

## Depression, stress can be positive

By Ruth Ostrow

I'VE been intrigued by two Radio National programs I heard over the past few weeks: the most recent was Norman Swan's *The Health Report* looking at a subject of stress, and the other was *All in the Mind* with Natasha Mitchell looking at depression.

Both programs featured academics debating two of our main bogies, stress and depression – and reframing them into a positive evolutionary light. I have long drawn attention to the fact that Buddhists and Eastern masters see adversity and challenge as the tools for enlightenment and growth.

In most spiritual traditions, hardship, pain and suffering are there to help us find our inner strength and discover the divine within and without. They are means of unearthing a profound sense of gratitude. They teach us empathy and compassion.

In shamanic traditions, the healer has to go into the darkness of his own soul and face misery, death, fear, and pain before emerging as the tribal leader. In mythology, the hero has to go down into the underworld and battle great demons before being reborn into the light. In nature, great mountains are born of earthquake and devastation. Indigenous people see the value of fire, and destruction as the beginning of rebirth.

And yet, in Western society we too readily take happy pills and intoxicants to neutralise uncomfortable states. As renowned grief counsellor Mal McKissock said in my book *The Gift* : "Sadness and passion do not equal anti-depressants. There is no truth that people should always control themselves, or that strong emotions equal madness."

And here are the experts validating a very Eastern view, espousing that there is a biological imperative to certain pains.

Bruce McEwen of Rockefeller University in New York City has written a book called *The End of Stress As We Know It* with co-author Elizabeth Norton Lasley, dealing with the biology and psychology of stress.

He tells Norman Swan: "I think life would be pretty dull if we didn't have stress or challenges. I sort of like to use the more neutral word challenge. Our bodies are designed to help us meet a challenge, meet changing environments.

"When something happens, we react to it. We learn something from it. If we are injured in the classic fight-or-flight response – an antelope running away from a predator – and still survive, then immune function is actually enhanced by the stress response, and this helps the animal fight the infection and repair the wound."

In the same sense, stress hormones help develop memory function in animals and humans, teaching us about places, people and situations to avoid. They are there to help us adapt to our world.

He says that there is "good stress" and "bad stress". When the stress system is over-used, or not properly turned off, then this can create wear and tear on the

body which he calls allostatic load, leading to fatigue, anxiety, memory loss, ageing and ultimately to illness. But Professor McEwen confirms that true to Eastern teachings it's about finding the right balance so that stress and suffering do not turn out to be negatives, but tools for development and learning.

Meanwhile, the more surprising program was on depression. Evolutionary biologists argued a deeply controversial theory that major and minor depression, even post-partum depression, could be an adaptation critical to our reproductive success and survival as a species, helping us sober up, elicit sympathy, and make the hard necessary changes we all need to make.

Edward Hagen, a research scientist at the Institute for Theoretical Biology in Berlin, told Natasha Mitchell: "I decided to pursue an alternative theory that depression actually serves a useful function, or at least did serve a useful function for our ancestors over evolutionary time."

He says we "really need to be careful, because when we give people drugs we're shutting down part of the brain or some structure or some process".

"Sure, it's a very uncomfortable process, but . . . when we shut something down we'd better know darned well that it doesn't have some useful function for that person – in the same way that we wouldn't want to shut off physical pain without investigating if there was any problem."

He explains that pain is something that actually helps us, it identifies problems that we have to address and circumstances that we need to change or avoid. Nausea – a very distressing state to be sure – has utility. It's something that despite its very uncomfortable nature helps us by expelling toxins from the body.

Whilst Hagen did go on to point out that some depressions are maladaptive in a modern context, his profound words prompting us to look deeper into the true nature of pain – emotional or physical – echo many religious and spiritual teachers before him.

It's hard to believe that stress, depression, anger, jealousy, or fear have positive features, given the cost they have to our bodies and those around us.

However, there are two sides to any coin and keeping an open mind to suffering has great spiritual and physiological value.

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