

Chapter 10

The Cinderella Effect

An Argument in a Nutshell

Schedule a day at the gym or at the dentist, and odds are you will be a little apprehensive and tense because these outings literally hurt. Schedule a day to find out the results of a medical test or a performance evaluation for one's job and you will also likely be apprehensive and tense because prospective bad news also hurts. Moreover, tension will occur even if these events are slightly uncomfortable. Surnamed the Cinderella effect, mild aversive events and the anticipation of such events cause slight tension that is at first unperceived, yet if sustained recruits other muscle groups to literally take up the slack as the initial musculature gives out through constant use, causing at the end of the day exhaustion and muscular pain.

So what's the difference between our examples? In the former case, the *physiological* discomfort that occurs at the gym or dentist is caused by physical events, and is reduced through simple avoidance (That is, you avoid the pain by simply cancelling your dental and gym appointments). However, the *psychological or neurological* discomfort of incurring loss or regret is caused by mental events, and is also reduced by avoidance of the behaviors they entail. If loss is noticeably painful we ruminate or think (i.e. we worry) about response options which will allow us to reinterpret or avoid bad 'news'. However, if losses are not noticeably painful we will not 'worry' about them, but nonetheless still get progressively more tense. Thus stresses of a day at the office are nothing to worry about, since there is nothing one can do about the everyday demands of life. (Or so we think.)

When choices are or are anticipated to be made that entail small but avoidable loss, tension occurs and will be sustained over time if those losses are continual. Like Damocles squirming under a sword hanging by a hair, or a parent with an eye to a toddler mischievously crawling out of sight, successive small negative changes in fortune causes minor muscular tension that 'builds', resulting in exhaustion and discomfort from a stressful day. So what is the solution? It is one of *selective* avoidance.

How to be relaxed: **Postpone or avoid all choices that entail small to significant loss.**

This can be done by (1) avoiding all choices, regardless of whether they entail prospective loss, (2) by pursuing decisions that entail continuous gain rather than loss, or (3) by avoiding choices that specifically entail loss.

The first option is reflective in meditative disciplines (Tai Chi, meditation, Benson's relaxation response) that avoid all thoughtful rumination and other physical distractions.

The second option is reflective in creative decisions (painting, writing, etc.) that only entail continuous positive gain. This reflects a 'flow' experience, where we are immersed in an interesting or challenging activity that tests but does not surpass one's capabilities.

A third option is to radically eliminate or avoid all decisions that entail avoidable loss. By postponing or avoiding for specific times during the day *all* loss entailing choices or 'distractions' large (thinking about grievances at work or other personal dilemmas) and small (doing work vs. chatting, web surfing, non-essential reading, phone calls, etc.) during a working day, choice or judgement is substantially reduced and relaxation ensues. This option is functionally equivalent to the practice of 'mindfulness', when thought is allowed but judgement is deferred, yet sharply refines the procedure to include only judgements or choices that entail avoidable loss.

Although all of these procedures correlate with relaxation, their success is at least partially attributed to the entirely different independent or operative cause of focused attention. Thus mindfulness is conflated with meditation even though restricting attentive focus or 'meditating' is not a necessary aspect *of* mindfulness, although it must be noted that meditating itself cannot occur without mindfulness. Specifically, because focusing or otherwise manipulating 'attention' and not reducing choice is attributed as a primary cause of relaxation, it becomes more difficult to envisage how reducing the many judgmental decisions we confront daily can be not a complementary but a *sole source* of relaxation. That is, because focusing attention and reducing judgment are separate independent variables that often occur simultaneously, their respective behavioral correlates can become commingled. Because parsing judgement is confused with restricting attention, it becomes more difficult to ascertain how restricting judgement or choice 'works' to reduce tension. More provocatively, if *avoidance* rather than *attention* is the main independent measure or correlate to relaxation and tension, then relaxation is due to a mindful awareness and control of the subtle discriminative outcomes to behavior or 'choices' that cause tension. As such, as a technique to achieve a state of relaxation, mindfulness is redefined as an awareness and avoidance of specific judgements or choices rather than an avoidance of all choice.

The implications of this theory are profound. First, 'demands' do not cause tension and autonomic arousal, or 'stress', *choices* do. Secondly, if tension depends upon information derived from choice, it follows that tension is changed by the results *of* choice. Thus tension cannot be a reflexive behavior, but must instead indirectly operate on the environment by changing behavior. That is, it is an 'operant' response. Third, the metaphorical conception of tension and relaxation as the reflexive result of the stimuli of 'demand' or 'attention' are wrong, and must be discarded. In sum, popular and academic explanations of stress are incorrect, and must be substantially revised.

The Cinderella Method

First, a quick reprise of our argument.

Anxiety: The changes in the autonomic nervous system, including an increase in blood pressure, heart rate, hormonal release, sweating, disjointed thinking, and otherwise bad feelings. Which is caused by:

Tension: Rapid and sustained small scale flexion and contraction of the striated musculature, which is caused by:

Irreconcilable Choices: Decision making or judgements between two events that entail avoidable loss. For example, making a choice between two surgical procedures with partial information as to their risk, making the right choices to get the kids on time, and deciding between rational choices and distractive ones such as doing homework or chatting on the phone.

Hypothesis: Tension, and hence anxiety occurs as a learned or operant behavior that speeds (but does not enhance) decision making between choices by expediting the avoidance of choices that entail loss. The greater the loss, the greater the tension. Secondly, relaxation occurs when loss entailing choices large and small are deferred or eliminated.

The procedure:

First: Take a mental or physical count for several days of all the *unnecessary* major and minor judgments executed in a working day that entailed avoidable loss. These

'distractions' include doings one's work vs. reading the newspaper, watching TV, chatting on the phone, internet surfing, or other diversions as well as judgements that involve personal dilemmas. This would include personal, business, or other decisions that would entail loss. *This provides a comparative or base rate to which to compare future behavior, and trains you to notice or attend to distractive choices.*

Secondly: Set aside fixed times during the day (e.g. 8-12pm, 1-5pm) where you will avoid as much as possible these distractive choices. If you are stressed by unavoidable choices, then simply take a time out from *all* distraction and sit. *Also, take a physical count of the total number of instances a day in which you 'succumb' to distraction.*

That's it.

By eliminating these distractive choices from major portions of your day, you can still anticipate them or be aware of them non-judgmentally, but you cannot be stressed by *choosing* between them. By deferring irreconcilable choices, tension falls, relaxation occurs, and you can go about your day more relaxed, more alert, more productive, and without the painful regret that occurs from a day misspent. Finally, by providing a feedback function to train attention and to compare behavior across days, you can compare corresponding emotional behavior (i.e. tension) across behavior or 'trials', demonstrate the efficacy of the procedure, and be reinforced for the overall effort by that feedback.

What the Cinderella Method Does

The Cinderella Method is essentially a method of exercising a control over tension in its often initial form as a *subliminal* behavior that escapes conscious awareness. Since for small distractions the proprioceptive stimuli which alert one to tension only indicate the presence of tension *after* tension has been sustained for some time, the isolation and control of the discriminative stimuli that are correlated with the initiation of slight or minor tension allow for tension to be avoided before its sustained occurrence taxes the musculature and autonomic nervous system. Hence, this method is not a therapy for tension since tension doesn't happen in the first place, but is rather a method of sustaining the natural resting state that occurs when tension is avoided.