



# SPLIT SECOND DECISIONS

## What You and Your Body Endures

By Deja Lawson

In the last 10 years of working in the event industry, I have learned what it takes to plan, implement and execute both small and large events. In doing so, I have also learned more about what our bodies endure during the events and have noticed the physical, emotional and mental reactions to these experiences, things only learned on the job. At first I wouldn't think anything of the physical reactions but over the last couple years, it has intrigued me more after noticing some of same attributes with other event managers; physical reactions our bodies have endured to the activities happening or not happening around us.

There have been a handful of events that have stood out in my mind. I believe we all have them, our "go-to" experiences, or as Chicken Little says "the sky is falling" moments! These are the times that I rely on to help me navigate and gauge what my body physically and mentally can handle. They are the thresholds of tolerance for the period of time without sleep I can manage or how long I can go without eating. Then there are the event moments that change you, make you realize what you are doing or the decisions you make will and can have a tremendous impact on 20, 50 or even hundreds of thousands of people.

In 2010 this kind of event happened to me. I was working on the Pegasus Parade which showcases 100 units with roughly 1200 people marching down Broadway in front of 250,000 people. Many of us have experienced the exhausted feeling of not eating or when we do it is scarfing down a cold hamburger, going to the hotel room long enough for a shower and change of clothes and if you're lucky laying down for maybe an hour, kind of week. Having minimal sleep and 20 hour days all week in preparation for the Thursday 5:00 pm start time. We had worked all year on a new TV review stand area; reworking the layout with new bleachers and new signage.

When people ask me what I do for a living, I say I am an event planner for the Kentucky Derby Festival. Their typical response is usually "oh how fun, can you get tickets?" Little do they know what it takes to make an event run smoothly and be successful! I am sure it is the same for many professions. A recent study<sup>1</sup> listed the top 10 most stressful jobs in America, Event Coordinator is number six on the list along with police officer, military personnel, airline pilot and firefighters. Now when I think of these professions, I automatically think about the amount of stress and mental complexity these professions must endure. I am not sure, however, the general public would see the stress, or more importantly, the physical and mental toll it takes on the average Event Coordinator.

We had a team in place to build the new set-up with scaffolding, mesh banners, new seating signage, and over the course of the early morning and afternoon we made sure we had everything laid out in place so that as soon as the bleachers were locked in we could start building the new review stand. Of course there were 100 other things happening at the same time. Everyone knows that weather is not a condition that can be controlled, if we could we would all be rich. In this particular case, the wind was our nemesis, with 20-30 mile per hour winds most of the afternoon. During the 1:00 p.m. opening act rehearsals in front of the TV station, 150 kids were dancing and singing and right behind them was the scaffolding structure 30 feet high weighing about 500 pounds. I happened to look up as a gust of wind lifted the 30ft mesh banners and the entire structure moved, leaning into the brand new aluminum bleachers only 20ft away from the kids practicing. This is the moment...*the moment* where everything started to move really slow and seemed blurry for what felt like forever, but in reality it is a split second. My stomach literally dropped, my hands were sweating and all the blood drained to my feet. In that second as my body is deciding what to do, my brain is trying to direct the next steps, do I stay frozen or do I react?

We all have what is called the Sympathetic Nervous System. It is perhaps best known for mediating the neuronal and hormonal stress response commonly known as the fight-or-flight response, it happens when we are put in a situation in which our bodies need to respond accordingly. Adrenaline is rapidly dumped into our bodies, preparing us to either stay and challenge the situation head on or get out of dodge. Messages travel through, triggering changes in different parts of the body simultaneously. For example, the sympathetic nervous system can accelerate heart rate; decrease mobility, constrict blood vessels, cause extreme perspiration and raise blood pressure. Hence the reason we spend a moment or more in a shocked reaction while the body determines how it will react.

