

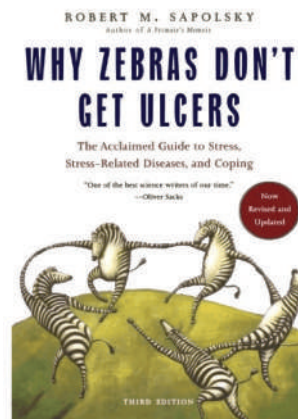
A large, stylized illustration of a zebra's head in profile, facing left. The zebra is rendered in a solid dark blue color against a white background. The illustration uses thick, bold lines to define the zebra's features, including its mane, ear, eye, and the stripes on its face and neck. The stripes are represented by a series of curved, parallel lines that sweep across the zebra's head and neck.

WHY ZEBRAS DON'T GET ULCERS

THE ACCLAIMED GUIDE TO STRESS, STRESS-RELATED DISEASES, AND COPING
BY ROBERT M. SAPOLSKY



THE BOOK



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INTRODUCTION

Think about the zebra fighting for life on the Serengeti plains. Being chased by lions is pretty stressful. Despite this, though, zebras don't get stress ulcers. And human beings, despite never being chased by lions (or at least very rarely), do.

Why is this?

With *Why Don't Zebras Get Ulcers*, Robert M. Sapolsky sets out to explain why prolonged stress is so human an issue. More importantly, he explains why prolonged stress is so unhealthy and what you can do to fight it. From biology to culture, Robert M. Sapolsky covers every angle of stress in modern society.

If you find yourself feeling 'wired' and anxious all the time, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* offers a deep-dive into what's going on in your mind and body. This book will help you understand why you feel stress, how it affects you, and how to avoid it.



5 BEST QUOTES

"Most people who do a lot of exercise, particularly in the form of competitive athletics, have unneurotic, extraverted, optimistic personalities to begin with. (Marathon runners are exceptions to this.)"

"In a world of stressful lack of control, an amazing source of control we all have is the ability to make the world a better place, one act at a time."

"Fear is the vigilance and the need to escape from something real. Anxiety is about dread and foreboding and your imagination running away with you. Much as with depression, anxiety is rooted in a cognitive distortion. In this case, people prone toward anxiety overestimate risks and the likelihood of a bad outcome."

"What the data show: the fewer social relationships a person has, the shorter his or her life expectancy, and the worse the impact of various infectious diseases."

"On an incredibly simplistic level, you can think of depression as occurring when your cortex thinks an abstract thought and manages to convince the rest of the brain that this is as real as a physical stressor."



8 BIG IDEAS

1. PROLONGED STRESS

Stress is a natural part of life. A zebra will feel stress when being chased across the plains by a lion. And even a lion feels it when she is hunting a zebra for lunch. It is what our ancestors (and the occasional modern human) felt when they encountered predators in the wild.

Stress, though, is short-lived. It elevates chemicals in the body in order to fight or flee. It is ok to live through occasional bouts of high stress. These days, almost no one is under threat from lions. What we now suffer is prolonged stress, which lasts for much longer and can cause severe medical problems. Modern life can mean living with the metaphorical feeling of being chased by a lion for most of the day.

2. STRESS HORMONES

The main hormones associated with stress are called glucocorticoids. People who live with high levels of stress produce excessive levels of glucocorticoids, and these are scientifically linked to a wide array of serious medical conditions, both physical and psychological.

In his book, Sapolsky explains that glucocorticoids contribute to all manner of conditions, from heart disease to stroke to depression to even possible psychogenic death (unexplained death accredited to extreme fear or shock).

Put simply, you don't want high levels of glucocorticoids in your system.

Stress and glucocorticoids “can wreak havoc with your metabolism, raise your blood pressure, burst your white blood cells, make you flatulent, ruin your sex life, and if that’s not enough, possibly damage your brain.”

3. ULCERS

For many years, it was believed that stomach ulcers were caused solely by stress. In fact, the study of ulcers was the kick-off point for studies into stress.

More recent discoveries, though, have laid the blame for ulcers at the feet of *Helicobacter pylori*, a nasty little bacteria that gets into the stomach lining. This was groundbreaking, in fact, Nobel Prize-winning, science, but it still left questions.

Not everyone who has *Helicobacter pylori* bacteria in their stomach lining develops ulcers. It will come as no surprise to learn that, along with alcohol, smoking, taking certain medication and lifestyle choices, stress is still a major factor in causing stomach ulcers.



