

### **Chronic Stress & 'Efforting':**

When the demands that you place on yourself are outside of your resources or abilities you will experience stress. You experience stress when you demand too much of yourself. Over a short period of time this is manageable – like cramming for an exam, getting the house and home in order before a major family function, working long hours to earn extra money, staying up late to get your books in order.

However, when stress becomes chronic you begin to experience difficulties. When the everyday demands you place on yourself lie just a tad beyond your abilities or resources, you will find over a long period of time that you become unhappy and distressed. Because you are driving yourself harder than you should your emotional tyres become worn and, your grip on life gets less secure.

Every so often you hear of a situation where someone who appears to be very successful and 'together' has an emotional breakdown or tragically even takes their own life. In these situations it is very difficult to understand how someone who is so successful and appears to have everything going for them can end up in such an awful emotional cul-de-sac that they feel they have no option but to seek relief from their life.

This is difficult to understand because we tend to stereotype or caricature people who are depressed or suicidal as people who are barely functioning. If someone were to have a 'nervous breakdown' or were to be suicidal, you would tend to imagine that their deterioration would be gradual and observable. Your caricature would be of a person who gradually becomes dishevelled and dysfunctional and shows signs of deterioration. While this happens in many cases, it is not always true. In fact, extremely successful people are sometimes 'running on empty'. This applies to the heroic housewife as much as to the successful businessman.

Very often a person who takes their own life is more of an over-functioner than an under-functioner. They are often people who instead of appearing stressed and distraught, they appear to be extremely capable and successful. However, the stress that is associated with keeping the show on the road, of carrying others, of compensating for other people's inadequacies, of trying to be successful, of overcoming a fear of failure, of compulsively feeling a need to juggle everything in the air, of trying to stave off an ever-present sense of guilt, can be ultimately overwhelming. The over-functioner, or the over-achiever, is always operating under stress, always reaching beyond themselves, always carrying more than their share, and can often just break under the internal pressure that they and others place on them.

You will surely identify with certain elements of this. The never-ending burden of responsibility for children, partners, parents, finances, and work. If you are an over-responsible type you will reflexively, without thought, carry other people's responsibilities readily with scarcely a measure of the burden it places on you. Your husband or partner may be this type.

Men often get caught on a compulsive, status-anxiety, success-driven, money-oriented drive to succeed in life that becomes too much to bear. They may have an expectation of themselves that is measured by the kind of car they drive, the kind of house they live

in, and the degree of financial security and freedom they can provide for their family. If their expectations and goals lie outside their resources or competencies then they can spend their entire working life burdened by a stress that eats into every waking moment of their lives. And all of this can happen so gradually as to be almost invisible. There is a very thin line between an inspirational goal and a cancerous expectation.

In fact many business models promoted in self-help books promote a kind of naïve suggestion that “You can achieve business success in 10 easy steps”. This can be more a recipe for never-ending stress than for confident inspiration.

Notice how your own expectations can drive and burden you. The effort invested in trying to be better than you are, of trying to make your children better than they are, of trying to encourage and enable others in your family to be better than they are, of trying to support and carry others who you feel are less capable, of trying to be a successful parent, a successful wife, a successful business person can gradually wear you to the bone.

Just be aware that you can spend so much effort in trying to be other than you are. Sometimes you need to relax back into the simple easy pleasure of just being average, and discovering, in the great scheme of things, that we don't need to push the river - it flows by itself!