



“The jungle path”

We generally accept that our ancestors were hunter-gatherers. The men formed hunting parties which went out daily to find and kill animals to bring home (usually to the family cave). The women set out daily, with their children cared for at home or, if old enough, the children would go gathering with the women. Gathering consisted of collecting seeds, berries, fruits, prawns, grubs, fish and other foods.

The life of a hunter-gatherer was not an easy or safe one. Dangers filled the environment, whether it was in open forest country or jungle. On setting out or returning after the day's work, it was normal to go via a stream or water hole - dangerous places. Who knew what lay behind that rock or in that thicket? One could be attacked by a large predator (lions and tigers easily come to mind). At a moment's notice, one could be running away as fast as one could or engaged in a fight to the death.

We all have built into our inherited physiological responses a series of mechanisms to assist us in our flight or fight. These are normal responses but not necessarily under our control. What are they? How can they affect us?

We are not necessarily on the jungle path or at the water hole, when the alarm goes off and the physiological responses are set in train. We are more likely to be concerned, to a greater or lesser extent, by the stressors chronically affecting our lives.

Our ancestor may hear a twig snap or a faint, soft growl. Instantly the upright walking position shifts to a crouched position, with the arms and legs extended laterally, the torso bent forward and the hands open, with the head turned toward the sound. To identify the source of the sound, the pupils open wider, giving a clearer field of vision. At the same time changes occur to deter the potential attacker. The eyelids are pulled back, exposing a larger eye and the lips are pulled back, exposing teeth (even though our mouths do not contain

fangs). Canine teeth are the most threatening we can show. Hairs, particularly along the back, are pulled to a more erect position, presenting the possible attacker with an apparently larger sized potential prey. In a moment, extreme effort may be required. Thus a series of responses occur to prepare for the possible attacks. Deep breaths are taken prior to the actual need for the extra oxygen required for the extra effort. The heart rate speeds up. The output of the heart increases with each beat, the blood pressure rises. The spleen contracts, giving a small blood transfusion.

Fortunately, we spend little or no time on jungle paths in modern societies but we carry all these mechanisms, and others, throughout life. However, many of us, when stressed or anxious, become aware of palpitations, with rapid or forceful heart action. We may also feel a need to take deep breaths and sometimes a need to pass urine or open the bowels. We may become aware of nausea, even vomit, develop tingling along the spine, note visual disturbances and rapid, strong muscular movements. Panic attacks may occur.

Muscular tension and discomfort may result in unexplained pain. The trigger to such events may be anything that can induce tension, distress or fear. We are not all the same, so different mechanisms and responses may vary from person to person. A panic attack, which may emerge with multiple jungle path responses, can arise from recognised external triggers or may emerge from patterns of conscious or unconscious thought.

All the above are considered to be psychosomatic responses. They do not represent heart disease, nor lung disease, nor stomach disease, nor nervous disease, nor disease of the blood or bowels. Pains may be from muscular tension. All of this may be a normal response to being on the jungle path or its more modern equivalent. The building of the symptoms may be instantaneous, progressive or develop slowly, depending on the stimulus and the response.

What happens after all this? It is usual to feel tired and need to rest. For most, the episode is over following that rest, provided one does not become more anxious due to fearful concerns that one may have a nasty condition. People think of heart disease, stroke and cancer, or possibly the disease

of the week as seen on television. If you have such strange and possibly unexplained symptoms, you should discuss them with your doctor. While this is meant to be reassuring and explanatory, it may be enough to make you feel tired and to need a rest.

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