

5,000 10/11/68

You and Tension

ROBERTA C. FRASIER

Extension Family Life Specialist

Oregon State University

LISTEN TO CONVERSATIONS around you, read magazine and newspaper articles or advertisements, watch or listen to radio and television, and you will be surrounded with evidence of tension in modern-day society. Statements such as these are heard every day:

“He’s been under a lot of tension lately.”

“She’s always been a tense child.”

“I’m so tense, I just can’t relax.”

“How can I reduce my tensions?”

“World tensions are at the breaking point.”

People are cautioned against letting tensions build up and urged to take tranquilizers to relieve them. Books and magazine articles are written on how to master tension, how to reduce tensions, how to conquer tension, how to get release from tension, and many other related subjects.

What is tension?

Tension is a word of many different meanings. Often it is used to mean frustration, fatigue, unhappiness, discontent, worry, inner turmoil, uneasiness, or some other feeling.

Dr. George S. Stevenson says that “tensions are nothing more than the sensations and feelings all human beings experience when they react to a threat.” More specifically, tension may be described as a mobilization of the body resources for action. The blood stream is filled with adrenalin and the nerves are stretched taut.

Cooperative Extension Service
Oregon State University, Corvallis

Tension can be visualized as one of the middle men between anxiety and relaxation. An individual feels a threat, the body reacts with tension, action takes place, and a feeling of relaxation occurs.

Tension serves a useful purpose because it stimulates action and provides excitement. Tension which leads to action makes relaxation possible and revitalizes the body.

By way of illustration, assume that you are watching an exciting basketball game. The teams are tied. Your team has the ball and goes down the court for the basket. Your excitement (tension) mounts. You are afraid the ball handler will make an error, foul, or miss the basket. He makes a beautiful shot. Your team is ahead. Your tension relaxes for a moment and you feel good. You will feel better and more relaxed when your team has a comfortable lead. But too great a lead, and the game becomes dull and uninteresting.

Or assume that you are at home and so weary you feel that you cannot do one more thing—but the phone rings with word that friends are coming by and you find a lift in your voice and hear yourself extend an invitation to dinner. In the hour before they arrive, you fly around and accomplish a whole day's work. Actually, your body mobilizes for action and you are in a state of tension. You forget about being tired and tense—until after it's all over.

Tension adds zest to life

Tension in these situations adds excitement and zest to life. You hope for it when you go to a game, and it mobilizes you for action at home. But if you had to remain at a high pitch of excitement indefinitely, it might be more than your body could take. You might develop an ulcer, a headache, become irritable, "go to pieces," become a "nervous wreck," become physically exhausted, or react in other ways.

Sometimes the response which comes after tension is released is interpreted as tension itself. A mother may discover her child in a dangerous spot. She will react calmly and wisely until the child is away from harm. After he is safe, she may shake all over, faint, become hysterical, or her body may react in some other way as she relaxes from the state of extreme tension.

Tension warns of trouble

Unrecognized tension is the kind of tension which causes trouble. It does not result in purposeful action and, therefore, does not lead to relaxation. Usually, the source of this tension is not recognized by the individual or by others since it stems from the inner conflicts of the individual. A person may recognize vague, undefinable feelings of worry or anxiety but may not realize he is experiencing tension. He may say, "I don't know why I feel this way, nothing is bothering me," or "I'm not worried about anything." But, he has the symptoms which come from a prolonged state of tension. Some of these symptoms are feelings of frustration, unhappiness, discontent, disgust with oneself, pressure, fear, worry, inner turmoil, anger, hate, and nervousness. Or he may experience some physical symptoms such as high blood pressure, diarrhea, constipation, ulcers, headaches, or any of a multitude of ailments.

