



Stephanie R. Deluse, Ph.D.

COPING WITH STRESS... THE SUPERHERO WAY

Part of the appeal of superheroes is that through them we can live out our dreams and fantasies. But the life of a superhero is fraught with stress: Saving the city (or planet) from the nefarious plots of evil-doers; and the hassles of daily life, such as finding a convenient spot to change into the superhero costume, or juggling being the host of a charity fundraiser while simultaneously taking out the bad guys who crash the event. Like superheroes, we humans are also confronted with stress. As deluse points out in her essay, we can learn from our superheroes how to cope effectively with stress.

"The man who doesn't relax and hoot a few hoots voluntarily, now and then, is in great danger of hooting hoots and standing on his head for the edification of the pathologist and trained nurse, a little later on."

—ELBERT HUBBARD, AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER AND WRITER

WE LIVE IN STRESSFUL TIMES. We don't need the news, with its stories of natural disasters and various political or military skirmishes, to remind us of how stressful life is as all of us are dealing with our own major life events (divorce, death, job loss, etc.) and challenges, with family and work, health and money, and a myriad of daily hassles. With all we have going on we may wish a superhero would rescue us from the mundane or dramatic stresses of our lives! But while all our wishing may not materialize a caped crusader to save us, we can still learn to cope like a superhero and, ultimately, save ourselves. Indeed, it's worth considering what lessons we can learn from superheroes as few individuals face more stress than those who must constantly protect the world from crime and destruction. If they can survive that, we can certainly survive our lives.

STRESS

Stress can be difficult to define. What's stressful to me might be exciting to you. What's too much for you to handle may be a walk in the park for me. Some stress is good in that it might, for example, facilitate productivity or help prepare you to engage in something you've been anticipating. This is sometimes referred to as "eustress" ("eu" as in euphoria). Some stress is bad or "distress" ("dis" as in disease, displeasure). But stress in general is how your body (and mind) respond to a demand to step up. The response is now commonly referred to as the "fight or flight" response when our ancestors, for instance, might have had to suddenly decide to run from the saber-tooth tiger or battle it. Once the saber-tooth tiger was either evaded or conquered, their systems would return to a balanced state. For modern humans, the choice isn't always that simple. It would be simple if our primary stressors were undeniably physically present (like tigers), but many of our stressors are subtler and tied up with how we perceive the situation (again, why some activities are stressful to me, but not to you). We may not have the option (or desire) to fight or run from our stressors and what we have to deal with doesn't always go away. Yes, we may still have acute (sudden) stressors, like when Batman sees the Bat-Signal light up over Gotham City, and must decide whether to swing into action now (fight) or hide

(fight). But much of what we deal with seems to be chronic (sustained) stressors that can wear and tear at our bodies, minds, and spirits over time. So if we can't (or don't want to) fight or flee, what might help us cope?

COPE WITH STRESS

You may be thinking there isn't anything special we can do about stress; that there are no special weapons to employ because the ability to cope, or not, generates from within. You may believe it is a matter of character, constitution, or personality that predicts if, or how, we cope with stress. Well, to some degree you'd be correct. It does help to have certain global personality traits that have been found to help with resiliency (that ability to bounce back when pressed). Two such traits that come to mind are dispositional optimism and locus of control. Dispositional optimism relates to a general expectancy that good things will happen in one's life. Peter Parker is an excellent example of a typically optimistic personality: Taken aback by his spider changes at first, he soon realizes the potential in it and remains ever hopeful that some of the successful experiences he has in the public domain of kicking evil's fanny will, at some point, in some way, positively affect his personal life—that some of the confidence he demonstrates as Spider-Man may eventually allow him similar confidence in dealing with the challenges that face him at home, school, and work. Locus of control refers to a generalized expectancy of whether one feels a sense, or lack, of power over the events that happen in one's life. If we perceive events as unrelated to our own behavior (beyond control) we fall on the "external" side of the control continuum. If we perceive events to be under our control we fall on the "internal" side. The funny thing is that sometimes, no matter what our dispositional leaning is, we may be wrong when we are assessing where to place "blame" for an event. So the coping strategies we're about to cover will help regardless of our typical locus of control tendency, if we allow ourselves to be flexible in our appraisal of and reaction to events.

