

CYNICISM IS BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH.

By

William Reville, University College, Cork.

It is well established that people with Type A personalities have a higher probability of suffering heart attacks than people with Type B personalities. The Type A personality displays a range of characteristics that generally produce stress, and research in the 1980s showed that, of all of these characteristics, cynicism is the most toxic. It follows therefore that being sensibly trusting of each other not only makes for a more contented and happier life, but is also good for our health. Generally, stress is a causative factor in a majority of illnesses and it is therefore important to know how to minimise it.

The fact that the mind can affect the body has been known since ancient times. However the psychosomatic dimensions of disease have been neglected by modern medicine. The history of modern medicine has been dominated by the 'one disease one germ' doctrine, i.e. every disease is caused by a single physical factor. This approach was very productive in many instances and resulted in the conquest of the major infectious diseases, e.g. pneumonia. However, it is obviously not a very fruitful doctrine with which to confront diseases of multifactorial causation, and it is of little or no use for dealing with mind-body interactions in disease. As a consequence medicine has made very slow progress in dealing with the two major killer diseases of modern civilisation - cancer and heart disease - both of multifactorial causation and, at least in the case of heart disease, having a pronounced psychosomatic dimension.

In 1959 two American cardiologists, Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, defined the 'Type A' personality. The classic Type A personality exhibits three main characteristics: (a) he/she is highly competitive and ambitious, (b) he/she speaks rapidly and interrupts others frequently, (c) he/she is cynical and is seized by hostility and anger with uncommon frequency. In short, he/she is constitutionally unable to sit back and relax. People who do not exhibit these pronounced personality characteristics are classed as Type B personalities.

Soon afterwards large-scale survey studies showed that Type A personalities were much more likely to develop heart disease than Type B personalities. The question now was - do each of the three characteristics of the Type A personality contribute equally to predisposing the individual to heart disease, or is the effect mainly due to one or two of these characteristics? Further survey studies showed that the main toxic element in the Type A personality resides in the area of hostility. Careful analysis of this area more precisely defines it as cynicism, i.e. a contemptuous distrust of human nature and motives. Oscar Wilde, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, defined the cynic as - 'A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing'. Another quote, attributed to H.L. Mencken, defines the cynic as - 'A man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin'.

How can a mental attitude lead to the development of atherosclerosis? Atherosclerosis is a disease characterised by the laying down of fatty deposits on the inner walls of arteries, thereby constricting them and, if the condition progresses, eventually leading to a heart attack. A cynical person, mistrustful of the world, is constantly on his/her guard, or, in other words, is constantly in a state of arousal. Such a person will naturally secrete a higher level of certain hormones into the blood than will a person who mostly spends his time in a less aroused state. These hormones, principally adrenalin, cortisol and testosterone exert a constant wear and tear effect on body organs and mobilise fat into the blood from fat depots. A person who tends to over-secrete these

hormones will regularly establish blood fat levels that favour the laying down of fatty deposits in the arteries.

I don't know to what extent the development of cynicism in a person is determined by hereditary factors. However, it seems very likely that cynicism must also be, to some extent at least, a learned attitude. Parents and teachers can therefore help children to grow into happier and healthier adults by teaching them to adopt sensible trusting attitudes towards the world.

Unfortunately the ill-effects of the stressful life-style of the Type A personality are not confined to heart disease. It is reckoned that stress is a contributory causative factor in about seventy per cent of all illnesses. In addition to heart disease, these illnesses include disorders of the gastrointestinal tract (e.g. ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome), asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, eczema, acne, psoriasis, alopecia areata, and various mental disorders.

A particularly unfortunate development in recent decades has been the increase in levels of stress experienced by students in all 3 levels of education. There are two components contributing to this increase - one is under our own control and is probably the major factor, the other is intrinsic to the system and is, to a large extent, beyond our control.

Our educational and social systems have intrinsic characteristics that produce more stress for students now than in the past. Lack of good immediate employment prospects for 18-20 year olds and technological changes in the workplace have combined to devalue the worth of the Leaving Certificate as a passport to a job. The main value of the Leaving Certificate nowadays is as an entry ticket to Third Level education. And of course the 'quality' of the seat in University to which your ticket will admit you is determined by the number of points you achieve in your Leaving Certificate.

Our educational system is competitive and is inherently stressful. This has always been so. There is little we can do in the short term about much of the endemic stress in education and it is unwise to dwell much on the matter. Mark Twain had some good advice in this regard - 'If you have to swallow a frog, don't look at it too long'.

The factors I described previously have increased pressures on young people in recent times, but not to the extent that is commonly claimed. A bigger contributor to increased stress, in my opinion, is the compulsion felt by so many, particularly the media, to focus unrelentingly on the 'race' for points. Senior cycle secondary education has been made miserable for so many teenagers and their parents by this pounding emphasis on the 'points race'. The pressure prevents so many (perhaps most) children from choosing careers they naturally like and forces them to pick the 'best' career they can 'win'. And, of course the most desirable careers are a handful of professions perceived to be the best paid. People forget that a person will automatically make a success, in every sense, of work he/she likes.

Stress is an enemy of health and happiness. We should all consciously strive to manage stress in our lives. A very good book which outlines a sensible blueprint for students that will enable them to negotiate a happy and productive path through second and third level education is *The Student: A guide to Success in Second and Third Level Education*, by Drs. Mary Dineen and Breda McLeavey (Folens, 1992). Jesus Christ also gave us very good general advice a long time ago - 'Can any of you live a minute longer, by worrying about it? If you can't manage even such a small thing, why worry about the other things?'

(This article first appeared in The Irish Times, July 29, 1998.)