

WHY ZEBRAS DON'T GET ULCERS AND HUMANS DO

Or How to Stay Well at Work

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:
 - ▣ Writing policy
 - ▣ Lobbying government on behalf of client group
 - ▣ Being on inter-agency working parties
 - ▣ Changing the outcomes for the client group as a whole (Charles Figley, 1995)

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!!