



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 42, No. 1

HEAD OFFICE, MONTREAL, FEBRUARY 1961

### *The Tensions of Home and Job*

**M**OST of us fit into our world well enough most of the time. We accept it with composure, and to some degree we shape our pattern of living in it. But sometimes the pattern that gives order and meaning to our lives goes awry.

There are annoyances in every walk of life. They are incidental to living. Because we spend most of our time in the home and at work, these two places are the source of many of our frictions, with our outside social environment third. To fret about these frictions and irritations is to generate tension of an unhealthy kind.

Our common practice is to allow tension to grow under our own heedlessness till it presses upon us with exasperating force, and then we blow up. We have not mastered the daily routine of living. We feel pushed and pressed, and we have lost the great art of healing: quietness.

Anyone speaking about tension must do so with reserve, because we know so little about it, its causes and its effects.

Tension of the right sort is a good thing. Without it there could be no life.

Too much tension is a disease, but so is too little. There are occasions when we ought to be tense, when an excess of tranquillity, perhaps imposed by a chemical, is entirely inappropriate. Normal tension enables us to be constructive, to achieve, to be successful; artificial tranquillity gives us only boredom.

During sleep our tension level is low, like the head of steam in a boiler when the fire is banked up. When we awake, our tension reaches its normal working level. It doesn't stay exactly at normal, but goes up and down with the requirements of the day. Tension becomes bad when it is kept above normal working pressure for too long.

Dozens of situations arise every day which require you to mobilize to meet a big or little crisis, but once the crisis is past the body must let down.

If you are able to relax you are handling tension in a normal way, but if you keep steam up, if you remain geared for action even though no emergency exists, your tension is of the bad sort, leading to fatigue of body and confusion of mind.

Dr. Hans Selye, of the University of Montreal, whose contributions in the field of stress have given medical science a new viewpoint on health, wrote in his book *The Stress of Life*: "Stress is part of life. It is a natural by-product of all our activities; there is no more justification for avoiding stress than for shunning food, exercise, or love. But, in order to express yourself fully, you must first find your optimum stress-level, and then, use your adaptation energy at a rate and in a direction adjusted to the innate structure of your mind and body."

The disease of tension seems to have been with human beings in all ages, primitive and modern. Anger, hatred, grief and fear build up tension to the point where we are unable to cope with situations, and our failure to handle our problems shows up in the doctor's office. Unhealthy tension may be a nothingness. It may be caused by the absence of something accustomed; suddenly the music stops, or the job ends, or a loved one departs.

Tension may be caused by disappointment of your desires; by an incurring of your aversions; by your inward compulsion to possess, to dominate or to conform; by procrastinating, and then fretting about what hasn't been done; or by such little irritations as an unexpected bill or a flickering on the television set. To the tension-prone person any of these assumes the proportions of a catastrophe.

#### *How tension starts*

What are the symptoms of undue tension? It shows itself mentally in a feeling of restlessness, irritability, intolerance, and anxiety. Physically, it seems to have favourite spots in various people, such as the head, the heart, the muscles.

When you find yourself in a state of uncomfortable tension, and you don't seem to be able to get things done because of mental or physical obstructions, don't jump to the conclusion that your job is too big for you or that you are too old. Instead, inquire of yourself whether you are directing your energy properly.

Harmful tension is more likely to result from over-anxiety than from overwork. Remember the trouble the centipede got into when the frog asked him how he knew which of his hundred legs to move first. He started to worry about it, and got his legs so tangled that he couldn't move.

Many things will happen to cross and vex you. Civilization often demands that we postpone the gratification of our desires and that we crush the expression of our fears and dislikes. Instead of dealing with unpleasant things, we repress them, push them into the back of our consciousness, where they fester and breed tension.

Everyone can become discontented if he ignores his blessings and looks only at his burdens, or if he allows himself to be plagued by a sense of terrible urgency about something when his common sense tells him his resources are inadequate to resolve the problem or meet the situation. Tension may be caused by conceit: we wish to appear as good or as clever as we would like to be; or, having boasted of something, we feel compelled to live up to it.

### *Conflict and escape*

Many people who are otherwise normal suffer from conflict situations. They want, and they also don't want.

In one sense all life is conflict and all conflict is good. We have to struggle to keep ourselves alive. Out of that struggle has come most of the intelligence we possess. If we were spoon-fed by Nature we should doubtless be Nature's morons.

But we go beyond what is needed. We are continually increasing tension between our inner personality and the role in which we find ourselves cast.

Parents, for example, are living in a different world from the one in which they were brought up. Material values have changed, goals have changed, education has changed, the relationship between parent and child has changed. Amidst all this innovation, where should parents take their stand, plant their feet firmly, and say: "this you shall not change"? How far can they go along with the times and still retain the things that matter, the principles upon which their faith and their social sense are grounded?

