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URBAN FAMILY

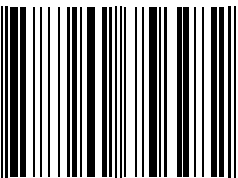
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WHAT IF YOU HATE IT HERE?

Notions about Stress from the Perspective of a Stress Counselor

By Ans Hooft



So here you are. You thought you had come to China prepared since you followed the rules: you found the perfect home in the right neighborhood, enrolled the children in a reputable international school, and enrolled in a comprehensive course dealing with Chinese language and culture. The move to China went smoothly, the ayi is looking after the house and the children have settled in nicely. But you? You are stressed and absolutely miserable in your new environment.

Why? You find communication to be difficult in China - people either smile politely without understanding what you have said, or misunderstand you and become offended. And daily life seems to be even more complicated - you cannot find your favorite products in the shops, or the right office to deal with your residency registration. And even when you try to adapt to local tastes by ordering a local dish in a restaurant, you find it to be inedible.

You ask yourself what on earth you are doing here.

Moving House and Country

Moving from one house to another is considered to be one of the most stressful events in a person's life and of course, this stress is magnified when coupled with a move to a new country. Each time we move from one country to another we are obliged to bid adieu to friends, and then create a social network in our new environment. It is natural then, that a move can be accompanied by a number of disconcerting sentiments: a sense of emptiness, a loss of control, and even depression. The good news is that it gets easier with time. Well, usually.

Stress

According to Albert Ellis, stress is not caused by an actual event but rather, it is the result of your reaction to a said event. Some people become extremely upset in the face of a problem, however small, whereas others remain calm because of the way they process their thoughts. According to his ABC theory of RET (Rational Emotive Training or Therapy) this ability to remain calm is something that everyone can learn. The first part (A) is the activating event or situation, then your reaction to it: the consequences, and last (C) how you feel about the event or situation. However, the mediating factor is what you think about the event, which takes place in B. These thoughts

define your reaction to the activating event or situation because they can be ineffective, negative or even depressing. For example, you may think it must be like this, it should not be like this, this is a disaster, or I cannot bear this. However, if you can challenge these thoughts and see that they are not constructive, you can reframe them to help you feel better.



China

Many expatriates argue that the culture shock and associated negative thoughts in China can be quite powerful. It is not always easy getting used to a new life in China, especially if you are a person who not only has a strict set of norms of how things *should* be done but also wants to control *how* things are done. It is clear that if you feel out of control you will feel stressed. And yes, you are definitely out of control here but take a deep breath and listen - getting angry or frustrated will only make things spiral out of control.

Our (mostly) Western set of norms is acquired throughout our life - from our parents, school, friends and environment - and by the time we reach adulthood we are fairly set in our ways. We often believe that things are supposed to be a certain way and we develop laws and rules to protect our beliefs. When an outsider does not fit into our created culture, we might find him to be strange or out of place. But wait, when we arrive in China not only are our norms challenged, but we are now the person who is out of place!

Apparently there are different

norms and unwritten rules in this part of the world, and that can be a shocking revelation. If you find it important to look each other in the eyes, you can find it very disturbing to have conversations with people who don't look at you. If you believe we should all stick by the traffic rules, you can get upset by a car that nearly runs you over when you are on a zebra crossing. If you come from a very specific and outspoken culture, the use of *we can try* and *maybe* can give you an ulcer. And if you come from a culture where people don't touch each other and keep a certain space between them, travelling by metro in the rush hour can be invasive.

But who is right and who is wrong, and who has the right to judge?

The answer to this question lies in your perspective and this process of understanding can be very interesting. For example, I recently showed my 11-year old nephew a world map with China in the middle. He claimed that this was wrong since Europe should be in the middle and the explanation that China calls itself Middle Kingdom puzzled him; how could others be in the middle? Using a globe I demonstrated that you could put virtually any country in the middle but the question remained: is there a right or wrong answer, or is it just a question of who drew the map first?

Another different perspective has to do with the hierarchy of decision-making. In my second week in China, my landline phone broke, literally. I asked my compound's management office to send someone from the telephone company to fix it. In my efficient Dutch mind this was simple but instead, they sent two men from the management office to see what was wrong. These men confirmed that the line was broken and that the telephone company should be contacted. Hadn't I told them that? A bit later, a man from the telephone company came to the house to look at the problem. He established that the line was broken, and that a technician should be contacted. At this point I was furious! An hour later a different man from the telephone company arrived, looked at the broken line, collected his tools and fixed the line. In my Western mind-set, I could not understand why this problem could not have been resolved in one step but for each of these men, making the correct decision within their clearly defined scope of responsibilities was

fundamental so that they did not make a mistake and lose face. Also, since there was no incentive for working fast they were even less compelled to help me. Once I could understand (and accept) this, life became easier.

Can I Enjoy it Here?

How to Cope?

Once you accept the differences between *you* and *them*, you can start to really enjoy your stay here.

One recommended book is “Seven Principles of Highly Effective People”. According to author Stephen Covey, you can direct your thoughts in such a way that makes you happy. He illustrates this thesis by sharing stories of people who live in extremely harsh circumstances and make a conscious decision that their situation would not determine their state of mind. In other words, they would control their happiness. If stress management can be achieved in challenging situations, it can be achieved in our daily lives through positive psychology.

Try this method on a day when a series of small things upset you. For example, I recently had a day when a guard was rude to me, I traveled far to Carrefour to find that my breakfast muesli was sold out, a shop assistant cleared up my trolley when I still needed it, my taxi had an accident and couldn't drive on, and since it was plum season I had to wait for ages in the rain for another taxi. When I got home I was not only soaked but in a horrible mood. I took a breath and thought ‘I cannot let these things ruin my day so I will put it all behind me and laugh.’

In fact, a sense of humor is one of the best coping techniques for stress. Try to laugh at yourself when stuck in the pouring rain, or when clumsily attempting to speak Chinese since it gives you a different perspective on the situation and a sense of detachment. If you can make light of a problem, your frustration disappears and you might find yourself laughing about it with friends and family. Apart from giving you a different perspective and detachment, laughter reduces the level of stress hormones and increases the level of health enhancing hormones. In short, laughter gives you a stronger immune system and fewer physical effects of stress. With this in mind, people have launched special laughter therapy sessions and laughter yoga. The message here is clear - don't just smile but laugh out loud!

Let's not forget there can also be



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physical factors contributing to your feelings of stress. For example, your daily routine is probably different as is your daily diet. Perhaps you are lacking vitamins or missing out on your work out routines? It takes a few months to find a sense of equilibrium in terms of exercise and sports but do make this a priority since - apart from all the obvious advantages of regular exercise - sport is also a stress reliever. When you exercise, your brains produce endorphins that make you feel happy and energized.

As you settle in to the new country, you will find out that there are great opportunities in China to get rid of some stress. You need to determine what works for you. Yoga? Meditation? For example, do you like to eat well? Go to the fresh market and haggle with the locals while purchasing delicious and fresh ingredients. If you do not like to cook then explore the plethora of restaurants the city has on offer. As you relax you will realize - nothing seems to be easy, but everything is possible in China! ●