Regardless of personality, there are a myriad of ways to cope with stress that we'll divide into three major categories: problem-focused

coping (silver bullets), emotion-focused coping (invisible shields), and proactive coping (gadgets and other resources). And, as we'll see, social support (supporting cast) is an important buffer to stress and is especially key to proactive coping.

1. PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING—SILVER BULLETS

Problem-focused coping involves direct efforts to confront stressors head-on rather than to deny them. They are like silver bullets in the sense that you find a specific tool to handle a specific job. This would include planning specific steps to minimize, modify, or avoid the stressor through taking specific action. These strategies are generally more active than some others and usually work well in situations where we actually have an opportunity to make a change or exercise some control. The actions aren't always of the in-your-face BAM, POW, BONK variety like Batman might use to beat a person or problem into submission. We might have a gentler touch. We might emulate a set of Batman's skills, like his strategic, detective-like thinking and ability to get straight to the heart of the problem to choose our problem-focused strategies. We might, for example, in focusing on the problem of traffic, arrange to arrive to and leave from work on a schedule that avoids traffic, listen to a book-on-tape (to help the traffic time pass more pleasantly), or arrange to telecommute. Or, taking a tip from the Pulitzer-Prize winning *Metropolis* reporter, Clark Kent, we might thoroughly research the issue via information gathering when, say, we must deal with a medical diagnosis or problem in ourselves or family members. We read books, search the Web, talk with counselors, mentors, or those who've dealt with something similar before. You can see how the information-gathering form of coping can be a precursor to more specifically focused actions by, for instance, leading one person to, say, deal with depression through the use of pharmaceuticals, another to divorce their abusive spouse, and yet another to engage in regular exercise—often a powerful antidote to depression.

And, while holding positive expectations is helpful coping in itself, we must remember not to be too disappointed if perfection doesn't result the first time out or immediate results don't ensue. Sometimes

copied is an iterative process: sometimes things we try work well from the gate; other times, in the style of a Peter Parker, we may fumble our way through a number of well-intentioned, integrity-based attempts that ultimately lead to success. A key here is to not get lost in information-gathering but use it as a tool and learning process to forward healthy coping and, hopefully, resolution to the stress. Another problem-focused strategy is, paradoxically, practicing restraint, as it allows us to observe the situation in order to assess it, gives us time to see if the issue might lessen or pass, or permits strategic waiting for the right time to act or bring something up. Yes, a sequential or multi-pronged approach to problem-focused coping is not unusual and may prove more effective.

Some of these strategies may work like a charm, but active, problem-focused strategies sometimes won't work as well when, for instance, something is just outside our control or isn't worth the effort. When trying to control or confront something directly requires more vigilance and energy than we can muster, or when it overwhelms our sense of personal responsibility (or simply isn't our responsibility), these strategies may not be the best choice. Likewise, if it would contribute to an already over-controlling type personality (the classic "Type A"), it may be worthwhile to try a different approach. In short, being able to discern when we do have some control and when we don't, what we can handle and what we can't, is an important skill that can be challenging at times but can be improved with practice. (Consider it a way of building an aspect of your own version of *Spi-Dee-Sense*, which, if you are a normal mortal, we consider the sum total of our individual experience and intuition.) In the world of superheroes facing super-evil, more often than not the evils are easily identified and dispatched head-on or with minimal strategy. So much of the coping superheroes do would be considered very problem-focused as the enemy is often the immediate stressor. But once we get into a hero's back-story or personal life, we see how there are times when situations are out of their control—like the loss of parents or other loved ones, or discovering they're different and having powers develop. So let's consider another set of particularly useful strategies to help in these cases.

2. EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING—INVISIBLE SHIELDS

When we can't do anything much about a problem directly we always have emotion-focused coping strategies that we can use. Emotion-focused coping strategies are like invisible shields because, unlike bullets, folks might not necessarily know you are using the technique or employing a shield (since they tend to be quiet and transparent) and they help us with things we can't really do much else about. These strategies, as the name implies, help us regulate the emotional response to the stress of life events (like death or divorce) or, for instance, chronic health situations—and we know "mutation" and the accidents that cause superhero powers are chronic! Emotion-focused coping techniques are also useful as short-term strategies to help us cope if there is a problem or stressor we can actually do something about but the timing is off for some reason.

One approach is to reframe or reinterpret the issues to see what good can come of it. For example, turning into Spider-Man is pretty freaky and could have sent Peter into withdrawal, self-loathing, or a hissy fit, but he kept an open mind to what good could come out of it. But many things just strike us as bad all around... there may be no silver-lining to see via reframing or we just aren't ready for that. In that case, one emotion-focused strategy to try might include distracting one's self in some healthy way. "Healthy" would be something challenging like digging into your work, exercising, or engaging in some hobby like gardening or reading—not smoking, drinking, shopping, or food binging for, as we know, vices, debt, and low self-esteem can create villains more often than heroes. Indeed, remember that two of Spider-Man's enemies developed, in part, from what some would consider low self-esteem issues as both Eddie Brock (who turned into Venom) and Harry Osborn (who turned into the Green Goblin II) had fathers who were cold and disapproving of their sons. But clearly allowing pain, jealousy, or anger into our mind and letting them motivate "evil" deeds toward self or others is a less heroic choice than finding a healthy distraction. Peter had the stress of losing his beloved uncle and was still coping with his physical changes into Spider-Man, but he distracted himself with doing what he could do (experimenting with his powers, trying to woo Mary

Jane, etc.) instead of getting lost in his problems or indulging in distractions that could cause new problems.

Similarly, "shutting down" for awhile by temporarily suppressing unwanted thoughts or feelings around a specifically painful topic or trauma can be useful, as sometimes our minds and hearts need a little space and time to process before we can talk about or deal with something more directly. Think of it as going into your Batcave for a good think, or maybe a good nap or some journaling time. Whatever you do, the key is to not let that "down time" go on for too long or feed on itself to the exclusion of using some other coping techniques. Though we may all do it a little bit, wallowing isn't the goal here as much as simply "re-grouping," if you will. Related to this is simple relaxation and deep-breathing, which can be helpful coping strategies that reduce our immediate arousal and let us get our thoughts and feelings straight which, in turn, helps us make better decisions about how to handle problems. (Maybe that's what Superman is up to, in part, when he inhales deeply and exhales with a gale-force wind.)

Instead of a shield, sometimes we need a mirror to help us cope. That is, we can look at ourselves and confront our own "demons" by talking or writing about the stressors, and our various reactions to them in a safe place. These can be excellent ways to process our grief, anger, disappointments, and fears, allowing a path to release some of the energy that is bottled up in us about an issue or event. It can be a temporarily challenging emotional and physiological stress in itself to do that—to talk it or write it out—but once you've told your story it is often as if you can see what you've been feeling or thinking instead of it feeling such a jumble inside. That has a way of helping many folks feel, or at least start to feel, better. This sort of processing can be a precursor to accepting in a peaceful way (with or without the help of a spiritual belief system) whatever happened and simply learning to live with it. Indeed, as simple as it sounds, choosing to "let it go" is often a most powerful option as few things release stress and return peace and power back to us faster than truly letting something lift from our minds and our shoulders.