This is a question which sets up tensions within individuals and between members of the family. It is a problem with some guide-marks toward solution, but the answer is different for every person and family.

An old book on the art of strategy gives a helpful suggestion, calling it the "Law of Minor Concessions": concede as much as possible. Enquire of the situation: can the point be yielded without putting the main issue in danger?

There are, really, only two choices. We must fight or give in. Fight means changing the situation: that is positive adjustment. But flight from the situation may also be normal. It is the chronic state of indecision which is bad.

In many circumstances, thought of escape must be put aside at once, because it offers no permanent solution of a problem. Of course, some people come to the point where they feel that they have been hurt too often, and they retreat rather than offer battle. Alas! they find that when fleeing from a lion they meet a bear, and on escaping into a house they lean against a wall, where a snake bites them.

Escape may take the form of regression to more primitive or childlike behaviour, contributing nothing toward solution of the problem or improvement of the frustrating situation.

Self-pity is another ineffectual escape. Much tension is caused by disappointment when the victim's headache, a cosmic tragedy to him, is not so regarded by those around him.

Some methods of escape are helpful because they give perspective and time to think. A trip away from the physical setting of your problem may be good, if it is not merely flight: to go shopping, to redecorate a room, to make a toy for a child; these give relaxation without a sense of futility.

What we should seek is strength to live successfully under pressure. It is spiritless to escape into the ill-conditioned state forecast by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* where all we need to do if we feel worried, anxious or upset is to take a pill.

Certain chemical compounds produce certain changes of consciousness and so give us a measure of self-transcendence and a temporary relief of tension. Huxley says that the so-called "tranquilizing drugs" are merely the latest addition to a long list of chemicals which have been used from time immemorial for changing the quality of consciousness. But if they are indulged in habitually they not only reduce tension but deflate our alertness, and therefore diminish our capacity to cope with life.

### *Tension in business*

Business is a strenuous game. A man needs to let down once in a while so as to recover his strength, but his health must be such that he is not forced to let down at the wrong time.

The average executive is called upon to do an almost superhuman job, living a life of endless crises which he must meet alone. The physical grind, to which most uninformed people direct their attention, is only a small part of the executive's tension-building burden. Business is remorseless in its demands upon a man's mind. It keeps his nerves twanging.

Even to be successful is not to avoid tension. The problems of success are more agreeable than those of failure, but they are no less difficult.

Privacy is a word with no meaning for the business executive. He is never alone; always the door is opening and someone is coming in.

He has to cope with modern technology and handle people. It is easier to wrestle with mechanical problems than with personalities. Some top executives have been heard to boast that their organizations have no politics, but every company, large or small, has a constant but perhaps concealed war for show and place going on. This is a natural state of affairs, and nothing to fret about except as we allow it to get out of proportion in our minds. But it is an added strain on the executive who must maintain efficient operation.

What effect has excess tension on an executive? It prevents him from thinking clearly, seeing situations objectively, planning policies soundly. What steps can he take to avoid harmful tension? To answer this question we must recognize that a man's anxieties are seriously aggravated by deficiencies in fundamental elements that are essential to the successful management of his business. Three of these requirements are: clear-cut statements of objectives and policies; sound organization structure, with every junior executive and worker knowing his duties and responsibilities; and good communication, made up of constant, habitual and automatic listening and telling.

### *Tension in the family*

The family is the oldest and most important of all social institutions. The hearthstone and all that it symbolizes of interdependence, co-operation, tolerance and understanding sympathy, is something to aspire to.

Here we have a social group in which there are exceptionally close and personal relationships. The situation is sensitive and delicate, almost as unstable as the magnetic needle. But the family is the only possible base upon which a society of responsible human beings has ever found it practicable to maintain the present and build for the future.

The family is kept going by certain fundamental virtues: some shared habits of mind, belief in persuasion, a willingness to think the best of fellow members even when differing, and a trustful exchange of informa-

tion and opinion. In a group like that, every day contains its due ration of affection.

When we think of tension, nevertheless, we must recognize that the family circle is the social situation of least reticence and most exacting demands.

The ancient accepted mould of the duties of parents to children and of children to parents is undergoing enormous change. The old standards of control and obligation have been modified. Economic and other changes have radically altered the relationship of husband and wife.

One constructive approach to the avoidance of family tension is much like the one proposed for business: the role and status of every member of the family must be properly recognized and appreciated by the other members.

This may demand a certain amount of family ritual, tending to unify the diverse elements of a family group into a harmonious unit. Ritual, such as doing regular household duties, and observing Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays and anniversaries as family get-together occasions, stimulates a sense of group participation, fosters family pride, and encourages refinements in personal relations.