Some people describe themselves as being "tense." They find it difficult to relax. They see tension as their problem rather than recognizing it as an indication that something is bothering them. This kind of tension might be compared to a fever. It is a symptom that something is wrong. Problems or illnesses cannot be solved by treating the symptoms. However, as you have probably learned, it may be necessary at times to work first at reducing fever to allow time to get at the cause. Tran-

quilizers work on the symptoms and although they are necessary at certain times, they only reduce symptoms; they do not overcome problems.

Tension provides satisfaction

Dr. Edmund Bergler¹ points out that some people use their tensions as a way of gaining self-satisfaction. He says that some people inwardly love tensions so much that they create them if external excuses do not present themselves. He describes such people as being "injustice collectors." They, in a sense, go around asking for trouble. They interpret any statement as an affront to themselves. Such people are not the "victims of" but the "lovers of" their tensions. Grandfather might have said, "They have chips on their shoulders" or "They borrow trouble."

To approach the subject from the viewpoint of tension as a "middle man" involves a look at tension-provoking situations, at the way the individual uses these situations, and ways in which some of these situations can be mastered or solved.

Before we proceed further, you should ask yourself four questions:

- How much do I talk about tensions or the situations which create tension for me?
- What positive steps do I take to overcome tension-provoking situations?
- What warning signs does my body give me of mounting tension?
- In what ways do my tensions stimulate me to constructive action?

Your answers to these questions may give you some clue as to the way in which you use your tensions.

¹Edmund Bergler, M.D., 1962. *Tensions Can Be Reduced to Nuisances*. New York: Collier Books.

Is there more tension today?

There is no doubt that modern-day living provides many potential tension-producing situations. But life was not free from fear and anxiety for preceding generations. Our ancestors had real and tangible things to fear—starvation, disease, and war. But they had a fatalistic philosophy which helped them accept their lot in life, and they did hard physical work which helped prevent the accumulation of tensions. The rigors of earning a living left them little free time to fret and worry. They were not bombarded through mass media about the danger of lung cancer, death on the highway, heart attacks, nuclear explosion, unconfined war, or a host of anxiety-provoking situations. The things they feared were real and predictable. However, a study of old household remedies reveals that even great grandmother had her recipes for tranquilizers; the inner bark of the choke cherry was brewed into a concoction to relieve nervousness.

Modern day citizens are faced with a more complex life which involves more decisions, more uncertainties, and fewer opportunities to work off tensions in daily living. People are expected to play many different roles, most of which are undefined. Patterns of behavior are changing; moral values are challenged. We live in a highly organized society which involves a myriad of interpersonal relationships. Higher demands are made on children and parents. Individuals and groups are highly competitive. Unemployment, sickness, and death always bring added tensions. The individual is at the mercy of many situations he cannot control.

No one can expect to avoid tension-provoking situations and live a full and creative life. Neither does he need to assume that he has no control over tension-provoking situations and must resign himself to living

with them. Some situations can be controlled; others may need to be accepted.

A look at the causes of tension and some positive steps that can be taken to reduce them may help you to live a more satisfying life.

What causes tension?

Tension-producing situations appear to fall into two broad categories: life situations and inner conflicts.

Life situations

No two people react to life situations in the same way. One person may view a situation as a challenge and a problem to be solved. Another person may view the same happening as an impossible situation and a personal affront. Grandfather would have said, "One man's meat is another man's poison."

What causes this difference? There is evidence that some individuals start life more prone to tenseness than others, just as some people are more sensitive to color and sound than others. In addition, early experiences in life build feelings about self which influence the way in which a person responds to life situations. During the growing years, children are taught specific ways of responding to frustrations. Some of these ways provide an opportunity to release tensions; others build tension with no opportunity for release.

Everyone is faced with certain tension-producing situations in the process of growing and maturing through the stages of his own and his family's life cycle.

When a child starts to school, he probably experiences some feelings of tension. Most first graders are worried over what is going to happen that first day in a strange place. Each child will respond in his own way. Some may become whiny, others may cling to mother; some have nightmares, others start biting fingernails.

