

High Performance West series – Understanding the Stress Response

PART 1 – The Beginning of Stress

I was trapped on the dreaded teenage rite of passage, the family road trip. We were traversing across the country, making our way along the 1,400 mile route from Houston, Texas to Washington, D.C. Unlike other rebellious teens, the being stuck in the car for endless hours on end with my family wasn't the issue. It was the impact it was having on my running.

For several days, the norms for runs were concrete loops. We'd stop for a meal or at a hotel for the night and off I would go. Endless laps around parking lots or a nearby neighborhood if I was lucky. If I hit the jackpot, a grass field or park would be close by, but for the most part, running circles had become the norm. And for a running obsessed teenager who *needed* to write 14 miles or more in his running log book, that was a lot of circles.

When we pulled up to Smoky Mountain National Park, it was a godsend. As my parents and sibling took a break from the drive and had a picnic, nature beckoned. I laced up my running shoes and headed onto the closest trail with miles of scenery to take in. I traversed through the wilderness, meandering along dirt trails, even crossing a small stream, all surrounded by lush green forest. I was lost in my surroundings and could feel my mind and spirit being slowly recharged. Then, nature intervened.

Five feet in front of me stood a black bear. In a moment, I went from clipping off six-minute miles to a complete halt, frozen, staring at what seemed like a giant black bear. In an instance I had made the transition from blissful unawareness, being lost in my thoughts running through the trails, to rapid awareness of everything. My perception of time changed. My mind was calm and at peace, but also seemingly scanning the environment for all options. After what seemed like minutes, but was surely seconds, I unlocked from my frozen state and slowly backed away. It was as if it was routine. As if

the bear was nothing more than the stray dog on the street or trails that I had encountered dozens of times before. Slowly back away and he'll leave you alone. I didn't turn and run, I didn't panic, in that moment, I was calm and at ease.

After surviving the encounter and momentarily regaling my family with my story, I went on to complete my run, as any runner would do. I left the trails, headed back to the safety of the road and a nearby paved pedestrian path. My pace picked up, as I felt the classic signs of adrenaline coursing through your veins. My thoughts ran wild, as I attempted to make sense of what happened, how close I was to being mauled by a bear. Was I in serious danger, was I lucky to escape by simply backing away or were these things normal? The immediate calm I felt when encountering the bear had dissipated and I was left with the classic, fight or flight symptoms.

As I was gliding along on the path, with a myriad feelings flashing into awareness, I went down with a thud. My foot caught a small bump in the pavement, sending me sprawling towards the unforgiving pavement. Somehow, I performed a slight turn at the last minute, landing on my hip and shoulder instead of having my face meet the hard asphalt. As I scanned my body to assess the damage, my hip, hands, and shoulder were a bloody, scraped mess. I dusted myself off, hobbled the mile back to my parents car and they asked the seemingly dumb, but obvious question, "What happened?! Did you get attacked by a bear?"

No, A bear didn't take me down, a very small bump on a paved path did.

When we encounter a stressful situation, we're used to thinking of it in terms of fight or flight. Do we run away or accept the challenge. We get excited or angry or scared. Adrenaline and cortisol are often described as common culprits for our intense reactions. We're used to seeing, whether it's in real life or in the latest movie thriller, these kinds of reactions. In our minds, we have a very simple model of what occurs when we encounter danger. A trigger causes our body to have a very particular response; an adrenaline filled one with a range of feelings—anxieties, anger, fright—accompanying them. In other words, we're used to thinking of our stress response as a reactive one. The bear provides the stimulus, and then our body issues a reaction. But

in its simplicity, we lose understanding of how the stress response system actually works.

When you've run over 50,000 miles in a lifetime, you're bound to encounter hazards. Bears are a rarity, dogs are much more common. Sometimes you stop and freeze, other times you quickly dart in the other direction. Why?

In a group, things get even stranger.

I was leading a group of six runners, both men and women, through the Arkansas back woods, when I took a left turn on a small dirt trail. Ten feet in front of me was a barrel of some chemical, dozens of empty jugs, and two tents. I immediately turned around, waved my hands to hastily gesture to go in the other direction, and quietly but firmly said "turn around, go that way. Go that way." And I took off running in the direction we had come from. The reaction by the others was wide and varied. The two nearest to me, did a quick 180 and darted off away from the camp we just encountered, one yelling "oh shit, oh shit" along the way. Another person stopped and calmly asked "what's going on?" as if she had to ascertain the situation before she made any decision, even with individuals whizzing past her as she tried to make sense of the situation. Another, stopped and stared at the potential meth camp, curious to see what was going on. And finally, one man picked up one of the ladies and began running off to safety with her in tow.

Amongst our group of six runners, the reactions were wide and varied. And it's not only when we encounter 'meth camps' are the responses so varied. See a pack of wild dogs? Some scream and run the other way, others continue along on their run, and some freeze in their steps. Why do people respond differently to stress? Why do similar situations push us towards different reactions? Why does one person stop and investigate, another run for their lives, and one attempt to play hero?

What pushes us to react to stressful situations in the way that we do, and where do these different reactions come from?

In the rest of this chapter, we'll begin unraveling the answers to these questions.

But, I thought this book was about the psychology of performance, you might be asking. What in the world does how react to a pack of wild dogs have to do with sitting down to perform Beethoven's 5th symphony, or taking the field in your next soccer match? Performance is reliant in how we handle stress. It's the flooding of hormones, the engagement of our nervous system, and the activation of a variety of areas in our brain that help guide whether we are ready to perform or if we need to wait to fight another day. It's the feelings of anxiety, arousal, happiness, calm, and joy that influence the decisions we make during business meetings, as well as in the middle of races.

Encountering a pack of dogs and quickly deciding what move to make shares much with coming to mile 23 of the marathon, running low on fuel, and seeing the pack you are running with slowly start to pull away. Do you settle, do you grit your teeth and hang on or as long as you can, or do you fall apart, slowing into a stumbling trot instead of a run?

While many of these decisions are made at the subconscious level, recent research shows that we can have a large impact on what sort of response we have. How we can push and pull these factors to make sure that we are making the right decisions when it matters the most. Performance is about being comfortable being uncomfortable, and putting your mind and body in a place to succeed.

But, we're getting carried away. Before delving into how to manipulate our reaction to stress, we need to take a step back to when stress first became the buzz word that it is today.