3. PROACTIVE COPING—SPIDEY-SENSE, STOCKPILES, AND A SUPPORTING CAST

The problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies we just covered assume something has occurred and you are responding to it—you are dealing with stressors that are present or have already happened. Ah, but there is so much more to coping than just reacting! A wise person will start to build their Spidey-Sense to ward off stressful events, or at least minimize them, before they even happen. If we are pro-actively coping (what Spider-Sense is all about!) instead of just reacting to life's big or little onslaughts we try to prevent them. For instance, if you sense change in the wind at work about lay-offs or reorganization, you might start networking or sending out résumés. Then you're a little ahead of the game by buying yourself some space and time, a head start to the job hunt, if you need it. So if Spidey-Sense is a resource in itself, so is the space and time it can buy us, and the building up of various resources are key to proactive coping. Think of it in terms of Batman or other gadgeteer heroes building up a stock of weapons or gadgets so they know they are ready in advance. That's pro-active coping. Even Batman's other identity is pro-active in that Bruce Wayne certainly has a nice stock of money (and probably various forms of health and property insurance). So financial-related resources or planning can also buffer us from some stresses as we know the lack, or mismanagement, of finances causes great woes. And even our costume, er, I mean our clothes can be a resource if we think pro-actively. We may not have or need the special cool clothes that Batman has but we can still be preventative in our attire. That is, superheroes would certainly think to wear SPF 30 fabric if they'd be hiking in the sun (or had skin cancer in the family), dress for success for a date or an interview, and button up their overcoat when the wind is free. So space, time, tools, clothes, and money are all important resources that we can think of as we develop our Spidey-Sense or gadgeteer's tool belt. But there are resources that lay within us, or within those around us, that are as, or more, valuable.

Possibly one of the most important resources for coping—whether for pro-active coping or for after-the-stressor coping—is social support. Social support is, in short, making and keeping good friends.

We don't have to have a lot of them as the key here is quality . . . we need folks to whom we can talk, who will listen to us talk, and, whether they know it or not, offer us some form of comfort. Even an animal companion, or a Wookiee, can be an important source of support with their quiet, loyal company. Self-awareness is another important internal resource we can build with time. Being willing to know ourselves through introspection and getting feedback from trusted others is helpful in acknowledging our hot buttons and weaknesses. Once we learn, and are really willing to acknowledge, what things act like Kryptonite to us we can then avoid them or plan how to handle them. That's pro-active coping at its best.

Related to self-awareness and social support is an interesting personal resource, of sorts, in the form of role diversity. By role diversity, I mean consciously realizing and observing the different roles we inhabit in our life that make up our identity. For instance, we may be a child, a parent, a sibling, a manager, an employee, a co-worker, a hiker, a member of the bowling team, a volunteer at a civic organization, etc. When we remember that we are more than any one of our roles, we are better able to cope with disappointment or trauma in any one area (or cope with distress in general), assuming most of our other roles are positive experiences. Think of this as similar to the warning not to "put all your eggs in one basket." If we do—if we have very few roles, or only one—it may be quite a bit more stressing when something goes wrong in that one area as we wouldn't have the good stuff in the other roles/areas of our lives to help balance it out. Yes, of course, there is a balance to be had. Logic would dictate that 100 many roles, or too many that we perceive as negative, overwhelming, or unrewarding, could cause role-overload. But if we have developed our Spidey-Sense, in this case an honest sense for what is stressful for us, *as individuals*, we can each then decide if there is a diminishing return in taking on a new role, or keeping hold of versus letting go of an old one.

Superheroes, it's true, may not have the same range of roles that we do as their primary role is often so all-encompassing. But their non-hero identities or love interests provide some role diversity and it is hard to argue against the benefits that Batman gets from having Robin as a sidekick, or what Peter Parker or Clark Kent get from

their personal lives. Peter, for instance, seems to enjoy his role being mild-mannered and helpful to his aunt, Mary Jane, and others in his birth identity. That doesn't keep him from being a kick-ass wise-cracker as Spider-Man. He learns a lot from his various roles and grows through the honorable decisions he makes in regard to the family and friends that help anchor him. Yes, not being a total loner introduces some stress as he is aware that his loved ones are at risk if his enemies learn his true identity, but keeping the people in his life, and keeping his secret, is worth it as these loved ones—through providing him general social support, tips to help him be more self-aware, and adding to his role diversity in a healthy way—also help him combat stress.

