

You May Not Know That Stress is Killing Your Heart

By Leonard Mees, MD

Work? Family? Time? Health? Do you have stress? Sure you do. We all do. We accept that it's part of living in modern times, part of our Twenty-first Century landscape. But, what we likely don't realize is that stress kills our hearts, minute by minute, cell by cell. Quite a price to pay for living in "progressive societies!"

Dr. Robert Eliot didn't think much about the effects of stress in his life until he had a stress-related heart attack at age 43. "Destined to become the chief of cardiology at a major metropolitan medical center," he suffered his stress-related heart attack, having no other heart risk factors. "There I was looking up from the wrong side of the sheets," he lamented in his excellent book about stress, *Is It Worth Dying For?* Turning lemons into lemonade, he began to study the effects cardiovascular of stress for the remainder of his career. If we take the time to heed his warning, we are all potential beneficiaries of his research.

I met Dr. Eliot at his research facility in Denver in 1988. In my discussion with him, I learned that the biochemical effects of stress lead directly to heart damage. Here's what he shared with me in conversation.

Each time you experience stress, a specific biochemical sequence processes. Your brain sends a signal to your adrenal glands, which in turn secrete adrenaline. That adrenaline courses through your body, quickly reaching your heart muscle. There, it effects tiny areas of cellular damage. These areas of cell damage eventually heal much as a heart attack heals, by scar formation. Pathologists identify these areas of healed damage as contraction band lesions.

If you work in a stressful environment, or have a stressful living circumstance, you may experience a stress response over a hundred times per day. Think of three hundred sixty-five days each year, all with multiple stress responses, and multiply that times thirty years. Over time you have subjected your heart to thousands of repeated insults from the adrenaline.

Perhaps even with greater risk are the people who have gradually, unconsciously, risen to a low to moderate level of chronic, constant, smoldering stress. Their hearts drown in a persistent pool of adrenaline. Could this be you?

Either way, over your stressed lifetime, you end up with a "Swiss cheese" heart, a heart peppered with tiny areas of cellular damage. This heart becomes a weak heart, a heart that has lost pumping strength and capacity. This heart becomes an irritable heart, a heart prone to abnormal rhythms.

The poor pumping capacity of your heart increases your risk of congestive heart failure, astronomically. The irritability and abnormal heart rhythms increase your chance of sudden death from a lethal arrhythmia.

How often have we heard the story of the young, exuberant 42 year-old, man or woman, found dead in bed on a bright Monday morning? That individual, stressed for years, didn't perceive that he or she had a "voice" in life, became discouraged, developed anger, internalized all of these feelings, and eventually suffered a lethal arrhythmia from the sum total of the stressors of his or her life.

Compounding our risk from stress, Dr. Eliot has identified a personality type that has significantly higher cardiac jeopardy than normal. "Hot reactors," those individuals, who upon exposure to modest or moderate stressors, react in a severe vascular manner. They raise their heart rates, increase their blood pressure, and drive their cardiac output through the roof. Across the spectrum of industrialized societies, about 17% of us are "hot reactors," but among professionals, the number doubles to 35%. Of particular concern, and unfortunately should have been to the poor 42 year-old who died well before his or her time, is the fact that a "hot reactor" who has an "anger-in" personality stands a very high probability of sudden death.

Yet, as we "progress" in our societies, we continue to accept stress as part of our normal psychological landscape. We shrug our shoulders and utter something like, "Everyone has stress. It's part of life. There's nothing I can do about it."

The sad fact remains, however, that stress is addictive, that stress kills, and we continue to ignore the danger. It's time to wake up to those facts and change our ways. But how?

How Do We Live a Life that Will Defend Us From the Stress-related Risks that "Progress" has Given Us?

Consider living a life that minimizes stress. Think about mindfulness meditation to achieve that goal.

Mindfulness meditation teaches us how to live in the "precious present" moment. Everyone has a past, but the past is dead and gone, as I recently heard vividly expressed, "deader than antlers on the wall." None of us is guaranteed a future. All we truly have in our lives is the now of our lives. Through the regular practice of meditation, learning to be aware and mindful of our "precious present," we will make better choices in all aspects of our lives. We will choose and participate in relationships better and more fully. We will make better financial decisions. And, we will make better choices for our health. For an excellent description of mindfulness meditation read Jon Kabat-Zinn's wonderful book, *Full Catastrophe Living*. It may change your life. It may save your life.

If you don't yet practice this wonderful discipline, and you feel life has hold of you like a bulldog on your pant leg that just won't let go, remember the **principles of stress management**.

- ◆ If you are unaware that you suffer from stress, you will never manage your stress. How, then, do you gain **awareness** about and identify your stress? Take a stress survey. Ask a friend. Journal. You will discover that stress affects you more than you might have suspected.

- ◆ Stress is our **perception**, not events. Always remind yourself of this fact. Two cars crash at an intersection, both insured, and neither driver is hurt. Yet, one emerges cool as a cucumber while the other rages, mad as a hatter. Two different perceptions of identical events led to very unique and different stress responses.
- ◆ We have **choice** about our perception. Remember Elisabeth Kubler-Ross who offers, “Beyond that glorious five second rage, everything is choice.” Yes, we can go bananas for five seconds, enjoy the rage, but then we have choice over how we feel about life’s circumstances.
- ◆ Not only do we have choice, I submit that we have **responsibility** for choice. Living in an organized society, we can’t allow our “fallout” from our stressors affect those around us.
- ◆ Stress management is not confronting our stressors head on. Rather, stress management is **bending, blending, and coping** with whatever life deals us. In a strong, stressful breeze, bend like the willow, don’t snap like a rigid oak tree.
- ◆ **Laugh!** I have always suggested that we can’t cry while we are laughing, but I was in error. A caller on my old radio show in Phoenix, Arizona corrected me by saying, “Laugh hard enough and you will cry; great, wonderful cleansing tears.”

When stress overwhelms you, and you feel addicted to stress, remember the Great Depression of 1929, stressful times beyond our wildest imagination. A diminutive comedian, Eddie Kantor, having just lost a huge fortune, talked about the fact that stress had killed his uncle. He quipped, “Not only did stress kill my uncle, he had diabetes at 45. You think that’s bad, I had Chrysler at 110?” He continued, “Buy National Casket, you can’t go wrong there!”

Norman Cousins was for many years the editor of *Saturday Review*, a conservative magazine. Before he accepted that position, he fought, and won, a near-deadly battle with what he was informed was a terminal illness. Mired in what he came to view as the “morass of modern medicine,” hospitalized with five blood tests a day and little returning information from his medical team, he signed out of the hospital, AMA (against medical advice). Traveling across the street, he took a hotel room, rented Laurel and Hardy movies, and laughed himself back to health. His eloquently chronicled experience avails itself in a wonderful book, *Anatomy of an Illness*.

Humor sits foundational to a good stress management attitude. Actually, it’s integral to a good life.

How was it that Red Skelton viewed life and stress? He reasoned, “If I have six things to worry about in a day, only one of them might happen. And, why worry, none of us gets out of life alive, anyway?”