

LEADERSHIP OUTLOOK

Making Stress Work for You

By Carolyn B. Thompson

Somewhere along the line, stress got a bad name. Stress in itself, however, isn't good or bad; it's a natural physiological and psychological reaction to a change to the body or the circumstances surrounding the body. The idea is not to get rid of stress, but to maintain our own optimum level of stress. If we go above our optimum level, we are in the panic zone. But when we drop below the optimum stress level, we may enter the drone zone and lack the energy to perform.

Walk the Wire

The body is under stress from breathing, walking and eating just as a tightrope walker's wire is under stress. If the wire was slack—not under stress—the tightrope walker would fall. The same is true of us. Without stress, our bodies and minds wouldn't perform the multiple daily tasks required of a busy lab administrator. With too much stress (like the tightrope wire), we snap.

The first step in maintaining your optimal level is to discover where your optimum level is. One way to do this is to watch yourself on a day when you did great work, when everything went really well and you got so much done you could take off the rest of the week. That's your optimum level.

Physical Reactions

You probably know the physiological responses of the body to too much stress. The heart beats faster, pupils dilate, muscles tense, breathing increases, the blood flows away from the limbs to the brain and adrenaline and many other hormones are pumped into the bloodstream. This response is important and gives you the energy to react to stress usually in one of two ways—fight or flight.

When things like heart rate, respiration and pupil dilation go above your optimum level, some form of stress reduction becomes necessary. Some people do deep breathing; others walk, read, listen to soothing music exercise, sleep, meditate or get away from the stressor.

→ The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health lists the following as job conditions that may lead to stress:

- Design of tasks
- Management style
- Interpersonal relationships
- Work roles
- Career concerns
- Environmental conditions

But don't you also find that sometimes after you feel calmer the slightest thing can send you right back into the panic zone? That's because once excess adrenaline (and many other hormones) are released into your system, they remain there for up to 48 hours. Exercise physiologists have proven that only exercise—some form of body movement—will reduce that excess adrenaline.

Sweat the Small Stuff

Of course, many people do their stress-relieving exercises and still have too much stress. This is often because we tend to take action to reduce stress only after major stressors. But stress levels increase even after little stressors that may not be labeled as such.

I call this problem of little every day stressors building up cumulative stress syndrome (CSS). Remember, stress is a behavioral adjustment to change and most of us have experienced many of these changes and little stressors before even getting to work.

In a world where so much feels beyond our control, there's one thing you can control—the way you respond to stress.

The best way to keep that adrenaline at bay is to exercise every day. Deep breathing is exercise, although it won't reduce adrenaline like running a marathon will.

Laughter Still the Best Medicine

If you're not interested in marathon running or circuit training at the gym, remember that laughing is a great exercise. Laughing uses the biggest muscle in the human body—the diaphragm. Studies show that laughing hard for one minute is equivalent to the cardiovascular workout of running a mile.

In addition to the exercise value, it also releases endorphins and other brain chemicals that literally block pain.

Perception is Everything

Ever wonder why two people can be exposed to the same exact stressor and one goes on about their day and the other goes through the roof? It's not about what happens to you; it's how you perceive it and the way you deal with it. In a world where so much feels beyond our control, there's one events you can control—the way you respond to stress. If you exercise and laugh more, the events that happen around you help you take action. ■

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