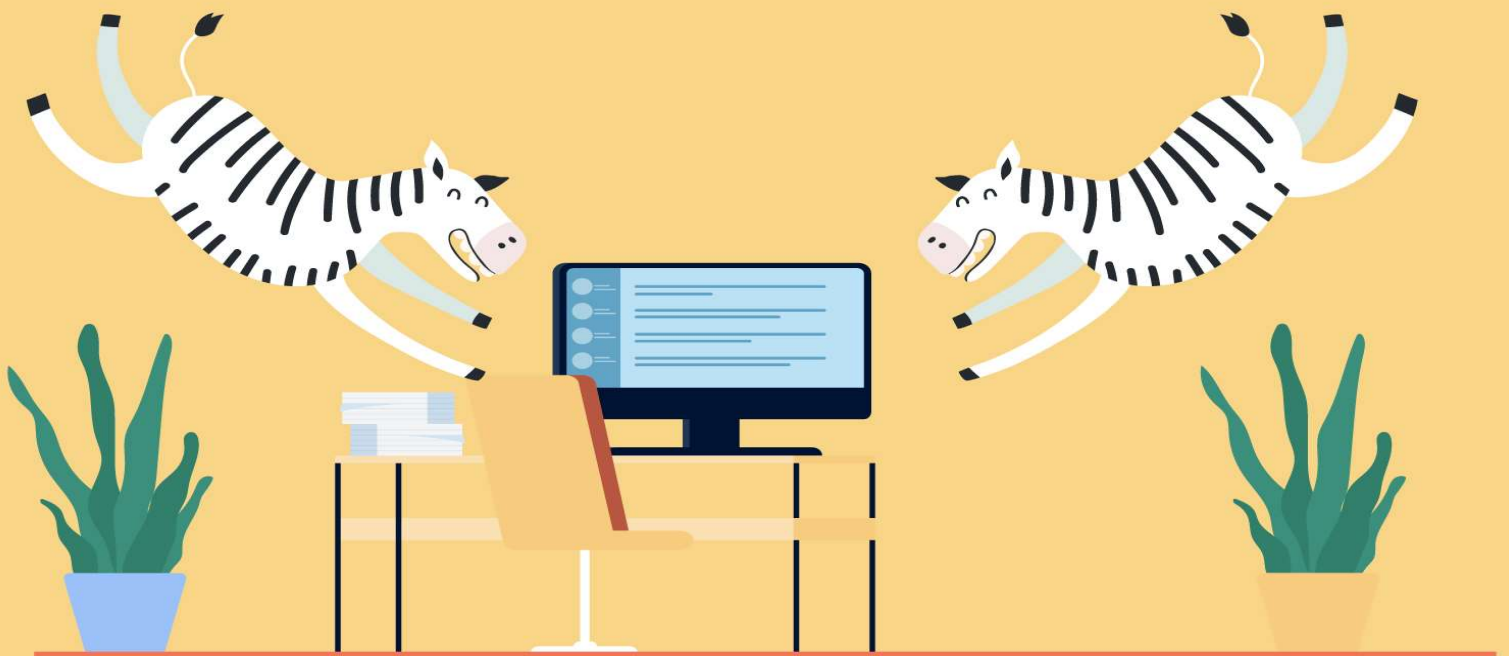


SUMMARY
BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

**WHY ZEBRAS
DON'T
GET ULCERS**
BY ROBERT M. SAPOLSKY



Summary of Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers by Robert M. Sapolsky

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Health tips from the animal kingdom that can help
you reduce stress.