The mother with preschool children faces unique tension-producing situations, as does the parent of a teenager. Middle aged and elderly persons encounter certain tension-provoking situations simply because they are faced with the reality of changing their life patterns to meet their change of age.

Regardless of age, you can expect some tension when you approach any new experience. You may describe it by saying, "I'm scared" or "I wouldn't want to do that." Some people limit their life experiences because they do not understand that tension will resolve itself once the situation has been faced and skills have been learned to cope with it. Other kinds of situations create some tension each time they are faced. Even the most experienced speaker feels tension before he speaks. Having had surgery once does not eliminate anxiety the next time it is faced—although a person may feel more comfortable in the hospital setting.

Inner conflicts

Inner, unrecognized conflicts buried deep within the personality structure of the individual can create tension. These inner conflicts prevent individuals from doing what seems to the outsider as the obvious and sensible thing to do to eliminate a tension-provoking situation.

Some people nurse along a tension-provoking situation in order to have a scapegoat for their other problems. In a sense, this is an undercover way of gaining punishment for guilt feelings. In such cases, situations which create tensions serve a purpose.

Everyone has inner conflicts. Most people are able to keep them under sufficient control so that they operate as a positive influence on everyday behavior. You cannot hope to identify all of your inner conflicts by self-analysis. But, the important thing is to recognize that

they are a motivating force in your life and that you can arrange your life situations so that you are able to maintain a healthy personality structure.

How can you control tension?

1. Get adequate rest, have a good diet, and maintain good physical health, and you will be less likely to make mountains out of molehills.
2. Recognize warning signs of tension and take the necessary steps to slow down.
3. Develop some satisfying tension-reducers which work well for you.
4. Ask yourself, "Is that *my* problem?" and you will be less likely to maintain a state of tension over situations you can do nothing about.
5. Learn to talk over the things that bother you with the person involved. In this way you will be able to solve many issues and reduce tension. (You may increase tension at the time—but skillful discussion can help you gain understanding.)
6. Make decisions instead of postponing them and you will have fewer things to bother you.
7. Sort out the really important things from those that will be of no consequence in five years. You will find a difference in your feelings if you can take a long-range look.
8. Escape temporarily when you are faced with an insolvable situation. Later you will be able to look at it from a fresh viewpoint or will have built some energy reserves to help you face it.

9. Develop the practice of asking yourself these questions:
 - What appears to be the thing that provokes my tension?
 - Do I want to change the situation?
 - How can I change it?
 - What can't I change? If I can't change a situation, how can I change my attitude to make the situation tolerable?
10. Seek professional help if you feel that you are in such a state of tension that your feelings about yourself and your relationships with family and friends are affected or if your physical health is affected.

Professional help may involve a call at your county Extension office for individual help in home and money management, care of children, or other homemaking skills. It may involve talking over your problems with your minister or with a professional person at your county mental health clinic or at a personal or family counseling agency. It may involve consultation and treatment by a psychiatrist.

Personal Worksheet

1. What are my own personal indicators of tension?

“Knot” at the back of my neck

Feeling of extreme fatigue

Depressed feeling

Talk too much

Easily irritated

Upset stomach

Sleeplessness

Headache

Loud voice

Lowered voice

Grit my teeth

High blood pressure

Butterflies

Cry easily

Other indicators :

2. What kind of things make me tense?

3. What can I do about those situations which make me tense?

For Additional Reading

Stevenson, George S., M.D., and Harry Milt, *Tensions and How to Master Them*. Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 305, 1959.

Copies may be purchased from: Public Affairs Pamphlets, 22 East 38th Street, New York 16, New York.

Stevenson, George S., M.D., *How to Deal With Your Tensions*. National Association of Mental Health, 1958.

Copies may be purchased from the Oregon Mental Health Association.

Extension Circular 722

Reprinted September 1965

Cooperative Extension work in Agriculture and Home Economics, F. E. Price, director, Oregon State University and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating. Printed and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914.