



What resilience is *really* about

There are no stressful events, just stressful ways of responding to them, says Dr Derek Roger. He outlines an alternative view of stress and resilience which has been shown to have a significant impact on a wide range of performance indices.

How often do we hear someone say they're stressed because they're moving house? They say they must be stressed, because moving house is 'way up there on the list'. The list will be one of the so-called life-event scales, which list things that might happen in your life: divorce, changing jobs, moving house, etc. There are even lists that include hassles like losing your keys. What you're asked to do is to tick all of the ones that have actually happened to you in the past six months.

Life-event scales assume that you have a capacity for coping that

is diminished each time you have to adapt to something. If a lot of things happen, you run out of capacity and suffer from stress, hence the more ticks on your scale the more 'stress' you're supposed to be under. These ideas have been so assiduously promoted that if anyone is moving house we unthinkingly assume they must be stressed. In fact, if all these things were really stressful there'd be no such thing as stress management.

How many of the issues you have to deal with on a day-to-day basis can just be ignored? You have to deal with them, and if they're

This depends how you define stress. The old-fashioned flat-earth idea saw stress as excessive numbers of events, but we all know resilient people who can cope with much more than others.

inherently stressful then stress becomes unavoidable. Our own experience tells us that this can't be right: for every person who says that moving house stresses them, there'll be another who is excited and looking forward to it.

We equally unthinkingly say that a bit of stress is good for you. Ask any group of people whether they think this is true and the majority will agree, but if you then ask how they feel when they're stressed they say 'miserable'. How can anything that makes you miserable possibly be good for you?

Pressure v stress

Pressure may be useful, but it should be called what it is: pressure, not stress. Calling pressure useful stress just confuses the issue. What we need is an unambiguous definition of what stress really is, one that is not based on erroneous ideas like life-events.

Pressure is demand, and can be hugely motivating, but all that stress offers is misery. Of course, this depends how you define stress. The old-fashioned flat-earth idea saw stress as excessive numbers of events, but we all know resilient people who can cope with much more than others.

In our own experience, we've had days when work has gone like a dream, but the next day feels like wading through treacle. The job hasn't changed, what's changed is our minds. Stress is all in the mind, which is just as well—there are many things in the world you can't change, but you can certainly change your perception of them.

Importantly, the alternative view of stress and resilience described in this article is based on a long-term programme of internationally-recognised research. I became interested in stress and resilience in the 1980s at the University of York in England, where I directed the Stress Research Unit until moving to New Zealand in 2003. The

Stress Research Unit was recognised as one of the foremost dedicated resilience research centres in the UK, and the research that I began there has continued at the University of Canterbury.

The findings have been published in over 120 books, journal papers and conference presentations. The research was used to develop a unique and revolutionary approach to resilience training entitled the Challenge of Change, which has been shown to impact significantly on a wide range of performance indices, including job satisfaction and sickness-absence.

In contrast to the conventional approach, the Challenge of Change starts from the principle that there are no stressful events, only stressful ways of responding to them. The programme also suggests that people are asleep most of the time. We ordinarily think of sleep as shifting between deep sleep, dreaming and sleepwalking, and that anything after that is awake.

Not so. Think back to the last time you were driving on the highway, getting to town X and then finding yourself at town Y, 30 kilometres later, with no recollection of anything between the two towns. Or listening to the news, and deciding to find out at the end of the news what the weather's going to be like in your home town. Ten minutes later, and you've missed the weather. Between the two towns or while the weather was broadcast, where were you? Not a blank, but thinking about the past and the future.

We would all agree that the future is a fantasy—we have some expectations about what might happen, but in fact we've no idea what might happen in the next ten minutes. Paradoxically, the past is also fantasy. What we call 'my life' is a little story we've made up, because everything we perceive passes through a screen of our personal conditioned attitudes. Past events did occur—9/11 happened, but everyone has a different perception of it.

Kensington Swan congratulates Philippa Jones

Kensington Swan is proud to have been providing strategic legal advice to Christchurch City Council for a number of years. Having worked closely with Philippa during this time, we are not surprised she was the clear winner of this prestigious award.

An outstanding HR Manager, such as Philippa, knows the law, but also knows the value of seeking strategic legal advice.

We are delighted to continue our work with the Council and wish Philippa well in her role as GM Corporate Services Crop and Food Research.

Winner of the HRINZ
HR Person of the Year.



