Jeff's entry is an excellent example of the way the journal works because it helps him to associate his symptom (the message that his body sent him that it was under stress) with the event that triggered off the alarm reaction of the GAS. In Jeff's case, the event had something to do with his boss's visit. Note that Jeff is still far from understanding exactly what it was that triggered his distress, but making the journal entry has alerted him to a possible pattern behind his experience of stress at work. By continuing to observe himself, Jeff will be able to get a more accurate impression of precisely what it is the boss does that causes Jeff to react with an upset stomach. Once he has a clearer idea of the cause of his stress, Jeff will be in a much better position to take action to alleviate, or even eliminate, his stress reaction.

As with brainstorming, the stress journal will work best for you if you keep it regularly over a period of at least several weeks. Some insights may come more quickly, of course, but ingrained patterns of stress-producing behavior often take repeated observation and thoughtful reflection before they become comprehensible. In stress self-analysis, the degree of success is often directly related to the amount of time given to brainstorming or the keeping of the journal.

TECHNIQUES FOR INTERPRETATION

As you become aware of a pattern between a particular stress signal that you experience and a sequence of events that seems to trigger that stress, the next step is to interpret the meaning of that pattern. Sometimes the interpretation will occur spontaneously. For instance, a man night notice that he is always tense and tired after he arrives home from work. Yet as he checks over his journal, he sees that he seldom if ever feels those signs stress before he leaves for home.
Suddenly he realizes the stressful toll taken by his daily commute in heavy traffic. "That's it!" he thinks, "that ___ drive is killing me?". With this insight, the meaning of his stress pattern becomes clear, and the man is ready to consider what he might do to reduce the stress of driving -- take the bus or train, join a carpool, look for a closer job, etc.

Unfortunately, not all interpretation is so spontaneous. In many cases it requires more effort to discover the meaning of a particular stress pattern. Two techniques that are often helpful in doing this are **language association**, and **self questioning**.

(1) **Language Association** depends upon commonly used phrases or expressions that mention either a part of the body or some other sensation that indicates tension or stress. These may include such expressions as "He's a pain in the neck," She's such a heartache," or "I can't stomach that."

It is no accident that expressions such as these occur in our language, as these expressions communicate feelings -- and feelings are often connected metaphorically with the body. Our postures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures are some of the bodily ways of reflecting feelings. Our language merely takes the process one step further using works for various body parts or sensations to describe feelings. If we are angry, for example, we may communicate that feeling simultaneously on a variety of channels, through **posture** (sharp, angular movements), **facial expression** (curled lips, tight eyebrows, flared nostrils), **tone of voice** (harsh, high pitched), **gestures** (forceful threatening, and **language** ("You ___ ___ ___").

This regular use of words that describe body or sensations as a way of expressing feeling provides us with a powerful tool for interpreting patterns of stress. If you discover in your stress self-analysis that you are experiencing a pattern of stress response that involves a part of your
body, allow yourself to free-associate to the name of that body part. That is, make yourself comfortable and relaxed, and then begin to think about the body part that is involved in your stress pattern. Try to think of some common expression that refers to that part of the body, and then see whether that expression applies in any way to the stress pattern you are trying to learn about. Here's an example: suppose you have discovered a pattern that results in your experiencing of gastritis (a burning sensation in the esophagus caused by excess stomach acid) or stomach cramping. Using language association, you might think of your stomach and any common phases that might refer to it, such as "I can't stomach that." Then try to apply that phrase to your own situation, such as a situation or a person in your environment. Usually this is best done in a question format ("Whom or what can't I stomach?"). By such free-association you may be better able to become conscious of the connection between a body part and the distress you have been feeling.

A variation of this approach that may be useful is to use writing instead of just thinking as the means of free-associating. Just write down the name of the body part(s) or sensations involved in your stress pattern, and then just write about them, jotting down whatever comes into your mind. If you choose this method, it is important to realize that this is an exercise in self-discovery—not in fancy or formal writing. If you free-associate in writing, it is important to write quickly and without reflection. Write rapidly and spontaneously, concentrating only on getting words onto the paper. Later, you can be critical and reflective; the free-association method of writing simply provides you with raw material that you can then investigate more carefully to see what relation it bears to your stress pattern. If you have trouble writing freely and spontaneously, you might want to make a contract with yourself that you will write without
stopping for a set period of time, usually 5 or 10 minutes. Don't remove your pencil or pen from
the paper (or your fingers from the computer or typewriter), and make no corrections. Just write
whatever comes into your mind about the body part that is involved in your stress pattern. Like
the brainstorming process discussed earlier, free-association—whether in the mind or on paper—
will often lead spontaneously to insight into the nature of the stressful patterns that affect your
life. Also, like brainstorming or the journal, this free-association technique usually works best
if it is practiced regularly. Plan time each day or two to do this.

