

The Lion and the Zebra

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We can easily imagine the scene where the zebra is doing what zebras do. He is just getting on with eating while the lion stalks quietly in the long grass. The lion creeps up closer and closer. Then suddenly, the lion leaps up to catch the zebra off guard. If the lion can manage to do so, she will dig her claws into the zebra's hide and drag him to the ground. The lion will kill the zebra by smothering him. The lion does this by crushing the zebra's throat in her mouth. But in this story, the zebra gets away.

Let's say that the zebra sees the lion just in time. The zebra bangs "The Emergency Button" and transforms from a grass eater to a galloping blur on the landscape. The zebra's body changes from a state of tranquillity to a state of emergency in a flash. In biology this is called the flight or fight response.

Flight or fight is a response in the autonomic nervous system. Amongst other things, this response involves the quick release of adrenalin. The adrenalin is a hormone that is tipped into the bloodstream from the adrenal glands. These adrenal glands are in the region of our kidneys. The end result is a quick release of energy to deal with the emergency.

The next chemical to be released by the zebra's body during an emergency is cortisol. If you've ever had a cortisone injection then you'd know that cortisol is an anti-inflammatory steroid. The cortisol comes from the adrenal glands also. It is slower to release. It has the effect of preventing inflammation during the emergency. The zebra needs mobility to get away from the lion. If he is wounded say in the leg, the last thing the zebra needs is for its leg to swell up and prevent mobility.

Just imagine that somewhere in the zebra's mind there is a big red button with "emergency" written across the top. This is the emergency button. When it is hit, the adrenalin is released. Then in due course, the cortisol is released.

The Button is not hit by the lion. The lion cannot get into the zebra's mind to hit the button. The Button is hit by an idea in the zebra's mind. For the zebra in this example, the button banger is an idea of mortal peril. For example, the idea, "this is a lion and it is trying to kill me," is an idea, taken as read that will hit the button. And just as well.

Hitting The Button; is a metaphor to describe the mind-body connection. It describes the connection between thought and the autonomic responses (fight or flight). In other words, the zebra has more than a 'survival instinct.' The zebra is able to perceive the danger and respond to the emergency.

Therefore...

The zebra sees the lion.

Immediately the idea of mortal peril hits The Button.

The zebra runs. It goes like the clappers until there is a distance between it and the lion.

Then the zebra stops and looks around. The zebra sees the grass and starts eating again at another location.

The emergency ends and the zebra is off The Button.

The zebra experienced an emergency and hits The Button.



Just the same as you might experience an emergency if you were crossing the road and a bus came down upon you and you had to jump out of the way. The important thing to remember here is that the emergency began at a discrete point in time. The emergency ran its course. The emergency ended.

From observing the zebra after the emergency is over, we must conclude that the zebra has stopped thinking about the lion. By just watching the zebra after the emergency is over, we could conclude that the zebra has forgotten that he even saw a lion. We might conclude that zebras have very short-term memories.

Why were you running just then," we might ask the zebra?

What," the zebra might reply, running?"

Did you see a lion," we might ask?

Lion, what lion," the zebra might reply?

If zebras do just merely forget then we must assume that forgetting is part of their survival strategy. Keep this important thought in the back of your mind because it pops up again.

Just imagine what the zebra would look like if he kept thinking about the lion. Such a zebra would keep the emergency going. These continuing thoughts or head-chatter about the lion would keep hitting The Button. The adrenalin would keep on pumping. The cortisol would keep on dripping. Such a zebra would look agitated. Such a zebra would pace up and down. Such a zebra would be hypervigilant and suspicious.

Is that a lion," the zebra would say to itself as it looked over there?

Is that a lion," the zebra would say to itself as it looked in the other direction?

Are you a lion," the zebra might say as he squints suspiciously at a tree-stump in the half-dark of the evening?

A zebra behaving in this way would begin to suffer stress. A stressed zebra would eventually experience burnout. Such a burnt-out zebra would become exhausted. Such a zebra, the next time the lion turned up, would get caught and eaten. This is an important point.

We might assume, with some humour, that all the zebras with a good ability to remember have all died out years ago from being eaten. This would be the process of natural selection, the survival of the fittest as described by Charles Darwin. Only the zebras with poor memory have survived. This is a bit of humour of course because it suggests that the fittest zebras for survival are the ones with the worst ability to remember.

We don't really know what goes on in a zebra's head. It could be forgetting. If it is, then forgetting is part of the zebra's survival strategy. Remember that I asked you to remember this point. If it is forgetting then it is for the zebra's survival.

Or perhaps the zebras have a more mindful approach to survival, rather than simply forgetting. Perhaps they are able to compartmentalise (com-part-mental-ise) their minds. In other words, perhaps they are able to accept that the lions are over there, and I am over here. So when the lion comes over here, it will be time to hit The Button again, and not until then." This is essential for the zebra's survival.

