
Coping with stress

By Thomas E. Backer, PhD.

It is 4:20 a.m., and the coffee grinder makes angry noises as it turns little brown beans into what will help actress Sandra Deel open her eyes long enough to get into the studio for her 7:00 call on "Love Boat." Deel, who has starred on Broadway (the original "South Pacific") and on national tours ("Company"), as well as in a short-lived TV sitcom ("Needles and 'Pins"), now finds the pickings on TV fairly slim. She spends most of her time as a successful real estate salesperson in Los Angeles. Her "Love Boat" guest shot has one good scene, and she'll be working with old friends.

Still, doing the show is a lot of hassles: getting up before daybreak, rearranging a busy work schedule so she can spend all day on the set waiting to do one scene. Learning lines under pressure because the script was late — delivered by a friendly neighbor who found it behind a bush on his way out to jog! Hard negotiations over terms that a few years ago would have been giv-

"The key is how stresses are handled"

en her without question. More pressure once she gets on the set, walking in cold and working with many strange faces, trying to keep up momentum for her part despite all the delays. In short, the reality isn't much like the glamorous image conjured up by "doing a guest shot on a hit TV series."

As a psychologist concerned with helping people learn to mobilize their personal resources to make work more creative and satisfying, I'm well aware that every kind of work has its pressures. Disappointment mixed with pleasure, triumph laced with frustration — these are the conditions of life at work for everyone. So Sandra Deel and her fellow actors in television are hardly alone in having some psychological stresses that are part of the career they've chosen.

But some of these pressures are special — and can be difficult to handle. Even great success brings its problems: long working hours, worry about whether your show will be on the air next season if the ratings drop, concern about how to best develop a fast-growing career, and so forth. The pressures are there for everyone. The key is how these psychological stresses and strains get handled, how an actor learns to cope with the pressures so that the many equally special rewards and joys of acting can be savored. Most people choose acting as their career because they truly love the work; that's why they put up with the problems and pressures! The trick, then, is to learn how to "put up with" more creatively, with less damage to health, happiness and peace of mind.

Looking at some of these frustrations and pressures also is important in helping to dispel what I see as a common myth about actors — that they're

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all “neurotic,” all “just children,” that they get into acting “to show off” or “to escape from reality.” Hogwash! Acting, like any other type of work, brings together a great diversity of people — some may be sick, but many others are healthy. The common thread is not so much in the people who act, but in the nature of the work itself: acting offers unusual opportunities for creative expression and many other rewards; it also has its unique pressures, and some people cope better than others. Improving those coping skills first requires knowing what the stresses are, and that was the opening question I asked a number of actors who were generous enough to share some of their experiences with me.

Rejection is one source of pressure for almost all actors. It is a cliché to say that actors are insecure, but the number of times most actors get rejected for every part they win is high enough to warrant some insecurity! Veteran actress Sandra Gould, who’s starred in 12 TV series and made more than 5,000 radio shows, still goes out on cattle calls for work on TV. Counting possible jobs from sitcoms to cleanser commercials, she may do 20 auditions for every part she gets. “Your phone is your lifeline while you wait to hear what happened at the audition,” she says, “and even when you do get a job, when it’s done you think you’ll never work again!” As an actor, Gould pointed out, you’re not selling a product, you’re **selling yourself**, and that makes the high rate of rejection even harder to take. On a purely statistical basis, being a professional actor probably involves hearing “sorry, you’re not right for the job” more often than any other kind of work.

An important consequence of rejection, simply put, is that the actor is then **not able to work**, can’t use the skills he or she may have spent years acquiring. This inability to put training and skills to work is the frustration of unemployed people everywhere — it just happens that actors more often than most other people as a group have to put up with periods of enforced idleness. Bleak statistics put out by unions like the Screen Actors Guild testify to this. The resulting psychological strain can be considerable, and is something almost all actors experience at some point in their careers.

“doing a series —
like living under a rock”

Unusual and demanding work hours face actors who do get jobs. For those who work in television, the hours are often very long, and may have to be put in when your family and friends are doing sane things like sleeping or eating dinner. Bernie Kopell of *Love Boat* quotes an actor friend: “doing a series is like living under a rock,” and there’s truth to this. Dinner invitations go unkept, vacations are canceled, family relationships get strained under the relentless grind of the camera and the clock. Combine this with the relatively long periods even successful actors may be out of work, and you have a recipe for mental strain. Books on brainwashing will tell you that constantly altering sleep and other daily activity periods can profoundly disorient a person — is it any wonder that actors get punchy by the end of a season’s shooting on a TV series?

