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The treadmill syndrome

WORKING as a counselling psychologist in primary care, I have noticed over the years an increasing number of middle-aged clients presenting with stress or depression or both with no specific life event as a precipitator. GPs may describe this as an endogenous depression, but I feel that it is a reactive depression to contemporary lifestyle.

You may consider lifestyle to be a question of personal choice. But when listening to a person reviewing his or her daily living, it becomes clear that these lifestyles are so self-perpetuating that it is no wonder an individual feels out of control. I have called this the treadmill syndrome, and in this article I will try to elaborate on what seems to me to be an increasingly common phenomenon.

It is believed that our development not

only occurs during childhood, but continues throughout our lives (often called 'womb-to-tomb' or 'lust-to-dust' psychology). These adult developmental transitions (Levinson *et al.*, 1978; Gould, 1978) often make individuals feel incongruous as they try to review their lives. They are asking questions like: What have I achieved? What do I like? and What do I want to change? In particular, these questions refer to the individuals' careers, relationships and homes. Is this house too big (or too small) for the family? Do I want to stay in this job for the next 10 to 15 years? Do I still love this person that I live with?

As these questions arise, fears and doubts cloud the consciousness, confidence can be lost, self-esteem reduced (Hopson & Scally, 1980). This leads to a general feeling of malaise that can in turn lead to physical symptoms.

These individuals then present themselves to their GP with non-specific ailments. They are tired all the time, have become irritable, especially with the family, have a sense of lethargy, demotivation, loss of joy and loss of sex drive; and some experience panic attacks. They usually say that they can never get sufficient sleep, and that there are never enough hours in the day.

GPs will take blood tests to try to pick their way through the vague symptoms. But when the tests show normal physical functioning, the individual may then be referred to the practice psychologist or counsellor.

The stories told in the counselling room are often very similar. The clients are in demanding jobs. Expectations of employers are high, so they work longer and longer hours to fulfil the demands of the job, and to earn money to pay their increasingly high mortgages. This applies to both partners in the relationship. But because working longer hours brings with it its own financial costs, it is here that the self-perpetuating nature of the issue becomes apparent.

These costs are partly in terms of labour-saving household items — such as dishwashers, automatic washing machines and microwaves — that become essentials rather than luxuries. Similarly, with both partners working long hours, the domestic roles change. Convenience foods replace the fresh cooking of former years. However, convenience foods for a family are expensive, hence a large increase in the weekly shopping bill that has to be paid for by extra work.

A working partnership may choose to have extra help with the domestic cleaning or laundry, which again has to be paid for, as does the high cost of childcare. Often, running two cars becomes the norm as the partners work in different locations, doubling the cost of household expenditure on road tax, insurance, etc. Yet having two cars is considered essential in terms of being a convenient time saver over (and probably cheaper than) public transport.

Hence, such clients are on a treadmill, running hard, going nowhere, struggling to

JENNY AND SIMON'S STORY

JENNY was sent to the psychologist as, at 49, she was experiencing peri-menopausal mood swings. She and her husband, Simon, were arguing all the time and he was threatening to leave if she did not sort herself out. Her GP had found that she had high follicular stimulating hormone levels, and she had begun hormone replacement therapy.

However, as she explored her day-to-day life with the psychologist, it soon became clear that there was more than this going on. The psychologist suggested that there might be a relationship issue and asked to see Jenny and Simon as a couple.

Simon, an engineer, worked six days a week, leaving home at 7.30am and returning at 7pm. His basic pay was insufficient for their needs, and he relied on overtime and callout payments. Jenny had three cleaning jobs: mornings, evenings and Sundays.

The only time that Simon and Jenny had together was on Friday evenings and Sunday mornings, and then they invariably rowed about something. They both felt that any reduction in working hours for either of them would mean a lower standard of living.

Jenny and Simon had two teenage children, Niki, aged 18, and Peter, 16. Niki's parents had bought her a car that they insured annually, as they were nervous about her coming home alone in the evenings after nights out with her

friends. Simon constantly worried about Niki when she was out, fearing an accident. He couldn't sleep until he knew she was home, which was sometimes not until the early hours. Peter had become argumentative with his father, was jealous of his sister's freedom, and had started to hang around with unsavoury friends, again staying out late at night.

It emerged that although Jenny was experiencing mood swings, Simon was equally depressed with his home life. Jenny had sought help from her GP as a way of coping. Simon had used denial in blaming Jenny. Both were extremely low in mood, and always excessively tired.

