

**WHY ZEBRAS
DON'T GET
ULCERS AND
HUMANS DO**

**OR: STRESS: HOW TO RECOGNISE AND DEAL
WITH IT.**

BY ROBYN BRADEY

UNDERSTANDING OUR BRAINS

- Stress activates our fear centre
- This turns down our immune system
- Operates from our right emotional brain
- Sidelines our executive function
- And triggers fight or flight

THIS HAPPENS TO ZEBRAS TOO...

- But their stress response only lasts about 3 minutes, which is the time it takes to run away from a lion!
- Once the lion catches a fellow zebra or they escape, the zebras stress response is quickly turned off.
- Turning the immune system and soothing mechanisms back on.

BUT IN HUMANS...

- The fear response can stay on for hours, days, weeks, months or even years because we ruminate.
- We analyse what went wrong
- Go over and over it in our minds
- And worry about what will happen next.

SO

- This effectively means we keep re-traumatising ourselves by our thoughts and worries long after the event and even before it!!
- All this time our immune system is compromised, and trauma chemicals are chugging around our brains and bodies.

From Robert Sapolsky, 1994

THE RESULT IS...

- Sickness
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbance
- Weight loss or gain
- Generalised anxiety
- Poor decision making
- Relationship issues

CONTINUED

- Memory problems
- Over reactions
- Avoidance
- Loss of empathy and intuition
- Increased stressful situations arising from poor judgement
- Cynicism

CONTINUED

- A feeling of futility
- Disparaging workmates, clients and others
- Blame and shame
- Loss of confidence.

AN EXAMPLE OF THIS IS VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- This happens when our fear centre is activated by what has happened to another person.
- One of the executive functions that we have that zebras don't, is empathy.
- The capacity to imagine what it must be like for the other *triggers* fear in us.
- Ironically if this happens our executive function in the cortex is compromised and fear takes over.

IF OUR WORK BRINGS US INTO THE SUFFERING OF OTHERS..

- Then we are triggering into a fear response on a daily basis
- The better our empathy, the more likely this is
- This has serious implications for both our work practices and our health.
- This kind of stress accumulates
- So that means experienced staff are more at risk of this

THE WORKPLACE CAN HELP BY...

- Allowing opportunities for staff to connect with “big picture” activities such as:
- Strategic planning
- Writing policy
- Being on inter-agency working parties

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY MEASURES

- Employers need to recognise the condition and validate it
- Provide a safe working environment
- Provide orientation and ongoing training
- Provide supervision and mentoring
- Rotation of duties
- Regular leave

CONTINUED..

- Tools to do the job
- Respect in the workplace (Including dealing decisively with bullying and harassment)
- Performance appraisal
- Peer review

THIRDLY..

- The employer should provide access to EAP services.
- Defusing and debriefing after stressful incidents
- Follow –up counselling for those who need it.

YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF BY...

- Exercising
- Meditating (or using a relaxation technique)
- Yoga
- Aromatherapy
- Stretching
- Sweating
- Eating well

CONTINUED..

- Sleeping well
- Avoiding drugs and using alcohol only moderately
- Having regular holidays
- Professional development
- Good communication with colleagues
- Mentoring others
- Planning your career

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS..

- Take a long break or
- **Quit!!**