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The Politics of Stress Management: The Newest Opiate of the Masses

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Title: The Politics of Stress Management: The Newest Opiate of the Masses

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Abstract. This article posits a politically exploitive agenda underlying the theory, research, and practice of stress management.

Stress most often connotes a biopsychological state--e.g., body discomfort or dysfunction, anxiety and/or depression--that should be attenuated. Recommendations to attenuate the state most often comprise self-regulatory practices, the ingestion of chemicals, the employment of other people as psychological receptacles or biopsychological transducers of noxiousness, and social clarification and modification. The most common self-regulatory practices include techniques of muscle relaxation, focused breathing, and fantasy. The most common chemicals prescribed by socially sanctioned "stress experts" are the various classes of anti-anxiety and anti-depressant drugs. (The most common prescribed by lay "stress experts" are alcohol and illicit drugs such as marijuana and cocaine.) The most common human receptacles and transducers are psychotherapists, religious figures, family members, and friends and acquaintances. The most common social interventions include clarification, negotiation, and modification concerning noxious micromolecular contingencies--e.g., effecting less noise in the work place as opposed to subverting huge socioeconomic disparities reinforced by the work place.

In fact, stress management now subsumes a huge industry, including popular magazines; best-selling books; a myriad of audio and video tapes; talk show panels and special guests; public and private seminars unique in their sophisticated marketing strategies; and a vast infrastructure of academics, consultants, and bureaucratic specialists whose livelihoods, social prestige, and self-esteem are intimately interwoven with the crusade to free humans from stress.

A strong case can be made, however, that stress comprises adaptive warning signals that something significant in the social life of an individual needs to change, that there is a threat (or opportunity) that needs to be managed or exploited, that attempting to do away with stress (for good) is a nonadaptive response against the evolutionary psychological heritage of humans. A Marxist might posit that stress management is the third opiate of the masses along with religion and alcohol--precipitating and then reinforcing false consciousness. The stress management movement may be the ultimate subjugating discourse that does not need to be exposed through deconstruction or hermeneutic sleight of hand, for it is already without clothes in the light of day. (See Barrios-Choplin, B., McCraty, R., & Cryer, B. (1997). An inner quality approach to reducing stress and improving physical and emotional well-being at work. *Stress Medicine*, 13, 193-201; Cooper, C.L., & Cartwright, S. (1997). An intervention strategy for workplace stress. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 43, 7-16; Mandel, S.E. (1996). Music for wellness: Music therapy for stress management in a rehabilitation program. *Music Therapy Perspectives*, 14, 38-43; Starkey, D., De leone, H., & Flannery, R.B. (1995). Stress management for psychiatric patients in a state hospital setting. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 65, 446-450.) (Keywords: Adaptation, Stress, Stress Management.)