked men to wear absorbent pads while watching clips from a horror movie. The pads were put in jars and presented along with neutral pads. More than three quarters of the women and more than half the men were able consciously to identify the smell of fearful men. Thus worry ripples through a crowd in a manner called “emotional contagion”.

The environment we have built around us worsens matters. If you ever feel angsty among slick modern towers with their flat expanses of glass, marble and concrete, you have good subliminal reason.

Studies by John Zeisel, the director of the Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture, indicate that places that seem too sterile are perceived subconsciously as dangerous and can trigger the release of stress hormones.

City-apartment living can have similar effects: a study of women randomly assigned to live in flats with a view of nothing but urban sprawl and car parks found that they have far lower mental focus for anything from puzzles to big life challenges, compared with women assigned to flats whose courtyards overlook grassy courtyards, trees and flowerbeds. If people can see trees or greenery, they fall ill less and recuperate better; they are happier, more relaxed, more able to concentrate, less aggressive.

But we don't all flock to the countryside to commune with Mother Nature in our spare time; nor do we tend to take long daily breaks from information-seeking or other stressors. In fact, the more stressed we are, the less disposed we seem to tackle it. Instead we lock ourselves into a spiral of anxiety. One reason may be the disturbing fact that stress is addictive. Laboratory studies by researchers at the University of Sydney indicate that the more stress you suffer, the more you crave it. Dr Nick Lavidis says his studies indicate that when humans are exposed to stress, their bodies release painkilling opiates to compensate — but in long-term stress, our brains may become addicted to them.

It certainly does seem hard to break our stress cycles. We all know that traditional yoga and meditation can calm us. Research at Harvard Medical School indicates that these practices can even change how our genes express themselves, switching off damaging physical reactions that can be sparked by chronic exposure to stress hormones. But who has time to sit around doing nothing — particularly when our fight-or-flight circuits are getting prodded continuously?

Instead, we are now offered “instant meditation” and “hot yoga”; relax faster and harder, dammit. Our stress-driven anxiety fuels the inferno of human hurry. We have become manic about speeding things up — speeding everything up. If our instant gratification isn't working (possibly because we're too stressed to enjoy it), we must further accelerate the instant gratification. A futurologist friend tells me how, at a focus group of 19-year-olds, one complained that McDonald's shouldn't call itself “fast food” because “you have to wait, like, up to a minute for it”. The other focus-groupers nodded in agreement. The multimedia retailer QVC says that its survey of 2,000 UK shoppers found that 47 per cent of Brits have suffered “queue rage”, with a fifth having stormed out of a shop after queuing for three minutes or less.

How do we break free from the cycle? Most of us do know how to relax. But we feel under pressure to keep striving our way out of the problem, rather than taking our foot off the pedal. It is important for each of us to see what this overheated culture does to us, psychologically and physically, and to understand how easily we can get trapped inside this social spiral. Hopefully, this can help us to commit to giving ourselves a break — helping ourselves to alleviate the pressure in nourishing ways that are gentle, sustainable and above all enjoyable. After all, just adding “relaxation anxiety” to our list of worries is hardly going to help.