This technique is exemplified by the case of Cindy, a dental student who had been
referred by her physician for psychological examination. Cindy's problem was chronic neck
pain, for which no organic cause could be found. As part of her treatment, Cindy began to keep
a stress journal. After a few weeks, she became aware that the pain tended to peak at certain
times and diminish at others. Further observation revealed that such increases normally occurred
at home. Cindy continued her journal until she had a clear conception of her stress pattern.
Then she began to use language association. Because the journal had worked so well, Cindy
decided to try writing as her vehicle for free-association, and she soon discovered that she had
written the following entry:

"My neck has been hurting so bad. Why does it hurt? Who is giving me this bad pain
in the neck? When does it hurt? My mother! My mother! It's her. She is a real pain
in the neck. I mean in my neck!"
Cindy went on to discover that she deeply resented her mother's intrusion into Cindy's recent marriage. The pain correlated, she discovered, with her mother's numerous phone calls and unannounced visits. Once Cindy became aware of the source of her pain, she was able to learn to express her anger toward her mother and to demand appropriate restrictions on her mother's visits and calls. (Can you think of any other approach to solving this problem?) After this was resolved, Cindy's mysterious neck pains gradually disappeared.

Self Questioning

In addition to language association, there is also a second technique for interpreting the meaning of your stress patterns. Self-questioning is a more direct, straightforward technique. You may find that you can use it more easily, or you may try it if the free-association technique is not productive. Before beginning the self-questioning procedure, use brainstorming or the stress journal to reveal your stress pattern to you. Once you have a clear picture of that pattern in mind, ask yourself the following sequence of question:

1. What am I doing when I get the distress signal? Whom am I with?
2. Is it always the same person? Or the same activity?
3. If different situations are involved, do they have common characteristics?
4. To which common characteristics do I react?
5. Does this person or situation remind me of someone or something that I have felt negative about in the past?
6. What is it about the context of the stress pattern that sets off my stress reaction?
7. When the stress reaction occurs, what are my primary feelings?
8. What do I tell myself that keeps me from expressing those feelings? (Or: What personal rules keep me from expressing those feelings?)

9. If I could express those feelings at the time I felt them, what would I feel like?

10. I am binding myself by not expressing the feelings the situation arouses. In what alternative ways could I release the tension generated by those bound feelings?

The systematic use of this series of questions can often help to free us from the stress pattern in which we have been caught. Let us look at an example of the use of the self-questioning technique: Jim is an upper-level manager who finds that he experiences a stress pattern when he interacts with his boss in certain ways. More specifically, whenever he and the boss disagree about company policy, Jim finds his heart beating irregularly and he feels chest pains. Jim is frightened about these symptoms, and he uses both brainstorming and the stress journal to clarify some of the details of these interactions between his boss and himself. Then he asks the ten-question series. Both the questions and Jim's answers are given below:

1. Whom am I with when I get the chest pain and heart-beat problems?
   My boss, Mr. Bradley.

2. Is it always him?
   Yes, it is.

3. Are there common characteristics in these situations?
   Yes, he is always so arrogant!

4. What do I react to?
   He's such a know-it-all. He won't give me credit for anything.
5. Does this remind me of anyone from my past?

6. What about the context?

7. What are my primary feelings?

8. How do I keep myself from expressing those feelings?

9. If I could express those feelings, how would I feel?

10. What alternatives do I have?

Yes... He's just as pigheaded as my father was. Couldn't tell him anything either.

He usually pulls his routine in front of other employees, and I feel I shouldn't confront him in public.

Frustration and sometimes rage.

I say, "Control yourself. He's the boss. Don't embarrass him in front of the others. The bastard might fire me if I did."

Really relieved.

Talk with him in private. Or tell him off and quit. Play racquet ball to relax. Don't take him so seriously. Talk to a friend to vent my feelings.
As you can see, self-questioning not only clarifies the nature and meaning of the stress pattern itself but also helps you to generate new ideas about other, more effective ways to cope with the situation. Here, too, as with the language-association technique, practice often leads to better results.

Many of us are not used to examining our behavior carefully, and it can take time to become comfortable and confident about our ability to learn from the messages that our body and mind send us about stress. Careful, repeated observation forms the foundation for our self-analysis. Brainstorming and the stress journal are both valuable tools with which to conduct such observation. Once stress patterns begin to emerge as a result of such careful attention, then is the time to apply various techniques of interpretation to help provide understanding of why the stress pattern operates as it does. Sometimes such understanding is nearly spontaneous, but other situations require the use of techniques such as language association or self-questioning. Taken together, these various methods of observation and interpretation offer a unique opportunity for you to practice your own stress self-analysis. While many of the topics that will be discussed subsequently will be of value, none of them can substitute for an effective, personal stress self-analysis!