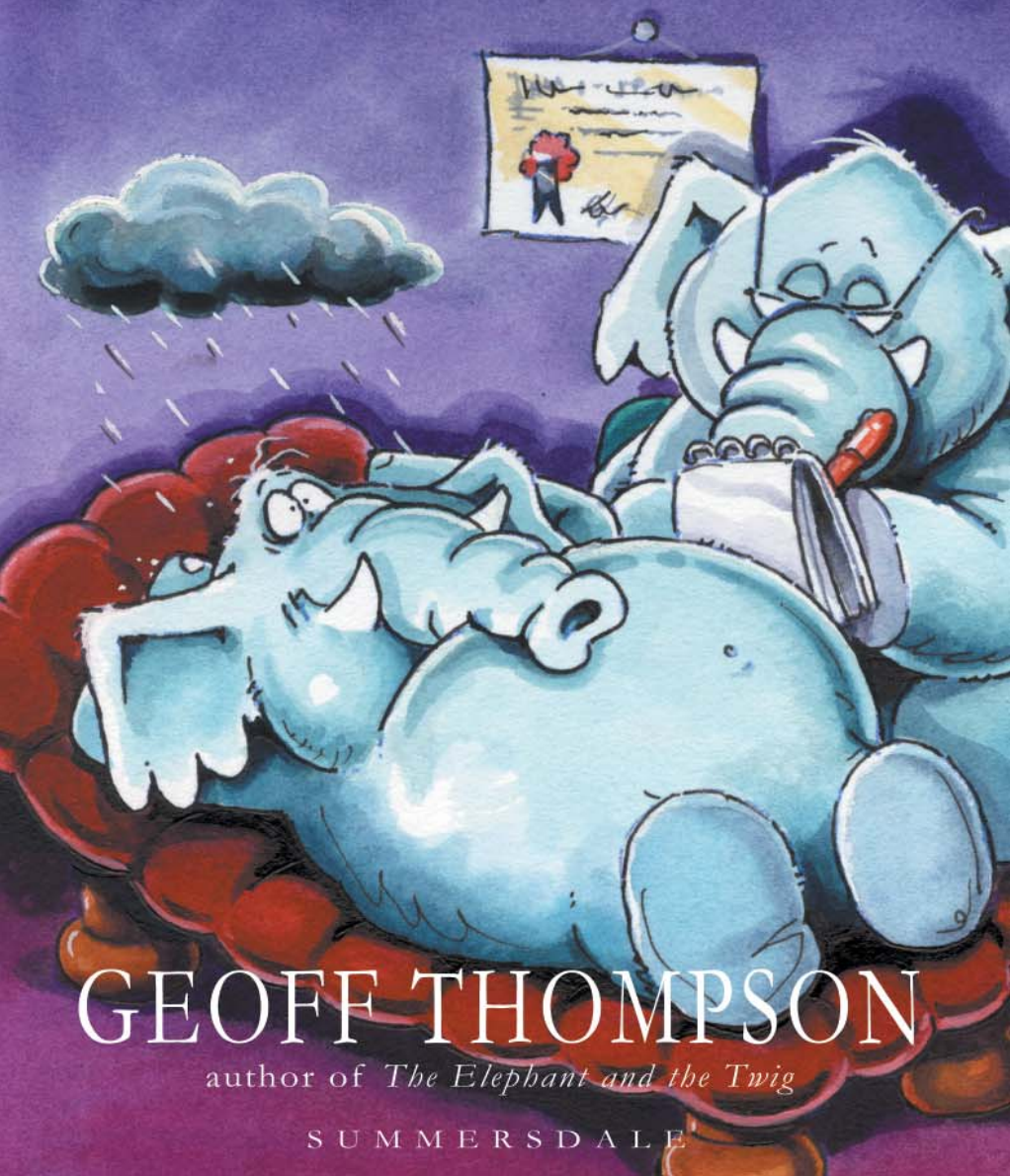


A BOOK FOR THE SERIOUSLY STRESSED

How To Stop Stress From Killing You



GEOFF THOMPSON

author of *The Elephant and the Twig*

SUMMERSDALE

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He has published several articles for *GQ* magazine, and has also been featured in *FHM*, *Maxim*, *Arena*, *Front* and *Loaded* magazines, and has appeared many times on mainstream television.