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Introduction

Why don't zebras get ulcers? This sounds like the lead-up to a joke, but it's actually a real question! And, as you've probably already guessed, the answer is simple: it's because they're zebras! However, that doesn't mean that zebras are, by default, happier than everybody else. Instead, it means that because they're zebras, they aren't susceptible to the stress-related illnesses that beset human beings. Put simply, zebras don't have anxiety. They don't come home stressed after a long day at the office and they don't fall asleep worrying about the stock market. But people do. And that's why we develop stress-related illnesses like ulcers. So, what can we do to combat it? Unfortunately, the answer is not for us all to magically transform into zebras. (Although that might be a cool ability to possess!) Instead, the author believes that we must find ways to fight this human affliction. If we can't become thoughtless and devoid of anxiety, we must seek other ways to address stress. And over the course of this summary, we'll examine a few of the author's solutions for doing exactly that.



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Anxiety is the Source of Stress

If this sounds like an overly obvious statement, you're exactly right. But it's worth saying because many people believe that anxiety isn't real. Ironically, this belief is even embraced by those who have high-stress jobs! Despite facing stressful situations on a daily basis, many people continue to insist that anxiety isn't real or that it's a cry for attention manufactured by overly sensitive people. And that's why it's important to begin this chapter with a few key facts about anxiety that you might not know. For example, did you know that:

- Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting 40 million adults in the United States age 18 and older, or 18.1% of the population every year.
- Anxiety disorders are highly treatable, yet only 36.9% of those suffering receive treatment.
- People with an anxiety disorder are three to five times more likely to go to the doctor and six times more likely to be hospitalized for psychiatric disorders than those who do not suffer from anxiety disorders.
- Anxiety disorders develop from a complex set of risk factors, including genetics, brain chemistry, personality, and life events.
- Anxiety is fairly common — nearly 18% of the population has an anxiety disorder. Yet, it's often misunderstood.
- While it's an emotion meant to keep you safe, sometimes it's triggered by things that aren't threatening — and can impact you cognitively and physically.
- It's often not rational — so changing the environment that's triggering it can make a big difference.

- When it impairs your functioning, anxiety becomes a disorder. But the good news is that it's treatable.

These facts come to you from the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. And they're important because understanding anxiety can help us to identify and relieve the source of stress-related illnesses. Psychotherapist Amy Morin explains that anxiety is so common because it's a natural response to stressful stimuli. In an article that unpacks the findings of her studies on anxiety, Morin writes that, "anxiety is a normal, healthy emotion meant to warn you of danger. If you didn't experience any anxiety, you wouldn't run out of a burning building, and you wouldn't look both ways before you cross the street. But no one's anxiety alarm bell is 100% foolproof. There will be times when your mind and your body respond as if you're in a life or death situation — even though you're not in any real danger. Giving a talk in public or asking someone on a date might trigger an anxiety alarm bell, even though neither situation will kill you. Learning how to separate real alarms from false alarms is key to managing your anxiety."

This is why the author employs the zebra analogy. Because everyone—including animals-- observes and reacts to stressful stimuli. Animals like zebras can feel anxious as well, but they typically experience anxiety only when they are confronted with an immediate, physical threat or stress. For example, a zebra might feel anxious when he realizes that there's a hungry lion bearing down on him. (And, after all, who wouldn't be anxious in that scenario!) But zebras don't make themselves anxious about the big presentation they have in tomorrow's board meeting. That's partially because zebras don't have jobs and partially because animals don't have the ability to make themselves stressed about events that are yet to happen.

Humans, by contrast, use stories to inform their understanding of the world and their place in it. These stories can be positive or negative but they are always present, even if we don't realize that we're telling ourselves stories all throughout the day. To put this concept into practical application, let's consider an example. For the sake of this hypothetical scenario, we'll say you're about to walk into a meeting with your boss. You're late on the report

she asked you to complete. So, as you approach her office, your steps might be twinged with trepidation and you might find yourself visualizing the outcome. You're wondering if she'll fire you. You're wondering if she'll be angry. Maybe you're imagining what she'll say when you walk in. Or maybe you're imagining what you'll say to defend yourself. Maybe she'll be cool about it. Or maybe it'll be catastrophic. No matter what, it's almost guaranteed that you've imagined outcomes for every possibility. And whether you've thought about them that way or not, these thoughts are actually stories that you tell yourself to predict the outcome of the day or to provide assurance or comfort.

