Letter from the President: stress

We interpreters are constantly on the go. We expend considerable mental energy and time on preparation, acquainting ourselves with a wide range of highly technical subjects, making our own travel arrangements whilst trying to keep our work-life balance on an even keel.

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Undeniably interpreters face unrelenting stress. What form does it take? Should we consider it friend or foe? Can we control it; even make an ally of it?

All work causes some kind of stress. Perhaps a person has to toil long hours, or doesn’t get on with his colleagues or line manager; workers may have to meet targets but have no say in how to achieve them. In a profession of freelances there may be different causes of stress, but it is as pervasive.

At its most visible, stress comes from the world around us - material concerns, other people or our own lifestyle; this is known as exogenous stress. Every interpreter has to satisfy several simultaneous demands: keeping his calendar up to date, arranging travel, finding a hotel, packing, corresponding with clients, sending invoices, and keeping accounts and work statistics.

A freelance constantly deals intensively yet briefly with a broad range of often very technical subjects. This calls for cramming: you have to find the information you need or sort what has been sent by the organiser, print the stuff out and bone up on the specialised vocabulary. And meetings don’t arrive singly; at busy times of the year they come thick and fast, so the interpreter is preparing several conferences at the same time and trying to juggle all the travel arrangements.

The mental effort of preparation plus the strain of making travel arrangements create stress. It’s down to time management: can I manage to do the necessary homework before rushing to the station or airport in time to clear security and get to my hotel not too late and then to the venue in time for the conference? Many things are beyond our control (strikes, delays), so an interpreter must develop a keen sense of how much time is needed, but then is always liable to stress if unforeseen circumstances upset his timetable.

There are outside stressors at the meeting too: changes to the schedule that play havoc with the timetable or the elaborate system of relays, gabbled speeches, poor presentational skills on the part of speakers or things said entirely out of context, problems within the team or things to discuss with the technician, or difficulties with the booths such as ventilation, sound quality and so on.

Clearly mental nimbleness and an ability to absorb another person’s ideas, coping techniques for difficult speakers and the ability to keep several irons in the fire (aka multitasking) are things we learn during training to deal with cognitive load. Individually the challenges are not insurmountable, but in conjunction they may make the interpreter feel “swamped”, to be “running on empty”, in other words stress.
Work is not the only source of stress. We are past masters at creating our own, endogenous, stress. Think back to how anxious we all felt as beginners: would we be up to the job, would we compare favourably with our more experienced colleagues, had we done enough (and the appropriate) preparation? Would we get enough work to make it as interpreters?

Age and experience do not shield us from this existential-cum-professional angst. Given the economic realities of the world we live in, it is perfectly reasonable to worry about the future, to wonder whether our languages will be in demand and about what professional life holds in store. And to cap it off, our profession is not the only source of endogenous or exogenous stress: our private life, family, general health, and other activities bring their dose of fears, tension and worry. Here again taken singly we can cope; it is the concatenation of problems of all types hitting us simultaneously from several directions and sometimes at the worst possible moment that creates the tangible tension that we find hard to shed and which, in its turn, may take hold of us.

We should not forget that stress, although the result of anxiety and psychological tension, manifests as something specific and physical. In the short term it causes breathing problems and affects our heart rate. We are all aware that breathing is what gives us our voice, with which we earn our living and which we must maintain and nurture. An interpreter’s voice is the medium through which most of the message passes, and calmness, ease and fluidity of rendition reassure and ring true to our listeners. Poor and irregular breathing also deprive the brain of sufficient oxygen, causing our concentration to slip and leading to anxiety.

Over the long term the prognosis is even gloomier: insomnia, stomach problems, irritability, serious illness... I will keep the list short, as I don’t want this article to cause more stress.

However there are several effective ways of dealing with stress, either by tackling it from within, in other words stopping it from getting too firm a hold on us, or by learning to live with the external stressors that the modern world and our profession impose.

We should know how to escape the feeling of being pressured from all sides. We need to learn to plan our daily lives, to manage our time sensibly, to stick to strict and regular timetables, to respect our need for sleep, to set ourselves attainable – i.e. quantifiable and measurable – professional targets, to set aside rest periods when we disconnect from the world and all the paraphernalia of modern communication.

We should also learn how to lead a healthy life so we are better able to withstand the inevitable predations: eat healthily, get exercise, clear our heads in the countryside, get fresh air, relax physically (gym or massage), have pastimes that release pressure or meditate (so we can take a step back from the intrusive daily routine).

Stress experts are happy to concede it comes in two forms: good stress and bad stress. Bad stress paralyses us and makes us feel we’ve lost control over our own lives. It robs us of our free time, torments us and makes us live life at 100 mph, creating anxiety and nervousness. Good stress is akin to an actor’s controlled stage fright when he goes before the public; it spurs and galvanizes us, makes us gather our physical and mental strength, keeps us concentrated. We must learn to tame it and make it an ally.

This Issue

The annual AIIC survey provides insight into interpreter demographics, market evolution, language use in conferences and much more. The 2009 report went further, comparing data for the previous five years. And that is where we start, with Jacquy Neff’s Statistical Portrait of AIIC.

AIIC’s Private Market Sector (PriMS) is always on top of developments, and its biannual meetings always serve as a forum of discussion. Recently certification, professional conference organisers
(PCOs), and remote interpreting have been on the agenda.

The first of these is covered by Birgit Christensen in Interpretation and Certification: “Interpreters need to examine the underlying question: how can we assure what clients, users and practitioners all want: quality.”

In 2010 the PriMS brought interpreters and PCOs together in Rome. Babette Siebel and Birgit Christensen tell us that they have a lot in common in The Business of Conference Interpreting in a Changing Environment.

Will improved technology push us out of the conference room anytime soon? The PriMS takes on the question in Conference and Remote Interpreting.

Next we turn to our friends on the Staff Interpreters' Committee for their annual rundown of what’s hot in the institutions: Growing by Leaps and Bounds.

And we wrap up with Language in the News, which points its searchlight at the controversy surrounding certification, books, webcasts, blogs and apps, and much more in the wide world of words.

[1] About 10 – 15 per cent of AIIC members are staff interpreters with national or international organisations, with all the duties and privileges tenure brings. This article focuses on freelances who work short contracts for many employers.

Recommended citation format: