

What Zebras Can Teach Us About Stress!

No doubt about it, recent events have caused many of us to become “stressed-out.” These include gloomy economic forecasts, a monster hurricane, a stubborn economy – and oh yes, an earthquake! So clearly, a stress response is understandable. But are we making it unnecessarily painful? According to Dr. Robert Sapolsky, the answer is a resounding **yes**. (**Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers**, New York: Henry Holt & Co.)

Sapolsky, Professor of Neurological Sciences at Stanford University, has spent the last 25 summers in Africa observing and documenting the stress response of zebras in the wild that are exposed to constant dangers including mortal attacks by predators. His conclusion? These animals respond appropriately to stress while we humans still don’t “get it.” The internal mechanism for humans and zebras is identical. Once an external danger is identified, the adrenal system immediately produces a flood of hormones which triggers and sustains the short term “fight or flight” response. After the danger has been evaded or overcome, the stress response quiets down and a sense of healing calm returns.

For humans, however, our advanced intellectual skills can undermine a healthy stress response by 1) anticipating danger where none exists and 2) “replaying” the stressful event long after the danger has passed. Unproductive worry about threats for which there is little or no evidence is sometimes called **catastrophizing** and many become trapped in a cycle of fearing every sort of catastrophe around the next corner. At the other

end, many of us constantly dwell on a past negative event thereby elongating the pain – sometimes for years. The good news is that these self-punishing mental habits can be overcome and in the final chapter of his book, Dr. Sapolsky offers some constructive suggestions:



- *Hope for the best and let that dominate most of your emotions, but at the same time let one piece of you prepare for the worst.*
- *Try to control present stress. Don’t try to control things that have already happened and don’t try to control the uncontrollable future.*
- *Seek out information that can help you right now but don’t overwhelm yourself with too much information or information with a clearly alarmist agenda.*
- *Find an outlet for your frustrations that is not harmful to you or others.*
- *Surround yourself with good, positive people.*

And to this we would add. **Remember your Employee Assistance Program!** Your EAP enables you and your immediate family members to connect with a professional counselor 24/7/365 for “in the moment” assistance in dealing with anticipatory fears, painful memories as well as practical assistance in dealing with clear and present life challenges.