

1

Introduction

The examples below all deal with the subject of this book. You may recognise them.

Mr. Hammond calls home from work.

'What did the doctor say?' his wife asks.

'He said I was fine.'

'How can that be', she goes on, 'you suffer of anxiety, you complain your memory is deteriorating. You can handle less ... '

'Still he said he couldn't find anything. It's only stress, he said.'

'Where is Harry?' 'At home. We haven't seen him for a while. Sick leave. Stressed.'

'I thought he had been pretty busy and nervous lately.'

'Margaret is so uptight. She can't handle anything. One moment she barks at you, the next she is as affectionate as a cat. What is eating her?'

'I am under so much pressure. It seems like I'm getting more and more tired. Work keeps piling up.'

'I do like the tension, but afterwards I need to give myself a break, or else I keep steaming ahead in the wrong way.'

A saying that often goes around: 'Isn't it weird how housewives, who don't have anything to do, can be overworked?' and 'Unemployed and still overworked, how is that possible?'

In these dialogues 'stress' is the protagonist.

- What is stress? How can I identify my own stress symptoms and those of others?
- How can I help myself and others to fight and prevent unhealthy stress signals (provided I would like to do that)?

This book deals with those two questions.

Of course, this is the umpteenth publication about this subject. We don't intend to offer a boring repetition of what has been said frequently before, but mainly a challenge to you, the reader.

This book is a *manual*. It means: You can use it to investigate how undesired stress expresses itself in your own case. You will also find instructions on how to avoid your own and other people's stress. To help you with this, many statements and test questions have been included. You have the opportunity to write in the book, so it becomes your own.

A second challenge consists in the fact that avoiding stress – yours or anybody else's – is possible, but at the same time quite difficult. It won't happen in a heartbeat. Undesired stress is often a result of long established habits, which one can only change gradually. However, it is possible, surely if you call on others to help you with it.

This conversation with someone else is crucial. It is a fact that slowly becoming overworked goes hand in hand with a certain narrowing of consciousness.

You will slowly but steadily lose track of your own situation. A strong signal from others becomes an important condition on the road to recovery.

'How are things??'

It is important for families, partners, friends, colleagues, superiors and staff not to lose the meaning of this question. You should shake each other up.

You may need that shake-up too. The same goes for you: An attentive third party will notice you are heading for the stress trap before you do.

You will notice quickly how this booklet will offer ample material to fuel these conversations.

2

Misunderstandings

Stress will make you tired, you'll age prematurely and get seriously ill!?

This sentence rambles. We need to distinguish clearly between normal stress and unhealthy stress. Unhealthy stress will indeed hurt. Under extreme circumstances, unhealthy stress may even be dangerous.

Unhealthy stress may contribute to and accelerate illnesses. All true. However, it is good to know that unhealthy stress itself is not necessarily bad, but rather an overdose of something good.

In part 1 we will first look with you into normal stress. After that, we will deal with the symptoms of unhealthy stress.

Stress must be avoided!?

No. You may indeed choose to achieve more than you can really handle. Many people seem to make this choice during short or longer periods.

Take for example the husband or wife who faces the double challenge of taking care of the domestic affairs while maintaining a day job; take the executive or politician who decides to give all he has for a while, even though he knows he will partially destroy himself. Or the housewife with too many chores who makes this conscious choice.

Nothing really has to happen.

Even if you choose this unhealthy stress for a period of time, you may attempt to control the damage as much as possible.

The other side of the medal has a few difficult aspects:

- Question 1: If you choose your own stress, others will often suffer from this as well. Your irritability and tired rushing will also exhaust the others. How far can you go when you say: 'I can do with my life what I want?' Does this apply if you know others will suffer from your choice?
- Question 2: To what extent am I 'my brother's keeper'? Often we see how people slide down in front of our eyes; how long should we maintain 'this is their own responsibility after all'?

Mental preparation and physical execution

How can it be: doing nothing and still being stressed? In the above example, we focussed on somebody who for a period of time works harder than is good for him.

Unhealthy stress follows as a result. This surely goes for a particular form of work: 'Intellectual work'.

Intellectual work is: working beforehand or preparation. Before the actual implementation takes place, we do the thinking; you try to imagine the actual situation in order to anticipate possible dangers, options are being weighed up against each other, solutions are researched, conversations take place in our head, et cetera.

Intellectual work is work nonetheless. The actual implementation is often a relief. True physical work is often less exhausting than the reflection beforehand.

Even healthy thinking beforehand can result in unhealthy reflection: worrying, fretting.

Examples of healthy and unhealthy preparational reflection vs. its implementation		
	Preparational Reflection	Physical Execution
Healthy	The pole-vaulter runs through the various steps in his head: the run up, the take-off, the jump	The actual run-up and jump at the moment X.
Unhealthy	Nights before in bed, the pole-vaulter is tossing and turning and endlessly mentally rehearsing hundreds of jumps. It exhausts him.	

	Preparational Reflection	Physical Execution
Healthy	Before making an important decision, Mr Van Dalen considers all the pros and cons. He writes them down and weighs them up against each other.	Mr Van Dalen decides it is better to postpone the decision until time X. Then he does other things.
Healthy	Before booking in the numbers, the accountant mentally sorts all the data.	At moment X, the accountant effectively enters all the data in the way he mentally envisaged it.
Unhealthy	The accountant mentally revisits every decision he has taken. He worries, is absent-minded, sees all sorts of disasters. It is never-ending.	

