There are three broad systems with which humans adapt to the world about them. These are learning, regulation of arousal, and maintenance of an organized conceptual system. Associated with these three systems are three kinds of behavioral disorder: Disorders arising from faulty learning; disorders arising from excessive stimulation, as in the traumatic neurosis; and disorders arising from threats to the integrity of an individual's conceptual system, as in acute schizophrenic reactions. A previous article (Epstein, 1979) examined acute schizophrenic disorganization as a natural healing process with the capacity to effect a constructive reorganization. The present article examines a natural process that I shall refer to as "graded stress inoculation," which facilitates the retroactive and proactive mastery of excessive stimulation.
Freud's observation of the traumatic neurosis in the First World War led him to drastically revise his theory of personality. Before then, he had assumed that wish fulfillment, operating according to the pleasure principle, provided the key to unlocking the meaning of dreams. However, the dreams of soldiers suffering from traumatic neuroses simply reproduced the traumatic incident and could not be accounted for by wish fulfillment. In attempting to account for these dreams, Freud (1959), in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, proposed a source of motivation more fundamental than wish fulfillment, namely the "repetition compulsion." He speculated that the traumatic neurosis is produced by stimulation of such magnitude that it breaches a hypothetical "stimulus barrier," which normally protects the brain from overstimulation. In addition to intensity of stimulation, he held that an important parameter that determines whether the stimulus barrier will be breached is surprise. According to Freud, anticipatory anxiety is adaptive because it prevents surprise, and, as a result, is able to foster an "anticathexis" that serves to "bind" stimulation, thereby preventing the brain from being flooded with excitation.

Freud viewed the occurrence of frightening repetitive dreams in the traumatic neurosis as a belated attempt to develop the anticipatory anxiety that was not initially present. He stated, "These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (Freud, 1959, p. 60). He noted that the repetition compulsion is also exhibited in the play of children, in transference reactions in psychotherapy, and in a "daemonic fate" that seems to pursue some individuals throughout their lives. Although Freud believed that the repetition compulsion represented an attempt at mastery, he did not discuss how successful the attempt was, other than to note that, insofar as the transference neurosis is concerned, and in the absence of interpretation, the individual is destined to reenact the past. Presumably, the same explanation would apply to the daemonic fate theme. As to the play of children, Freud believed that mastery was fostered only when what had initially been experienced passively was reexperienced actively. He let the matter rest at that and did not suggest that the terrifying repetitive dreams in the traumatic neurosis succeeded in binding stimulation and in curing the neurosis, and indeed, available evidence does not support the view that the dreams are therapeutic.