

The Boulder County BUSINESS REPORT

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How to deal skillfully with the stress of crisis

Change is part of life. When it occurs suddenly, however, change can become crisis, a tear in the fabric of life resulting in fear and harmful stress. Yet within the midst of crisis there lies hidden the potential for new growth. For this reason the ancient Chinese used the same character for both crisis and opportunity.

Unfortunately for many, crisis means major stress, and major stress often leads to major illness. In the 1970s, Dr. Thomas Holmes developed an impressive body of research to measure stress with a Social Readjustment Rating Scale. Based on the response to 43 questions, which earn a range of 100 points for the death of a spouse and 47 points for loss of a job, to 11 points for a traffic ticket, he determined that individuals who had a cumulative score over 300 points in the preceding two year period had an 80% chance of developing an illness, often a serious one.

Since Dr. Holmes' early pioneering work, there have been a number of studies demonstrating the significant, adverse health effects of prolonged stress, such as a 1994 study published in *Circulation* demonstrating that men at the highest levels of stress are up to six times more likely than calmer men to suffer sudden cardiac death.

What, then, is a skillful way to deal with the stress of crisis? My first lesson came from an orthopedic surgeon who had recently returned from a MASH unit dur-



GUEST OPINION

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ing the Vietnam War. As a medical student I listened uncomfortably to his graphic descriptions of wounded soldiers screaming in pain while nurses and doctors treated an endless flow of mangled bodies until their nerves were frayed from the intensity and long hours without sleep.

Afterward, when everyone had left, realizing that some day I would have to be the doctor, I walked up to the surgeon and asked, "How do you keep calm and think straight in such a challenging situation?" He looked into my wide eyes and realized the seriousness of my question. Then he turned away, as if to absorb my question. He gave me an answer that would later serve me well in many a difficult emergency room situation. In a moment of naked transparency he turned to me and said, "By realizing that I could lose it,

too. By being in touch with my own fear."

In order to see and respond to the opportunities that change brings, you must be in touch with the truth, and the first truth is how you feel in your gut. The ancient Samurai understood the paralyzing effects of fear that in a blink of an eye could make the difference between who lives and who dies. They practiced confronting fear directly by plunging themselves into icy cold water. You may try this yourself by finishing your morning shower with a blast of cold water. At first the breath is seized and if you cringe the cold is unbearable. However, if you breathe deeply into your center, opening up to the truth of the cold, your fear will be quickly replaced by calm clarity.

Try this approach the next time you are faced with a stressful situation. Instead of defaulting to your habitual impulse to clench or resist what is happening, breathe into it. With this deceptively simple technique you can easily learn to stand calmly at the quiet, still point of any situation. From this vantage point of clear centeredness, you will be able to confidently face the challenges of crisis, discover new opportunities that appear on the horizon, and have the presence of mind to respond decisively. Ultimately, stress of crisis offers you the opportunity to change your life, to grow bigger, and to create the life you really want.

Dr. Jia Gottlieb is an author, trainer and physician in private practice based in Boulder. His Refresh. Renew. Revitalize.™ workshops, drawn from the disciplines of science, medicine, martial arts and self-mastery, teach the techniques of personal effectiveness in both the workplace and in the home. He may be reached at (303) 444-2425 or by visiting his Web site at www.jiamd.com.