Geoff is currently a contributing editor for *Men's Fitness* magazine.

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The Elephant and the Twig – *The Art of Positive Thinking. 14 Golden Rules to Success and Happiness*

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Thank you very much to Rachael Osborne for her patience and guidance in editing this book. Thank you to Kerry Thompson for the 1st edit.

Dedicated to the memory of my lovely friend James Gillies who died in 1998 after a long and brave battle with cancer. You remain a great inspiration to me James, I love you. God bless.

A little boy can be paralysed with fear
when he is told there is a bogie man under
his bed who is going to take him away. When
his father turns on the light and shows him
there is no bogie man, he is freed from
fear. The fear in the mind of the boy was as
real as if there was a bogie man there. He was
healed of a false thought in his mind.
The thing he feared did not exist.
Likewise, most of your fears have no reality.
They are merely a conglomeration of sinister
shadows, and shadows have no reality.

Dr Joseph Murphy
The Power of Your Subconscious Mind

LET'S TURN ON THE LIGHTS!

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Introduction

Welcome to *A Book For the Seriously Stressed* (so called because people kept asking me, 'So what's the new book about then Geoff?' and I kept replying, 'It's a book for the seriously stressed'). My sole intention with this book is to offer solace to those of you out there who may be suffering the consequences of fear and stress. It is not a motivational book – though it does motivate in places – neither is it meant to be. Rather it is a book for the seriously stressed. I hope to offer solace in big chunks by explaining the mechanics of fear and why the feeling of wanting to run away from confrontational moments in life is both expected and natural. We all feel fear; it's how we deal with it that determines where our lives might lead. My intention is to put a name to some of the problems our species face, because to name something gives us a certain amount of power over it.

Most people misread, and therefore mismanage, fear. Subsequently, they live a metaphoric prison existence in a comfort cell under the wardenship of ignorance and surrounded by bars of fear.

Man was not fashioned to kill man and yet we are living in a world where war, our greatest expression of violence, is not only frequent but also seen as normal. Recent surveys carried out on human warfare have demonstrated not only man's antipathy toward self-destruction but also his predilection to run from conflict as opposed to standing and fighting.

It is evident that when our survival is threatened or we feel that it is, our impulse to turn and run is far stronger than

it is to stand and fight. So much so that if the flight option is negated, the greater majority of us would rather risk death than kill another of the same species. Either obviously or deliberately, we become conscientious objectors at the point of pulling the trigger. The survey intimated that the greater majority of soldiers fired their bullets into the ground, high into the air or they did not shoot at all.

This is what I call the Minority Rule; the minority of soldiers in major human conflicts are responsible for the majority of the killings. In the Second World War for instance, it was reported that only 15–20 per cent of combat infantry were willing to fire their rifles.¹

I'm sure we all agree that an aversion to killing and the urge to escape threat is desirable and essential to our survival, but the Minority Rule does have some major shortfalls in contemporary society. Problems start to arise when our socially under-evolved mid-brain (the part of the brain that deals with fight or flight) fails to distinguish between real threat and that which is imagined. The mid-brain perceives all threat as physical and therefore, in most confrontational situations (real or imagined), we are apt to freeze or feel the natural urge to run away. To our survival mechanism every stressor is a war, often in microcosm, but a war nevertheless. And the majority of us, when faced with conflict of any kind, are likely to become conscientious objectors at the onset of fear. What this important fact tells us is that the majority of people do not want to, and most often will not, enter into what they perceive as a threatening conflict.