Along the same lines of being self aware about the role of identity and social support, we can learn from superheroes about the stress of feeling alone in the world. Consider that some of the most popular superheroes were orphaned and some notable villains had a mean or unloving parent. Indeed, these situations that involved feeling isolated, alone, or misunderstood in the back-stories of many comic book superheroes or villains help us relate to them. We may relate because it resonates with how alone we feel at times (whether it is during stressful times or not), how isolated or different or alienated) we may sometimes feel from those around us (especially when some of our "mutant" characteristics start surfacing). The positive coping that superheroes demonstrate (compared to super-villains) helps us appreciate what our culture values in rugged individualism and pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps—something we have to do all too often, yes? Still, while superheroes often have the loss of loved ones in their past or present, and often have to go it alone for awhile (or in some ways), they find ways to take strength from that and, really, aren't so alone as they may think. (And neither are we). Superheroes seem to have the love of their real or surrogate families and/or have joined a new family, in some sense of the word. For instance, they might create their own "family" with other superheroes who come together by virtue of similar levels of excellence in their mission, like with the Justice League band of super superheroes. Or they might come together due to a similar sense of being misunderstood or persecuted minority mutants, like with the X-Men in which

Professor Xavier and Magneto both play father-like roles for their bands of marvelous mutants who support each other in their respective missions. With the Fantastic Four, they were friends and relatives before they suffered a similar transformational fate and, thus, continued to value sharing the ups and downs of life together afterward. Even Buffy the Vampire Slayer who, like previous slayers, was supposed to work alone in order to keep her focus and not risk innocents, found that she became a much better (and longer-lived) slayer by having her friends work with her and, in the end, finding a way to share her power with many others. These heroes are just like you and me in that we have our biological family of origin, we have families or groups we are more or less thrown into, and still other "families" we choose or create. Good coping often includes finding or making a place that feels good with people who like us for who we are and will help us grow to be the best we can be. (Or, I suppose, in the case of the villains who band together, help us on the way to being the worst we can be.) Our comic book comrades, like us, find ways to meet our apparent need to belong. Interestingly, perhaps you have partially met that need by being a superhero fan, yes? That is, when specific groups of fans develop that follow a certain hero, we sometimes—without even trying—suddenly belong to a group of folks who understand certain universes of being that many others do not. So, if, perchance, we felt like an outsider before then we aren't anymore—we've become an insider. We've found a clutch of social support, we've found another role.

With social support being as important as it is, you can imagine that the flip-side is equally important—we need to, like any superhero would, dispatch without delay any people who are not supportive or, worse, who do us wrong. While open communication and forgiveness may be appropriate in some circumstances, it isn't always. When encountering an "anti-supporter," a super-villain (a toxic person who is damaging to us mentally, emotionally, physically, or spiritually) or a symbiote (someone who sucks the life out of us like an energy-vampire with their neediness), we need to take decisive, definitive action. Indeed, no matter how much we think we can take someone's toxin and no matter what little boost of ego we may get from being needed or "rescuing" someone, it isn't worth the risk. A

wise superhero would banish them quickly to The Vault (the maximum security prison for super-villains in the Marvel universe) or The Void (that has housed mutant bad guys in a video game version of the X-Men universe). Whatever you want to call it, the key is to vanquish, in one way or another, the people in our life who treat us poorly, don't appreciate us, or who neglect or actively work against our enjoyment or fulfillment of our life goals and dreams. Modern day heroes like us—of the ordinary, human variety—really don't have the resources and time for drawn out interactions with these enemies, no matter how subtle their poison.

YOU ARE HEROIC

Many of us admire superheroes because we want to be like them somehow—they often deal so well with the major stressors they encounter as they protect the planet, fight crime, and rescue the innocent, or go to war for some vengeful reason (if you're into the darker hero sorts). For us mortals, our lives may not be so much about dealing with the dire and dramatic, but our modern stresses can compare to the roughest rogue's gallery of any superhero. The thugs across the street, the goons at work, and the criminals in traffic: we deal with our own version of stresses. When Superman saves the day, the crowds cheer. But many a superhero's good deeds are not publicly displayed; many occur unobserved by anyone other than the criminal he's bested and the person he's protected. These deeds occur just because they are the right thing to do and not for the accolades they may garner. Beyond issues of "right" or "wrong," the deed could occur as a random act of kindness, something a hero does "just because."

