

# Stress

## Don't let it be your personal paralyzer



**WORRYING WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT** in this column is usually not a concern. There are so many interesting facets of modern health care and the people who deliver and receive it that finding a topic is normally easy. But defining this column was proving stressful. I just couldn't come to grips with it. A bit of reflection reminded me that at the time it was due, I was facing commitments of a personal nature that arose out of nowhere and required significant time and energy: financial obligations and family issues. Wondering what would cause someone who can usually comfortably handle a number of work-related commitments at the same time to feel stressed now, I realized that it was the addition of the personal problems.

As all of this was going on, I was also working on an article on headaches; many sources identified stress as a major trigger for these. And it's not just headaches. Stress, especially chronic stress, can be harmful to many aspects of mental and physical health. For that groundbreaking insight, you can thank a Canadian. It was Dr. Hans Selye, a world-renowned endocrinologist working in Montreal for 50 years, who is credited with discovering the stress syndrome and

its impact on the human body. Selye died in 1982, and his name is not well known outside of the field he helped to pioneer, but during his lifetime, he headed a research institute with dozens of assistants and was mentioned as a potential Nobel Prize candidate for identifying the biological impact of various stressors.

In a paper published after his death, the pioneering Selye explained the concept: "When I wrote the first paper on the stress syndrome in 1936, I tried to demonstrate that stress is not a vague concept, somehow related to the decline in the influence of traditional codes of behaviour, dissatisfaction with the world or the rising cost of living, but rather that it is clearly a definable biological and medical phenomenon whose mechanisms can be objectively identified and with which we can cope much better once we know how to handle it."

In addition to being a respected scientist and physician, Selye also became a popular lecturer and author on stress and ways to better understand and cope with it. Among his popular works is *Stress Without Distress* (1974). One of his many insights is that stress can be a positive force — as when you're competing in sports, performing onstage or

getting ready for your wedding. Another of his perceptions is that every individual must learn to assess how much stress he or she can personally handle.

Selye had these words of advice: "Find your own stress level — the speed at which you can run toward your own goal. Make sure that both the stress level and the goal are really your own, and not imposed upon you by society, for only you, yourself, can know what you want and how fast you can accomplish it. There is no point in forcing a turtle to run like a racehorse or in preventing a racehorse from running faster than a turtle because of some moral obligation." In other words, you may be by nature a turtle or a racehorse, but don't let society force you to be a racing turtle or a schlepping racehorse! And, I would add, figuring out exactly why you feel stressed is the first constructive step in dealing with it.

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**PAT RICH** has been a medical writer and editor for almost 30 years. He currently works for the Canadian Medical Association. In addition to being executive editor of *Canadian Health*, Pat has written for both health-care consumers and physicians in several other national magazines. He has also spent some time in waiting rooms as a patient.