



Living On The Edge

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Do you have topic ideas? Comments or questions?

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It is clear that despite the modern-day advances of computers, robotics and cell phones, all aimed at making our lives easier, we are under more stress and working harder than ever before. Why this paradox? The answer is that we are built to live on the edge.

The Situation

On a recent Saturday morning, as a friend's cell phone rang a few feet from me, he sighed exasperatedly as he put the device to his ear. After fielding the call, he asked, rhetorically: "We can't escape it, can we?" I replied: "As I think you know, I threw my cell phone into the Rideau Canal about five years ago; I have chosen to escape it." He looked at me as if I were not of this world.

As society has moved forward, especially in the past dozen or so years, we have advanced in ways not even imaginable a short time earlier. All of these advances have been constructed to assist us. Back those dozen or so years ago some forward-thinking people were predicting with the advent of computerization there would be paperless offices and we all could work 20-hour weeks. Instead what we see is more paper in the office than ever before and 60-hour weeks becoming the norm for managers, executives or anyone ambitious to move ahead.

The Reason

The reason is that humans will work to their threshold of stress. As modern devices make us more efficient, instead of banking that efficiency with more leisure time, we allow ourselves to move a notch up to get back to our edge of stress. Cross the edge and we have a nervous breakdown. The only difference between the nervous breakdown now and a dozen years ago is the tools at our disposal to bring us to that edge of stress. Sometimes as I wrestle with problems in my world and wonder if my nervous system will survive it, I reflect back to the caveman. He had to hunt to have enough food to feed his family and game wasn't always plentiful. He had to fear large animals – bears, sabre-toothed tigers – on an almost daily basis. And if that wasn't bad enough, the tribe next door might attack his cave or group with the aim of stealing their food and raping their women – at any time. For the cavewoman it was even worse! Now there was stress! So I conclude I am probably built as well as that caveman to endure



the stress I encounter.

A parallel is our driving speed as pointed out to me by a transportation consultant. He said that we choose a speed at our level of perceived safety (read 'stress'). On an old curvy road we drive at our level of stress, perhaps 40 or 50 km/hr; whereas on the freeway, we have no trouble climbing to 110 km/hr to return to our level of stress. Somerset Maugham, in the 1920's spoke of the carelessness of driving at 60 mph in *Up at the Villa*. Today, advances in new cars and new roads have increased the level of tolerable stress considerably.

Football and hockey injuries have climbed dramatically despite huge advances in protective equipment. In fact injuries have increased because of the advances in protective equipment. For, while these items do increase defensive protection, they also increase offensive capability, turning the aggressive person into a dangerous missile with hidden weapons.

Wars have been with us forever; we are easily reminded of that as NATO fighter jets strafe Algeria within days of a declaration of intent. The armament advances allowed a quick (and devastating) military response. Contrast that with the Roman Legions in their day who created fear throughout the world. But to get the troops from Spain to Persia, it would take three months as 30,000 soldiers walked the distance (what else could they do?).

Each to their own level of stress.

Do Something About It

We don't have to be so stressed. Individually we can counter the pressure on us. Using myself as the simplest example for me to describe, the choices I have made to balance working hard (which I believe in) with having some sanity in my life (which I also believe in) are (i) to not have a cell phone, but to use a land-line and email with a promise to respond to any contact within 24 hours (ii) to exercise informally by using stairs instead of elevators, carry bags in airports rather than wheeled ones, etc. (iii) to make sure I participate actively in at least one not-for-profit organization to keep my perspectives solidly grounded (iv) to not have cable TV and trade that time for live performances of the arts, (v) to live near downtown so that I am spared the time and frustration of a daily commute (and don't whine that it's too expensive for you – how much is your mental health worth?), (vi) to not send Christmas cards but to wish all my close friends well at that time of year. Everyone is different, but everyone can make workable choices.

What might yours be?

Good luck

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