

STRESS

It's been a long day. You were at your desk at 8am this morning, yet the 'to do' list is only three lines lighter. Seventy emails, all urgent, are competing for your attention; a fractious CFO is fretting over the company's upcoming bond issuance; and the Excel credentials of your newest team member are looking highly suspect. And then there are the telephone calls. Bankers, lawyers, the hue and cry of a plethora of consultants – everyone wants a piece of you: your professional judgement, a few minutes of your time, the odd social catch-up and that ever-closer, beyond-your-control funding deadline for the latest acquisition.

Sound familiar? What's the last thing you need on a day like this? Here comes your number two – yes, she's handing in her notice, citing stress from the relentless pressure of her role. Pressure? Stress? She doesn't know the meaning of the words.

The nature of the job?

Stress is much more than pressure. We all need pressure: to motivate us, to get the job done, to feel fulfilment, to drive us forward. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them". It's a myth that as pressure intensifies, performance increases. It does, but only up to a point. Optimum performance occurs as pressure increases, but hit that tipping point and excessive, or relentless, pressure turns to stress, resulting in exhaustion, ill health and, ultimately, breakdown.

Our response to stress is physiological, namely the 'fight or flight' survival mechanism. It's a natural reaction, activated without conscious thought, to get us to take action when danger threatens. Comprising a series of bodily reflexes, here are just a few examples of the stress response:

- ◆ Breathing becomes rapid, taking more oxygen into the blood;
- ◆ Heartbeat speeds up, getting blood to the muscles more quickly; and
- ◆ Nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea may occur as 'energy-wasting' digestive systems are relegated.

The fight or flight mechanism is responsible for the physical symptoms of anxiety that we know. The odd burst of stress is one thing. But think about the effect on the body of experiencing these physiological responses day in, day out, where the perceived threat is of an emotional nature – a despotic CEO, an impossible workload, a bungled investment strategy. You can't run away from these challenges, or fight them, so there is no natural outlet for the hormonal and other physical changes. Hormone levels will stay elevated and physiological change, which is designed as a short-term response, will

also remain, preventing the body from returning to its normal state and taking its toll on your health. Stress can increase the production of cortisol and adrenalin – leading to the build-up of fatty deposits in the arteries and increasing blood pressure. Stress has been linked to heart disease, diabetes and a suppressed immune system, leaving sufferers more susceptible to infection and disease.

So while pressure is a given, and some pressure is actually good for us, sustained pressure (too much for too long) takes the body beyond the ability to function effectively.

What can you do to help yourself?

Firstly, don't make any assumptions about, or attempt to benchmark, your own or a colleague's ability to tolerate pressure. Why? Well, not only are we all individuals in terms of our personalities, responses

THREE APPROACHES TO MANAGING YOUR STRESS LEVELS

AVERT	CHANGE	ADAPT
Avoid people and situations that press your hot buttons	Become proactive. Confront problems and move into solution mode	Change your perspective, focus on the big picture, what you can change, the positives
Assert yourself and don't be afraid to say no	Openly communicate and share your feelings	Question your personal standards. How realistic are you? Challenge perfectionism
Delegate, upwards and downwards, sideways and outwards	Prioritise and leverage your time. Focus on your highest-value activities	Change your thinking. Beware of generalising, black and white thinking, catastrophising

BOILING POINT

The high-profile nature of their jobs means that treasurers are constantly under pressure. Carol McLachlan explains how they can win the war against stress

and resilience, but at any one time we will all have different contributors to our stress levels. It's not just about what's going on in the office, but also personally, at home, and in life in general.

In the battle against stress, you also have to recognise your own personal stressors. What explicitly winds you up? Is it your teenager's Facebook addiction, an investor's habitual cancellations or the thought of that project you keep putting off? Remember, forewarned is forearmed. Once you've identified your personal hot buttons – and those of your team – you can find ways to manage them. Preventive strategies include avoidance, taking control and flexing thinking or behaviour. While the 'cure' could be speaking up and admitting that you need extra resource or even a shoulder to cry on.

Real-time stressors are a start, but consider the bigger picture, including personal risk management. There might be challenges with finance or imminent heavy deadlines, alongside family illness or relationship aggravations. Raise your awareness and you can avoid that tipping point, where pressure turns to stress. Make contingency plans, ask for support, ease up on your own personal expectations and take some 'me' time.

As a line manager, you need to watch out for your team, too. Besides getting to know them as individuals so you can calibrate deviations from their personal norm, use the HSE Management Standards to see where they might be at risk of stress:

- ◆ The **demands** of the job: workload, work patterns, environment;
- ◆ Degree of personal **control** over how work is executed;
- ◆ **Support**: encouragement, sponsorship, resources;
- ◆ **Relationships**: positive working, conflict avoidance, tackling unacceptable behaviour;

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Described as the ability to 'bounce back' or 'roll with the punches', resilience helps us to keep functioning, physically and psychologically. It keeps us on that upward trajectory of thriving under pressure, but protecting us from tipping over into stress.

Your mental resilience is not static. Invest in your personal development to top up your resilience quotient. Typically, resilient people score well in the following areas:

- ◆ **Purposefulness**: knowing where they are going and why;

- ◆ **Self-awareness**: understanding personal strengths and weaknesses and how they impact on professional and personal life;
- ◆ **Support**: possessing a wide, diverse network of supportive relationships. Seeking help and advice on a timely basis; and
- ◆ **Flexibility**: employing strategies for coping with the unexpected and recovering from setbacks.

Resilience is *the* core competency for stress management.

- ◆ **Role**: individual understanding of; and
- ◆ **Change**: management and communication of.

Signs and symptoms of stress

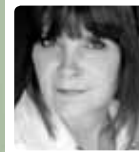
The International Stress Management Association (ISMA) points out that the stress response is not just the acute flight or fight reaction. There is also a raft of chronic and insidious signs of stress.

These include: behavioural symptoms (long working hours, absenteeism, self-neglect, reliance on alcohol, smoking, caffeine), often noticed first, but usually symptomatic of a longstanding condition. Less apparent signs range from the psychological (inability to make decisions, memory lapses, anxiety) to the emotional (tearful, defensive, irritable) to the physical (frequent colds, rashes, weight loss or gain).

Remember, these are all potential indicators of too much pressure emanating from self, work, home or all three. The ISMA urges us not to rationalise away the

symptoms, but to see the GP on a timely basis. Similarly, as a line manager, don't hold back from expressing concerns to a team member.

How can you keep yourself in shape to face the inevitable challenges? For starters, you can maintain physical resilience by following healthy eating and exercise guidelines, quitting smoking and keeping within the directives on alcohol. It is equally vital to establish a means of winding down – not just when your stress levels feel high, but on a regular, ongoing basis. Find something that you can incorporate into your daily routine. If you are not into meditation or yoga, curl up with a book, go to the beach or watch a comedy. ♡



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