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Why all this stress data will be the death of us

By **DAN ZAK**

On a car-clogged avenue that runs toward Washington, D.C., lair of legislative frustration, in a building wallpapered with headlines such as "Fire displaces families" and "Divorce turns deadly" and "Guantanamo forever," in front of a giant backdrop that reads "Stress in America: Our Health at Risk," the American Psychological Association reminded America that America is stressed.

Or, rather, that 22 percent of 1,226 U.S. residents reported extreme stress when cold-called by a market research firm in the summer. Moderate stress has eroded microscopically since last year's survey (from 5.4 to 5.2 on a 10-point scale), although Americans are reporting that their stress has increased over time, and who's got a cigarette?

OK. Take a deep breath.

A panel of experts was on hand at the Newseum last week to regurgitate and extrapolate the findings of the APA's annual Stress in America report and to divine some cogent takeaways from the data.

Takeaway 1: Life involves money, work and relationships.

Takeaway 2: Money, work and relationships cause stress.

Takeaway 3: Stress causes chronic illness.

Takeaway 4: Chronic illness causes death.

Therefore, one might conclude, life causes death. Evidence supporting this theory is perhaps more efficiently obtained by glancing over your newspaper's obituaries than by hiring a market research firm to interrupt tense family dinners to inquire about levels of anxiety. But back to our serene panel.

"You have to have an understanding that stress is killing you before you can" do anything about it, said Katherine C. Nordal, executive director for professional practice at the APA.

Stress has been shown to cause brain shrinkage, said Norman B. Anderson, chief executive of the APA.

Stress can be a good thing — a motivator, a survival mechanism — until it reaches levels at which the body can't cope with haywire hormones, whipsawing enzymes and misfiring neurotransmitters. Then stress becomes a health problem. Then it becomes high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, depression, cardiac arrest, insomnia, death, death, death.

Stress is one of those things that Americans will always read and talk about — the others being commute times and Angelina Jolie — but not necessarily mitigate. The APA survey found that only 29 percent of adults believe they are doing a good job managing or reducing stress.

Take another deep breath.

In the 1930s, Viennese endocrinologist Hans Selye defined stress as we know it today, according to the American Institute of Stress, and began his pioneering studies by injecting ovarian extracts into lab rats, whose over-stimulated adrenal glands caused the deterioration of the thymus glands, resulting in ulcers and — wait for it — death. He used these experiments to determine that an overstressed hormonal system could result in conditions such as heart disease or high blood pressure.

A June 1983 issue of Time magazine called stress "the epidemic of the '80s." (The cure was not "Chicken Soup for the Soul.")

In 2012, at least one book exploring the study or management of stress will be published every week, according to Amazon listings.

Back to the Newseum. Proclaiming that stress is a national health crisis that's killing us — isn't that a stress-inducing tactic?

Well, yeah, said Suzanne Bennett Johnson, president of APA. "The problem is so profound that we need to wake people up to this," Johnson said. "Some stress is good if it motivates people to say, 'I need to do something.' "

In other words, it's time to stress about stress before stress stresses us out.