

Old Stress, New Stress: Why Some People Try to Keep Busy

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(Dedicated to N.S., V.S. & Z.R.)

Remember the popular children's book, [Old Hat New Hat by Stan and Jan Berenstain](#)? People often experience the same thing when coping with stress.

Early on in life most people are taught that a full life is a good life, but it's not always clear precisely what that entails. Many presume that it means filling your time with activities – school, work, socials, etc. – but for those who experience stress and anxiety issues even simple activities like grabbing a coffee with an acquaintance, sharing a meal with family and friends or reading a text message can trigger the beginnings of a mild anxiety attack.

Signs of anxiety can manifest in different ways, and coping mechanisms that are either formally learned or gradually developed over time to allow one to be functional on a day-to-day basis are not always the best since they mask the source issue rather than working to resolve it.

Often times a person feels run down and demotivated by old anxieties ("Old Hat") and so they try to swap that out by taking on a new stressful project ("New Hat"), which can create a spiraling cycle of anxiety-driven thoughts and behaviors that mask the initial issue rather than dealing with it. This article will address common concerns about emotional masking and substitutions, addictive properties of creating new stress, the dangers of negative people or cycles and the importance of facing life at one's own pace and with a clear mind.

WHAT IS MASKING?

Remember being a kid and having children's Tylenol to bring down a fever? In actuality, Tylenol does not bring down the fever, it "masks" the condition so that the individual feels less miserable and can get the rest needed to let the fever pass naturally. The function of the Tylenol is both chemical (masking) and emotional (allowing the person experiencing fever and his/her loved ones to feel more at ease about the situation).

Similarly, most individuals cope with stress with an automatic go-to response that will allow them to look and feel functional, however all the person is doing is masking an issue rather than dealing with it head on. Examples include the propensity to tell jokes when one feels nervous, to substitute a stressful task with an enjoyable task or to procrastinate in making decisions about complex questions or issues.

While some people display their go-to behaviors overtly or openly declare that they are stressed and need some space, some time at the gym, etc., many people do, in fact, mask their stress and seem completely functional at work, school, home, etc. until one event (perhaps a permanent loss or change) set off an anxiety attack that prevents them from maintaining their day-to-day activities, sometimes quite significantly.

SUBSTITUTING OLD STRESS WITH NEW STRESS

Individuals who experience stress at this level are often encouraged to take up a new routine or activity to alleviate anxieties caused by the "old" or original source of stress. They may also be encouraged to take in a change of scenery (vacation, new living arrangement, etc.).

While this may work for a short time, however, ultimately the new routine or scenery can ultimately lead the person to form a new anxiety about losing or shaking up this new status quo. "Many people are addicted to the adrenaline rush of [anxiety](#), known as 'the fight or flight response' and don't know how to diffuse it." says Dr. Judith Orloff, author of ["Are You Addicted to Anxiety? Learn How Not to Be" \(2011\)](#). Her article includes a helpful 6-question quiz to help a person identify if he/she is "addicted" to stress and anxiety.

Dr. Orloff's article also provides some helpful guidelines and 7-Step Strategy to allow a person to build productive coping mechanisms, which are summarized as follows:

- (1) Dietary Adjustment (no sugar/caffeine/stimulants)
- (2) Avoid Emotional Vampires (enablers/negative people)
- (3) Avoid Stressful News & Documentation in the Evenings
- (4) Set Healthy Work-Life Boundaries
- (5) When Something Triggers You, Pause
- (6) Engage in a Routine Deep Breathing Exercise
- (7) Stay in the present.

While most of Dr. Orloff's strategy (which have been discussed at length in philosophical and psychological communities since 1991) are on point, I personally part ways on Items 3 and 7, which essentially say the same thing.

There is no way that a person would be here in the present if it were not in their past. Rather than just avoid the past, which ultimately builds emotional baggage that is overwhelming to deal with, it's important to proceed to a positive space with determination and then gradually reflect on the past from a positive and empowered vantage point so that one can learn from the past rather than falling into states of negativity and panic. Similarly, there's no real way to permanently avoid practical cyclical tasks that may inevitably cause stress (e.g., paying bills, taking an exam, having a medical checkup).

