

Adrenaline and Fear

Whenever we sense danger or confrontation be it real or imaginary our adrenal glands situated on the kidneys release a mixture of chemicals commonly known as adrenaline. Adrenaline sometimes referred to as the flight or fight drug feels very uncomfortable indeed, but these feelings by themselves cannot hurt you in the short term. Without over simplifying, Adrenaline can be experienced in two main forms, Anticipated and Unexpected. If we expect something unpleasant is going to happen our body will release adrenaline in order to prepare us for confrontation the more unpleasant the experience the more adrenaline is released. When something unpleasant happens that we don't expect adrenaline is dumped into the bloodstream in one go so that we enter a type of "overdrive state". Unfortunately, our nervous system doesn't seem to differentiate between the anticipated physical and non-physical events so we end up with the following:

Situation:

Mad axe man running towards you shouting "Kill!, Kill!, Kill!"

Body's Response:

Release Adrenaline

Marks:

10 out of 10 for body response

Situation:

Get up and make a speech

Body's Response:

Release Adrenaline

Marks:

Big Fat Zero

The release of adrenaline draws blood into the major muscle groups in anticipation of 'fight or flight' but a consequence of this is to also draw blood away from the brain, which is fine if you are running from the mad axe man as cognitive thought processes are not exactly number one on the priority list. However, in a non-physical situation such as public speaking this same body response impairs the thought process and recall making the task much more difficult. Stage fright is a physical response to a non-physical situation.

It is our misinterpretation of our body's natural defence mechanism that confuses adrenaline with fear. In fact, it can be easily be argued that there is no such thing as fear. If we look at the dictionary definition of fear we find fear to be '**A feeling of distress, apprehension, or alarm caused by impending danger, pain, etc.**', we have been brought up to think of fear as something tangible, as something experienced by weak people when in fact fear is only a description of the symptoms of adrenal release. Fear is such a negative concept because it promotes helplessness and helplessness is the last thing you want to be feeling when experiencing adrenaline because it will make you release even more.

Listed below are just some of the effects you may experience when adrenaline is released. It is more than likely that you will have at some point in your life experienced several of the effects listed here. We are often told that if we have these feelings it is a sign that we are scared and weak when in reality we are becoming faster, stronger, pain resistant and explosive. Have you ever noticed that fear and excitement often display very similar symptoms, or even wondered why? The answer is simple, they are one in the same! The only difference our perception of the event, if we perceive a pleasant outcome we feel excited and if we perceive an unpleasant one we feel apprehension. This is why two people doing the exactly the same thing can have completely opposite reactions a situation. Imagine two people about to make a parachute jump for the first time, one may be excited by the prospect and the other scared s***less.

We need to remember two things:

Firstly, our reaction to any situation depends not on the situation itself but purely on our individual perception of it.

Secondly, we can tolerate adrenal response and find our performance enhanced up to a certain point after which we find our ability to function and perform in these conditions greatly reduced.

So ask yourself the following question: If I had a choice, would I prefer to feel scared or ready for action?

Short Term

Butterflies in the stomach or Nausea
Increased heart rate
Sweating
Dry mouth
Shakes
Loss of colour in the skin
Tunnel vision
Fine motor skills become difficult to perform
Your strength and speed increase
Your pain tolerance increases
Cognitive thinking becomes difficult as blood is directed to the major muscle groups
Diarrhoea

Extreme (More likely with Adrenal Dump)

**Paralysis - Being frozen to the spot
Possible loss of bowel and bladder control
Memory distortion (tachypsychia)
Auditory Exclusion (Deafness)**

Longer Term

**Loss of appetite
Insomnia
Fatigue
Loss of libido
Irritable Bowel Syndrome
General decline in health due to the above symptoms**

The key to coping with adrenaline is keeping it within manageable levels. If we experience adrenal release over our personal limit we cannot cope and cease to function properly experiencing symptoms such as being frozen to the spot or talking rapidly and incoherently, in this state we cannot deal effectively with the situation we may be in. So why does it seem that some people cope with adrenaline and others do not?

Everyone feels adrenaline, no exceptions, the only difference is the way we react to it, we control it or it controls us. In order to address this problem we need a way of lessening the negative impact of adrenaline on our ability to handle high stress situations and the key word is **DESENSITISATION**.

As you can see from the small list of effects, if we allow ourselves to be at the mercy of our adrenal glands then this alone will cause us long term health problems.

In much the same way as raising the heart rate through regular exercise will produce a lower overall rate, exposure to higher than normal levels of adrenaline on a regular basis will produce a lower day to day level. This happens because once we overcome a stimuli of adrenal release e.g. a phobia of spiders, then it disappears you either have a phobia of spiders or you don't! Only through exposure to causes of adrenaline on a regular basis can we become desensitised to its effects and therefore reduce overall levels. This can be done in a number of ways but in our opinion the best and most practical method is The Fear Pyramid. Devised by Geoff Thompson (British Combat Association) the Fear Pyramid systematically exposes us to gradually more powerful sources of adrenaline.

Of course, this cannot be achieved overnight; it is a process that will take many years. The benefits of persevering with this method are incalculable but this is not the end of the story. In order to react effectively in a high stress situation it is necessary to train with adrenaline, in other words, train with reality.

Only by testing your techniques under extreme conditions will you truly have confidence in them. It's fine sparring with someone you know and feel at ease with trying out fancy moves but put someone in front of you who will shout, swear and yell abuse, will try and knock you out, will try to choke you out, will kick you when you are down, will bite, scratch and gouge and the emphasis changes from point scoring to survival. This example is, of course, at the higher end of the syllabus but reality is the theme throughout, steadily building in intensity and ferocity. You simply cannot afford to use techniques in a real situation that you do not have 110% confidence in and the only way to achieve this is to pressure test.

Unfortunately, there is not enough space here to do justice to this subject but if you would like to find out more about adrenaline I can personally recommend a couple of Geoff's books 'Fear: The Friend of Exceptional People' and 'Animal Day'.