

Stress relief on track in Dubai

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The opening of the Metro, now just weeks away, looks to me like the biggest contribution to stress relief that the government could possibly have initiated. Those 1.2 million rail-journeys a day, made vastly easier by prepaid cards that can also be used on buses and water-taxis, are going to go a long way to reduce the stress of commuting, which has been the subject of so many of our readers' comments.

For example, in my various columns about Dubai's traffic problems, you don't read far without seeing that name Shaikh Zayed Road appearing as a sort of code for urban stress. Now, the new Metro line serving Shaikh Zayed Road from Al Rashidiya to Jebel Ali will have 29 stations served by up to 40 automated trains an hour. That should relieve tens of thousands of frustrated drivers from their twice-daily traffic ordeal along the traffic-jammed highway.

Just stop and think about the possibilities for stress relief. First, the actual daily routine of driving in heavy traffic and delayed by traffic congestion, as well as averting potential accidents. Second, the stress of being late for the office and the knock-on effect on your work timetable. Third, the extra pressures that can happen if your car suddenly needs attention, or suffers damage in a collision.

All of these can seriously distract your mind throughout the day. And I can confirm endless research demonstrating the relationship between stress and a reduced professional performance.

But will this mean people actually giving up their cars - the supreme challenge to any environmental planner? Notice the free multi-storey car parks being provided for Metro users. Obviously it makes sense to facilitate access to the new stations. But it does suggest that the Metro will be complementing road-traffic rather than replacing it.

I had a client in Scotland who drove an Italian car - fast and elegant, but not particularly designed for snow, rain and ice. Through one freezing Scottish winter, he would worry more about the health of his car than his own health. When I reminded him that he did not need a car for his job, and suggested that he might experiment with going car-free for a while, he reluctantly tried it.

A few months later, he said it was like having a great weight taken off his back - or even feeling weightless in space, he was so relieved of the recurring worry and expense of the car. The extra walking, even though it was mostly short distances, must have been doing him good because he had noticeably slimmed down.

He concluded that on the average day, he was glad he did not have a car. But there were a few days through the year when he did miss having his own "little piece of male jewellery".

I imagine the "jewellery" dimension will bulk-up rather bigger here. But perhaps some wise drivers will consider the sheer effortless harmony of travel by co-ordinated Metro, bus and ferry.

Key points: Easy commute

- The new Dubai Metro will provide 1.2 million journeys a day.
- The relief from traffic stress will reflect in better business performance.
- Most drivers will probably retain their cars, but not for daily commuting.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.