

Stress-speak: A Message from the Mind

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For several years now I have been researching the language we use to talk about stress and mental illness. There are hundreds of these striking and descriptive 'throwaway' idioms, yet nobody to my knowledge has ever studied them before. I call the strange patois 'Stressspeak', and I was first alerted to it years ago when a brilliant fellow-undergraduate had what she called a 'nervous breakdown' prior to her finals. I witnessed her distress at close quarters. She said that she was 'falling apart'. She felt 'nerve-racked', 'on tenterhooks', 'at the end of her tether'. She could not 'concentrate', or 'get it together'. Her agony of mind and cryptic terminology haunted my studies of English literature, so rich and deep in its expressions of human psychology. The special language we call poetry is written in short lines on the page to show that it is highly 'concentrated'. Great writers in every culture have given their lives to this art form. Why? Indeed, notwithstanding recent research on Attention Deficiency Disorders what is the literal meaning of 'concentration'?

After my Fulbright scholarship I sought to find out by interviewing famous sportsmen. They know how to 'concentrate'. Indeed, some are said to have 'tunnel vision', focusing so intensely that they appear obsessed. My findings were published in a widely serialized *Times* sports book of the year on performance-related stress. Sportsmen's minds are put under enormous sudden strain during competition. I counted over eighty different expressions for 'concentration' and 150 for 'falling apart'. The word 'pressure' is used *ad nauseam*. Even to a non-scientist, such insistent use of a meta-language seemed a resource. A book with *Daily Mirror* 'agony aunt' Marje Proops gave me access to her huge volume of mail from distressed readers, many using stress slang, and scores more expressions came from the realms of mental illness, the martial arts, television interviews, movie scripts, quiz shows, news footage. How could we have ignored such a striking Esperanto, at a time when scientists and artists are trying so hard to understand the link between consciousness and the brain?

The miracle of awareness perplexes neurologists. DrSusan Greenfield, giving the Royal Institution Christmas lectures on the Brain, told her audience how scientists have long believed that there must be some part of the brain acting like the captain on the bridge of the Starship *Enterprise*, but that sadly, 'a hundred years or more of exploration through the universe inside our heads have failed to find it'. And as Dr Adam Zeman recently wrote in a *Times* article entitled 'Will we ever make sense of awareness?', '...there is no single compelling theory of consciousness'.

Puzzling over my stress glossary and still hoping science would provide the answers, I scanned the available literature on brain monitoring techniques, on artificial intelligence, on experimental psychology, looking for clues, insights, that shiver down the spine of instinctive recognition. The language I had discovered must correspond to *something*. Evidently it described key psychological states. Might it possibly refer to events in the brain? The brain is, after all, a conscious organ, and surely cannot fail to be aware of even the minutest changes in its own activity. What if the brain were transmitting this awareness to us through the medium of words and expressions which we use unthinkingly to describe stress and madness? Could this 'throwaway' language be giving us a glimpse of the brain's own processes?

The scientific literature offered clues. Parts of the brain that are particularly active at any moment can be seen on monitoring equipment to have an improved blood supply. Blood is vital to brain cells, because it bears oxygen and glucose. With it, they work; without it, they die. The brain is thought to contain a hundred billion of these cells or neurones, each one connected up to perhaps ten thousand others. A neurone looks like a tiny spider with fibrous 'legs'. One long fibre, the axon, extends like a cable for carrying electrical signals. When a cell gets a signal telling it to fire, the electrical potential across the cell membrane, after a tense build-up, *suddenly switches from negative to positive*. This 'action potential' moves in a wave along the minuscule nerve cable until it reaches the nerve terminals, when it triggers the release of chemical neurotransmitters that carry the message on to all the cell's neighbours in the network.

Then there was the fight-or-flight syndrome. When we meet a dangerous or threatening situation, the heart speeds up, and blood pressure increases. Blood supply to non-essential organs, like the digestive system and the extremities, is diverted (hence 'butterflies' and 'cold feet'). The precious blood goes to the large muscles, which we may need for fighting or running away, and to the brain, which we urgently need to make sense of the situation. And in order to avoid a dangerous rise in pressure on the artery walls, *the blood vessels at these important sites dilate*, ready to receive the surge. A shiver went down my spine.

Below is a selection of common words and phrases used under stress. I have sorted them into four groups, or rather, they sorted themselves. I believe that scientific minds will make the connection faster than I did.

List I	List II	List III	List IV
<i>to do with blood and heat.</i>	<i>all to do with feeling or being mentally unwell or unsettled.</i>	<i>to do with high tension.</i>	<i>to do with coming together, joining together, contraction, fusion.</i>
A heated argument	A shattering blow	At full stretch	Adamant
about to burst	all over the place	batty (stretched out like a bat)	art form
an inflammatory remark	beside myself	distracted (from the Latin for 'pulling asunder')	articulate
blew a gasket	coming apart at the seams	distraught (ditto)	association
bloody (the swearword)	crack-brained	distress (ditto)	came through in one piece
bloody hell	crackers	extending herself	centred
bloody minded	cracking up	frayed nerves	coherent
boiling with rage	crackpot	hang-up	<i>compos mentis</i>
burning desire	crazy (like crazy paving)	haywire (stretched every which way like lengths of wire for binding hay)	composed
don't burst a blood vessel	disjointed	he snapped under the strain	composition
feeling the pressure	dislocated	highly strung	composure
fit to bust	distraught		concentrate
flushed with pride	driven to distraction		concert
	falling apart		concise
	going to pieces		concrete
	having a breakdown		connection
			contemplate (blend

