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That Which Does Not Kill Me, Makes me Stronger

Putting Job Stress to Work

Stress is a fact of life in the 21st century. Workplace issues are a leading cause of this epidemic of anxiety. A poll conducted by Harris Interactive found that 8 out of 10 Americans report feeling stressed at work. I don't have numbers to back it up, but I believe that if a similar study was made of people employed in the publishing industry the number would be significantly higher. We share the same stressors as other industries (workplace/home balance, job security, heavy workload, and interpersonal conflicts) plus we must deal with the many additional challenges endemic to publishing a weekly paper. We must deal with regular deadlines and the never-ending need to come up with creative ideas for our clients. Add to this, the false perception that our industry is failing, and the need to increase our personal productivity, and you have a perfect storm of stressors week in and week out.

The cost of stress

It has been estimated that stress related disorders cost American businesses over \$200 billion per year in healthcare costs, lost productivity, errors and other related expenses. Stress's toll on an individual's health can be devastating. Studies have shown a direct correlation between high levels of stress and cardiovascular disease and other ailments. I started my advertising career with the Yellow Pages and I shared an office with a woman who had been a successful rep for many years. Emily pushed herself harder than anyone in our office and it had a demonstrable effect on her health. Each year as we dead lined our largest project of the year, she would exhibit some bazaar symptom. One year she went blind in one eye and another year she broke out in hives. In her last year with the company, Emily lost all feeling and use of her left arm—you could stick a pin in it and she would not flinch! At this point, she decided to listen to the message her body was sending her and left to follow a less stressful career path.

The benefits of stress

At the same time my coworker was suffering from the stress of the impending deadline, I was thriving. I felt energized and made some of the best sales presentations of my life. I felt healthy and mentally sharp. Looking at the twenty or so people in my department, I noticed how different people reacted to our work environment in different ways. Some showed the ill effects of stress, though not as dramatically as Emily, while others seemed to thrive. I have seen this repeatedly in the intervening years, some people are crippled by stress while others are impervious to its detrimental effects.

Psychologists borrowed the word "stress" from engineering. Engineers define it as "pressure or tension exerted upon a material." Every modern structure is designed to withstand any stress that it is likely to encounter in its environment. Sometimes, designers use stress to accomplish their goals.

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The Brooklyn Bridge has stood firm for more than a century because of the tension the weight of the structure puts on its suspension cables. We can apply these same concepts to protect ourselves from the harmful effects of stress and make it work for us.

The double-edged sword

In his recent book *The Stress Test*, (Bloomsbury 2017), Dr. Ian Robertson wrote, “*stress is a two-edged sword—it can distract and inhibit you, or it can boost your abilities pushing you nearer to optimal performance.*” Using data from his forty years plus as a clinical psychologist and researcher, Robertson has identified what distinguishes those who react negatively to stress from those who thrive under pressure. His work offers some insights into how we can not only “immunize” ourselves from the ill effects of stress but use it to be more productive.

Dr. Robertson describes a study that was intended to show the dangers of driving under the influence. One group of subjects were given a drink of alcohol while a second group was given a nonalcoholic placebo. No participant knew whether they had consumed alcohol. Both groups were instructed to test their skills on a driving course. Surprisingly, the group that had consumed the alcohol outperformed the control group. This test was repeated several times with the same results. The researchers determined that the control group was stressing out over driving the course in their “drunk” condition while the alcohol dulled the inhibitions of their peers. The control group was simply trying too hard and their stress interfered with their driving.

The impact of stress on our performance can be plotted on a graph that looks like an inverted letter “U”. The left leg of the graph represents a “low stress” situation. In the absence of stress our bodies and minds are relaxed. Our senses are not engaged and we tend to be lethargic. As our stress level increases the body’s “fight or flight” mechanism kicks in. We become more aware of our surroundings and hormones flood our bodies and our brains. We are primed for action. At the top of the curve we are at our productive best. The dark side of stress appears if we allow ourselves to slide down the right leg of the “U.” This is the point where stress begins to manifest itself in physical symptoms and we begin to freeze up like the tinman in the Wizard of Oz.

