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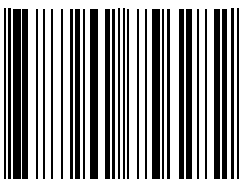
# URBAN FAMILY

May, June | 2012



## OVERLOAD

ISBN 978-7-900756-28-2



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# The Stress of Waiting in Line

By Ans Hooft

I was in a rush and had to quickly make a cash payment at the bank. I still haven't managed to do Internet banking in China, so there was no other way to do it. I should have known that the middle of the day might be busy at the bank. But this was the worst I had ever seen: nearly 100 people waiting before me. All I could do was sit down on the waiting bench, impatient and stressed. As I felt my heart racing I wondered: how do other people do it? So many people here seem to be patient and very good at waiting. How can they do this? And why can't I?

## What happens when you are impatient?

When you are impatient, your stress hormones are working at full speed. The adrenaline is rushing through your body and makes you ready to 'fight or fly'. You are saying to yourself "I can't take this anymore". You feel stressed and worked up, frustrated and hostile. As with all stress, in the long run this is not a very healthy state to be in. If you have an impatient and hostile personality (also known as 'type A'), you even have an increased risk of developing high blood pressure. For our own health and happiness it would be much better to develop some patience. Is this possible? Can we actually learn how to be patient and relaxed? The answer is 'yes'.

Impatience is all about your inner dialog. Your inner dialog at that moment is all about being in a hurry, not being able to wait, and saying that every minute spent waiting is 'lost'. If you keep talking to yourself in this way, you can make yourself so angry that smoke will come out of your ears. But who is causing this: you are. Your inner dialog is within your control. That means you can also tell yourself to be



calm.

## Breathe first

When you find yourself in a stressful situation, the first thing you need to do is breathe properly. Breathe in through your nose, hold your breath for three or four seconds, then breath out through your mouth. Make sure you are breathing through your belly and not your chest. Do this a few times and be aware of your tension. If you're breathing well you will feel the tension flow down out of your body. If you don't, just keep repeating this. Are you perhaps breathing too fast? See if you can count your breaths. If you are breathing more than 20 times per minute and you are not climbing stairs or cycling in the wind, you are definitely breathing too fast. Make a conscious effort to bring this down. If you are sitting at your desk, an average of 6 to 18 breaths per minute would be ideal.

## Use some numbers: three steps

If you are a numbers person, it might help you to evaluate your stress in a balance sheet. Step one is this: give a figure to your stress reaction. '0' is you being completely calm and balanced and '10' is you totally going through the roof. Step two is assessing the importance of the event. For instance: '1' could be a red traffic light and '10' is the worst thing that can possibly happen to you, like the death of a close family member.

In step three you evaluate whether your stress reaction measures up to the importance of the event. For instance: your taxi driver is taking the wrong turn (importance: 2 or 3) and your reaction is that you start screaming and swearing at him (stress level 7 or 8). Or somebody is pushing you in the metro (true: in your home country this could be a 5 or 6, but here it is rather a 2) and your reaction is that you are ready to fight (6 or 7). Your reaction clearly

does not measure up to the activating event and if there is no balance between the two, it is time you have a serious conversation with yourself.

### Talk to yourself

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this really the end of the world?
- Is this as bad as the nuclear disaster in Japan or the troubles in Syria?
- Will I remember this situation in three weeks or three months time?
- Will my stress result in anything positive?
- Can I change the situation?
- Do I really want to be this stressed?

I'm guessing the answer to all these questions is 'no', so stop wasting your energy!

### Practice it

How about practicing this on a small scale? Go to the supermarket and choose the longest line. Take a few deep breaths and say to yourself: "I am going to accept this situation. More than that: I am going to enjoy these extra moments that I have here." Look around you and see how other people are doing. Stare in somebody's trolley



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the way they always stare in yours. Try to work out what other people will be cooking tonight. Think about what your friends back home are doing. Try a little mindfulness and reflect about yourself as you are now: in a supermarket in

Shanghai. Think about the next holiday you are planning. Picture yourself on that sunny beach. Feel relaxed yet?

One of the best stress relievers is to see the funny side of things. While I was waiting in the bank, the security guard who helped me came to look at my number. When he saw that there were still 80 numbers before me he just burst out laughing. Not in an insulting way but spontaneously, just because he thought it was funny that it was so crowded. Then it hit me: why don't I just laugh at it too? Isn't it all incredibly funny, this long queue and me being all worked up about it? Just see the fun side of it! And it worked: my stress was gone.

Five minutes later, this friendly security guard slipped me a number that was 50 numbers lower down the queue. I don't know how he did it, and I don't know why. Was it perhaps because I laughed with him? So in the end it all worked out fine and I was out of the bank in no time. Plus I had a new friend! ●

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