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I believe our natural instinct to withdraw is stronger than any other emotion we might experience; certainly it is stronger than the willpower of the greater majority. And it is only a concrete and well-disciplined will that might allow us to override our instincts when flight is neither an answer or an option. Our ignorance in matters relating to fear is also, in my view, responsible for the majority of world conflict. If we knew more about ourselves – and therefore our fellow man – we would have less reason to fear him and more reason to love and forgive him.

This would encourage a greater propensity toward leniency and compassion in affairs that might need a change of dynamics rather than a charge of dynamite. As it is, we seem prepared to fight over just about any issue that is sponsored by ignorance and fear. We constantly fight over boundaries, whether they are ideological (personal beliefs), environmental (the environment), psychological (ego), theological (religious) or geographical (land). I'm ashamed to say that we even kill in the name of The Deity that said we should forgive not 7 times but 47 times 7.

We also have a paradox at play in this capricious era. If we listen to our oldest instincts and flee from potential danger we feel, or are often made to feel, like cowards and shunned by our peers. However, if we should find ourselves cornered and engage in a physical fight we become criminals and thugs and are incarcerated. It seems hypocrisy in our society knows no bounds.

The instinct to run as opposed to fight, as stated earlier, is deeply gene-embedded and dates back to mammalian ancestry. Our impulses in that dangerous era were sharply

honed to survival at any cost; this usually meant fleeing from wild, threatening animals that were too big or dangerous to stand up to and fight.

Unfortunately, or fortunately depending upon your viewpoint, these instincts are still with us, though they have not evolved to meet the contemporary stressor. The mid-brain cannot discern between the sabre-toothed tiger and any of its modern day equivalents; marital disputes, talking in public, business deadlines, confrontation with the boss, exams, personal challenges or traffic jams.

Running or fighting for your life is all well and good but what if that stressor is imagined, symbolic or vague and there is nothing to run away from or fight? We spend our entire lives fleeing from metaphoric tigers or fighting projectional duels on displaced battlefields. Alternatively, we might find ourselves frozen by an ill-defined stressor that dulls the aptitude with confusion, tension, anxiety, withdrawal and inactivity.

In short, many people fail to live their dreams because of fear; every stressor becomes a physical threat that our chemical and electrical messengers heed us to flee from. This equates to non-achievement and a non-productive existence. The ambiguous fear signals create a prison for our entrepreneurial selves and stop us from evolving.

The contemporary stressor cannot be fought or escaped on a physical plain. The challenge therefore must be met by other means. We need a better understanding of the unconscious workings of the human body. We must nurture the development of will. And we should employ coping mechanisms to help us avoid, escape or manage the physical,

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psychological and spiritual aspects of fear. Only then will inappropriate and antiquated instinct effectively evolve.

Over the next couple of generations we have to help our survival instincts in this quest so that we might realise our full potential as a species, grow in consciousness and metamorphose into more spiritual beings. This might sound ideological, it might even sound corny, but I believe that we can be so much more than we are right now. Life is so (potentially) exciting, there is so much that we can be, do and enjoy but we are blocked by our own fears. In many ways our greatest underlying fear is our own potential, deep down we know that we are princes but the very thought frightens us into staying paupers. We need to grow in consciousness, and therefore in spirituality, we need more knowledge and this cannot be achieved whilst our fear impedes us. By overcoming our own fears we can release and realise our greatest potential.

A friend told me about an incident that really disturbed him. He was disgusted by the actions of several 'cowardly' men in a virtual reality game he visited in London. The game involved being locked into a small room and exposed to a pretend war scenario. The men in question, with their girlfriends and wives, eagerly anticipated the fun when suddenly the doors crashed open and a group of soldiers burst in firing automatic weapons (part of the game). Three of the men ran for the door in an attack of panic. One even elbowed his girlfriend in the face to escape. Unconsciously they believed the danger to be real and centuries of instinct went into action. They fled for their lives.