Probably more often than actors who work on stage or in films, regulars on TV shows complain about **loss of identity**. Particularly because television moves the actor right into people’s living rooms, there is a blurring effect that can damage careers (being too strongly identified with a part) and also damage fragile egos. Years after doing her last “Bewitched” Sandra Gould still has to sign “Mrs. Kravitz” underneath her own name to satisfy eager young autograph hounds. She does it good-naturedly, and realizes there’s a compliment to her talent, too; for less secure actors or those who don’t get work because they are “typed” by one role, the problem can be much more serious.

Sometimes, the identity problem crops up even with an actor’s colleagues. Janice Rule remembers with amusement her first acting assignment as a whore, a choice part in a television show. “The technical crew on this particular project,” she says, “was one I had worked with often over the years. Because there is a funny mystique about the so-called New York actor, I had always been treated with a kind of distant respect. But after a few days of shooting, members of the crew began to whistle when I walked on the set and talk to me in a kind of buddy-buddy slang. The topper came when the sweet old sound man took me into a corner and told me a very dirty, vulgar story.”

And Sandra Gould tells how her social life has been affected by people’s tendency to equate her with the parts she’s played: “I’ve had to fight a war to be accepted in this town as a human being, not a round-faced, high-voiced caricature.”

Doing good work under time pressure is a problem for all TV actors, and has been talked about so much it is a cliché. What some outsiders may not realize, though, is how personally traumatic it may be for some actors to be forced into working without adequate preparation. As actress Udana Power (she was Billy Crystal's amorous nurse in "Soap," and now co-stars in the syndicated "Life and Times of Eddie Roberts") says, "It's tough to dive into the pool when there's no water there! Theatre-trained actors like Betty Garrett, used to weeks of rehearsal, find it tough getting up to performance level in only a day or two, yet that's what working on TV all too often demands.

Mixed in with time pressure is the demand to **keep characterizations fresh**, despite doing some scenes over and over again, while waiting endlessly for others. This can be especially challenging for the supporting players, whose characters are not central to the action and may have little to do but provide "set-ups" for the stars. Betty Garrett, second banana to Penny Marshall and Cindy Williams in "Laverne and Shirley," finds that it takes all the ingenuity she can muster as an actor just to do a little more than merely "read the lines and go home."

Financial instability is a never-ending source of stress for actors who haven't yet enjoyed an uninterrupted period of success so that they can "get ahead of the game." Nearly every actor I've ever talked to remembers lean times, when the dismal alternatives were starvation or taking a non-acting job until the career shapes up. There are few vocations where such hard luck is so widespread, even among those who'd be rated objectively as both talented and experienced. And even for those who ultimately make it, the memory of financially hard times can linger, coloring career decisions in unhealthy ways (e.g., taking an acting job just because it pays well) and making it difficult to relax and enjoy success.

Lack of privacy is a source of considerable pressure for major stars of television series. The cliché about "life in a fishbowl" takes on quite a new reality the first time you find yourself mobbed in the supermarket or at a local restaurant, and some TV personalities find it necessary to isolate themselves from many of life's everyday activities as a result. The strains are much smaller for supporting players like Betty Garrett and Sandra Gould; they are recognized wherever they go, but, as Garrett puts it, "the attention is friendly and rather nice. Also, I love to be able to

get a good table in any restaurant I walk into."

Then there are the subtler stresses that come with success as an actor, particularly if it is sudden and unexpected. There may be lingering doubts about whether success is deserved, much less likely to last. Like survivors of some terrible disaster, the new series stars wonder: "Why me?" "Why not somebody else instead?" Couple self-doubts with the reality demands of coping with suddenly more complicated financial circumstances, a flurry of opportunities that have to be decided on, and a generally much greater level of activity, and it is no wonder that there is a "period of adjustment" for the newly successful. Bernie Kopell and his wife Yolanda have both had the joy of success over the last several years — he in his acting career, and she in real estate sales. "This is what we've been working so hard for," Kopell emphasizes, and both take genuine, well-deserved pleasure in the personal satisfaction, recognition by their peers, and the financial rewards. Yet "along with the good come many frustrations," Bernie Kopell goes on to say, and both he and his wife talk with insight about the "hazards of success." They have to fight for time together, experience resentment over all the new responsibilities their success has brought, and still find it hard to accept how much their lifestyle has really changed.