No matter what the scenario is, human beings have the ability to tell themselves an infinite amount of anxiety-inducing stories. But now that we've considered the function and mental impact of anxiety, it's time to take a look at how stress impacts our bodies.



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How Stress Affects Our Bodies

In the previous chapter, we learned about the origins of anxiety and the havoc it can wreak on our brains. But now we turn our attention to the physical impact of anxiety. In order to understand why it's possible for a mental malady to cause physical harm, we need to take a closer look at the relationship between the human body and stress. Everyone knows about the human "fight or flight" response; our bodies come pre-downloaded with this evolutionary "software." But when you think about this program in action, what types of situations do you imagine? Is it something magnanimously scary like a blitz attack from a stranger with a gun? Is it an experience like being chased by a bear? Or can it be triggered by something as ordinary as the combination of a shrieking tea kettle and a crying baby? Can it be triggered by the pressure of making a stressful decision while driving? Although you might be surprised to hear it, these everyday stresses are perfect and legitimate examples of pressures that activate our primal fight or flight response. You might also be surprised to know that consistent exposure to high-stress fight or flight situations can take a serious toll on your mental, physical, and emotional health.

That's partly because our brain works together with our emotions to help us perceive threats. These emotional cues then help us to identify feelings like, "I feel unsafe in this situation!" And ultimately, with the help of these cues, we can connect with our fight or flight response to determine our next course of action. The problem, of course, is that our emotions often lie to us and this is one of the root issues when it comes to disorders like anxiety. For example, your brain might be sending you signals that something as simple as a conversation or a phone call is extremely unsafe. As a result, we get incredibly anxious and we may feel the need to flee the situation. The presence of these conflicting cues therefore means that human beings are not always quite as rational as we think we are; our logic can be easily overpowered by emotional cues. And as you can imagine, these cues and the reactions they trigger can often be problematic.

One significant problem is the fact that prolonged exposure to chronic stress can literally cause our brains to atrophy. A stressed brain struggles to acquire or retain information. This can lead to memory loss, trouble concentrating, and an ability to solve problems, complete tasks, or handle stressful situation. It also causes us to develop learned helplessness, which means that we become so accustomed to stress, we stop trying to get better. And in addition to these psychological detriments, let's not forget the titular malady of this book: stress-related ulcers! Ulcers are sores that develop on the lining of your stomach and they are literally created by stress. So, if you want to avoid developing painful internal sores, you have to reduce your stress! These examples are by no means a comprehensive overview of the mental and physical effects of prolonged exposure to chronic stress. But as you can see from these few examples, stress-related illnesses affect every area of our lives and they can lead to some extremely unhealthy results.

Unfortunately, however, misinformation often invites us to believe that stress can be good. For example, you probably know someone who says that they work best under pressure. As a result, this person might intentionally trigger high-stress situations to provide themselves with a sudden burst of adrenaline-fueled motivation. Short bursts of adrenaline-based motivation can certainly be helpful, but this process puts a lot of wear and tear on our bodies. And over time, we can suffer tremendously from the stress. Because stress is an inherently negative thing, it naturally generates negative self-talk and negative coping mechanisms. For example, if you're under a great deal of pressure, being kind to yourself probably isn't your first instinct. Instead, you're more likely to think something like, "You're so stupid! Why can't you get this done faster!"

Similarly, you might be preoccupied with worries about what will happen if you fail. Instead of helping and motivating us, this stress can actually lead to burn-out and cause us to suffer from anxiety or depression or both. (Negative self-talk contributes heavily to depression!) And in many cases, it can also lead to a mental breakdown. So, by putting ourselves under intense and prolonged stress, we're actually doing our bodies more harm than good! That's why it's better to focus on being present in the moment and creating

small, self-driven incentives for motivation rather than relying on external pressure.



