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SPEAKERS' CORNER.....

King Saul, work-related stress and depression

Martijn Huisman

The story of King Saul in the Bible provides a good example of a man suffering from depression, and I believe that the story fits well with current scientific understanding of the role of work-related stress as a determinant of depression.^{1 2}

According to Karasek's job stress model, a combination of high demands and low control at work will lead to psychological stress,³ which can eventually lead to chronic disease, including psychopathology. Several elements in the story of King Saul are illustrative of the effects of job-related stress. I will relate just one episode that I found especially moving when I read it.

This context is Saul's war against the Philistines. From the start it is quite clear that Saul faces extremely unfavourable odds. His people panic when the Philistine army gathers before them, which is not surprising, as Saul's core army amounts to about 3000 men, while the Philistine army consists of "thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude" (1 Samuel 13.5). Furthermore, Saul has been ordered by the religious leader Samuel to wait for his arrival after the hostilities have started, so that Samuel will make it known what Saul must do. Samuel, as Israel's religious leader, speaks for God. Ignoring his order is out of the question.

Clearly, the demands are extremely high: fighting a war against all odds, keeping his frightened soldiers under control and facing what appears to be almost certain defeat. Saul's control over the situation is obviously minimal. Before he can actually take action, Saul needs to wait for the arrival of Samuel (for 7 days!) so that he can be told what course of action to follow.

In the end, Saul cannot bear the stress and he does what is forbidden to him. He starts by giving burnt offerings to God, in order to gain his favour in battle. However, giving burnt offerings was traditionally a domain preserved for the priests

and hence was forbidden to the king. When Samuel finally arrives, he reprimand Saul severely. Samuel says: "thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee: [...] now thy kingdom shall not continue [...]" (1 Samuel 13.13–14).

Subsequently, Saul begins to display the well-known signs of depression.

It is through an emotional experience of a piece of literature that we learn from it.[4] I believe that the story of King Saul in the Bible can provide us with such an experience, which can help us understand the links between environmental stress and mental illness.

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