

## NERVOUS TENSION IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE

By DR. AINSLIE MEARES

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OUR subject tonight is "Nervous Tension in Professional Life." I have been tempted to present to you a statistical analysis of the problems of the large number of professional people who have sought my help over the years. But statistics has always seemed to me to be a rather sterile subject, and I would prefer to talk of the more human aspects of these problems which lie beneath the statistics.

First let us discuss those features of professional life which are related to nervous tension. The hallmark of the professional man is not in the nature of the work that he does, but it lies in the special type of relationship which he has with those who seek his services. This concept is both very simple and very important. The non-professional has a reality oriented relationship with those with whom he does business. He has something to sell, whether it be material things or his labour, which can be assessed in a realistic way by the would-be purchaser. On the other hand, the professional person offers a service which cannot be assessed by the purchaser. He therefore operates in a relationship of trust as opposed to the non-professional's reality-based relationship. So, like it or not, we are people who operate within a framework of trust. Now, how does this affect our level of nervous tension? It is like this. Because of our relationship of trust we often have to act in a way which is clearly against our own self-interest. This acting against self-interest comes into professional life in a way that simply does not happen with the non-professional. This has its effect on the level of our nervous tension. We have built into us a great number of psychological reactions which in the past has helped us to survive. To act in one's self-interest is one such reaction. When we act contrary to our basic reactions, our mind interprets it as if something were going wrong and this results in the experience of tension.

There are also other reactions concerning this relationship of

trust. The young lawyer or young doctor is aware that he must bring his client or patient to trust him. In his desire to do this he often makes the mistake of logically reassuring his client. But trust is not established by logical processes of the mind. To say, "I am your lawyer, you can trust me", only alerts the critical faculties of the client and puts him on guard so that trust is diminished. Trust comes about not by logical processes but by paralogical mechanisms working below the level of clear consciousness. Of these the professional man's openness, his natural display of symbolic gestures of friendliness, and offers of trust on his part are important. To suspect that one's client or patient is not trusting us engenders nervous tension, and often provokes an aggressive comment which causes the relationship to further deteriorate.

There is another strange reaction concerning professional trust. The very fact of being trusted sometimes produces tension. There is a kind of guilt reaction. "Am I worthy of such trust?" And the individual's level of nervous tension is increased.

Besides trust, another important feature of professional life is individual responsibility. In the big firm or organization there is the established hierarchy. When the responsibility seems too great the employed person can always refer the matter to a higher authority. Of course the professional man can call in another opinion. We do this when we ourselves are in doubt or our patient desires it. But we do not call in another opinion just to help us bear the burden of our own individual responsibility. Of course this responsibility is a factor in our nervous tension.

There is a point that I would make in regard to the professional man's individual responsibility. The fact that the client or patient knows that we individually accept this responsibility has a profound effect on his relationship with us. He often feels thankful to us for accepting this individual responsibility. At a deeper level it reactivates child parent relationships. If what I am saying is true, the lawyer or doctor who works as an employee never has this particular kind of professional relationship. The relationship may be just as moral, just as ethical, but it is inherently different in quality from that enjoyed by those who take individual responsibility for their client or patient.

There is another significant cause of nervous tension in professional life which is often not recognized by those concerned. Our clients and patients tell us of their problems, and it often comes about that the matters that they discuss resemble past or present problems of our own. When this happens, and it is quite



a common occurrence, our own tensions concerning our problem become reactivated with a consequent rise in our general nervous tension. The professional man, who may have stolen some trivial thing as a child, becomes tense in discussing a matter of theft. The man whose marriage is not going well is similarly tense with matters of divorce. Similarly past homosexual conflicts, whether overt or latent, will be activated by professional work in this area. My experience with patients makes it clear that this is an important cause of nervous tension in professional life, and the individual is usually quite unaware of the cause of his sudden exacerbation of tension.

Another important cause of nervous tension comes from the way in which professional life intrudes into and sometimes disrupts our domestic life. In general the lawyer or doctor has less opportunity to spend time with his wife and family than has the businessman of similar status. Matters of education and discipline of the children fall heavily on the wife. She may be resentful that other women have a freer social life with their husbands. The nature of our work brings us into intimate contact with those around us. There is the perennial problem of emotional involvement with one's secretary, and also with a client or patient. I regret to have to inform you that this is one of the commonest causes which brings professional people to see me. Some professionals are aware of this danger, keep emotionally distant from their client or patient. But in this they lose something of their capacity to help. In spite of the assertions of psychoanalysts to the contrary, I personally believe that it is possible to develop a very intense relationship, which has a professional quality, and which quite transcends erotic or sexual feelings. But there is another reaction which also involves the wife. She may become strangely jealous, not of the secretary, nor of the nurse, nor of the patients, but of her husband's other love, medicine. There is also the problem of the self-employed person providing adequately for his retirement. Professional life also produces domestic problems in another way. All of us, professionals and non-professionals, really hope that our sons will follow us. The businessman's son can do this without going to the university, but our sons must get into the quota. The children of professional households are continually subject to the stress of their parents' anxiety in this matter. I emphasize that this is usually communicated quite indirectly. But it is there. The children feel oppressed by it, and the household simmers with tension. Of course the woman

