

TIGERS AND TUNNEL VISION

Is our biological reaction to stress maladaptive in an urban society?

by Ralph Strauch

It's a beautiful summer day. You're walking through a tropical forest, feeling the sun on your back and the breeze brushing your face. A burbling brook accompanies the birds in the trees. You are one with your surroundings, in a soft, unfocused way.

A tiger steps in front of you, less than 50 yards down the path!

The world suddenly changes. Your heart pounds; your muscles tense. The sun on your back disappears, the brook and the birds go silent. Your awareness narrows sharply now—focusing only on the tiger. Your entire being is poised and ready—to run if you have a chance, to do battle otherwise.

That transformation, known as the “flight/fight” response, is an automatic reaction to sudden stress. Facing the tiger this response is highly adaptive; it heightens your chances of survival. But in our sedentary urban society it may be maladaptive, contributing to individual and social ills from hypertension and backache to environmental pollution and the arms race.

How could this simple biological response contribute to such a diverse a range of problems? The connecting thread is the perceptual narrowing it induces, and the resulting generalized *tunnel vision*. This article will examine that narrowing, and look briefly at ways of reversing it and rediscovering the broad understanding which is our natural due.

In a threatening situation, your body responds dramatically. Digestion slows, and bloodflow to the large muscles used for movement increases. Muscles tense, as surges of stress hormones ready the body for action. Perception narrows, directing all attention to the threat and the need to meet it. Dealing with a threat like the tiger will require intense activity and utilize these preparations, burning up the extra stress hormones in your bloodstream. When it's over you can return to a relaxed and unfocused state, again feeling the sun and hearing the birds in the trees.

In contemporary urban society, however, “threats” are often chronic, not acute. They trigger the same physiological responses as the tiger, but do not call for similar physical reactions.

“Am I getting old and unattractive? Will someone younger get my job or my mate?”

“Is my boss dissatisfied and getting ready to lay me off?”

“Will my competitor bring out a better product next year? Will new government regulations hamstring my business?”

“Will the Russians bomb us? Will a burglar kill me in the night?”

Evolving in environments where physical threats required physical reactions, we developed automatic ways to prepare for those reactions. We now live differently, but our automatic responses remain unchanged. We secrete stress hormones we will not use, we ready for action we will never take. Stresses accumulate, blocking the relaxation which should naturally follow the intense reactions we never make. Harvard cardiologist Herbert Benson, author of *The Relaxation Response*, sees this as a leading cause of chronic stress and stress-related diseases, and prescribes a method of relaxation and mild meditation as a way of reversing those effects.

Narrowing your awareness

Perceptually, the result is a chronic narrowing of awareness—a generalized “tunnel vision” where we focus on one thing at a time, ignoring most of our environment. Aesthetically, our lives become shallower than necessary, because we fail to notice and appreciate the richness of the world around us. On a practical level, we base decisions on too narrowly defined grounds, excluding important considerations without realizing the consequences of that exclusion. It's like looking at the world through a cardboard mailing tube, without ever realizing what our peripheral vision could show us if we used our full visual capabilities. My book, *The Reality Illusion*, explores the limits we place on ourselves by too narrowly constraining our perceptual focus.

Every aspect of our lives is affected, from our most fundamental physical movements to our most complex intellectual judgements. We act as if we live in simpler less interconnected bodies than we really have, in a simpler less interconnected world than we really live in. Our interactions with our environment become less efficient than they could be at best, and sometimes even counterproductive.

To see this at a fundamental physical level, look over your right shoulder and notice how far to the side you can see. How did you turn? Did your shoulders move, or just your head and neck? Many people conceptualize “moving the head” as involving only the head and neck, holding their chest and shoulders rigid. If you did that, sit quietly and become aware of your head, neck, and trunk as a unit. Now turn your head slowly to the right again, allowing your shoulders and trunk to turn as well. You should turn noticeably farther, with less effort.

Human movements *should be* smooth and fluid, with the body flowing as a single unit. We all have the inherent capability to move that way, though few of us do. Instead, we act as if we were a collection of

separate pieces, trying to move one piece while holding the others still. We create internal barriers to our own movement, then expend energy fighting against those barriers. We fail to see the barriers because of our “tunnel vision,” so we remain unaware of the role we play in creating our own limitations.

The same mechanism affects us on psychological and interpersonal levels. Our limited vision may exclude crucial aspects of a situation, making our attempts to cope futile and frustrating. We see only the other person’s contribution to a dispute but not our own, for example. Even unpleasant personality traits such as excessive self-interest and greed may stem from the sense of isolation a restricted focus brings on, blinding people to their interconnectedness with those around them.

When the Tiger Appears

Recall the path in the jungle. Relaxed and at one with your surroundings, your boundaries seem permeable and indistinct. You feel a part of your environment. But when the tiger appears your focus narrows, separating you from your surroundings. No longer a comfortable stream within which you flow, the world becomes a harsh and hostile place where the line between “us” (you) and “them” (the tiger) is clearly drawn. Alone now, no longer one with the larger world, you must fight for your very survival.

When the flight/fight response never reverses and you never return to that relaxed open place, this sense of “us-them” separation hardens. Narrow self-interest becomes a form of self protection, and the idea of a broader, softer focus seems absurd. “Looking out for Number One” becomes a way of life.

“Us” may be an isolated individual or a larger entity—a corporation (“What’s good for General Motors is good for the country”) or even a nation (“My country right or wrong”). However “us” is defined, though, dividing the world into “us” and “them” encourages “us” to look out for only “our” interests, viewing “them” with distrust and hostility.

Those most affected by this narrowing, unfortunately, include our most responsible decisionmakers, society’s “movers and shakers.” The hard driving executive—the intense “man of action”—is someone whose flight/fight response is continually activated, narrowly focused on “solving” his most immediate problem. This kind of narrowly focused decisionmaking gave us effective pesticides that poison the food chain, and continues to “solve” our national security problems with succeeding new generations of weapons, ignoring the risks brought about by the weapons themselves.

We seem caught on a treadmill where the harder we run, the less we see, the more problems we create, and the harder we must run. Threatened by the problems our tunnel vision creates, we reinforce the tunnel. To really make things different we must learn to see them differently. If a way out of our dilemma exists, it must lie in the direction of reversing the

narrowing process and allowing our vision to soften and broaden again.

Expanding Your Awareness

This can, fortunately, be done. We *can* take back responsibility for our own well-being, increasing our awareness of self and of the world around us. There are tools available to assist in this process, including biofeedback, meditation, and a variety of holistic health practices and body/mind awareness disciplines. One particularly effective approach is a method of self-awareness training called the *Feldenkrais Method*, developed by Israeli physicist Moshe Feldenkrais, and described in his book *Awareness Through Movement*.

When we lived in jungles and the threats were tigers, the flight/fight response was biologically adaptive. It may still serve us in those increasingly uncommon situations when an intense physical response to a threat is needed. But in our day-to-day sedentary urban lives it has become maladaptive, leading to excessive stress and to perceptual tunnel vision with the ill effects discussed above.

The real problem lies not with the flight/fight response, but with our abdication of responsibility for our responses to and interactions with the world around us. Stress and the accompanying perceptual narrowing are not unavoidable; they become serious only because we *choose* to ignore them and to not deal with them “when they are small.” We are each in control, if we choose to be. We can undo the stress and reverse the tunnel vision, and experience the richness of life that is our natural birthright. Tools like meditation and the *Feldenkrais Method* can help. But in the end, they are only tools. The real solution lies within each of us, in the decision to take the responsibility for broadening our vision and living a richer, fuller life.

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