

ON CALL

AND FEELING STRESSED!



PROFILE



TEXT BY

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Major disclaimer – this article is my personal opinion; and comprises many anecdotes collated from my own experience, and also from friends and acquaintances over the past ten years. I think bits and pieces will resonate with you, but rest assured, you are not the one I got the idea from. Apologies, I didn't have time to reference some of my comments. Hopefully this will make you laugh a bit, reflect a bit, and perhaps sigh in relief that you aren't the only one!

STRESS

Stress comes in many forms, and manifests in many ways. I broadly classify them into happy and upsetting stressors, and will be discussing only the latter in this article. Each group can be further divided into three main categories: personal, people and events. Examples of upsetting stressors include:

1. Personal: mental and physical ailments – eg, a minor illness like an upper respiratory tract infection (URTI), or something more serious like a stroke/cancer. Doctors are just as prone (maybe even more so?) to some forms of mental illness, for a multitude of reasons.
2. People: relationships with partners, spouses, parents, children, neighbours, maids – all these are already stressful enough. In our line, we usually see people who are at a bad spot in their own lives (like illness or tragedy) and these frazzled individuals often need to vent their anger on someone, so it is no surprise that healthcare staff end up bearing the brunt of it sometimes.
3. Events: car accident, MRT breakdown, air-con leaking, or being late for work. Anything can be a stressor, including major life events such as marriage, divorce, birth, death and travel.

MANIFESTATIONS

We all show stress differently. The trick is to recognise it in ourselves, and in each other. Try not to be too smug when telling your stressed-out, burned-out colleague: "Oh, just relax lah, what's there to be stressed about?" You may not know the full circumstances of that person's stressors. It's also difficult to recognise when you are the main stressor for someone else! But the situation should become obvious when the other person tries to avoid you because you scold him/her too much. A much more sinister type of stressful colleague is the one who pretends to be concerned for you, but is secretly prying your secrets out and feeding them to the boss (ie, backstabber or sh*t-stirrer). What's scary is that he/she is not even aware of the harm he/she is causing! Here are the various manifestations of stress:

1. Psychosomatic: this one no need to explain right? Diagnosis of exclusion. But fellow doctors, be mindful not to UNDER-diagnose yourself, ie, brush off symptoms until they blow up in your face!
2. Physical: stress ulcers! Classical. Frequent URTIs. Musculoskeletal aches and pains. Menstrual upsets. Erectile dysfunction?
3. Mental: anxiety, anger, depression, insomnia, hallucinations (eg, hearing phone ringing or patients crying in call room), thinking that colleagues are talking bad about you (but then, this COULD be true...).

COPING

I envy some people who seem to cope with stress very well. No anger, no sleep problems, no worries. One dear friend, who's like that, tells me: "It's easy, people who irritate me are all stupid and beneath me, so why stress? Things just happen, just go with the flow!" I was amazed to hear that, not just from him, but also from a few others who seem very chill and relaxed ALL the time! I won't say I agree with their views but it sure is a refreshing perspective!

Gillian wrote a great article on stress and coping in the 2015 April issue (<https://goo.gl/D0EVXR>), so I would like to focus specifically on what's unique to our field: *what is more stressful than being on call?* Being the solo warrior against heaps of changes to be done? (Or so it feels on most days!)

I have heard of so many practices and superstitions that doctors have devised to cope with a stressful call, some unique to certain disciplines/departments/hospitals — do write in (email: news@sma.org.sg) if you have more that weren't mentioned!

Despite priding myself as a thinking, modern, scientific woman, I did start observing some of these customs after learning about them in the past... and the habits have lasted till today. Those of you who no longer do calls — do you find this nostalgic? Those still on call, do let us know how these work for you!

I hope this simple write-up was a wee bit helpful, and will inspire you to read up more relevant, scientific articles on stress and coping! Keep healthy, stay sane! ◆

BEFORE THE CALL

- Sleep early the night before
- Post a little prayer/plea on Facebook/Twitter for a good call
- Check who your team partners are, who the covering consultant is, and who the admitting senior doctor in the emergency department is
- Charge handphone battery!

DURING THE CALL

- Don't wear red underwear
- Don't ever brag about how relaxed one is ("Wah! EOT no cases ah?")
- Abide by food restrictions (the list is as extensive as confinement practices and merits its own table given below)
- Bathe early (to wash away bad luck) versus...
- Don't bathe (so as not to give the impression that one is free)
- Don't take the "last" lift, ie, the one furthest down the corridor
- Bring an extra battery and charger
- Don't lose your piece of paper with changes and admissions!

AFTER THE CALL

- Hand over on time and go off post-call in a timely fashion (if your department has such a culture)
- Enjoy a facial/massage
- Enjoy a movie
- Enjoy a good meal
- Go back and sleep
- Go exercise
- Make requests never to be on call with xxx ever again!



FOOD TO EAT DURING CALL

- Coke Light or Coke Zero (to reduce admissions)
- Green tea (for good luck)
- *Kopi-o kosong* (ie, black coffee only with NOTHING else)
- In general, eat when you can because you won't know when the next meal will be



FOOD NEVER TO EAT DURING CALL

- Chilli and spices (in case of diarrhoea)
- Chinese *bao* (as it may mean for one to "bao"[or "do"] everything, may also refer to a shroud)
- Beef (or "*niu rou*" in Mandarin, which sounds like "neuro" — heard this from neurology and neurosurgery colleagues)
- Pineapple tarts (as this brings in "prosperity" and "business")