IS ANXIETY A PERSONALITY ADDICTION?

According to Dr. Orloff **and many other medical and psychological specialists** who work with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), there are individuals who seek out stressful situations the way other thrill-seeking individuals search for new opportunities to test their physical limitations with high-risk athletic activities.

One possible cause for this addiction can be the fear of emotional or intellectual independence. Another cause can be a more general failure to process and adapt to small and mid-level challenges over time.

The addiction can also manifest itself in the form of manipulative self-victimization – or cases in which a person never allows him/herself to feel empowered because he/she always places him/herself in a position of a victim. Logically, even if a person falls prey to a negative situation once or twice in life, he/she should be able to learn from these experiences and adapt in order to avoid being a victim of similar problems or scenarios in the future. Those who continuously create this emotionally negative, psychologically draining atmosphere for themselves and others are commonly referred to as “emotional vampires.”

JUSTIFYING ANXIETY

Another possible source of new (or additional) anxiety can be the fact that close family and friends either enable the anxiety by feeding the proverbial flames or they dismiss the issue as being unworthy of anxiety. In such cases, rather than replacing one source of anxiety with another, a person feels the strain of repeatedly justifying the anxiety to family and friends (including parents, spouses and even medical specialists).

To be clear, this article is not discounting or devaluing any individual's right to claim that a person, activity or scenario *triggers* anxiety; rather, the goal is (1) to help pinpoint reactive masking of a real problem and (2) to encourage a more direct approach to dealing with one's problems “Siga Siga” as the Greeks say – gradually, one step at a time.

Once anxiety triggers are identified and mapped out a person can clearly anticipate the sources of anxiety and respond with positive thoughts and actions. Alternatively, the person can know that they are about to reach a point that requires a pause and reflection before coming back to the issue or task calmly and logically.

REPLACING “BEING STRONG” WITH BEING ORGANIZED (OR SYSTEMICALLY CHAOTIC)

Fun fact: To escape an alligator one is typically advised to run in a zigzag pattern. The key terms here are “pattern” and “zigzag,” which imply a sort of organized chaos that will derail the alligator from its goal of capturing the person running.

While most people don’t find themselves face-to-face with an actual alligator, they do find themselves face-to-face with life challenges that cause them to feel the same anxiety spike. Their response to situations that make them uncomfortable (whether natural or learned over time) typically involves some level of hyper organization (equivalent to OCD in one or more aspects of life) or systemic chaos (or “organized chaos”).

As stated earlier, at times circumstances disrupt the established coping mechanisms, which cause what is popularly referred to as a “meltdown” (a sudden loss of control over one's feelings or behavior) by educators and psychologists. In many cases, these coping mechanisms can be used as masks – meaning that a person avoids an issue through their go-to behavior rather than using it to actually process and address it.

While many individuals who struggle with anxiety issues may feel that they are not strong enough to deal with a particular issue or negative cycle, “being strong” simply means that one will commit to using coping mechanisms properly to achieve sustainable positive outcomes that allow them to grow and thrive rather than succumbing to negative thoughts and actions (including masking tendencies).

The key to “being strong” is being patient with oneself and with the process of reflecting on things clearly and at your own pace. Being strong means not allowing others to manipulate your thoughts and words from positive/productive to negative/destructive. It means cutting the emotional vampires out and seeking positive influences in work and in life.

FACING LIFE WITH A CLEAR MIND

It’s important to know that all individuals – even those who do not struggle with anxiety disorders – struggle with major changes (e.g., a new atmosphere, loss of a loved one. etc.). At times when the red flags of anxiety begin to manifest themselves just remember that the “Strongest” individuals are the ones who allow themselves to process at their own pace and maintain clear, positive, productive goals.

For some, processing entails physical meditation in a calm space, for others it requires a scheduled change of scene before returning to the main issue. Regardless of what the mechanism itself is, the important thing is to return to the task or concern with a plan for sustainable resolution.

RELATED RESEARCH

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