

a better way than Type A

Richard M. Suinn

The busy farm owner, the rancher, the accountant, the research scientist, the Extension agent, the medical technician, the homemaker, the high level executive . . . all have one thing in common. Exposure to stress. "But everyone experiences stress," you might say. "It's part of making a success out of life today." Indeed, the high demands, fast-moving pace, and achievement orientation of our society does characterize 20th century living. Moreover, we've accepted these characteristics to such a degree that we admire those people who adopt behaviors that fit such values.

Dangerous Lifestyle

Common compliments in our speech include, "He can be counted on to keep his nose to the grindstone." "You won't find her relaxing on the job." "Give the work to the him, he's reliable, always gets things done ahead of schedule." "She's a workhorse, always productive."

Consider for a moment, the following description: "Constantly works with self-imposed deadlines, achieving, never relaxes, high drive, even works on planning the day while driving to work, physically and mentally alert." How would you evaluate a person with those traits? Probably very favorably; yet medical research data suggest that such a person is very likely to have a short life span.

We've been describing a style of life that's encouraged by our culture, and yet is associated with heart disease. In 1975, an estimated one to three million people suffered from heart disease. Heart disease continues to be one of the leading causes of death among Americans. Among the risk factors that increase your chances of heart disease are high levels of cholesterol or other fats in the blood, obesity, poor physical exercise, smoking, and high blood pressure.

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Type A Pattern

Interestingly, another factor, called the Type A pattern is also associated with heart disease. The Type A lifestyle involves many of the traits listed before: self-imposed deadlines, intense drive, quickness of physical and mental functioning, an eagerness to compete, desire for recognition, multiple thinking (such as planning while driving), uneasiness at taking time to relax, scheduling more and more things in less time, rapid walking, and eating at a fast pace. Two cardiologists, Drs. Friedman and Rosenman,¹ conducted extensive studies of Type A people and heart disease. They discovered that Type A men within the age group of 39-49 show a rate of coronary disease 6 times higher than those lacking these traits. Moreover, possessing *any* of the Type A traits increased one's risk of heart disease.

Until recently, attempts to alter the Type A behavioral pattern have met with minimal success. Although the Type A person may acknowledge the importance of changing, it's characteristic of this same individual that change is resisted. "I don't have the time to learn new ways" or "I can't afford to change my successful ways" are common rationalizations. The role of stress is important in understanding this resistance. Stress, pressures, environmental pressures trigger the Type A person to strive more frantically. The Type A person works harder, seeks to finish assignments even more quickly, takes less time off, jams more tasks into the day. Because these responses often succeed and are valued by others, they're rewarded. However, such rewards further strengthen a person's conviction that Type A behaviors are good and necessary.

Paradoxically, continued adoption of such behaviors then lead the Type A person to put himself in other situations that create stress. For example, he or she may take on additional new assignments in an already overloaded work schedule, and this in turn may be an added source of stress, which in turn triggers more Type A behaviors, and so forth. In other words, the Type A person becomes caught in a vicious cycle of stress. Many Extension people exhibit Type A behaviors.

Cardiac Stress Management Training

A few years ago, through some grant funds, I developed a pilot program—Cardiac Stress Management Training (CSMT). The underlying principle of this program suggests that Type A behaviors are made up of habits we've learned, and thus it's possible to unlearn such habit patterns.

Stress Management Training

CSMT uses two training methods to encourage behavioral change: stress management training and imagery

behavior rehearsal. Stress management training involves first learning to quickly control stress by relaxing muscle groups through the Jacobsen deep muscle relaxation exercise.²

Next, the Type A individuals are taught to identify body signals that warn of the onset of stress reactions, signals such as the tightening of neck or shoulder muscles. (The next time you're under stress, take a quick survey of your muscles. Do you experience stress through neck strain, tightening of the fists, a frowning effect in the forehead? This might be your muscle profile of stress.) Once this muscle profile of stress is identified, then the individual can use them as early-warning signs and take action to block stress buildup, by initiation of relaxation responses.

Often people don't realize they're coming under stress until they learn to check their bodily cues, or until the stress has built up so severely that it's too late to stop the banging headache, the upset stomach, or the tense fatigue. Since Type A people tend to place themselves frequently in stress conditions, stress management training is a crucial weapon to prevent tension buildup and perhaps reduce the risk of heart disease as well.

*Imagery
Behavior
Rehearsal*

Imagery behavior rehearsal was designed as a means of practicing new habits. Used successfully originally with executives and musicians, I later had the chance to apply this method to athletes. During the 1976 Winter Olympics, I traveled with members of the U.S. Nordic Ski Teams and the U.S. Biathlon Team as the team psychologist and used the imagery rehearsal technique with the athletes. The technique is based on the premise that practice makes perfect, and that practice should be done under conditions as similar as possible to those actually faced under competitive conditions. Imagery can be stimulated to a degree as to be as realistic as the imagery in a vivid dream. Typically, imagery rehearsal is achieved after deep muscle relaxation, and is under the control of the participant.

During the 1976 Winter Olympics, athletes used imagery to practice skiing the difficult sections of an Olympic course or shooting under windy conditions as a means of preparing for the actual events. For the Type A person, imagery is used to practice alternative behaviors to the Type A ones currently being used. The alternatives are selected by the participant as being those which still retain productivity, and which are congruent with the personality of the participant.

