

STOP STRESSING ABOUT STRESS

BY GARY KUEHN & DR. IAN SNAPE

IN ORDER TO MITIGATE RISK

ABSTRACT

A skier riding in trees needs to focus on the gaps while peripherally watching or listening for others. If they focus on the trees then they hit the trees. Similarly a focus on the negative effects of stress (distress) can induce a nocebo effect, creating more distress. This has two implications for risk: distress inhibits high-quality decision-making, and distress is a risk in itself for the health of avalanche professionals.

By focusing on creating and maintaining resilience, we can eliminate the nocebo effect, minimize distress, and improve both risk-based decision making and the wellbeing of avalanche professionals.

As avalanche professionals, our association with risk is personal. Our decision-making often occurs under pressure, is highly consequential, and most of us have direct experience of loss or trauma. Compared with the general population, the likelihood and consequences of risks are high. As Kristensen & Genswein point out in their 2012 ISSW paper, *Perception of Risk in Avalanche Terrain*, over a professional mountain guide's 40-year career the chance of dying in an avalanche is 1:20, or higher if operating at increased hazard levels in consequential terrain.¹ Eric Haskell & Darcy Solanyk in TAR 40.1 acknowledge that "Professional guides, rescuers, and avalanche forecasters are a unique subset... Their increased exposure to the mountain environment and other party's accidents increase their chances of experiencing physical and psychological trauma."²

In such a high risk profession, that role of stress (distress) is clearly critical for risk-based decision-making and as a response to workplace risk factors. However, there are three problems with the term 'stress':

1. Stress means different things to different people. For many, stress is a positive state of anticipation or action—this is commonly referred to as **eustress**. It is common to hear that people need a bit of stress to perform well. While for others, stress is more like the bad type (distress). And of course people can experience both and a wide variety of other states not called stress, as they respond to context in either well adapted or maladapted ways.
2. Stress is entirely created internally. As a term, stress is often used to describe an environment as a cause, or an effect (like a mechanism). Whether eustress or distress, both states are entirely our chosen response to the external environment.



Experts miss what they are not looking for. In this case, the avalanche gorilla is focussed on the trees and stress is a consequence. ■ TIM ULEWICZ AT FRONTLINE MIND

Whilst there is a strong correlation between workplace risk factors or adverse life events and stress, this relationship is not causative.³ Workplace risk factors for stress, burnout, and trauma for avalanche professionals include time pressure, consequential decisions, and death or trauma from friends, colleagues, and family.

3. By focusing on stress (implied to be of the distress kind), we predispose ourselves and others to create those sorts of states through the nocebo effect. Quite literally, stressing about stress creates stress! Excessive internal distress changes the ways our brains function and this is identifiable with neuroimaging and biomarkers. We can also sense the changes ourselves: as increase in blood pressure and heart rate, sweating, inflammation, and speed while decreasing digestion and prefrontal cortex activity (where reasoning and critical thinking are mediated). In turn, that impedes effective decision-making. If we practice distress for a prolonged period, we will become prone to a range of illnesses, especially heart disease and early death.^{4,5}

At the 2021 American Mountain Guides annual meeting, Jayson Simons-Jones compared [dis] stress to two scenarios: one being a "rapid loading event... you get 2" SWE overnight and everything falls down no matter how strong the structure is underneath and it's kinda predictable," in the other, "there is incremental loading... 2, 4, 6 inches of snow and maybe a bit of wind and you have the same end result where there can be a catastrophic avalanche."⁶

Expressing stress, burnout, or trauma in terms of snow accumulation events is useful to a point—both single catastrophic events and multiple significant or cumulative events represent different workplace risk factors; however, that's where the comparison stops.

Unlike snow, that passively responds to the environment and our interactions, humans have agency. Snowpack doesn't learn from past events and cannot choose to anneal and become stable, whereas humans can learn and exercise choice. There is no doubt that some people respond with distress when their otherwise resilient state fails to cope, hence the correlation between workplace risk factors and internal distress. Such distress can occur in response to a single

catastrophic event (the one rapid load event), or from many gradual experiences (like incremental snow loading).

“Historically, resilience has been defined as a trait which is a constellation of personal qualities that protects individuals. These protective factors help individuals to withstand the pressure of the environments they are operating in.”

In much the same way that we want a snowpack that is resilient, especially to human interactions, “Incremental loading” allows more time for adjustment, healing, and metamorphosis of both the snowpack AND us! A better snowpack structure is more resilient to any loading in the same way that a resilient person’s robust base improves their adaptation after external pressures. Persistent weak layers of snow, by definition, take longer to become dormant, and may not be totally safe until flowing in the river.

So rather than focusing on or inducing states of stress, is it better to focus on developing resilience. Perhaps we have personal persistent weak layers? If so, one option is to choose safer terrain (with less exposure to workplace risk factors) until we develop resilience (where we can ‘anneal’ like snow).

For dealing with the prospect of a heavy loading event or seemingly unending storm, we will manage better if we have built an established support network into our structure.

SUMMARY

Stress is an internally created response. It does not adequately describe the environment or the interaction between the environment and our response. An external event that is stressful for one person may be neutral or even beneficial for another. Most importantly, stressing about stress will induce stress through the nocebo effect—instead focus on resilience and what is needed to thrive in the operating context.

Resilience is about having the choice of how to respond to challenges, and potentially having that good stress if it is useful to you. You can prepare yourself for some of life’s demands, whether these are many small challenging events or one large challenge.

There will always be change. In seasons with a chronic persistent weak layer problem(s) we can plan for the reawakening of these layers in the spring, and possibly look forward to their transition into the river. Maintaining resilience might be planning for change. It could be a change in focus or an entirely separate career path.

RESILIENCE IS ABOUT HAVING THE CHOICE OF HOW TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES, AND POTENTIALLY HAVING THAT GOOD STRESS IF IT IS USEFUL TO YOU. YOU CAN PREPARE YOURSELF FOR SOME OF LIFE’S DEMANDS, WHETHER THESE ARE MANY SMALL CHALLENGING EVENTS OR ONE LARGE CHALLENGE.

Just as we mitigate avalanche risk by awareness, education, developing safe habits, and rescue training, we can mitigate the risk of stress, burn-out and trauma by developing resilient habits, and establishing support and recovery systems. And always remembering that it’s ok not to go out when the danger rating/workplace has reached ‘extreme’ hazard. ●

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