he exploded	he blew up	keyed up (compare	together)
his blood was up	he just crumbled	piano keys and	co-ordinate
his passions were	inarticulate	strings)	crystal clear
inflamed	incoherent	nerve-racking	crystallized
hot under the	inner conflict	(stretched as on a	cute (short for 'acute')
collar	it blew my mind	torture rack)	feeling together
hot-blooded	it broke her heart	nervous tension	focused
hothead	nerves shot to	on tenterhooks	getting it together
I popped my cork	pieces	(stretched like cloth	'God'
if you can't stand	neurosis	on a frame)	harmony
the heat get out of	<i>non compos mentis</i>	something just	integrity
the kitchen	potty (from	snapped	I pulled myself
in the heat of the	crackpots)	strain	together
moment	scatterbrain	stress (a shortened	life form
in the hot seat	scatty	form of 'distress' from	light at the end of the
it went to his head	schizoid	'pulling	tunnel
(i.e., the blood)	schizophrenic	asunder')	'love' - made up his
let off steam	shell-shock	strung out	mind
livid	split mind	taut	organize
pressure situation	split personality	tense	organism
ruddy (the	splitting headache	tension	sharp
swearword)	tearing me apart.	tight as a bowstring	single-minded
rush of blood		under a lot of strain	succinct
she blushed		uptight	to the point
she inflamed his		wound up (tightened	tunnel vision
desires		as by a winch)	wholehearted.
she saw red		wired. (To 'unwind' or	
turned on the		'loosen up' is just the	
heat		opposite.)	
when the heat is			
on.			

In the first group, by contrast, a 'cold-blooded killer' *doesn't* get hot under the collar; a 'depressed' person is not feeling the pressure; 'chill out' means 'don't get hot under the collar', and so on.

I suggest that this 'throwaway' language describes, in great detail, a process: pressure, heat, expansion, high tension, and finally fusion. The first group, to do with blood and pressure and heat, are all expressions that we use to describe arousal, both mental and physical. I believe they correspond to the dilatation of neural blood vessels at the onset of a threatening situation. This would explain our feelings of 'pressure' inside our heads. The minute networks are ingesting blood and absorbing bombarding fragments of information, which they must urgently combine and connect, in order to tell us what to do.

The second group, to do with expansion and explosion, are all associated with worry and fear, with mental illness and a feeling of losing one's sanity. They are all unpleasant and frightening. They describe a feeling of swelling and explosion because the brain's networks are literally 'expanding' as the blood vessels dilate. The feeling of being about to burst or break, although not unnatural in the circumstances, is illusory.

The third 'high tension' group of expressions describe being stretched taut and pulled asunder. We use them when we are 'at breaking point' and 'about to crack up'. These expressions are even more unpleasant than the second lot, but I suggest that they may simply be describing what the nerve cells are doing, and in particular the nerve cables or axons which transmit messages to other cells and create connections and circuits. The minuscule nerve fibres are being 'stretched' by the vasodilatation. The resultant 'pulling asunder' feeling is fearful and unpleasant, but it is presumably a necessary part of the process. At the moment of highest tension (and perhaps optimum heat), the electrical potential of the cell walls switches suddenly from negative to positive. The hundreds of thousands of nerve cells then make their connections, and the brain orchestrates new circuits, linking them together both electrically and chemically.

The final list is to do with fusion. All of these expressions involve creativity, a feeling of 'being at one' with oneself, or with nature. 'They are pleasant, healthy, positive or meaningful, and they refer to the miracle of 'making connections', of concentration and 'crystallized' thinking, when everything becomes suddenly 'bright', 'brilliant', 'crystal clear'. The fusions that the brain makes under this high tension come forth in our minds as important ideas and insights. they create our music, our scientific breakthroughs, our art. They give us our sense of meaning, our focus and our goal. These diamonds of the mind are surely the 'point' of the whole stress process. This, I respectfully submit, is how the brain makes sense of experience. This is the philosophers' stone of the alchemist, distilling his base metals in a limbeck not unlike the brain.

Unfortunately, there is nothing 1990s man will not do to avoid the physical symptoms associated with this cerebral alchemy. He thinks it healthy to stress his body to the limits, but unhealthy to stress his mind. We have become afraid of fear, of apprehension, of the tension necessary to generate meaning in our lives. We never complete the circuit. Not surprisingly we are left with a vague sense of unreality. Low-level stress inhibits us all the time, increasing our fear of fear. Our brains are triggered by tiny problems to commence firing and then shut down with alcohol or drugs.

Of course, Stressspeak may really *be* 'throwaway'. Or perhaps there is some better explanation for its use. More rigorous research is needed, properly funded, monitored, controlled. But one thing is certain. If my unscientific interpretation is even partly valid, we should not be 'managing' stress, as we are commonly taught to do. Although tension is felt by most people to be unpleasant, it is none the less part of a survival process, like those other expansion contraction wonders of sex, childbirth and digestion. Very occasionally people die during these activities. But as a species we interrupt them at our peril.

Our ancestors always intended us to 'go through with it'. A completed stress pattern is taught in social rituals - fiction, movies, thrillers, sport, gambling, fairground rides, quiz shows, dares of childhood and adulthood of every kind. At least experiencing these, the brain learns what a successful stress process actually feels like, and enjoys some measure of satisfaction and relief. *Not* running away is the first step towards the most tremendous prize known to human beings - a crystal that may only be formed after high-tension activity of the brain.