One foreman, for example, wished to change his habit of accepting new jobs late in the working day (and thereby having to stay overtime to finish them). During training he tried out several ways of handling these later requests, rejecting those that didn't suit him. For example, a hostile refusal was unsuitable since this wasn't in keeping with his usual disposition. He finally settled on sharing the decision, for example, pointing out the work that had to be done yet that day, and asking the other person what he should do about it if he accepted the new task.

The value of the imagery was in enabling the foreman to practice what to say and how to say it enough times to be comfortable and more habitual when faced with it on the job. The same might be applicable to you in your Extension position.

Time-Binding Factor

Much of our research at Colorado State is aimed at the time-urgency traits of Type A people. Type A's seem to run by the clock, establishing deadlines for themselves even when there are none actually associated with the original assignment. Type A's are usually on or ahead of time to meetings, and dislike waiting for others to arrive. Rush hour traffic jams are extremely frustrating for them.

The inability to take time out for relaxing or leisure activities is another indication that the Type A person hates not using all available time for productivity. Walking at a harried pace, impatience at having to listen to others talk, rushing through meals, and scanning reports rapidly are caused by this time anxiousness. I call this "time-binding" since it appears that the Type A person is chained or bound to time, which controls his actions. Stress management training helps the person break this chain and allows him to respond more neutrally to the passage of time.

Program's Results

The results of the CSMT program have been encouraging. Type A heart attack patients exposed to this program reported substantial relief from their sense of stress and a better ability to alter their lifestyles. Interestingly, a side effect has been a reduction of cholesterol following our training program. This is consistent with other data that suggest that cholesterol level increases with increases in daily stress.

Recent work with healthy Type A persons is also promising. We've offered the program in six one-hour training sessions to community people. Participants included a dentist, city manager, farmer, head secretary, mathematician,

vocational-technical school executive, insurance sales manager, and dental technician. All reported important gains in being able to detect signs of early stress arousal, and in being better able to reduce or control these reactions through relaxation. A number of these people started to initiate a more controlled approach towards their occupational stresses. Some decreases in blood pressure were also noted.

Other Techniques

Ways to Relax

Beyond the methods used in this training program, there are other things that can help Type A people: Learning to properly relax is a goal of value—deep muscle relaxation is one method. A soothing warm bath or whirlpool can act directly on the muscles. Reading a book or listening to music can also calm you mentally. It's important to allocate time to relaxation activities, so you don't negate their impact through rushing. The relaxation activities should be scheduled so there are no interruptions and no tension-building tasks immediately following relaxation. While listening to music or soaking in the tub, you might imagine yourself in a calm and relaxing environment, noting the muscles releasing their tenseness, especially those associated with your muscle stress profile.

Taking Breaks

Taking breaks during the daily routine is valuable to prevent stress from building to a point of no return. Once every 1 or 2 hours, take 30 seconds to check your muscles: are there signs that stress is starting to build? If so, then take a break, preferably by walking away from the work area. Refocus your attention on other aspects of the environment. If you're outdoors, for example, look at the clouds . . . really look at them, seeing their fluffiness or their windblown streaks. Let yourself drift as the clouds might be drifting; take a few deep breaths, and slowly exhale to release the build-up pressures.

Control Your Environment

Learn to take control over your environment instead of being under the control of your surroundings. Telephone calls, interruptions, multiple demands, disruptive requests, all serve to foster a loss of control and a sense of pressure. Schedule appointments realistically, allowing for a few minutes in between appointments to catch up to yourself. After a number of appointments, allow for a period when you don't see anyone. If you travel from one meeting to another, give yourself a good head start to allow for traffic delays and to prevent your rushing from one spot to another

Set Priorities

Each morning set your priorities, and stick to that order; also don't force yourself to have to finish everything instantly. If a task has a low priority, set it for a future date . . . then forget about it until that date. Don't get into the trap of constantly worrying about getting to a task that you arranged to be deferred to that later date.

*Learn To
Manage Demands*

Learn how to manage demands from others. If the request is unreasonable, share the decision making or your concerns. You can be assertive without being aggressive. If you find yourself becoming increasingly angry, it may be a sign that you're taking on more than is reasonable in the time you have available to you.

Slow Down

Slow down behaviorally. If you act rushed, you will feel under stress. Practice slower movements. For example, when you're not walking to an appointment, then slow your pace deliberately. Pay attention to actually walking slowly and with a more leisurely stride. When eating, put your fork down in between bites; sip and savor rather than drink and gulp.

Listen to yourself. Are you speaking rapidly and becoming more stressed and aroused by your own speech pattern? Slow your speaking rate and lower your volume, and see how that slows your heart rate too. Listen to others. If they're trying to say something and not coming over well, listen carefully and see if you can trace the pattern of their thoughts. This will help you to understand them better and also reduce your impatience.

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Footnotes

1. Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, *Type A Behavior and Your Heart* (New York: Knopf, 1974).
2. Audio tapes for relaxation training can be purchased by writing to: Richard M. Suinn, Psychology Department, Colorado State University—Fort Collins 80523.