

Still - In The Storm

How to Manage Your Stress and Achieve Balance in Life



Dr Ann Williamson

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Are you a born worrier?

Chapter 1

Are You A Born Worrier?

Everyone feels anxious and stressed at some time in their lives. This book will show you ways to help yourself with these feelings and not enter the vicious cycle that may end in panic and burnout.

“I’m a born worrier,” some of my patients tell me. They are wrong. You may have personality traits that make it more likely for you to become anxious, but you are not born anxious. Young toddlers do not know fear or anxiety and will run into danger until they learn. If I had no anxiety I would not bother to look both ways before crossing the road, and I would not bother to check that I’ve locked the front door when I go out.

So fear and anxiety have a protective value – but some people have just learnt anxiety too well.

If something has been learnt – it can be unlearnt!

We all need some anxiety to protect ourselves from danger. Anxiety only becomes a problem when, rather than feeling sensible concern, we find ourselves edging along the continuum towards panic.

Stress – Friend or Foe?

We all need some challenge in our lives or we would not be motivated to do anything. Problems arise when the demands made upon us outstrip our coping abilities. Ideally we should live our lives with a little slack in the system so that we have enough reserve to deal with emergencies or the unexpected. We may find

that we are working at our peak, but then extra demands mean that we start to feel over stressed. We need to be able to detect for ourselves when this starts to happen.

Often we manage to cope during times of upheaval and crisis and then, as events settle and we expect to be able to relax and enjoy life, we begin to feel worse. Sometimes it is as though we have a delayed reaction to stressful events. This probably has survival value in that it enables us to deal with the crisis instinctively, without thinking about it. Then we allow the emotional reaction to surface when it is safe to do so.

When our stress levels are getting too high, even something very minor can tip the balance. When the jug is full, it only takes a drop or two to make it overflow. Events that we would normally take in our stride assume mountainous proportions. When our stress levels are consistently too high we tend to lose our sense of perspective and operate with much less tolerance than usual.

Our Survival Reflex

Our caveman ancestors had to contend with many dangers that threatened their very existence. Their bodies became geared up to give them what they needed for short, sharp bursts of physical activity. This meant that when threatened, they released adrenalin and other similar chemicals into their bloodstream, which helped them to fight their way out of danger or flee the scene. Adrenalin quickens the rate at which your heart beats. It makes you breathe more rapidly, thus giving you a greater supply of oxygen, and it increases your blood supply to the muscles so you can run faster. We still have this survival reflex. Adrenalin is automatically produced whenever we encounter anything our minds perceive as a threat.

Modern Stress

Unfortunately our minds perceive not only dangerous situations as threatening, but also situations in which we get frustrated and annoyed. Anxious thoughts, as well as external events, cause a release of adrenalin.

The ‘What if’ scenarios we often run through in our minds also generate anxiety, and therefore adrenalin. Our unconscious mind cannot distinguish between the feeling generated by an actual event and that of its anticipation.

Fight or flight are often not appropriate ways to deal with modern stress and our adrenalin levels stay high. Often the physical feelings that then ensue – such as a rapid heartbeat, palpitations, shakiness or sweating – make us feel that there is something seriously wrong with us, which leads to even more anxiety! The physical effects of adrenalin pass off within twenty minutes, but often we manage to keep producing anxiety-provoking thoughts. These keep producing more and more adrenalin, thereby prolonging the effects. No wonder people feel tired all the time when they are continually anxious! All that adrenalin makes everything work that much faster. Prolonged high levels of circulating adrenalin give rise to a whole range of physical, emotional and behavioural symptoms.

Physical Effects Of Stress

People experience the physical effects of stress in different ways. Some find it gives them feelings of nausea, and they have to keep going to the lavatory. Others feel that they can’t breathe properly – they feel a tightness in their chest or a choking sensation in their throat. Still others feel shaky, or faint and sweaty. These are all effects of the adrenalin.

Stop Worrying

Have you ever wondered why just knowing that there is really no need to worry about something, and telling yourself so, never seems to help stop the worrying thoughts? We may learn to challenge our thoughts and not get stuck on the 'worry wheel', but simply telling ourselves not to worry doesn't often stop us. The model I am now going to explain may give us some answers.

A model is not the 'truth' but a possible explanation based on what we know so far, which helps us to understand what might be happening.

The brain has two halves, which tend to function fairly independently. The left half of the brain, which is responsible for our verbal and arithmetical skills, and is the source of our critical, evaluative, logical thought processes, is that part of our mind or consciousness that we are generally most aware of in our day-to-day activities.

The right side of our brain, which becomes more active as we relax, is responsible for our visual and creative imagination, the intuitive and instinctive part of ourselves. This is where we process our feelings and emotions. This part of us constantly works in the background and controls all our bodily processes such as our breathing and how fast our heart beats.

There is little communication between these two halves in our day-to-day conscious waking state.

Simply deciding at a logical (left-brain) level that you want to feel calm and then expecting to be able to achieve this as you experience a panic attack (right-brain feeling) just doesn't work. Logical reasoning doesn't get through very well, in the normal waking state, to that part of our consciousness where we process our feelings.



The brain has two halves ...

But read on, and I will show you some ways that you can affect how you feel, improve your self-confidence and keep hold of that stillness within when all about you is bustle and storm.

Relaxation Techniques And Self-Hypnosis

As I mentioned earlier, in our normal waking state, our brain functions predominantly in left-brain mode. As you begin to relax, the activity begins to shift over to the right brain. The critical, evaluative thought processes (predominantly a left-brain or conscious operation) start to lessen and suggestions are more easily accepted.

This shift in brain activity occurs quite naturally throughout our day anyway. Whenever we find ourselves gazing out of the window in a daydream; driving on 'autopilot', with no conscious recollection of the last few miles; whenever we become totally focused on an activity and start to lose awareness of our surroundings, we are predominantly in a right-brain state.

I want to teach you how to access this state of mind, whenever you wish to – to bring it under your own conscious control, so that you can utilise it to help you achieve greater calmness and self-confidence.

How Can I Do That?

There are many different ways to increase your right-brain activity, and I will describe a few. Try them out and see which one feels right for you. We all experience reality differently, so what you need to do is to find your own personal 'key' to open the 'door' to your 'unconscious' right-brain.

Why use this particular book to beat stress?

Simple. This guide presents a useable and accessible programme of exercises that offer long-term stress solutions. It identifies and explains the most empowering, enjoyable and effective stress-relieving techniques, including:

- hypnosis
- cognitive strategy
- visualisation
- time management
- relaxation
- exercise
- positive mental rehearsal

Accessibility is the aim of this book, matching a clear layout with amusing cartoon illustrations and a reader-friendly tone. But, as well as being fun, it offers a serious message and comes with the weighty assurance of the author's many years experience in helping people handle anxiety and manage stress.

"This is definitely *first choice reading* for self-help stress management."

Terri Bodell FNACHP, Deputy Chair of the NACHP

"Written in a style that's both easy to read and follow, the techniques for returning calm and balance are simple and straightforward. I found it impossible to put down and feel the time spent reading it was an investment. Now I can look forward with optimism."

Francis Rowlands, Marketing Director, Dragon Marketing

"Still – *In The Storm* is one of those [books] that you should have on your book case, read from cover to cover at least once and refer to when you feel you need some balance back in your life."

David Feakes

Dr Ann Williamson is a GP with over thirty years' experience in practice. She has been using hypnosis to facilitate change and empower her patients. She is co-author of *Smoke Free No Buts* ISBN: 978-189983620-8.

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