KENSINGTONSWAN.COM

AUCKLAND 18 Viaduct Harbour Avenue, Private Bag 92101, Auckland, New Zealand Tel: +64 9 379 4196

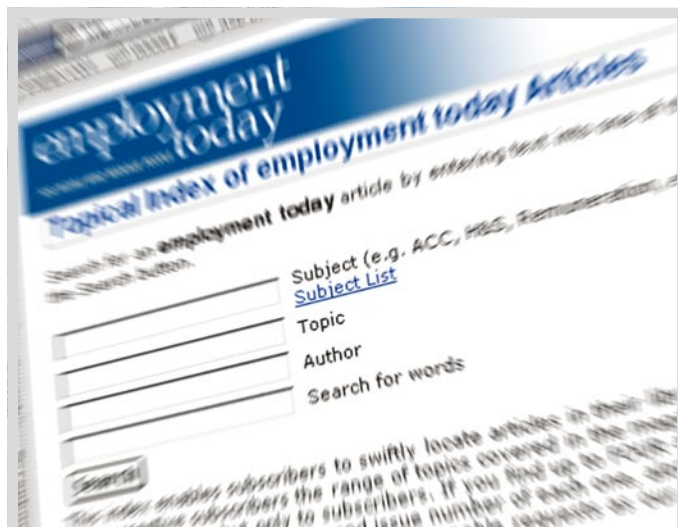
WELLINGTON 89 The Terrace, P O Box 10246, Wellington, New Zealand Tel: +64 4 472 7877

KensingtonSwan
LAWYERS

We can intentionally go into the past or the future. For example, when a piece of work arrives on our desk, we draw on experience, and make plans for what we're going to do. Or something we're working on may go completely pear-shaped, and we need to consider what went wrong and how to avoid it happening again.

However, all of this happens with your attention under control, moving into the past and the future selectively but with the present remaining the point of reference. The problem comes when our attention is captured by something in the past or the future. A piece of work arrives on the desk and we take one look and groan 'not that again!' In no time we're off thinking about next weekend, last holiday, anything except the work in front of us.

This state of captured attention is what lies between the ordinary states of sleep and being awake, and is defined as waking sleep.



Instant index Need help with an urgent issue?

Use our story index to swiftly locate what you need from your back issues of *Employment Today*.

Search by subject, key word or author.

Visit www.employmenttoday.co.nz
and select Topical Index.

THOMSON
BROOKERS

You might well say that this is hardly stressful—last holiday is a pleasant memory—but since you can't work and sleep, for as long as attention is caught like this, no work gets done.

Preferring to think about something else is essentially an emotional decision—we prefer the emotion of last holiday to what's in front of us. To bring stress into the picture we need to change the emotional tone to negative emotion.

Provoking a response

Suppose the line manager comes in with a piece of work, but instead of just leaving, stops at the door and says 'Just do a better job this time, sunshine, not like last week!' Instead of weekends and holidays, the mind fills with lynch gangs, anger, fear, resentment. We not only feel miserable, the emotion provokes a physiological response that increases blood pressure and compromises immune function.

The arousal itself is not really the problem: fight or flight is an appropriate and adaptive response, but only if it isn't prolonged. If you wake your pet cat suddenly, it may jump into the air with its hair standing on end and its heart racing. Physiologically this is identical to what we do, but once the cat recognises you it becomes calm again. What your cat doesn't do is to then think 'that might have been the dog next door! What if there'd been three of them! What if there's one there now!' If it did, its hair would continue to stand on end, but instead it recovers.

Compare this to your own experience, to the last time something really upset you. How often, and for how long, did you go on and on and on thinking about it? Each time you do, blood pressure and heart rate go up, but all you're reacting to is a thought in your head: there's nothing there.

This is how stress is defined in the Challenge of Change: ruminating about emotional upset, and nothing else. Rumination doesn't mean reflecting on what went wrong in an emotionally objective way, but just endlessly thinking 'what if' and 'if only', going on and on dwelling on things after they've happened or anticipating things that might happen in the future.

As Mark Twain said, 'some of the worst things in my life never happened'. All that events do is to offer you something to ruminate about, but whether you do so or not is a choice. Without practice it might not feel like a choice, but this is a maladaptive response that can be changed. Giving people the knowledge to make that choice is what resilience is really about, and it is an empowering experience. **et**



Derek Roger's company, The Work Skills Centre, provides his unique Challenge of Change training programme in addition to a range of individual and teamwork systems for enhancing performance. www.challengeofchange.co.nz