### *The family budget*

There is no economic activity engaged in by human beings which affords so much personal satisfaction and happiness as does the careful handling of income. Yet this is a rock upon which many otherwise ideal husband-wife relationships founder.

Worry over money matters impairs working efficiency, threatens home tranquillity, and builds anxiety in every member of the family.

This is a problem separate from the amount of income: the man who earns two hundred dollars a week can get into financial tension just as readily as the man with only fifty dollars a week. In each case the family may be living beyond its means.

Budgeting the family income demands co-operation, fairness and unselfishness if it is to contribute to easing of harmful tension. The quantity and quality of the material and cultural benefits obtained by members of the family depend upon the extent to which the available funds are wisely spent and saved.

Many husbands would find their home tensions relieved if only they would take their wives into their confidence about the state of the family finances. They are unfair when they hug the problem to themselves, for how can a family be expected to help solve financial problems unless it knows what the problems are? Why not call the family into conference and decide on what standard of living you can afford to live? This will

spread the burden, decide spending priorities, and enhance family feeling by making every member a participant in one of the most vital of family functions.

The Royal Bank has a handy publication called *The Family Budget Book*, free for the asking, to help in this necessary job.

### *Compulsions toward tension*

Worries, fears and forebodings of various kinds make up a considerable share of our common personality maladjustments.

It is not cowardly to feel anxiety, but it is silly not to do something about it.

Cares and worries may be violent and tempestuous, like stormy seas, but those are most dangerous which gnaw implacably at the foundations of our lives.

Unjustified anxiety may become morbid. It produces continuous tension. But to anticipate difficulties constructively, and plan a way to meet them, is a relief of the tension system.

Solving a problem does not necessarily mean wiping it out. It often means going part way toward solution. You may not get rid of your anxiety completely, but you can make it easier to live with. Whenever we take time to analyze a worry, to see where it came from, we are doing something constructive toward freeing ourselves from its burden.

Sometimes it helps just to write down what the worry is. It may not look so gruesome on paper: in fact, it may laugh itself right out of our minds. Just think of the complications from which Copernicus freed the world when he drew a sky map putting the sun in the centre of the Solar System with the planets moving in orderly and dignified orbits instead of cavorting all over space in unbelievable geometric capers.

Of this be sure: unless you put your worry into words, in your mind or written down, you do not give it form, and if it has no form then it is incapable of solution.

### *Relieving tension*

We cannot, by mere act of will, banish injurious tension, but we can get rid of it by constructive thought and action.

Always give in when the situation does not matter much to you. Go into neutral. Decide in this restful mood whether the problem is worth gnawing your nails about. Or try the expulsive power of a new affection, a new interest, a new purpose in life. Take a dose of healing laughter. Tell others about your mistakes, not in a sombre, complaining mood, but as a good story.

This is not idealistic, but realistic. Harmful tension is lurking around every corner of our lives, at home,

in the office, in the factory, in traffic, in the elevator. When we allow our common sense to take over we give way in the face of the irresistible and cease banging our heads against the immovable.

No lullaby will ease the tense mind. We must uncover the cause and do something about it, or reconcile ourselves to things as they are. When you stop tapping your foot or wringing your hands, notice how relatively collected, perceptive and commanding you feel.

The true expertness in handling life is to keep a proper balance between tension and energy. It eliminates nervous fumbling and morale-destroying doing nothing.

Start small. Don't clutter up, or allow others to clutter up, any part of your life. If you feel the need of relief from tension, do a clean-up. Start with small areas of your physical environment and you will find that the job on big areas of your mental life comes easily.

After clearing up our working area — and that in itself is a wonderful relief — we can proceed with clear minds to tackle our bigger areas, mental and physical. Once we make a decision and set a course, once we take action in the world of reality, we relieve our bodies of the emotional turbulence which builds undesirable tension.

### *Positive living*

You can go through life being neither tall nor short, neither fat nor lean, but you can't avoid being positive or negative. The negative person sits on the lid of ideas, building up tension. The positive person encourages them to come out into the open in the expectation that they may contribute to his life happiness.

The positive person is likely to be more mature than his negative neighbour. He knows his strong points and uses them, he admits his weak points and stops fretting over them. Thought and deed march together toward an accomplishment, and even failure is, to the positive person, preferable to dull indifference.

To live an orderly life does not necessarily mean that you have a humdrum existence. Life's splendour, as well as its utility and its challenge, open up before the constructive, ongoing person who is releasing his tensions through calculated energy.

Rest from harmful tension does not reside in unbelieving callousness, nor is it found in reckless surrender to blind force. It is not an opiate delusion found through pills. It is a harmonious adjustment of the necessities and accidents and opportunities and hopes and actions of life. It results in the calm supremacy of our spirit over its circumstances.