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Stress for Success

Science. Dr. Noitall, you are the world's supreme authority on stress, the man who once routinely cleaned out the Augean stables until Hercules took over, the man who treats Atlas for lower back pain, the man who can see a bleeding ulcer without even a scanning electron microscope.

Noitall. A vast understatement of my true worth.

Science. It has been reported that 70% of U.S. workers feel great stress on their jobs, and a high proportion of these are considering suing their employers or quitting completely. Do you think those figures are accurate?

Noitall. Quite frankly, I suspect the stress figure may be more than 70%. Most American workers are in an unnatural situation of incredible complexity, far beyond any evolutionary selection for survival of the fittest. *Homo sapiens* could cope in the good old days when stress came from such simple threats as lions, tigers, and an occasional flood or two.

Science. But why should the modern office be more stressful than the jungle?

Noitall. What a stupid question. Take information transfer as a simple case. Can anyone operate a computer using the instruction booklet given by the company? Or assemble a scientific instrument after reading the operating instructions? In the good old days, there were the Ten Commandments—clear, simple, direct—they don't have writers like that anymore.

Science. But surely, threats to life and limb were much greater in those days.

Noitall. That is exactly the problem. In the good old days, the boss had a cat-o'-nine-tails, and job expectations were clear-cut. After 12 hours a day at hard labor, no one had trouble sleeping. Today, between psychiatric counseling, management techniques, sexual, political, and disability harassment, and truth in advertising, the terra ain't firma anymore.

Science. But at least modern jobs don't require much physical strength.

Noitall. What a silly thing to say! Have you ever tried to open one of these modern courier packages in tearproof plastic? I have seen grown men burst into tears after trying in vain to open a little bag of peanuts.

Science. But communication is certainly better today.

Noitall. Not true. Sign language came naturally for cavemen, but today communication is done through answering services, automated messages, faxes, and dictating machines. An executive does not talk to human beings! Even picking up your own phone is not compatible with modern civilization.

Science. Do you believe there is a conspiracy to add stress to the American worker?

Noitall. Absolutely. There are certain unexplained phenomena that are clearly designed to create doubt in the rational mind. For example, bill forms that are too big to fit into the envelopes provided must be a CIA plan to create vulnerability. Then dressing for work is a major pressure point. Wearing a tie classifies you as too old, and a miniskirt as too young. Jeans are too devil-may-care, and a gray flannel suit too conservative.

Science. But surely we have drugs that can help relieve stressful symptoms.

Noitall. That of course is part of the conspiracy. We have better and better medicines in absolutely safe bottles that can't be opened. A worker in Michigan was arrested for bringing blasting caps to the office to open an aspirin bottle, but was acquitted when the jury found there was no other method.

Science. Are these anxieties directly related to job performance?

Noitall. The work itself has to be squeezed into a 35-hour week interrupted by coffee breaks, power lunches, and phone calls from relatives. Ambitious executives are under social pressure to jog 10 miles before work and to stay awake during interminable office safety meetings. Cigarette smoke alarms and bottled drinking water alerts are incessant.

Science. How does the stress in other countries compare to that here?

Noitall. All our objective stress indicators, such as the low number of psychiatrists per capita, indicate that people in other countries are more relaxed. We have found one country without ozone, asbestos, health insurance problems, power lunches, or complaints to OSHA, and we have sent stress experts to learn why they don't have U.S. anxieties.

Science. Could I ask the identity of this country?

Noitall. Of course. Bangladesh.

—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.