Simon told the psychologist about his fears of ageing and not being able to physically do the things that he used to. He worried about their lack of savings and having nothing but a state pension to look forward to.

They both recognised that they did not spend enough time together, that they had stopped socialising and stopped having fun. They were often too tired for sex, which was very intermittent. The little time they did have together was spent on domestic chores and house maintenance, and often sparked off rows as they were both so tired and unhappy with their lives. It was all work and sleep and no way off the treadmill.

maintain their standard of living. If they dare to slow down, they are aware that they may fall off the machine with increasing debts and a lower standard of living. So they keep up the pace, never believing that one day their body may become exhausted.

Contemporary demands

Two external demands also keep people at this pace of life, particularly those in their forties and fifties. The first is a legacy of the Thatcher era, when trade unions lost their power and employers increasingly gained the upper hand. Following the economic recession, employers have cut back their workforces to the minimum, expecting employees, in gratitude for not losing their jobs, to take on the workload of those who were made redundant. Longer hours and less time off are demanded as normal working conditions.

Stress is considered a dirty word in many industries. I am frequently being told by clients that the employer or manager has informed an employee in a discussion about workloads and demands: 'If you can't cope with the job, there are plenty of folk out there who will!'

Fear of losing one's job when there are high mortgages to pay and a family to support keeps the employee with his or her head down and uncomplaining. This is especially so for those who are approaching or who have tipped the 50 mark, to whom employers become reluctant to offer work, given the zeitgeist of ageism. Thus, employers are snapping at the heels of the runner on the treadmill, making sure that the pace never slows.

The other demand comes from within the family in the form of adolescent children. Often, to justify or overcompensate for being working parents, the children of the

family are given every conceivable material possession. The consequence of this seems to be that the more these children have, the more they demand.

Younger adolescents want designer-label clothes, televisions, videos and stereos in their bedrooms, and pagers and mobile phones to contact their friends. Older adolescents demand driving lessons and cars, many of which will cost more to insure annually than they do to buy. If they go to university, the lack of educational grant perpetuates the financial pressures on the parents until the child reaches the early twenties. With more than one child at university, the financial drain worsens.

What is even more interesting is that the attitude of the adolescent or young adult to the family of origin has changed inter-generationally. There used to be a light at the end of the tunnel for a family struggling with the costs of a growing family: when the children themselves at the end of their education would earn sufficient to contribute to the family income.

It appears that this rarely happens in contemporary society. For, it seems, children leaving school and going to work pay their parents very little for their keep and often resent the need to contribute, with some even refusing to do so. But these children still expect their parents to contribute to their credit card bills or insurance premiums that they cannot afford themselves. Similarly, children who leave home to go to university, and who command higher levels of income thereafter as a result, rarely return home to benefit the family income.

So we have mum and dad, pounding away on their treadmill, fearing the consequences of a slower pace, with the pull of family demands dragging them along, and the expectations of the employer behind.

The consequence is that they become physically and emotionally exhausted.

Midlife crisis

Relationships such as that of Jenny and Simon (opposite) are at a critical point. Often, before help is sought, one of the partners embarks on an extramarital affair. Someone in the office is there to listen and understand, whereas the couple have become ships that pass in the night. Sex and secrecy are a combustible combination, and give a false impression of where the grass is greener. It is at this stage that the erring partner is accused of experiencing a midlife crisis, by turning his or her back on all the original partnership had worked for, just to replace it with another.

If anything will knock a couple off their treadmill, an affair will, but here again it has a self-perpetuating effect. The cost of marital breakdown in terms of new homes, child support payments and solicitors' fees just place an individual on a different treadmill with a new partner, and sometimes with new children growing up to continue the cycle.

The treadmill syndrome thus exhausts individuals both physically and emotionally and can place marriages and partnerships under threat. Psychologists and counsellors can help such people by facilitating a review of their lifestyles with stress management techniques. Clients need to reappraise and prioritise their working roles and become more assertive at work in respect of the demands that are placed upon them.

They need to create appropriate boundaries in their households so that adolescent and adult children realise that they should contribute physically and financially to a family, or leave to make their own. Relationships need time and space to revitalise after the demands of launching children, and to readjust to the prospect of living as a couple again.

And finally, individuals need to become aware that they have the power to slow the treadmill down and readjust to a gentler pace of life.

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