

STRESS – CAN IT BE A GOOD THING?

We asked two writers to share their views...

‘NO’



FIONA EMBLETON, 32

...thinks stress is a life-wrecker that not only causes her sleepless nights, it also ruins her love life

‘LIKE ALL SMALL CHILDREN, I had an imaginary friend – it’s just that mine was called Stress Bunny and she still follows me everywhere.

I first realised I had a problem when I was nine and made the crazy assumption I must have been adopted – I mean with a mum so calm, how could we be related? Being an only child, I always felt it was my job to make my parents proud. Not that they put any pressure on me. Oh no, I did that all by myself – it’s as if stress was written into my DNA. Pushing myself to the max and running up a list of achievements longer than Victoria Beckham’s shopping list made me feel better about myself and gave me more confidence in social situations.

It didn’t matter that I was already getting worry lines in primary school – I’d get up at 6 o’clock in the morning to train for sports day and knuckle down to homework on a Saturday if I felt this was necessary in order to top the class. I always reach my goals so most people think I thrive on stress when, in fact, I absolutely hate it.

Stress is my worst enemy because it makes even the tiniest mole hill feel like Everest. Just getting out the house in the morning involves more planning than a WAG’s wedding. The stress triggers are endless. “What shall I wear today?” for starters. Not to mention, “Is brown still the new black?” and



Sue cut her stress by filing it all under ‘miscellaneous’

“How many calories are there in marmalade?”

Trying to make a simple decision makes my palms sweaty and my mouth drier than the Sahara. The thing I hate most is that it takes the joy out of life. Like the date I went on last week. Did I feel thrilled? Excited? Nope, on the verge of a nervous breakdown was more like it.

I took the afternoon off to get ready, booked a facial and waxed my body parts as well as my car – all before getting so worked up over what to wear I was almost sick in the women’s department of Debenhams. By the time I got to the pub, my tongue was tied in knots and my heart was beating so loud I couldn’t hear a word my date was saying. I nipped to the loo and came back to find an empty pint glass. He never phoned me again.

Stress has quite literally taken over my life. I get cold sweats at 3am worrying about work deadlines, over whether I can afford to fix the leak in my roof, or if taking that dream holiday to Morocco will mean living on fresh air for the foreseeable future. No wonder I ended up in A&E

with a stomach ulcer instead of a sun tan.

I’ve tried everything to deal better with stress. I had a brief love affair with Marlboro Lights but even that didn’t last long as I began to fret about lung cancer. Then I tried yoga. Whoever said it brings about inner peace has been looking at the sun too long. What if my body refused to stretch like an elastic band – or worse still, pinged back in front of everyone? I really do want to be that in-control person who deals with everything life throws at them – minus the valium and high blood pressure.

I once went on holiday to the Maldives and for two blissful, sun-kissed weeks became Girl Friday, living for the weekend and not giving Monday a second thought. I’d love to feel that way again and float into work without swearing under my breath when the bus is late or my computer crashes.

But for now I’ve opted for Botox and a fringe to hide the furrows on my forehead that are so deep they could swallow someone whole.

So even when I’m having a panic attack, my face is fixed in a permanent expression of calm. Stressed? Me? Never!

‘YES’



LOWRI TURNER, 42

...believes that anxiety is the key to juggling the demands of her three children and her hectic career and life

‘I DID TRY TO RELAX, I really did. It was day six of my honeymoon in India. I laid on the beach, by the pool, even on a massage table while two women whose auras of calm were proof they had never even heard of caffeine, massaged oil into all my crevices. But, instead of floating off into a state of yogic bliss, I was just bored. Really, really bored. When my mobile rang (of course I had it switched on) with an offer of work, I could have kissed my laptop. And yes, I’d brought that along as well.

Now, some may think it’s sad to work on your honeymoon. These same people would probably disapprove of working over Christmas – I’ve done that too – and hauling yourself into the office the day after you give birth – yup, me again. But the thing is I love stress. I thrive on it. It’s why I love being a journalist, writing to deadlines and working in live television.

I once did a weekend of live broadcasts, working with a director who had no experience of live television and we soon worked out why he’d never be working in it again. After our first take he practically hyperventilated, then hid in his caravan, and we never saw him again. Thank goodness my co-host and I were so hyper and driven or they’d have had to put the test card up.

When I meet people who are laid back I’m fascinated by them, as if I’m encountering an interesting tribe with peculiar habits that I only

vaguely understand. Still, anxiety-free people do always seem a bit, well, slow. On a spectrum with unstressed at one end and stressed at the other, I’d rather not hang out with Keith from The Office.

Unstressed people actually stress me out. I used to walk to work through a park, passing a group of Japanese Tai Chi-ers and, every morning, I had a terrible urge to bellow: ‘For God’s sake, get on with it!’ If you had one of these chilled people serving you a coffee in Starbucks, you’d want to hit them with a plastic spoon.

The best thing about stress is it helps you get lots of things done. It’s what makes multi-tasking possible. There is no way I could cope with three children and a career if I didn’t regard cortisol as my best friend. My mother is the same. She is the most stressed yet productive person I have ever known. She had five kids, a job



‘Of course I can achieve world peace by lunchtime’

and a 1970s husband who did sod all round the house and took the only car to work. Yet, she still found time to do voluntary work, make all our clothes and give dinner parties.

The bottom line is that for some of us stress isn’t an enemy, it’s enjoyable. Adrenaline is, after all, a drug. Give me a choice between a glass of wine and an adrenaline rush and I’ll go with the adrenaline every time. It’s free, it’s legal and it has no calories. Now, what could be better than that?’

I thrive on stress... it helps you get things done

How to get the stress balance right

‘It’s important not to see all stress as harmful,’ advises psychologist Susan Ayers, a member of the British Psychological Society. ‘We need new challenges to grow as people and an adrenalin rush can give you the push you need to get things done.’ A little will help you deal with challenging circumstances, such as giving a speech or sitting an exam. But too much tension can damage physical and mental health, so it’s important to spot the danger signs. ‘Acute anxiety, irritability, depression, stomach pains and headaches are warnings that you may not be dealing with a situation well,’ adds Susan. So you should identify the causes of unconstructive stress in your life and try to minimise them. ‘An event only becomes stressful when you see it as negative or threatening. The key is to ask yourself why you’re getting so stressed – then focus on the things you can change, not what you can’t.’ And look after yourself, too. If things are getting on top of you, find some breathing space. ‘Take the day off work and do things you enjoy,’ she adds.

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