Thus, even with all the excitement and rewards of "making it" as a television actor, surviving the psychological pressures that go with the territory can be a real challenge. The actors I've talked to have each found their own ways to cope with the pressures their work brings so that they can fully experience the joys and rewards of their careers. What works for them might not for someone else, but there do seem to be some common threads that also make sense from what I know as a student of human behavior.

First, it is important to have something nourishing in your life **other than acting**. The people who survive stress of all sorts best are those who have a "safe haven" to retreat to, a place where enjoyment and success are possible even when the rest of life is frustrating. And more to the point, developing that alternative source of nourishment takes time and effort. Sandra Gould writes novels and magazine articles. Udana Power writes scripts, composes music, and has just finished her first novel. Bernie Kopell focuses time and energy on his home and supporting his wife's career. Janice Rule has developed a whole second career for herself; she has become a trained

therapist, and works with patients almost full-time as a clinical associate of the Southern California Psychoanalytic Institute.

“develop alternative source of nourishment”

Sometimes the best “other source” of nourishment may be another person. Betty Garrett remembers how much easier it was to put up with the frustrations of her work as an actor when she could share them with her late husband, Larry Parks; often, he’d set dinner on the table himself when she was working and he happened not to be. Bernie and Yolanda Kopell often turn down party invitations, preferring to spend evenings at home alone, sharing a bowl of popcorn and talking.

Another common “strategy for living” I found among those who seem to cope fairly well with the kinds of pressure mentioned earlier: these people take time to **process**, or try to understand and learn from their own experiences. Bernie and Yolanda Kopell talk regularly about how what each of them is doing relates to their longer-term goals, and to their overall philosophy of life. Udana Power reads not only books on acting, but also works of philosophy and religion, and spends time thinking about how the concepts she reads relate to her everyday life. Particularly for actors enjoying their first sustained career success, it becomes very easy to get totally absorbed in work, and to lose the perspective of goals and hopes — often, not even to notice how cherished dreams (a good marriage, raising a family, enjoying hobbies) are slipping away one by one. Just stopping long enough to think about where you want to be five years from now, and then examine how what you did last week will help — or hinder — you in getting there, can make an important difference. Moreover, regaining one’s perspective makes it easier to accept a certain degree of anxiety and upset as part of living, rather than wasting additional energy “worrying about being worried.”

Processing also means developing a career plan. Success brings with it a profusion of opportunities, and there has to be a careful selection from among them that will contribute the most to career development. Taking risks is still necessary, of course; as Betty Garrett puts it, “If you’re afraid of making a fool of yourself, you don’t belong in the theatre.” But the actors I talked to all seem to have taken the time to think about where they want their careers to go, even if **how** they decide to get there changes from week to week.

Udana Power, for example, is now making plans to record some songs she’s written before her new TV series goes into production. By the time her series airs, she’ll be well prepared to make a recording deal that could launch a whole new phase of her career. Sandra Deel turns down less appealing acting jobs because they interfere with her real estate activities. These are the kinds of thoughtful decisions that, in any type of work, make the difference between living life versus having it live you!

Perhaps most obvious of all in the strategies for coping with stress mentioned by the actors I talked

“be well prepared for your work”

to is this: be well prepared for your work. Udana Power frequently takes an entire script and records all the lines, leaving blank spaces where her part appears. Then she can rehearse totally on her own by simply turning the recorder on. Betty Garrett has worked hard to develop a facility for improvising lines — something often necessary in situation comedy shows because there may be no time to “grow into” the lines as written. Every actor has devices for preparation; the key is to use them thoroughly enough so that all the other sources of anxiety and upset aren’t simply added to by the nerves that come from being ill-prepared.

Finally, if the psychological stresses and strains of working as an actor seem to get out of hand despite your best efforts, the people I talked with all emphasized the need for getting outside help. Some of that help might be professional counseling regarding one’s career, or psychotherapy (Janice Rule suggests some form of therapy as helpful to any actor in improving their professional craft), or it might just be advice from a good friend.

There are many ways to reduce the stresses and strains of surviving as a television actor. What turns the ideas mentioned here into more than mere common sense is their emphasis on **action** and **hard work**. It is easy to think of strategies like “have a career plan” or “have something else in your life besides acting.” Much more difficult is turning the idea into a way of life. Actors **do** face an unusually high degree of psychological stress in their professional work, as compared with most other walks of life. Anyone who says differently simply hasn’t experienced the reality! That makes surviving as an actor more challenging than surviving in many other areas of work — but not impossible, as the talented actors whose philosophies and lifestyles I’ve shared a little of here certainly prove.