This is mindfulness. The zebra might simply accept that lions exist and that from time to time they will appear and try to catch me." The zebra might simply accept that next time the lion turns up I will run like the clappers. In the mean time I'll just get on with eating the grass. Hitting The Button whilst the lion is not attacking will not keep the lion away.

For the zebra, survival is more than just the ability to hit The Button and to run like mad. Survival also depends upon the zebra's recovery from the state of emergency by getting off The Button as soon as possible. This is stress management at its best and most basic.

If the zebra was to continue with repeatedly hitting of The Button beyond necessity, there would be elevated levels of adrenalin in the zebra over extended periods of time. There would be

elevated levels of cortisol in the zebra over extended periods of time. This would not be good for the zebra. There is a price to pay for using The Button because of the damage caused by the adrenalin and cortisol in your body. These are the emergency chemicals and should only be used for a real emergency.

During an emergency our bodies have an agenda of survival. Whilst there is an agenda for survival, our body is not doing other things like growing, healing, digesting food or fighting off diseases.

In the zebra, as an example, the extended elevated levels of adrenalin would cause the observable behaviour that I described earlier as agitation. This agitation would be seen as pacing up and down. There would be startled responses to any movement, hypervigilance, and tunnelled vision. This behaviour would easily develop into observable panic and anxiety. This behaviour would extend into sleep disturbance. This behaviour would also prevent the zebra from eating and from participating in a normal life.

Extended elevated levels of cortisol are far more damaging in the long run. The cortisol will eventually destroy the zebra's immune system. Yes, destroy it, or cause it severe damage. There is no time for building an immune system whilst one is dealing with an emergency.

Too much cortisol will compromise the zebra's ability to process cholesterol and salt. These effects alone should be of concern for any zebra because of the long term health risks. Let alone the short-term catastrophes of catching every cold and 'flu' going around. But when a lion is on your back your body cares less about catching a cold or getting hardened arteries.

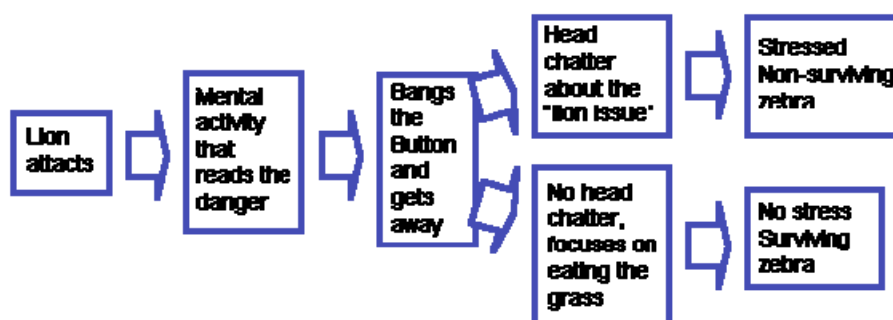
Worst of all, extended elevated levels of cortisol alter blood-sugar levels, leaving the zebra with a feeling of exhaustion. The zebra would develop that paradoxical combination of exhaustion and restlessness. Have you ever experienced exhaustion but when you put your head down, it's up again because you can't sleep? This is that keyed-up feeling.

You don't need sleep during an emergency. You need hypervigilance (watching-watching). You need to be watchful. You can only keep this up for so long.

For zebras stress is deadly. For the zebra to continue banging The Button with thoughts about the lion, or with head-chatter about the lion-issue, would be to introduce stress into their lives. Stress over extended periods of time is likely to compromise the zebra's ability to survive. Stress will inevitably accumulate into a collapse. Zebras cannot afford to collapse or they will be eaten. The zebra's adaptive strategy is to run faster than the lion and then to get off The Button: Nothing else.



From this story, you can relate yourself to the zebra and you can relate all the stressors in your life to the lion. The zebra can survive and live a stress-free life without having to get rid of the lions. In fact, the zebras have no control over the existence of lions in the same way that we will always have stressors in our lives. There will always be demands, challenges, threats, danger, loss or change in our lives. We need to find ways to adapt to these stressors as they occur and then we need mindfulness to get out of the head-chatter and back to eating the grass (the metaphor for the present moment) which keeps us off The Button.



Sapolsky , R. M. (1994). *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. W.H. Freeman: New York

Selye, H. (1984). *The Stress of Life*. McGraw-Hill: New York

WARNING

For very serious psychological problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, specific phobias, addiction, conduct disorder, or personality disorders, I strongly recommend that you seek out a local psychologist to tackle those problems in face-to-face consultations. For serious psychiatric disorders such as psychosis or bi-polar or schizophrenia you will need to consult with a psychiatrist face-to-face about suitable medication.