Adrenaline rushes into your bloodstream along with an abundance of sugar and fatty acids, giving you a surge of energy. Your heart pounds, your muscles contract and your breathing accelerates as you shift into 'fight or flight' gear. It prepares the body by quickening the heart rate and adding strength, sometimes perceived as almost superhuman and speed to our usual abilities. Even being excessively tired can bring on an adrenaline rush, as the substance acts as a pick-me-up, allowing a person to work harder and longer than they would otherwise be able to.

In that moment of the scaffolding coming down becoming a potential parade stopping dilemma, my body physically reacted; there was no room for an emotional reaction at

the time. It was all about fixing the problem with the least amount of risk. Our team sprung into action-problem-solving mode, calling in resources that could help stabilize the structure, moving all the people away to ensure there were no injuries and bringing in vendor resources with water barrels to secure the structure. What felt like hours to put the plan in place took only minutes, all the while not allowing the outside public to see the fear and anxiety that is rushing through our minds. Not until after the problem was fixed and the structure secure, did my body return to its normal state, breathing normally and perspiration reduced, but then the emotional and mental realization came with what just occurred.

Thinking back to what happened created an emotional replay of what I experienced. You realize all the things that "could have happened" and the shaking and sinking feeling of being on a roller coaster comes back to flood you with emotion. How we reacted could have negatively impacted many people and put a halt to the entire year's worth of planning. That is not something most of us take lightly. Most of us are emotionally tied to our events. We hand-hold every aspect to the end and to potentially see what we did, how we accomplished it and what could have happened all at the same time can be somewhat overwhelming. Hence, added stress to an already stressful job. Usually this tends to happen after the event or the problem has been resolved. In this particular situation and in most of our events we have to move on to the next problem or tend to the planned event details. There was, after all, a parade to produce.

The physical and emotional attributes are things we learn along the way with experience. Everyone is different and deals with stress in many different ways. How we deal with problem solving and instantaneous response not only affect the event itself but can trickle down to sponsorship, securing venues, insurance policies, staff and volunteers and more importantly our customers and patrons. We want the public to feel secure in our abilities to produce high quality and safe events so they will continue to return each year.

Key factors and steps we learn from the industry along with our peers can help us learn to control our reactions. We can learn from how our bodies react and try and maintain a sense of calmness during split second decisions.

### Think Safety First

- Not only should your event have entertainment appeal, but it should always be safe. Sometimes we learn from example and sometimes we learn from our mistakes; either way, we learn the steps to make sure our events are secure and safe for our patrons.

### Be Able to React Professionally

- Know there is always someone watching. Whether it be participants, vendors, sponsors, peers, employers or board members, the problem you are facing will have an effect on the remainder of the event. As long as the patrons see a calm and collected professional, they do not need to see that realistically you are freaking out and coming up with 16 different action steps. Use your event knowledge to identify problems that may arise during an event.

### Highlight Factors of Plan B Planning

- With high stress/high exposure events, know and be aware of the potential hazards. Plan out "what if" scenarios. The event is not planned until it is over. Anything can happen at any time, but you can eliminate certain problems beforehand by reviewing past events and consulting past event planners.
- Weather is always going to be a factor with outside events. Know the severe weather plan and make sure the team around you knows what to do in the event severe weather becomes the issue.

### It Takes a Village

- Use the team around you. Two heads are better than one, but six are unstoppable. Most of us work with committees, board members and volunteers - use their expertise. You do not have to carry the weight of the entire event on your shoulders. There is not enough time in the day.

### Trust Your Gut

- We all have the small voice inside that warns us of positive and negative situations; use this as a tool to help guide decisions. Be confident in the decisions you make, they may not all work out but at least a decision was made.

Event Planning may be planning parties to the outside world, but as long as Event Planners have fun planning the party it is all worth it. It can be a physical, emotional and a mental roller coaster, but it is worth the ride each time. Once you see what goes on behind the curtains it is hard to go to an event as a patron and not see the little details it took to create the event. Most of us know it is hard to repeat the exact same event each time; there will always be new factors, new venues, new sponsors and most of all new challenges, which is the exciting part. We have the privilege to put smiles on peoples face and create memories for our consumers and their families, that is not something everyone gets to do every day. Stress or no stress, it is worth the ride.