

Welfare:

On the edge of a black hole

It was quite simply the single most terrifying moment of my life. It was a Wednesday in August almost three years ago. I had finished my morning list and was walking back to the operating theatres after lunch. I stopped - I could neither go forwards or backwards - it was as if I was frozen to the spot. Suddenly, I realised that I could not carry on and do the list. I didn't know at that moment why I could not carry on; all I knew was that I could not. I seemed to stand there for minutes completely immobile. It was as if I were standing at the edge of an infinitely dark and deep abyss that lay right before me - a sort of black hole that would swallow me up if I lost my balance - and my legs were shaking more and more as I imagined the consequences of falling into the black hole. Eventually, I turned and managed to walk to the car park, get in my car and drive home. As I got back to the house, it felt as if my head was going to explode, I felt utterly exhausted and I was terrified that my illness - or whatever it was - would end my career and harm my family. If I could not work, what was the point of carrying on? I felt thoroughly wretched and totally confused. Two days later, I was to go on holiday for three weeks, so I 'phoned the department and told them that I was sick and would not return until after my holiday. For the next week, I tried to work out what was happening to me - perhaps I really was ill. I thought back to what had happened in the few days before my encounter with the black hole. The week before had been tough - it was August and those of us not on holiday had been working hard to cover all the lists. I had been on call during the week and had

a bad night - not only because it was busy but also because we lost a young patient on the operating table. It was no one's fault but we all felt pretty bad about it. Then I was on call for the weekend, which was busy, but not unusually so. Monday was a day of compensatory rest after being on call, so I went to play a round of golf. I recall driving up to the golf club not feeling quite right and thinking rather angrily that I shouldn't have to do on-call at my advanced age! I expected that a day's golf would "blow away the cobwebs", and after a good night's sleep I would be fit for work the next day. I worked on the Tuesday but felt unwell, with a headache, some 'flu-like symptoms and also feeling generally "strange" - I couldn't really explain it. I didn't feel right the next morning, the Wednesday, but I felt okay to do my list - or so I thought. That was the day I arrived at the edge of my own personal black hole. What was happening to me?

It slowly dawned on me that what I was going through was a manifestation of some sort of stress that had been building within me for some months and even years, and had been brought to a head by the emotional challenge of the death of a young patient and by the tiredness of a couple of busy weeks. The previous couple of years had not indeed been easy. My clinical work had been busy, and I was fulfilling a challenging and stressful management role in my hospital. At the same time, I was an elected member of the AAGBI's Council and was travelling to London on a regular basis for meetings. In addition to this, I was the President of ESRA GB & I, and its representative on the main pan-European

Board of ESRA, which at the time was going through a political maelstrom. As the person charged with the responsibility of rewriting the society's constitution, I was in the very middle of this storm, and had been the subject of some very typical mainland European wrangling and politicking. I had not had a terribly easy time but I was blithely ignorant of what my lifestyle was doing to me right up to the moment that the black hole opened up in front of me. Stress - isn't that what happens to other people - the weak, disorganised or inadequate? Surely, stress doesn't affect people like me, I thought. How wrong I was.

Stress-related illness is an increasingly common occurrence. It has a significant impact on the individual, on their place of work and on the organisation that employs them. It is estimated that about 1 : 6 workers is affected. Most doctors are aware of this but few think it could happen to them, me included! This is most certainly not the case. In fact, doctors are more likely to be affected than almost any other group of professionals. There seems to be a spectrum, ranging from a minor event to a full-blown illness requiring significant time off work, but nearly always needing some form of lifestyle change on the part of the individual concerned in order to make progress. Stress is common and does happen to people like me - and you.

Stress is part of everyday life, and low levels of stress are actually good for performance. However, the physical and psychological signs of excessive stress need to be recognised, and if appropriate

steps are taken early in the process, the situation can be remedied without the individual concerned suffering significantly or needing to take time off work. However, the signs of stress should act as a wakeup call for that person and should cause them to make some lifestyle changes, either at home or, more likely, at work. This is where correct management of stress in the workplace is important. If the situation is handled badly or just ignored, the affected individual will be driven towards a crisis and will cease to be a useful employee, requiring considerable time off work. Good employers go to great lengths to help and prevent stress-related illness. This is done not just on humanitarian grounds but also for hard economic reasons.

The key management strategy is for the person affected to recognise what is happening to them, admit it to themselves and seek help. They may approach sympathetic colleagues first, but most hospitals have excellent occupational health services that are also a good starting point for seeking help. Often, some time off work will be required and both psychiatric treatment and psychotherapy may be sought. In the very acute phase, pharmacological treatment may be needed, particularly with acute anxiety states and depression. However, when these symptoms improve, psychotherapy may be very helpful. Its aim is to provide insight into the causes of the stress and how to minimise them. In order to drive a successful recovery from this illness and to prevent future relapses, some form of change to the person's lifestyle is required, whether this is at work, at home or both.

So what happened to me? With the support of my wife, I spent the holiday thinking through the things that were causing me stress and working out how I might be able to decrease the pressures on me. Although I was concerned that continuing to do on call would be a source of significant stress, I eventually realised that my worry about the pressures of being on call was more a symptom of my overall stress than a cause of it. Perhaps the turning point in my case was a series of long chats with a colleague who had been through something very similar a few years before. He had admitted

to himself that he was stressed, had sought and received professional help, had made some changes to his life and had returned to full health. This gave me a real boost. As it happens, my terms of office at my hospital, the AAGBI and ESRA were all coming to an end, so I promised myself that I would not replace them with equally demanding positions and I was able to build more relaxation into my life.

So, there you have it. Stress is common. It happens to people like you and me. It is not the end of the world and it doesn't mean the end of your career. People will not think any less of you if you admit to being stressed and seek help for it. You could almost say that the sort of people who are good anaesthetists are the sort of people who are particularly vulnerable to stress – hard-working people who try their best to treat patients well and who sometimes take life just a little too seriously.

I will finish with a well-known story that I think sets life into its proper context:

When things in your life seem almost too much to handle, when there seem to be not enough hours in the day, remember the mayonnaise jar, the golf balls and the two beers:

A professor stood before his philosophy class with some items in front of him.

When the class began, he wordlessly picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with golf balls.

He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them in the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles rolled into the open areas between the golf balls. He then asked the students again if the jar was full.

They agreed it was.

The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else.

He asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous "yes".

The professor then produced two beers

from under the table and poured the entire contents into the jar, effectively filling the empty space between the sand. The students laughed. "Now", said the professor as the laughter subsided, "I want you to recognise that this jar represents your life.

The golf balls are the important things: your family, your children, your health, your friends and your favourite passions... and if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full.

The pebbles are the other things that matter like your job, your house, your car.

The sand is everything else... the small stuff".

"If you put the sand in the jar first," he continued, "there is no room for the pebbles and the golf balls. The same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff you will never have room for the things that are important to you.

Pay attention to the things that are critical to your happiness.

Spend time with your children.

Spend time with your parents.

Visit your grandparents.

Take time to get medical checkups.

Take your spouse out to dinner.

Play another 18 holes.

Take care of the golf balls first - the things that really matter.

Set your priorities.

The rest is just sand".

One of the students raised her hand and asked what the beer represented.

The professor smiled and said: "I am glad you asked.

The beer just shows you that no matter how full your life may seem, there's always room for a couple of beers with a friend."

**Dr Nick Denny,
Consultant Anaesthetist, Kings Lynn**

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