

Stress

Bob Leckridge describes some of the major characteristics of and commonly indicated medicines for dealing with stress

How often do you hear those around you using the s-word: stress?

“I’m so stressed!”

“I’m stressed out.”

“I can’t go to work. I’m stressed.”

“I’ve got a stress headache.”

“It’s just stress.”

These are statements you hear all the time aren’t they? You’ve probably even said one or two of them yourself. But what do people actually mean when they use this word, stress? Does everyone mean the same thing?

In homeopathy, we are always interested to understand what another person is actually experiencing. Of course, we can only understand by interpreting what we observe from their behaviour, in addition to listening to them explain what their inner experience is using their own words.

However we often use words in quite loose and general ways, so to grasp what someone else is really feeling we need to ask them for examples, and to get them to describe their experience in as much detail as possible.

When we do that, we find that individuals have quite different interpretations of the word stress. For some it’s a feeling of anxiety, a kind of nervousness. For others, it’s primarily a kind of agitation. For yet others it’s a feeling of not being able to cope. In fact, there is a wide range of emotions and inner feelings associated with this word “stress”.

Biologically, a stressor is anything which impacts on an organism requiring it to adapt or to defend its integrity. In human beings that impact may come from within, or from without. Physical disease processes can alter the inner environment of the body and these alterations require adjustments to be made.

More commonly, probably, we



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attribute stress to circumstance or to some external force. (We can call this external force the “stressor” – the whatever it is that’s doing the stressing.) When we come to consider these “stressors”, again we find a wide range of possibilities. It can be a kind of harassment, a being hurried and pressured to meet deadlines, or to perform tasks in particular ways which we find demanding or challenging. It can be about feeling we have too many issues and/or tasks demanding our attention all at once. Or it can be about experiencing some significant trauma, like a bereavement, a divorce, or losing a job.

In most circumstances we feel stressed when dealing with change. However, clearly everyone will experience similar situations differently, some feeling

stressed, and others seemingly quite unruffled. Even those who are experiencing a situation as stressful will have different thoughts and different sensations from each other.

As always, the homeopathic approach recognises this and therefore there is no single remedy for stress, or even small handful of remedies for stress. The most appropriate remedy will be the one which best matches the individual’s experience and characteristics.

I’d like to describe for you some of the leading characteristics of some commonly indicated remedies for those who are experiencing stress, partly so you can see the diversity of patterns, and partly because you might identify with one or two which could be useful for you, yourself.

Anticipatory anxiety

There are a number of ways to consider the specifics of stress. For example, we can consider the pattern of the person's symptoms in a common stress-inducing situation, such as anticipatory anxiety. A common situation in which to feel stressed is in the run-up to a challenging task or event, such as an examination or a performance. Two of the most commonly indicated medicines here are *Argentum nitricum* and *Gelsemium*.

Both of these medicines can be useful in reducing the effects of stress in situations where some kind of performance is expected. As a GP I frequently prescribed these remedies for patients who had previously failed a driving test because of "nerves". It was very satisfying to see them come back with their new driving licence in their hands after the remedy settled their nerves and let them perform at their best.

A very particular group of patients who came to me asking for one of these remedies were those who performed for a living. Musicians who played a string instrument like a violin or viola might find that shaky hands caused by the stress of the event could ruin their performance and, just like those who were about to take a driving test, taking a sedative drug like valium was totally out of the question. In modern homeopathic thinking, remedies which are prepared from the metals we find in the row of the periodic table which contains silver seem commonly indicated for people who are involved in creative work such as musicians and other performers. (Right in the middle of that row of the table is the metal palladium, and you'll be well aware of the long-standing reputation of a theatre like The London Palladium where you could expect to see the best performers.)

What about the fact that many performers say they need stress in order to perform well? It's true that most great performers not only feel very stressed as they are about to step on the stage, the track or the pitch, but they claim it benefits them; it gets the adrenaline flowing and without that their performance doesn't go so well. This is a good example of how stress is a complex phenomenon. We often feel that disturbing or uncomfortable symptoms are just bad things and if we could have a life free of stress, then that would be a better life. If we listen to what the top performers say, then we'll realise that such a view is simplistic. Stress has the essential value in preparing us to meet

challenges and in optimising our abilities to cope with them. Medication which removed stress might seem like a desirable thing, but if it impaired our ability to cope and to perform, it wouldn't be doing us any favours. Sedative drugs like valium have this drawback. Not only do they cause drowsiness which makes it impossible to think or act clearly but they are highly addictive and people can find that once they've started them, it's very hard to stop.

Homeopathic medicines have a huge advantage over sedatives here. A remedy does not act in a chemical way, suppressing anything within the body. Rather it stimulates the natural mechanisms of healing, repair and resilience. In other words, the intention of taking a homeopathic medicine is to improve the efficiency of your body and your mind. The remedy, therefore, reduces the distressing symptoms of stress only by enhancing your ability to cope with it.

Are remedies performance enhancing drugs then? No, they are not. Not in the way a sports authority would think of it anyway. (Of course even if they were, they are neither proscribed medicines in sport, nor are they detectable in the human body.) Homeopathic medicines are not magic. They won't enable anyone to do what they are not naturally able to do. In that sense, they cannot enhance performance. They are not a kind of cheating.

The problem with stress is when it becomes overwhelming. An amount of stress might be good for us. It might stimulate us and tone us up to perform at our best, but when it becomes too much then it makes it hard for us to function at all.