8 BIG IDEAS

4. SUSCEPTIBILITY TO STRESS

So, who is susceptible to stress?

While stress is a normal part of human life, there are some people who seem to be far more susceptible to stress-related illnesses.

Sapolsky mischievously mentions that one of the best ways to fight stress is not to be born poor. People who grow up poor, marginalised, insufficiently cared for by their parents, or all of the above are at much greater risk of developing high glucocorticoid levels. People with ‘type-A’ personalities are also at higher risk, as are infants who did not receive enough nutrients in the womb. In fact, there are so many reasons that you might be susceptible to stress that it might stress you out!

5. THE PROBLEM WITH PROLONGED STRESS

When you feel stressed, the body goes through many physiological changes. It prepares for a burst of activity; the bladder and bowels may be voided to reduce weight, and pressure is put on the heart.

With prolonged stress, you are putting these pressures on your body for a lengthy period of time. These pressures are only intended to get you away from the lion and then fade away. Keeping your body under this pressure is not healthy. This is why you feel restless and may even need the toilet when you are stressed.

6. FIND AN OUTLET

Sapolsky has spent a portion of his life studying wild baboons. One thing he noticed is that after losing a fight, a baboon will go and take it out on a lower-ranked individual. Thumping someone weaker, it turns out, is an excellent way for baboons to lower their glucocorticoid levels.

Of course, people can’t go around thumping others when they feel stressed! The point is that the baboons found an outlet, and that helps to reduce stress. One of the best outlets for humans is exercise, although taking refuge in a hobby or even imagining an ideal situation can help. Again, make sure that your outlet is not causing suffering in others; Sapolsky says, “one should not give ulcers in order to avoid getting them.”



8 BIG IDEAS

7. CONTROL

One of the most interesting aspects of controlling stress is the concept of control. Sapolsky notes that residents of aged care homes, when given more control over their lives in the form of choosing their own meals or being given a plant to take care of, do considerably better than those with less control.

What makes this even more interesting is that control is different in different situations. For instance, something goes wrong, and you think, “At least I was in charge, it could have been much worse” that’s good, but it is also very likely that you think, “I was in charge; how could I let this happen?”

The trick is to take control over the controllable. Don’t expect to be in control of unpredictable future events, and don’t try to control things that have already passed.

8. SOCIAL SUPPORT

Another key factor in managing the ill effects of stress is to have an adequate social support group. Baboons that regularly perform mutual grooming with one another have significantly lower glucocorticoid levels than their less social peers.

Social support is more than simply being around other people. You can feel lonely in a crowd, and support from a stranger can be unwelcome. Social support comes from finding the right people at the right time.

**3 ACTION STEPS****1. BE BORN WEALTHY AND TO THE RIGHT TYPE OF PARENTS**

While this is very good advice to avoid stress, it is clearly not a controllable variable in life.

However, it helps to be aware that a lot of the way you deal with stress is determined by your biology, socioeconomic situation, and your upbringing.

Knowing there are factors outside of your control frees you up to deal with the things you can influence more easily.

2. EXERCISE

Exercising is excellent for managing stress. It works on a biological and psychological level to make you feel better.

The trick according to Sapolsky is to do 20–30 minutes of exercise a few times a week and to do it because you want to.

3. TAKE CONTROL; SOMETIMES

Feeling in control helps to lower stress. Find a way to take control of a situation, and you will generally feel better.

At the same time, control can create guilt, so don't allow yourself to imagine you have control over the worst situations when you don't. Simply put, take control of minor situations and relinquish control of the worst.

**1 KEY TAKEAWAY**

The key takeaway of *Why Don't Zebras Get Ulcers* is that stress is a significant problem in modern society but that this doesn't mean it can't be tackled.

Stress is related to a number of illnesses, many of which can be life-threatening as well as decreasing quality of life. It is caused by a multitude of factors, many of which we can do nothing about.

However, by learning the nature of stress and making a few lifestyle tweaks, you can avoid suffering ill consequences.

Understand stress, and you have a better chance of controlling it.



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Read the full book

Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers

by Robert M. Sapolsky

Robert Sapolsky explains why a stress response built to outrun lions is quietly wearing you down at a desk. A zebra sprints, escapes, and forgets. We carry the fear for weeks. This summary captures the core science. The full book shows you how to switch the alarm off.

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