

# A LAYMAN'S VIEW OF STRESS

By Monroe S. Miller

Most people unfamiliar with our business are surprised to learn that we work in what **can** be stressful conditions and situations. Golf courses appear to be calm, peaceful, and beautiful corners of the world, and it taxes a Superintendent's credibility when he talks of the stress and pressure and worry he has to deal with during the summer months. Most do not realize and cannot relate to the problems inflicted by the weather, disease pressure and cultural problems. They are unfamiliar with the demands of the game and the players and how they can be contrary to sound agronomics. Few recognize how closely economic limitations impact on the product we turn out and the frustration of wanting and needing to do more and not being able to, because of money. Hard work and long hours too often are not noticed. And so on, ad infinitum. But regardless of others' impressions, the fact remains that we do work in difficult situations and that stress can and has taken its toll among our colleagues.

I guess my interest in stress has been obvious. The GRASSROOTS has treated the subject a couple of different times in past issues. A two part article appears in this and in the next issue. And it's a condition that, quite frankly, I've learned to deal with in the golf course setting.

I saw stress in our rural community at a young age. Farmers are subject to some of the same uncontrollable situations we are — weather, insects, diseases, etc. Beyond that they confront interest rates, land costs, declining prices and sometimes worse. In fact, haven't you heard the old farm saying that, in reality, defines modern day stress — "I am in over five buckles deep and I don't own any six bucklers; and I have the sinking feeling I'm going to lose more than my boots!" I've felt myself and seen in other students the stress of college — life at a large University can be very trying as one struggles with classes, grades and competition.

But one never sees or feels stress like that which exists in military action. Many of the violations I saw as a Military Policeman on an Army base 20 miles north of Saigon were the result of stress — combat stress. Normally solid young men found themselves in varying degrees of trouble, too often as a result of the mental stress of war. I think of that frequently when fretting over some problem. It provides a reference point that quickly puts my small problems in proper perspective.

I do not profess any expertise in dealing with this problem. I'm merely sharing with you some things that have worked for me in handling the stress found in our profession. Pieces with medical and psychological advice will be left to people with proper credentials. But I hope there is some appeal to and interest in a layman's success with anything, even something as complicated as stress.

Medical science is finally zeroing in on how stress can make one physically ill. It has been

known for years that a wave of deaths follows a recession by three years. A second one comes in five to seven years. These are explained by the fact that heart disease takes a few years to catch up with you. Kidney failure deaths also lag. Death by stroke follows a recession by two to four years. Prime risk factors like high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels follow stressful conditions. And, when humans can least afford to, they turn to booze and tobacco and the concomitant risks they bring start to show up. Prolonged mental stress leads to more suicides, more traffic accidents and even high infant mortality.

And even though the evidence is still circumstantial, there is a belief building among some medical researchers that stress can weaken the body's immune system, which protects us from disease. Stress hormones may be involved. Although the whole complicated system is still in early stages of study, it is a fact that stress can induce physical ailments and disease. Beyond statistics and beyond medical research, that mind affects body is pretty well accepted by people in our age. I love Woody Allen's line in his movie of a couple of years ago — **Manhattan**: "I can't express anger; I grow a tumor instead!"

Recognizing that stress exists in our profession and realizing that it has a deleterious effect on our well being requires that each of us, in his own way, manage the stress that surrounds him. The first step I learned in handling mental pressures was to accept that there are really only two things to worry about: 1) what you can change, and 2) what you can't change. If you cannot change a situation, it must be accepted and made the best of. When Madison received 12 inches of snow in mid-November and I didn't have snowmold fungicides applied to some of my fairways, I didn't get all bent out of shape. There was nothing I could do about that much snow and no amount of grumbling was going to change it. Ten years ago I'd have worked myself right into a nervous sweat, but the situation wouldn't have changed a bit. All that came from the nervousness was a stomach ache, a headache, and fatigue accompanied by some sleepless nights. The fact is that we are confronted, by Nature itself, with many situations we have no control over and cannot change. I've quit worrying about them, accept them, hope for and make the best of them. I've relieved myself of a lot of unnecessary stress.

