

## The Lion and Zebra

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We can easily imagine the scene where the zebra is doing what zebras do. He is just getting on with eating while the lion stalks quietly in the long grass. The lion creeps up closer and closer. Then suddenly, the lion leaps up to catch the zebra off guard. If the lion can manage to do so, she will dig her claws into the zebra's hide and drag him to the ground. The lion will kill the zebra by smothering him. The lion does this by crushing the zebra's throat in her mouth. But in this story, the zebra gets away.

Let's say that the zebra sees the lion just in time. The zebra "hits The Emergency Button" and transforms himself from a grass eater to a galloping blur on the landscape. The zebra's body changes from a state of tranquillity to a state of emergency in a flash. In biology this is called the flight or fight response.

Flight or fight is a response is the activation of a sympathetic response in the autonomic nervous system. Amongst other things, this response involves the quick release of adrenalin. The adrenalin is a hormone that is tipped into the bloodstream from the adrenal glands. These adrenal glands sit on top of your kidneys. The end result is faster and stronger responses to deal with the emergency.

The next chemical to be released by the zebra's body during an emergency is cortisol. If you've ever had a cortisone injection then you'd know that cortisol is an anti-inflammatory steroid. The cortisol comes from the adrenal glands also. It is slower to release. It has the effect of preventing inflammation during the emergency. The zebra needs mobility to get away from the lion. If he is wounded say in the leg, the last thing the zebra needs is for its leg to swell up and prevent mobility.

The cortisol has another important emergency function because and it also provides active muscles with an extra dose of fuel.

Just imagine that somewhere in the zebra's mind there is a big red button with "emergency" written across the top. This is the Emergency Button. When it is hit, the adrenalin is released and the cortisol follows.

The Button is not hit by the lion. The lion cannot get into the zebra's brain to hit the button. The Button is hit by an idea in the zebra's mind. For the zebra in this example, the button banger is an idea of mortal peril. For example, the idea, "this is a lion and it is trying to kill me," is an idea, taken as read will hit the button. And just as well.

"Hitting The Button" is a metaphor to describe the mind-body connection. It describes the connection between mental activity and the sympathetic response in the autonomic system (fight or flight). In other words, the zebra has more than a 'survival instinct.' The zebra is able to perceive the danger and respond to the emergency.

Therefore...

1. The zebra sees the lion.
2. Immediately the perceived danger hits The Button.
3. The zebra runs. It goes like the clappers until there is a distance between it and the lion.
4. Then the zebra stops and looks around. The zebra sees the grass and starts eating again at another location.
5. The emergency ends and the zebra is off the Button.



The zebra experienced an emergency and hit The Button. Just the same as you might experience an emergency if you were crossing the road and a bus came down upon you and you had to jump out of the way. The important thing to remember here is that the emergency began at a single point in time. The emergency ran its course. The emergency ended.

Just imagine what the zebra would look like if he kept up the head-chatter about the lion. Such a zebra would keep the emergency going. The continuing head-chatter about the lion would keep hitting The Button. The adrenalin would keep on pumping. The cortisol would keep on dripping. Such a zebra would look agitated. Such a zebra would pace up and down. Such a zebra would look hypervigilant and suspicious.

A zebra behaving in this way would begin to suffer stress. A stressed zebra would eventually experience burnout. Such a burnt-out zebra would become exhausted. Such a zebra, the next time the lion turned up, would get caught and eaten. This is an important point.

For the zebra, survival is more than just the ability to hit the Emergency Button and to run like mad. Survival also depends upon the zebra's recovery from the state of emergency **by getting off the Emergency Button as soon as possible.**

If the zebra was to continue with repeatedly hitting the Emergency Button beyond necessity, there would be elevated levels of adrenalin in the zebra over extended periods of time. There would be elevated levels of cortisol in the zebra over extended periods of time. This would not be good for the zebra. There is a price to pay for using the Emergency Button because of the damage caused by the adrenalin and cortisol in your body. These are the emergency chemicals and should only be used for a real emergency.

During an emergency our bodies have an agenda of survival. Whilst there is an agenda for survival, our body is not doing other things like growing, healing, digesting food or fighting off diseases.

In the zebra, as an example, the extended elevated levels of adrenalin would cause the observable behaviour that I described earlier as agitation. This agitation would be seen as pacing up and down. There would be startled responses to any movement, hypervigilance, and tunnelled vision. This behaviour would easily develop into observable panic and anxiety. This behaviour would extend into sleep disturbance. This behaviour would also prevent the zebra from eating and from participating in a normal zebra life.

Extended elevated levels of cortisol are far more damaging in the long run. The cortisol will eventually destroy the zebra's immune system. Yes, destroy it, or cause it severe damage. There is no time for building an immune system whilst one is dealing with an emergency.

Too much cortisol will compromise the zebra's ability to process salt and it will contribute to elevated cholesterol. These effects alone should be of concern for any zebra because of the long term health risks. Let alone the short-term catastrophes of catching every cold and 'flu' going around. But when a lion is on your back your body cares less about catching a cold or getting hardened arteries.

Worst of all, extended elevated levels of adrenalin and cortisol alter blood-sugar levels, leaving the zebra with a feeling of exhaustion. The zebra would develop that paradoxical combination of exhaustion and restlessness. Have you ever experienced exhaustion but when you put your head down, it's up again because you can't sleep? This is that keyed-up feeling.

You don't need sleep during an emergency. You need hypervigilance (watching-watching). You need to be watchful. You can only keep this up for so long.

For zebras stress is deadly. For the zebra to continue hitting the Emergency Button with head-chatter about the lion, or with head-chatter about the lion-issue, would be to introduce stress into his life. Stress over extended periods of time is likely to compromise the zebra's ability to survive.

In the Lion and Zebra story there is a major stressor for the zebra, which is of course the lion. The lion becomes a metaphor for the stressors in our lives. In other words, stressors will not just go away and leave us alone.

There is no stress in the life of the zebra because of the zebra's adaptation. The lion is an external stressor that the zebra has adapted to for survival. The main adaptation for the zebra is to have legs that are longer than lions' legs. Whilst the zebra has longer legs, and whilst the zebra is able to use them, the zebra need not worry too much about being eaten by a lion.

There was a real emergency for the zebra when the lion turned up. The zebra needed his legs. There is a price to pay for using the emergency chemicals, namely adrenalin and cortisol. The price is stress if we do not bring about a timely conclusion to the emergency. In other words, the stressor must be resolved ASAP. Stress would take the zebra's legs away. Imagine what would happen if the lion turned up, and the zebra found that he had no legs.

The zebra adapts to the stressor in two steps.

1. Gets on the Button and use his legs.
2. Gets off the Button to recover.

The zebra gets off the Button **by focusing his attention** on the grass and not on the lion. The lion is far away. The lion is no longer in the zebra's present-moment. Eating the grass brings the zebra's attention to the present-moment. Of course, zebras don't just eat grass. They do many present-moment zebra activities. Eating the grass is used here as another metaphor to illustrate the point. By focusing in the present-moment, by eating the grass, the zebra's body does the rest automatically and returns to a state of equilibrium.



**Your question is, “why is the zebra not stressed?”**

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