I explained to my friend that these men were not cowards, neither should they be judged for or by their actions, they did nothing more than listen to natural instinct. As far as their survival mechanism was concerned they did exactly the right thing. And if you think that my friend was disgusted, imagine how badly these men must have felt about themselves. Because of self-ignorance they will probably brand *themselves* cowards and carry the subsequent guilt to their graves.

It takes great understanding, will-power and specific training to override natural instinct. If the training is aimed at overcoming intangible threats then the concept is not only sound but also imperative. If however the training is aimed at overcoming our natural disinclination to kill then the concept has serious drawbacks that need to be addressed.

In the Vietnam War American soldiers were taught, via specific desensitisation and dehumanisation techniques, to override their natural disinclination to kill, and the Minority Rule was reversed. The majority (90 per cent) of the American soldiers in Vietnam were responsible for the majority of the killings.²

The Cortisol Connection

Our ancestral instinct is badly outdated and gone crazy in a society exposed to more neurological stressors than ever before. The fight or flight instinct operates via the senses and triggers adrenalin (and other stress hormones such as cortisol) when it senses imminent danger. In theory this is fine; it prepares us for life and death battles with aggressors. In actuality it has major drawbacks because our senses are constantly being attacked by stimuli that might be aggressive

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but most often are not. Even the loud horn of a car can trigger fight or flight, releasing a cocktail of stress hormones in anticipation of an affray that never materialises.

Moving jobs, moving house, changing partners, marital conflict or stress at work may cause enough concern to fool the brain into thinking they are in fact sabre-toothed tigers. This triggers the release of adrenalin that is not used by the body because there is no fight or flight. Due to this we are left aroused and with the very corrosive effect of cortisol in our bodies.

Cortisol is very corrosive. It attacks the smooth internal muscles (heart, lungs, intestines) and has been linked with many debilitating illnesses; it has been strongly linked with Alzheimer's disease because of the part it plays in destroying brain cells. Hence our survival structure is killing us from the inside out.

Our bodies, perhaps sensing this danger, try to expel the residue or waste by displacing it, usually via a physical act; perhaps sport or our work (if the work is physical), but more often via inappropriate actions like road rage, marital disputes, temper tantrums, irrational behaviour and very often violence.

It doesn't take a degree in psychology to realise that stress hormones left in the body leave the recipient in an aroused state with displacement being the usual method of release. Usually displacement occurs unconsciously, in the home, in the car, at the pub. And the more vague stressors we engage, the more Rogue Stress Hormones we collect until arousal reaches bursting point. This eventually creates a pressure cooker effect; arousal is so high the recipient explodes in an uncontrolled manner at the slightest provocation.

The **ROGUE** Hormone



Jim was a very successful bookmaker. His job held no real physical threat, though it could be confrontational, especially if a customer hit a losing streak. Jim's main stress came from the threat of losing money; if the punters won their bets he lost money. His brain registered this trepidation as a sabretoothed tiger several times a day and he would get massive adrenalin injections into his body that found no physical release.

His release came at the end of each day; often on his girlfriend and family. Arriving home after a stressful day he'd spend his evening in procrastination, arguing with the people he loved most. Jim was one of the most violently aggressive men I have ever met. He was like a time bomb constantly waiting to go off. He never held a relationship down for very

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long because his violent outbursts became intolerable for any potential suitor.

This mild-mannered man with a shy smile would become a demon after a day of stress.

You might think that after years of failed relationships Jim might have figured it out. Unfortunately not. He assured me that his rages were the fault of his girlfriend, his mother, his father, the driver who cut him up on the road, the chap in the pub who spilled his beer. He was one of the many who never learned because he could not accept responsibility.

Jim's violent outbursts overflowed into physical abuse and he physically attacked many of the women he dated. Jim is a lovely looking man, very fit and usually very gentle but when the stress is high he strikes out with violence.

He has even taken counselling (under advisement), which is good, though privately he still insists on projecting the blame on to anyone other than himself.

I am aware of course that this man may have a bigger, more deep-seated problem that needs to be addressed, but fundamentally his problem is one of displacement and denial.

