

## Sea Change on 'Stress' Angela Patmore

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I write contentious books challenging current thinking on depression and 'stress' (the term has hundreds of different and opposite meanings). The Government's determination to reduce benefits-dependency has caused fear and alarm in my catchment area, which was pretty fraught with fear and alarm already. Tamper with benefits to the 'stressed' and depressed? Unthinkable!

But there has been a sea change in government strategy on emotional disability, and I should like to think that critics of 'stress management' theory like myself had something to do with it. My research and professional

experience over many years (as a Fulbright Scholar, UEA research fellow, Met Police adviser and Employment Service Restart trainer) has shown that calm-down 'stress management' harms the vulnerable rather than helps them. It medicalises normal emotions and physiological reactions and convinces people that they are mentally ill.



I suggest millions in Britain didn't just fall into the abyss of stress and depression. I say they were pushed. Sufferers are told to look for 'symptoms', and warned that they must avoid arousal or they may succumb to disease and die. Understandably, they then go in search of ways to calm down - and sink into inertia instead of showing courage and tackling urgent problems head-on. The latter has been the traditional way of coping with life's troubles in every age and culture other than this one.

Actually the clinical literature on 'stress' does not show that arousal per se causes disease at all. It does show that sinking into numbing helplessness to escape from problems leads to depression - and that this behaviour can dramatically shut off the immune system, exposing the body to pathogens. Give up and sit on your behind following retirement, or loss of your spouse, and you could become an insurance statistic. Give up on looking for a job or self-help activities after being made redundant, and you could end up in a box rather than just your jimjams.

My work has naturally brought me into conflict with the stress industry, whose deeply flawed science is often funded by pharmaceutical giants marketing calm-downs. Stress practitioners, whose numbers have swelled by 804% in twelve years and who are regulated by no one but themselves, would like to see me at the bottom of a pond. Fair enough: my work threatens their livelihoods. According to the New Statesman, I am 'widely regarded as a heartless bitch'.

Rather more disconcerting is the animosity of some of those I am trying to help. When *Challenging Depression and Despair* was published, a ghostwritten article appeared in the Daily Mail explaining that I too suffered from suicidal depression and panic attacks when I was young, but that I refused mood-altering drugs because my father had suffered their terrifying side-effects and begun attacking my mother and myself. Instead I turned my life around by doing challenges that made me tougher, and these same challenges had helped my long-term unemployed trainees conquer anxiety and despair.

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One critic said ‘Mmm. This tells me all I need to know. This person didn’t have depression. Wouldn’t take antidepressants? Listen... if you have clinical depression, you will grab at anything to get better.’ Another said: ‘The article and no doubt the book it’s from is highly offensive to the millions of people who struggle with depression. I refuse to believe that she has ever truly suffered like she claims to have done.’ Another complained: ‘This puff piece is merely an advert by another self-help quack trying to massage their own ego and enhance their bank account.’ One critic felt: ‘Completely disgusting and shameful article. You cannot control or talk yourself out of real clinical depression or panic attacks no more than you could tell an athlete with a broken leg that they could still run a marathon.’ And another thought: ‘I was certainly deeply offended by the phrase she uses: “The secret, I learnt, was to develop resilience in the face of adversity.”’

So then you try to convince them. I talk about my heroic cousin Brian Day, who refused stress counselling after six members of his immediate family were killed by an arsonist in Chingford, East London. Through sheer courage he got back to work and rebuilt his life. Yet naysayers tell me: ‘That was just one person’. If I offer 440 pages of evidence citing hundreds of studies showing that the stress science is bogus and stress management doesn’t work, they don’t open the book. If I say look at heroes like Chris Moon who runs the Marathon des



Sables with one arm and one leg, or victims of the Blitz who dodged doodlebugs to get to work, they say – ‘Oh that sort of courage is genetic. That’s why I don’t have it.’ If I say you can reverse the spirals of depression and panic attacks by altering behaviour, they say: ‘Oh no you can’t – my symptoms are caused by a chemical imbalance.’ If I offer a series of challenges that helped my trainees get their lives restarted, they say: ‘I’m not doing challenges. Challenges stress me out.’ And if I lead by example, and hold a tarantula or go up in a hot air balloon, they say: ‘You weren’t really scared then or you couldn’t have done it.’

I realise of course that these reactions are not those of rational critics prepared to debate or look at evidence. They are more like the responses of those whose religious faith has been questioned and who are fanatically lashing out at an unbeliever. In a way, stress management is a new religion, one that seems to offer compassion, pastors, and a system for explaining health and happiness. Questioning any tenet of this faith threatens to bring down the whole edifice, and to some this causes anguish even greater than the symptoms they endure.

To hear that they themselves are responsible for their health exposes them to fear of freedom, just as the Reformation exposed the Catholic Church.

Yet stress and depression sufferers do have a choice. They can make the decision to help themselves, or rely on therapists, pills and (as they hope) welfare handouts for the rest of their lives. They can choose to be cowardly and go under, or courageous and survive. It really is up to them.