Another common situation which calls for one of these anticipatory anxiety remedies is where the stress is so inhibiting that it limits personal choices and freedom such as when people have a severe fear of flying which prevents them from actually being able to get onto an aircraft and being able to enjoy a foreign holiday.

Argentum nitricum or *Gelsemium* or some other anticipatory anxiety remedy can enable some people to take their holidays with the rest of their families, spreading the benefits beyond just the patient who takes the medicine, to their family and friends who wanted to travel with them. This is especially the case where someone is literally paralysed by their fear and just cannot physically climb onto the plane.

This same principle applies in many phobias. Think of someone who is unable to get on a bus, or who is so afraid of crowds that they can't go into town to shops or restaurants. Whilst phobias are a more extreme form of stress, they do show how a situation which one person finds overwhelmingly stressful can be problem-free for another. We are all so different.



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Argentum nitricum

The pattern of Argentum nitricum is predominantly focused on the bowels and the limbs. This is a common state. The bowel becomes noisy with loud gurgling and this over-activity can reach the outside world as diarrhoea. The anxious, stressed exam candidate who has to keep dashing to the loo is a typical example. But it's not just the bowels which become overactive. This poor soul becomes tremulous developing both a fine tremor of the hands and shaky legs. You can imagine how difficult this is if you are a musician about to perform in a major concert! They feel flushed and overheated, crave something sweet or sugary, which can easily make them feel sick.

Gelsemium

This is the classic stage fright remedy. There's a theme of paralysis running through all its main features. It's the pattern where the main focus is not so much the bowel but more the head and the limbs. The legs feel heavy and shaky, and there's a foggy, dull feeling in the head. It can feel quite like certain kinds of flu. When about to get up on stage they find their legs just won't take them, or they get onto stage and find that their voice has disappeared and they're unable to talk or sing. Most professional performers who have these symptoms find that once they actually get going, once they begin to act or sing, then the symptoms disappear and they actually perform very well. In fact, that's also the case with Argentum nitricum, where if they can get beyond the stressful symptoms, many of these people can deliver excellent performances.

Pinpointing stressful circumstances

We can also consider the focus of the person's stress, their main issue. In other words, exactly what are the circumstances or issues which this person finds so stressful? As we saw above in considering the anticipatory anxiety remedies, finding the cause of a stress can also give clues about which remedy might help.

Arsenicum album

The patient who responds well to Arsenicum album, for example, is usually quite an anxious, nervous type of person, someone who is very fastidious and punctilious. In fact, these are people who always arrive in plenty of time for an appointment because they absolutely cannot stand to be late. Time

pressure can be a major source of stress. I remember a number of years ago sitting on a commuter train which kept stopping between stations. It was clearly going to arrive late. I found that I was constantly checking my watch, updating myself literally every few minutes about just how late I was going to be. I was becoming increasingly stressed. Then I had an insight. No matter how often I looked at my watch, the train would not go any faster. All my time checking was doing was increasing my stress level. I took my watch off and settled down to read my book. I haven't worn a watch for over ten years now and I don't get stressed on commuter trains any more. That worked for me, but I guess if you are an Arsenicum album type, the idea of going through life without a watch is a complete non-starter for you.

Another major focus for the patient who responds to Arsenicum album is disease. They are often afraid that some minor symptom is a sign of a serious disease. I had one patient in general practice who had a fear of cancer of the throat. He made an appointment once a month for me to shine a torch in his mouth and check his throat. He always arrived in plenty of time! However, as you can imagine, if you are particularly anxious about disease, then any small symptom might send you off to the doctor because every small symptom becomes a stressor.

Bryonia

In these economically troubled times Bryonia is an increasingly indicated remedy for stress. The main focus for the Bryonia patient is stress about their business or about money. These are people who are hard workers and whose work provides them with the money they need to live their lives. It's not that they are necessarily ambitious or competitive. It's more that they have a deep insecurity about not having enough money, a real fear of poverty. When such a person faces uncertainty at work, then their stress levels can go through the roof. The stress manifests itself most typically as physical pain or stiffness.

Calcarea carbonica

This is another common work-focused remedy. People who need this remedy are good steady workers but they get especially concerned about being observed or stressed by being hurried towards a deadline of some sort. You can imagine that in difficult economic times, as employees come under increasing pressure to do more in less time, that the Calcarea carbonica patient will become very stressed. Another common feature of employment these days is appraisal. More and more, employees are being subjected to demands to demonstrate their work skills and performance. If you are a typical Calcarea carbonica type, then you'll find the annual appraisal round an especially stressful event.

Staphysagria

Other patterns are revealed by the kind of issues to which a person is sensitive. Unfairness, or injustice, is one such common issue. The Staphysagria patient, for example, will probably have experienced something which they feel has been unjust or unfair. "It's just not fair!" is a common remark they'll make. This is common in either school or at work where someone is being bullied. A remedy, of course, will not change a bully's behaviour, but if it enables the bullied person to feel stronger and less vulnerable, then they often find that they cease to be the target of the bully.

A useful tool

There are many, many situations which individuals can find stressful, and a myriad of ways in which people experience stress. The situations, the sensitivities and the particulars of the symptom patterns are always the keys to finding the best remedy for someone. Homeopathy is a great treatment for stress, because we can't, and shouldn't, remove stress from our lives, but when our whole being is working optimally then we cope well, we are resilient and confident and stress can then be a useful tool rather than a limiting, distressing phenomenon. A well-chosen remedy can help to achieve this goal.



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