

LIVE  
MORE

*Happy*

STRESS

Dr Darren Morton

## **Zebras and stress**

In his classic book on stress, *Why Zebras Don't Get Stomach Ulcers*, stress researcher Robert Sapolsky makes the point that zebras do a lot right when it comes to managing stress. So let's learn from the zebra!

### **Move dynamically**

If you watch what happens after a zebra has just outrun a lion—lions give up pretty easily—you will notice something remarkable. The zebra will watch for a moment to make sure the lion has definitely called off the chase, then the zebra will put its head down and go back to its lunch. Can you believe it? It has just run for its life—literally—and shortly after doesn't appear stressed at all. How is this possible?

The stress response is designed to enable us for “fight or flight.” All smart—and living—zebras choose the flight option when it comes to lions. Essentially, the stress response gears us to do something physically active, as both fighting and fleeing are demanding physical pursuits. And here is the interesting thing: By doing something active, the stress response dials down. In effect, exercise “burns off” the stress. For the zebra, it is the act of running that allows them to calm down and return

to the important business of eating grass.

By contrast, modern humans tend to become more sedentary when they are stressed. A recent study indicated that the most popular way people endeavour to manage their stress is to sit and watch television or a movie. In effect, they are doing the exact opposite of what the stress response is equipping them to do. Is it any wonder that stress levels remain so high?

Instead of sitting in our stress, we need to move dynamically. Just one bout of exercise is enough to bring down our blood pressure. Doing something physically active is one of the best ways to open the valves when the pressure mounts.

## **Laugh a little**

There is something else zebras seem to do that we could benefit from doing a lot more often. Like all mammals, zebras laugh. What tickles their funny bone is unclear, but it is likely good for them. To laugh is definitely good for us humans. Many studies show that humour and laughter boost our health, resilience and happiness. And it is a great way to relieve stress. Wise Solomon was right when he wrote, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." How long has it been since you indulged in a good belly laugh? If you need

help, studies indicate that we are about 30 times more likely to laugh when we are with others. So seriously, find a funny friend and get a giggle going. Your stress levels will thank you for it.

## **Rest well**

When it comes to resting well, there are two lessons we can learn from zebras to help manage stress. The first is to get enough sleep. But there is another aspect to the life of a zebra that probably helps them rest from stress. Zebras are in touch with the natural rhythms of life. They flow with yearly cycles—the seasons dictate their migratory behaviour. On a more micro level, they are in touch with the daily cycle—they watch the sun come up, peak and then go down. There is something connecting and calming about being in tune with these natural rhythms.

There is good evidence that humans also benefit from another rhythm of life—the weekly seven-day cycle, referred to as the circaseptan rhythm. Unlike the day, month and year, which are determined by the relative positions of the sun, moon and earth, there is no cosmological rationale for a seven-day cycle. But humans seem to respond well to a six-days-on, one-day-off cycle.

Humans tend to display circaseptan rhythms

in their health behaviours and outcomes. For example, heart rate, blood pressure and immune responses fluctuate during the week, leading to predictable weekly variations in heart attacks, strokes and the contraction of infectious diseases.

In a fascinating study, researchers examined the death rates of Jews over a 10-year period and found a distinct circaseptan cycle, in which death rates dipped on their Sabbath (Saturday), which is their “holy day”. The premise of Sabbath is to take an entire day off each week—the Jewish Sabbath extends from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset—from work and the busyness of life to celebrate, prioritise, balance and nurture the truly important things in life including health, happiness, relationships, connectedness and spirituality. The researchers titled the paper “Death rests a while” but the results of the study indicated that it wasn’t just the act of resting that had the death-defying effect. No dip in death rates were observed on other “holy days” that did not coincide with the weekly six-days-on, one-day-off cycle.

Another study found that people’s concern about their health, indicated by the number of recorded internet searches on related topics, fluctuates in a circaseptan manner. One of the biggest causes of stress reported by people relates to their health and

what they should be doing that they are not doing. It seems we are geared to need a stress-free day once a week.

There is a profound wisdom in the practice of Sabbath. In the 1960s and 1970s, economists forecast that, by the beginning of the 21st century, technological breakthroughs would allow us to work only a few hours a week and our main problem would be deciding what to do with all our leisure time. Instead, we are working longer and longer hours, and it is taking its toll on every aspect of our lives. The principle of Sabbath offers an antidote to this ever-quickenning pace of life, and the stress, anxiety, depression and burnout it leaves in its wake. It offers a rest we so desperately need, which can revitalise our physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing.

Even in my busiest periods of life, I have always prioritised one day out in seven. I don't check emails or open my laptop—I endeavour to make it a “digital Sabbath”—and I don't feel guilty about it. It is my experience that practising Sabbath enhances my work, but more importantly, it enhances every aspect of my life—my relationships, my health and my happiness.

## Putting it into action

### 1. *Go outside and play.*

Make an effort to get outside while the sun is shining for at least 30 minutes each day. While you are outside, perform some moderate-intensity physical activity, so you get a double happiness hit.

### 2. *LOL.*

Laugh out loud! Seek out something that tickles your funny bone and causes you to laugh.

### 3. *Rest day.*

Take a day off. Don't even think about work! And make it a digital Sabbath by giving all your digital devices a rest too!

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Find more scientifically proven ways to **lift your mood** and **your life** in Dr Darren Morton's book, *Live More Happy*.



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