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Coping With Stress

In the previous chapters, we've examined the origin of anxiety, its impact on our mental health, and the physical impact of stress-related illnesses. But now that we know how detrimental stress can be, it's time to turn our attention to a happier topic: healthy coping mechanisms for stress. Because we can't all be zebras, it's important to find effective ways to manage our stress. We all have different stressors and different things that comfort us, but our physiological responses to stress are the same. That's because every human being's body releases the stress hormone cortisol into our bloodstream, which increases our heart rate and blood pressure. When this happens, it can be easy to get caught up in a spiral of stress, but would you believe that reducing your stress can be as simple as breathing in and out? That sounds almost insultingly easy, but there's actually some science behind it. Because when you're stressed, your breathing becomes rapid and shallow. Relaxed breathing, on the other hand, is characterized by breaths which are long, deep, and slow. And because our breathing patterns are a reflection of our mental state, they can be used to change our mentalities as well.

When we actively practice relaxed breathing during moments of stress, we can literally trick our bodies into believing we're relaxed. And as an added bonus, taking long, slow breaths over a period of 60 seconds is actually enough to rid our bloodstream of the cortisol hormone entirely! So, while that doesn't mean you have to learn how to breathe again, it does mean that you may need to get in touch with your relaxed breathing practices from an earlier time. You might know what this looks like if you've ever watched a baby breathe. Babies inhale through their nose, which fills their bellies with breath. They then exhale through their nose for longer than they inhaled. And although there are a number of babyish practices we should grow out of, this actually isn't one of them!

So, especially for stress management purposes, you should concentrate on breathing like a baby. Begin by being intentional about your breathing and make an active effort to breathe in and out through your nose instead of your

mouth. Feel your belly and diaphragm filling up with air and concentrate on the centered feeling of calm and control this motion gives you. And remember to breathe out for longer than you breathe in.

You can also reduce stress by forging meaningful connections with others. Relying on a support network is crucial for everyone's physical and mental health. Talking out your problems with a friend or sharing a laugh over a funny meme can do wonders for your stress reduction! Unfortunately, however, some people find it hard to connect with others in the first place. The stress and pressure of our daily lives can make it hard to stay open; we often feel as though life is trying to flatten us with all the force of a steamroller, so it's easy to put up walls that will protect us. But the author observes that openness is closely connected to peace. We can't be calm if we're closed off and guarded and that's why it's important to open ourselves up to new connections.

So, take the opportunity to have a chat with your Uber driver. Ask how your barista's day is going. Smile at a stranger. Give a random compliment. You'll be surprised at the amount of new connections you make and new things you can learn! But if you find these things difficult, it may be because you struggle to even be open with yourself. Although you may not be aware of it, it's easy for us to lose touch with ourselves when we're surrounded by the blips and bleeps of constant incoming notifications from our phones and laptops. As a result, we may feel disengaged from our own thoughts, dreams, and vulnerabilities. And if this is true for you, then you will undoubtedly struggle to connect with others or achieve fulfilling relationships.



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Final Summary

Stress often dominates the human experience. Whether we're worried about an immediate threat or we're suffering from anxiety about an imagined threat, stress is everywhere. And because stress is so prevalent, it has engendered some unhealthy misconceptions. Many people believe that anxiety isn't real and that stress is a necessary component for motivation. Likewise, many others believe that extreme stress is indicative of your strength and success. But nothing could be further from the truth!

As the author's research shows, stress is extremely detrimental to our physical and mental health. Prolonged exposure to chronic stress and anxiety can create stress-related illnesses such as ulcers, heart disease, and PTSD. That's why it's important to acknowledge and reduce your stress. You can do so by identifying the sources of your stress and developing healthy coping mechanisms. You can then implement these coping mechanisms to help manage your response to stressful stimuli.



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