lawyer or doctor is even more acutely affected by the conflict of loyalties between profession and home life.

These four features of professional life, the element of trust, the individual responsibility, the activation of our own conflicts, and the intrusion into domestic life, have been the most potent causes of nervous tension in those who have consulted me. But other matters also contribute. For instance the goods or services of the non-professional have a realistic money value, whereas any attempt to put monetary value on professional services is unrealistic. This is so because professional service is based on trust, and trust cannot be bought. So the young lawyer or doctor often finds himself confused in that at times he feels his reward is too great and at others far too small.

A common cause of anxiety in professional men and women who have consulted me has been a regrettable friction with colleagues. I have seen many who have attained both success and respect in their professional life only to lose the rewards of their labours in quarrels with their colleagues. This may seem to you a trivial matter which I could have well omitted from a discussion of this nature. I would have been pleased to have done so. But in my experience friction with one's colleagues is a more common and more significant cause of nervous tension in professional than it is in business life.

I expect that any way of life both ennobles and degrades. Thus army life ennobles in that it promotes courage and fellowship, but it degrades if it produces callousness. What of professional life? We are fortunate. It is ennobling to help others. But we must not turn a blind eye to the other side of the picture. We operate in a position of power in relation to our clients and patients. This is psychological power, but it is very real. Because it is psychological in origin, it is not reduced by the reality of the fact that the client or patient can go elsewhere. Power often corrupts, and professional people are no exception to the rule. We see it in doctors who keep patients waiting or who disregard their need of privacy. Success in professional life has its dangers. People attribute to the successful professional man a degree of wisdom which in fact he does not have. He tends to become dogmatic and arrogant. He often assumes an authority in matters which lie far beyond his particular area of expert knowledge. It is well to remember that dogmatism and arrogance are in fact reactions which unconsciously aim to cover up nervous tension. So underneath he is really not as sure of himself as he would like



you to think. Perhaps the commonest way in which professional life can degrade the individual is by involving him in procedures which are professionally accepted as ethical but which at the same time are not consistent with the individual's moral standards. I am sure that many doctors feel degraded and corrupted when they prescribe tranquillizers for patients when they know that there are better methods of treatment. Last year I saw a doctor who had broken down because he felt corrupted by his partners' demands that he should spend less time with his patients and so earn more money.

Whatever people may say or think, the professional mystique is a reality. Let us be clear about this. A relationship of trust precludes the questioning of competence. This is the genesis of professional mystique. It sets the professional man apart. And this in itself may be a cause of nervous tension.

But the effects of the professional mystique are wider than this. The mystique itself is threatened by forces of social evolution. There are two important factors. An egalitarian society finds it difficult to tolerate a professional elite even though such an elite may be of great benefit to that society as a whole. Furthermore, in our egalitarian society our clients and patients are becoming increasingly more knowledgeable. So the situation is developing in which the client or patient may no longer put himself in our hands on a basis of trust. But instead he may come and ask us to render a specific service. "We don't need to discuss this matter, just arrange the stamp duty." Or, "I don't want to be examined, I just want a shot of penicillin." In these circumstances there is no professional mystique and those who operate in this way are technicians and not professional people. But we as a group are caught up in these matters, and the uncertainty of it increases our nervous tension.

These are some of the causes of nervous tension which apply more particularly to professional life. Now, how does this nervous tension manifest itself? In what particular ways are professional people affected by nervous tension? I shall not bore you by enumerating all the psychoneurotic and psychosomatic symptoms of nervous tension. The dyspepsia, the palpitations, the nervous headache, the undue fatigue and the general feeling of apprehension are all too familiar. But I would like to discuss with you the indirect manifestations of nervous tension in professional people. These indirect manifestations are really the reactions which we unconsciously use to ward off our nervous tension. In