Unlike another gentleman who came to train with me at my karate school. I explained the concept of adrenal overload and displacement to the class one lesson. He got it in one. He said it was a revelation. He approached me the next week. 'I now understand' he told me, 'why I have been such a pig to my wife for the last three years!'

Apparently he'd been under a lot of stress at work and inadvertently took it home with him. He became very aggressive, irrational and snappy with his lady to the point that it was ruining their marriage. As soon as he understood

his problem he went straight home to his wife with flowers and chocolates and apologised for his mistreatment. He said the information probably saved his marriage.

When you find yourself looking for a fight with others and blaming them it creates more problems that it solves. It does get the stress out of you but, when you argue and fight, it also triggers more stress. If you displace your stress on your wife for instance, she'll understandably be upset. She might not speak to you for a few days. Certainly there will be tension in the home and in the top ten of most stressful events, marital discord rates right up there with the best of them.

Similarly, someone who displaces their stress in road rage will, potentially, create a lot more stress if the other driver argues or fights back or if there is police involvement.

Other people suppress or repress the build-up of stress rather than release it unfairly on to others, and whilst this may be magnanimous, it certainly is not healthy. It does little more than drive the stress underground, where it ferments and builds in intensity. In the long-term this is highly detrimental to health. It can promote mild to serious, even fatal, illness.

All this and more will be explored throughout this book. It is my sincere hope that you will find solace, health and personal power in this information. Don't allow fear and ignorance to stop you from loving your life.

Chapter One

Understanding the Enemy

Understanding the enemy is predominantly what this book is all about. They say that knowledge is power: in this case it certainly is.

We need, at the very least, a basic understanding of our own bodies if we are going to get through this life in one piece. Unfortunately people seem to know more about the engines in their cars than they do the internal workings of their own bodies. Most of us go through a whole lifetime without ever understanding ourselves, or others for that matter. The good thing about understanding yourself is that, once you do, you automatically have a very good understanding of others because biologically we are all made of the same stuff.

Understanding myself had a profound influence on the way I handled potentially violent situations in my capacity as a nightclub doorman. As a young bouncer I didn't know the first thing about myself. What I knew didn't extend far beyond what I saw in the shaving mirror every morning. The real me, the one hiding on the inside, was almost a complete stranger.

Before the doors – and whenever a violent situation reared its ugly head – my instinct was always to run away from confrontation. With the benefit of hindsight I understand this to be a natural and expected feeling. Without retrospect I felt like a coward. I felt completely alone, the only one in the world who felt this scared. My ignorance created a lot of self-doubt. I equated wanting to run away with weakness. As

a beginner I allowed these very strong emotions to overwhelm me and I ran away from most of life's confrontational moments. I was the running man! And each time I ran I made it harder for myself to make a stand the next time fear came calling. With a history of defeat behind me failure became my norm.

To overcome this lack I set about confronting my fears. I developed my will until it was strong enough to override the inclination to leg it every time I sensed fear. However, I still struggled with the discomfort of adrenalin and subsequently, as a fledgling doorman, I would attack my antagonists as soon as I could, usually too soon, just to get it over and done with. Customers who just wanted to vent a bit of aggression in my direction got a punch in the eye (or worse) for their troubles. I became feared very quickly, and at the time I thought this was a good thing. Now I can see how awful and also how stupid I was to think that people fearing me led to people respecting me. In a reciprocal world such as ours, fear attracts nothing but more fear and its ugly handmaiden violence. Basically, every time I felt fear I hit someone. I was the proverbial caveman, with an ugly club as my means of communication. Because of this I acquired a reputation as a hair trigger, a man who hit first and asked questions later.

As I became more familiar with adrenalin I developed a profound understanding of its mechanics. I learned how to handle anticipation for longer and longer periods. Sometimes, in the case of threats of reprisal, for months at a time.

I also realised, from talking to the other doormen, that we all feel the same, to varying degrees, some just hide it better than others. So I no longer associated the release of adrenalin