Fortunately, we face many potentially devastating situations that we **can** change. In these instances I form a plan of attack and usually write it down as a list on a piece of paper. Then I get to it. Cases like those do a curious and constructive thing to me. I find myself more energized than overwhelmed by the stress I know I can overcome by controlling and changing the situation. It works to motivate me and that in turn motivates my employees to more serious action. Rather than fuming to excess, steps or goals on my list are crossed off. It eliminates a lot of frustration and discouragement — progress is being made. Little time is spent brooding and most time is spent executing what usually ends up a successful

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solution. Identification of stressful situations and vigorous measures changing them gives me a powerful sense of control of my own fate — this emotion overwhelms any stress.

It may seem too obvious to mention, but it is essential in composing a list with a plan of attack, to arrange tasks to be done in some order of **priority**. There is no sense in changing ballwasher water and soap when the golf course needs every available man for hand watering. I love the story that former Minnesota Viking defensive end Carl Eller told about Coach Bud Grant. Eller recalled buying his first pair of lavish, custom-made boots. He was proud of those boots, and when he noticed Grant staring at them on the team bus, he began to recite the whole story of how he'd bought them. "I went into how I picked the boot maker, all the different grades of leather you look at, and why I had decided to get multi-colored boots — because I only had one pair like this and I wanted to be able to wear them with a lot of different outfits," Eller remembers. After Eller finished his elaborate explanation, Grant looked at him out of his ice-blue eyes and asked, "Are they any good in the snow?" That is keeping your priorities straight and I am willing to bet Bud Grant feels little stress in his life because he's able to put first things first!

Another suggestion with a well established positive effect is to, in some way, share your frustration or trouble over a situation. I do, and it works. It may be talking a golf course problem through with a key employee. It may be sharing a personnel problem with my wife. Occasionally I take Mark Twain's suggestion: "When angry, count to four; when very angry, swear!" The point is to get whatever is bothering me out of my system; when I do, the stress seems to go with it. Along these same lines comes something I noticed helpful over the years. I work hard to maintain a comfortable and smooth-running work situation on the golf course. I like to keep all of us on the golf course staff geared up and working toward a well-defined objective. This leads to a less stressful work environment for all of us.

Everyone knows what is expected and surprises are not a part of their work life. I am not implying an easy or a soft or a laid back environment, where anything goes and everything is OK. Make no mistake — I have full rein. But there is nothing wrong with an attitude where all understand what is expected.

Age and experience on the job just naturally help perspective and in turn reduce the stress of that job. But also with age comes a better grasp of reality and a decreasing tendency to let job stress get you down. This isn't always true, but it has been for me. Also, with experience comes more clear action plans. It is true that with more experience comes fewer panic situations. I am better able to foresee and head off problems, and this reduces stresses.

Another trick I've learned to reduce stress is to participate in some **physical** opportunity. I don't jog or play racketball or any other vogue activity. I find by working **physically**, on the golf course, maybe with shovel in hand or on a machine, stress leaves me. Sometimes I'll walk to a golf course

destination, rather than driving a vehicle. Frequently I go for early morning walks. Lots of different things work — paramount is the physical nature of the activity. A good sweat doesn't hurt. I've thought that maybe part of the reason physical activities help is that they are very relaxing in nature.

I am asked a hundred times each season if I play golf. My reply is no, much to nearly everyone's surprise. This has less to do with my lack of skill and more to do with a need to get away from the work place and do something — **anything** — **unrelated** to golf courses. Very few other people recreate where they work and I cannot see any reason for me to do that. Pleasurable and enjoyable activity away from my golf course certainly helps in reducing stress.

The frustrating thing about stress is that there is no single, guaranteed method for control. But the few thoughts in the preceding paragraphs have worked for me. The stress management I have learned really works; my hope in sharing is that they might work for you, too.

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