general, different types of people use different types of reaction. So this leads us to a difficult question. "Psychologically, what sort of people are lawyers and doctors?" As a generalization, professional men, I say "men", are much more introverted than business men of similar status. Yes, I can see some well extroverted people in the audience in front of me. Please do not use this to deny the general truth of my statement. Remember that a gathering like this attracts the more extroverted elements of our professions. But as far as professional women are concerned the situation is rather different, in fact quite different. Professional women have a much higher masculine-aggressive bias to their personality than do women in domestic life. I must explain what I mean by "masculine-aggressive". We can take two different attitudes towards our environment. We can aggressively mould the environment to suit our needs. This is the typical masculine attitude. On the other hand we can accept the environment, fit in with it, and passively adjust to it. This is the typical feminine attitude. In this, the professional woman has more of the masculine attitude than does her more domesticated sister. These basic concepts, the professional man's tendency to introversion, and the professional woman's tendency to a masculine-aggressive attitude, affect their reactions to nervous tension. The introvert habitually reacts to tension by withdrawal. He sees less of his partners, he no longer has lunch with his friends. He drops out from his usual weekend recreations and has less contact with his wife and children. But the reaction of the professional woman, when she becomes tense, is quite different. She vents her tension because this is the habitual response of a masculine-aggressive person. She does not withdraw from contact with others in the office, but becomes more assertive, more demanding and perhaps quarrelsome. The same assertive irritability becomes a feature of her family life.

Sometimes there is a relationship between the cause of nervous tension and the way in which it is manifested. For instance, if we become tense through the problems of our client or patient re-activating our own conflicts, our tension is likely to show itself in some form of aggressive response, either direct or indirect. On the other hand if we are tense as a result of a moral situation which we find degrading we often react with a kind of hostile apathy, described in the vernacular as "being browned off".

I would now like to discuss with you some of the manifestations of nervous tension in various professional subgroups. Because of his tendency to introversion the solicitor often reacts to



nervous tension by withdrawal. On the other hand, the barrister in his professional work is accustomed to studying the effect of his own behaviour on others. So when he becomes tense, instead of withdrawing, he is likely to react with a good deal of camaraderie with his colleagues. The judge typically rationalizes and tries to quieten his mind by thinking. "I am merely a cog in the machine." In this way he diminishes his sense of responsibility. A common way for the doctor to cope with his nervous tension is by dogmatism. By being very dogmatic he saves himself the worry of uncertainty. Doctors also save themselves from nervous tension by developing the belief that their own particular way of doing things is best. The medical scientist can afford to be objective because he is not involved in the human situation in which he is dealing. But the physician is involved. And his tension is lessened if he believes in himself and feels, "I am helping this person as well as he can be helped." It is interesting that the priest typically reacts in the opposite manner. The physician reduces anxiety by assuming God-like qualities, whereas the priest who is expected to be God-like typically tries to reduce his feelings of tension by repeating to himself, "I am only human, I must expect to make mistakes."

In this way, nervous tension by inducing symptoms and motivating defensive reactions reduces the quality of life. But even more important it reduces the quality of the individual as a person. Let me explain. Those characteristics which reduce our quality as human beings are in fact all motivated by anxiety or nervous tension. Thus, to be aggressive or to be obsequious are both manifestations of nervous tension. If you think about it you will soon see that arrogance, suspicion, dogmatism, rigidity of thought, resistance to change are all simple reactions to underlying nervous tension.

I have said something of the cause of nervous tension in professional life, and something of its manifestations. How do professional people cope with their nervous tension? The answer is simple, "By drinking, smoking and taking tranquillizers." There is not much virtue in this. But there is a better way, which is simple, easy to master and effective. I thought I would take just a few minutes to describe this briefly to you. It is based on the concept that we have within our minds a self-regulating mechanism which, if given a chance, can control nervous tension very effectively. It is a matter of providing favourable circumstances for the mind to work in this way. This is attained in

five simple steps. The first is to learn how to relax our body very completely. This is simple physical relaxation. The second step is to learn to experience the physical relaxation. It is not just our body being very relaxed. It is the experience of the relaxation in our whole self, our mind, our whole being. The third step is to practise this experience of relaxation in circumstances of minor discomfort, so that the relaxation transcends the discomfort. This is very important. There is no therapeutic effect in reducing nervous tension through relaxation achieved by flopping in an armchair or lying on one's bed. The fourth step is to practise this simple mental exercise for ten minutes a couple of times a day. And the last step is to let this ease of mind come into our daily life. Remember that there is no suggestion that you do less. When we are at ease in ourselves we do more with less effort. It is important to capture a kind of natural effortlessness about it. There is no making yourself relax. It is real effortlessness, real naturalness. By this simple procedure the individual can reduce his nervous tension which otherwise may threaten the quality of his life.