Staying at the top of the curve

A proper attitude is the secret of staying in the “zone” where stress is our friend. Numerous studies have confirmed that one of the key contributors to negative stress is a feeling that we lack control over our lives. This can be characterized by statements like, “that’s just the way I am,” or, “things will always be that way.” While we cannot control what happens around us, we can control the way we react to circumstances. How we categorize our situation and our feelings influences our stress level. Dr. Robertson notes that the physiological effects of excitement and fear are essentially identical, our pulse quickens, our muscles tighten etc. It is how we interpret the experience that sets these two emotions apart. Instead of thinking, I am anxious about

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this presentation,” tell yourself, “I am excited about this presentation.” Trying to stay calm in all situations is unrealistic, this tactic turns your natural bodily response into an ally rather than an enemy. Robertson adds that being “excited” rather than “anxious” puts us into a productive mode and fosters “opportunity thinking.”

Approach vs. avoidance

Dr. Robertson has spent his life studying how the human brain functions. He and other researchers have identified two desires which drive our behavior—approach and avoidance. Approach is associated with the left side of the brain and drives us to seek out rewards and pursue goals. Avoidance, associated with the right side of the brain, drives us to avoid pain and to seek safety. Both functions are vital to our survival, our ancient ancestors needed to approach the juicy berries and avoid the lions. Robertson wrote that, “the tug-of-war between approach and avoidance is a fundamental feature, perhaps the fundamental feature, of our day-to-day lives.”

People who are prone to the debilitating effects of stress tend to “catastrophize,” exaggerating the negative consequences of their actions. This is particularly true when it comes to our interactions with others. Humans are by nature social beings and fear being disliked or disrespected by other people. We tend to be self-centered, to view ourselves as the center of the universe. Some people constantly worry about how others see them. The truth is that most people are so concerned about what others think about “them,” that they have little time to think about anyone else. This unrealistic fear of negative consequences can cause a person to withdraw and avoid potentially stressful situations—not an option for an advertising sales person.

The best strategy to overcome an excessive concern over the opinions of others is to focus on building self-esteem. Believing that we have something valuable to offer others is the antidote about feelings of inadequacy. As salespeople, we are constantly faced with people and situations which batter our confidence and sense of self-worth. To counter this, we should dedicate time each day to read something uplifting, we should keep a list of our successes and constantly seek to improve our product knowledge and sales skills. If we feel confident in our abilities, we will be anxious (in the good sense of the word) to share our ideas with others.

Once burned, twice shy

Failure can be temporary or it can be permanent, depending on the person who experiences it. We all experience failures in life. As fallible beings, we are bound to make mistakes, as intelligent beings we can either dwell on our mistakes or we can learn from them and move on. Resilient people choose the second course of action. If we remain fixated on life’s “*woulda—shoulda—couldas,*” we relive them over and over again in our minds—turning a single incident into how we see ourselves. A person who lingers on past mistakes risks becoming “*failure phobic.*” They become hopeless, “*why should I even try, I know I’ll just screw it up!*”

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To free ourselves from being stuck in the “quicksand of regret” over our past failings, we need to learn from them and move on. Like a soccer player taking a penalty kick, sometimes we need to take a few steps back and come at the problem again. We need to dispassionately review our mistakes and ask ourselves, “*What can I learn from this? What will I do differently next time?*” This is very different from thinking, “*I’m an idiot—I really screwed up!*” The first approach allows us to extract some value from the situation—we learn how to do better. The second can easily degenerate into an endless paralyzing loop that destroys our self-esteem.

The old advice to get “back up on the horse” has some merit. Dr. Robertson writes, “Actions effect emotions as much as emotions effect actions.” The sooner we apply the lessons learned from a previous failure the better. The objective is to replace the bad experience with a new, hopefully more positive experience, rather than dwelling on it. If things fall apart again, we should remind ourselves that, “at least I didn’t quit and I’ll do better next time.”

It’s all in your head

In Hamlet, William Shakespeare wrote, “*there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*” This is true of stress—it can be good or bad, depending on how we think about it. We need to engage in “*Metacognition.*” Metacognition is a fancy word with a simple meaning—it means, “thinking about thinking.” Taking a moment to listen to what’s going on in our heads and being aware of our thought processes is the first step to overcoming stress. We often use stress as a verb, “*Don’t stress out over this.*” Looking at it in this way shows that “stress” is an action, a behavior we can control. By asking yourself questions like, “*Why am I upset?*” “*What can I learn from this?*” “*What’s the worst that could happen?*”, you retake control over this behavior. Just as a knife can be a tool or a weapon, stress can help us to be our best or it can destroy us from within. You cannot eliminate stress from your life, but you can choose to make friends with it and use it to your advantage.

This article was written by Jim Busch.

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