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How do you tackle stress?

IT'S ONE OF LIFE'S GREAT CONUNDRUMS. WHY IS IT THAT OUR GREATEST

strengths almost always turn out to be our greatest weaknesses?

The fact that the exact opposite applies equally is something of a compensation.

'Why do I get so stressed?' my patients often asked me during tearful consultations.

The source of stress might be their job, their family, their spouse, or any one of many other potential sources of angst.

I would often ask them if they would prefer to be the sort of person who was less caring, less sensitive, less aware. Their response was almost inevitably, 'I guess not.'

The price you sometimes pay for sensitivity is pain, and in general, that price is worth paying.

Some years ago, I edited a book for GPs on how best to handle the stresses involved in our branch of the profession.

As part of my research, I spoke to a large number of doctors about their experiences.

One interview really stuck in my mind. This involved a GP who practised fairly near to my practice area who claimed to have solved the stress issue once and for all.

Whenever a patient raised a concern about a problem that appeared not to be a 100% organic medical problem – family worries, work worries, marriage worries, whatever – he would

simply lift his hands in the air making a gesture for them to stop. 'That's not my problem,' he would say. And that would be that.

I was horrified. After all, the boundary between the psychosocial and the physical is deeply porous, and current research demonstrates the profound linkage between life stresses and ill health.

His refusal to deal with anything that wasn't manifested as an organic health problem seemed to me to be both simplistic and cruel.

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There was no doubt that it made his life as a GP much easier. Would I have swapped my approach for his? Absolutely not. My strengths, my passion for the way I practised medicine, were certainly a source of stress, but I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Understanding why we get stressed as doctors is critical to understanding how best we might deal with stress. This might seem obvious, after all, GPs work under huge pressure with extraordinary levels of demand, but some of the reasons why you feel particularly stressed may be more amenable to action.

Some years ago, I tried using a

simple stress diary when I was going through a particularly rough patch.

The technique may sound like some sort of Californian psychobabble, but it certainly helped me.

For a week, every hour on the hour I made a note as to how stressed I felt, using a simple score of between 1 and 10.

I also recorded how happy I felt, using a similar score. These had to be pure gut feelings and not analysed too closely.

If any score changed by more than 2 in an hour, I wrote down what I thought the reason was.

The results astonished me. The most seemingly insignificant things seemed to make the biggest differences.

It wasn't the life and death decisions of medicine, but rather comparatively trivial things such as setting myself impossible deadlines and missing them.

I know what you're thinking. How amazingly shallow. However, I found a number of minor things about my working life that I could change and that did make a difference.

Of course, it didn't stop too many patients wanting and needing more care than I could offer. But it did help the days and the weeks go by more easily.

It could be worth a try.