That's how it is for us most of the time, isn't it? We do many little things, like kindly let people ahead of us in lines or in traffic. Or, we probably "save the day" more often than we get credit for. Big or small, our heroic deeds often go unnoticed when we really do deserve a cheer or a pat on the back—even if we provide it for our selves. Indeed, being our own cheerleader is one more way we can buffer stress and it is important to acknowledge our minor triumphs, the small hurdles, and subtle victories that accumulate to equal our happiness, our success, and our well-being. And often what we admire

in superheroes is their sense of purpose, powerful passion, or clear mission. For some of us, our purpose may be hazy at times and we may not know what something in our life means until, like a movie, we finish the scene or have seen the final ending. (Truly, it's sometimes hard to know from just one frame of film how to contextualize an experience.) For others, we may have a purpose that underpins our entire lives or one that shifts as we mature and encounter different challenges and opportunities. For still others, we may at times feel our life is either a painfully dull rut or a stressful cauldron void of meaning. Even then, a heroic coper will remember that we have a choice; we can choose to find or make meaning in each minute, or each episode, even if it is just to enjoy, learn, or survive—if not become a hero crusading against, or protecting others from, the evil that caused the rut or temporary void of meaning.

Yes, staying alert to meaning, finding a moment to remember all we've accomplished, and being grateful for what we have can be some of the best coping strategies of all. After all, think about it: while you may not be a force to be reckoned with on the scale of a comic book superhero, you *are* a success and have been a hero in your own life (and, no doubt, in the lives of many others) in great and small ways. Remember that and remind yourself of all you've seen, learned, done, and overcome. Hold yourself in the same positive regard in which you hold your favorite superhero. Imagine yourself as the hero in your own comic book. Therein lies the seed to seeing your own personal greatness and claiming inner peace, if we just take the time to notice.

Dr. Stephanie R. deLuse, psychologist, researcher, author, and teacher, is also Associate Faculty Director of the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies (BIS) program at Arizona State University. Her graduate training focused on social and personal issues that affect most of us at one time or another—issues around individual/group interactions, family support and divorce, and health and wellness. Her most recent academic efforts have earned her recognition for her teaching, including selection as one of ASU's Featured Faculty in 2006 and an Outstanding Faculty Award in 2005. In her spare free time she communes with nature most frequently in the guise of her cat, her trees, and her herb garden replete with insect life and lizards.

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Bradley J. Daniels

ARKHAM ASYLUM: FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY AND GOTHAM'S (NOT SO) "SERIOUS HOUSE"

Did you ever notice how many of Batman's worst enemies—such as the Joker—keep breaking out of Gotham City's Arkham Asylum? What's up with that? In this essay, Daniels focuses on Arkham Asylum, treating us to a history of the asylum and explaining how criminals are likely to end up at Arkham (for the criminally insane) rather than Blackgate Penitentiary (for criminals who, in theory, are not insane). Daniels also explains the ways in which Arkham, and the treatment it provides, is similar to and different from actual institutions for the criminally insane.

IN THE DC COMICS UNIVERSE, whenever the Dark Knight captures a member of his rogue's gallery or some other deranged criminal, they are almost always inevitably committed to the Elizabeth

GRAPHIC NOVELS/FILM

*Is the Punisher a psychopath or just an incredible bad-ass?
Did Spider-Man make a good career choice?
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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SUPERHEROES puts your favorite comics characters on the couch and shows how much psychology can teach us about superheroes, and how much superheroes can teach us about psychology. From real-life mind reading to Wonder Woman's perverse personality, from a visit to Arkham Asylum to why Mr. Incredible goes on a diet, dozens of fascinating insights are provided into the minds of the masked crusaders ... and into our own psyches.

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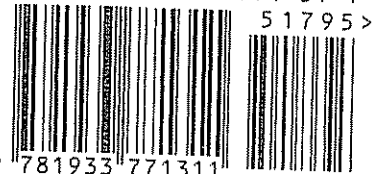
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