(As becomes clear from the examples, sometimes the execution of work may also include mental activity. However, there is always a distinction between preparation and implementation.)

At this point physical tiredness will increase to the point when it becomes unhealthy. Unhealthy, lengthy and unsuccessful reflection may cause you to be unhealthily tired. We are distinguishing between two types of work. What we are saying is that both can cause stress. Unhealthy stress is a result of an overdose of goodness; if you keep working without a break, you will at some point cross the line after which you will become ill of exhaustion.

This may clarify why somebody who is 'unemployed' can be stressed at the same time. Even a housewife, who has 'nothing to do', can show unhealthy stress symptoms. It seems as if they cannot become tired because they are not working, but they are indeed; they are achieving a massive amount of preparational thinking.

In this context, we may not forget another category of people who 'cannot possibly be stressed because they don't achieve anything': kids.

In the same way as adults, children perform a great deal of reflection, but if this normal thinking becomes a form of painful brooding, children may exhaust themselves in an unhealthy way, which means: They will suffer from unhealthy stress.

Fortunately, the subject of 'stress among children' is getting more and more attention.

Stress is for the weak!?

We have always listened in disbelief when people under stress were called 'weak'. On the contrary: People who are stressed are indeed fighters. In a way, they keep fighting until they have drained their last bit of energy. They continue working, while others may have long given up and taken some rest.

3

What will you use this booklet for?

We like to think of 'stress' as: undesirable-tension-and-exhaustion, and all that in one breath. Why? This will become clear later on. Whichever words you use, 'stress' is at the focus of attention: in books, on TV and radio, in conversations, at your GP et cetera. But why should it have *your* attention? Let us ponder over those questions for a moment.

First possibility

There are some people around you of whom you think or know: they are 'stressed'. You think 'I want to help them, but first I need to better understand them!' and: 'How can I best help them?'

Second possibility

Sometimes (perhaps often) you notice you are losing your energy. You keep going but you think 'Perhaps it is stress! So what is it? How to understand myself? What should I do about it? Should I think it is bad?'

Third possibility

You think 'It is not all that bad. People around me don't mind. However, I would like to know what to think of stress. What does the concept mean? What does it look like? Can you eat it? What can you actually do about it?'

Fourth possibility

'I would like to know how I give other people stress. How can I control it?'

Obviously, you can ask more questions. In any case, we are offering you these four.

Now the question: 'What will you be using this booklet for?' We are inviting you to think for a moment about the following questions and answer them quietly.

Tick your answers

- | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. By using this booklet I am hoping to get a better understanding of other people suffering from stress. | Yes!! | Yes! | No! | No!! |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. By using this booklet I am hoping to better understand and deal with my own stress. | Yes!! | Yes! | No! | No!! |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. By using this booklet I am hoping to get a better understanding of the phenomenon 'stress'. | Yes!! | Yes! | No! | No!! |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. By using this booklet I am hoping to understand how I may be causing stress to others. | Yes!! | Yes! | No! | No!! |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

These are of course very general questions and possibilities. Describe below in your own words what you would *personally* like to achieve by working through this workbook.

By working through this book I hope to achieve the following:

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You may have many reasons why *not* to write down your answer. However, a good reason to do it: writing helps to structure your thoughts.

You are your own best example

Whatever ways you would like to make the best of this booklet, one thing is certain: as far as we are concerned, the focus is you.

Repeatedly you will be encouraged to try to understand how *you* are experiencing stress.

Theoretical notions about stress are all well and good, but useless if they are not each time related to the living reality. And that living reality in the first place is you. Stress is a general human condition from which you cannot escape.

If you are used to thinking about human aspects in general terms, this method may be slightly awkward.

However, we do invite you to start. You will notice that it will work out fine for you.

4

Monitoring stress

Normal, healthy stress

What is hiding behind that strange word 'stress'? First, we want to show you that stress is a normal phenomenon. Some notions will be explained. We will show you how normal stress becomes visible. We invite you to check which types of stress you show.

The assumption is always that stress is inextricably tied to work, whether it applies to preparational reflection or its implementation. After that, we will discuss different types of unhealthy stress (page 24 onwards).

Examples of normal, healthy stress

To start, check for yourself in which of the following examples you recognise yourself and others. Be mindful: all these examples relate directly to the notion of 'stress'. Each emphasises a different aspect of it.

... You are quietly working at home. The radio is on. It is almost 10 am. The kettle is boiling. Time for coffee. You are feeling pleasant. A moment to yourself ... Suddenly the doorbell rings. You jolt slightly. 'Who can that be?' If you had been aware, you would have felt butterflies in your stomach. Perhaps your breathing might accelerate. Perhaps even now, while you are imagining it. You run to the front of the house. You open the door. Two policemen stand in front of you with a dark, serious face. 'Can we come in for a moment, madam?' the tall one says. For a moment, you feel how your heart rate increases.

'What is wrong?' you think. And that is what you ask. It appears the agents are trainees and they want to hear from citizens what they are expecting from the police. An invisible sigh of relief, as when you saw the two men, it suddenly flashed through your head: 'Would anything have happened to ... ?'