

Turn Stress Into Productive Energy

07/18/05

Stress. How do you manage it, and keep it in check, while you go about your day's business? This week's question comes from a husband and wife team. Their company formulates and manufactures industrial strength, environmentally safe products, for a wide range of industries. The business is never far away, as the dinner table becomes an opportunity for a management meeting every night. The stress of balancing work and family life follows them, as they work in partnership, from home to work and back.

We all have stress. As business owners, it sometimes seems we have more than our fair share of it. What is it? Why do we experience it? What does it do to us? What can we do to manage it?

In its simplest form, stress is a measure of a person's reaction to an event, circumstance, or experience. As we perceive events to be threatening or disruptive, our body naturally increases its adrenaline flow, helping us to think faster, and move more quickly, in order to better respond to the events around us. Stress comes out of our natural coping mechanism, known as fight or flight.

Unfortunately, in today's world, many of the circumstances we experience are not easily cured by our primitive fight or flight mechanism. We resist our instinct

to react, or are unable to change the circumstances even though we do react. We get impatient or hostile when things don't go our way. Stress increases, in a spiral, causing further strain on our bodies and lives.

Let me put this in more tangible terms, which we, as business owners can relate to more specifically. Feel like the weight of the business sits squarely on your shoulders, as owner? Not making enough money? Got too little control over outside influences, like increases in supply prices, banks that don't want to support you, vendors who don't perform as promised? Employees who don't get it? The next generation isn't prepared to run the business? Working longer hours, with fewer rewards than you expected? Working within a set of conditions you don't know how to change? Can't take a real vacation because the business can't afford to lose you for a couple weeks? That's stress!

Prolonged stress is unhealthy. It can cause coronary problems, hypertension, chest pains, artery disease, and more. Some people overeat in response to stress, some people take up drinking, others stop eating - all unhealthy. For some of us, stress shows up as difficulty concentrating, or swings from high to low activity. Some people get short-temper, others stop talking, or try to avoid dealing with the stressful conditions. These coping

mechanisms don't work, and can only lead to increased stress, as situations wind further out of control if not resolved.

Controlling stress happens on 4 levels: physical, mental, spiritual and conditional. Physically, you need to eat a healthy diet, get a good night's sleep, and engage in regular exercise. Give your body a chance to work off the adrenaline, and replenish the reserves the adrenaline rush used up.

Mentally, structure your day into blocks of time, where you work on specific tasks, designed to move the business forward. Write a plan. Include extra time to get things done, so that you are prepared with things go wrong, and ahead of the game when they go right. Focus. Get some tasks done that lead towards your end point. When you are done with the tasks, take a break, go for a walk.

Spiritually, recognize that most problems don't resolve themselves overnight, but if you are heading in the right direction, things will likely get better. If you're stuck, try to figure out why, and consider options. If you're not sure what is right, talk to other people, seek advice, and then pick a direction.

Conditionally, figure out which circumstances you can fix, and which are out of your control. Don't keep banging your head

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into a brick wall – your head will give way before the wall does. Figure out how to go around big problems, rather than trying to avoid them, or blasting through them.

Change things around at work, so that things are less stressful. Ask employees to take on more responsibility. Get rid of vendors who don't perform well. Learn how to sell more, and get better clients who appreciate what you do. Say 'thank you' more often. Work to fix the conditions you control, build and implement plans to work around the conditions that are out of your control.

Create some time in your day when you can do something rewarding, do something that makes you happy. Practice a little selfishness and do something that is just for you, without obligation to others. It can be something small, like taking a walk, reading a book, having a conversation with a friend.

Take a vacation. Trust me, the business will still be there when you get back, and you'll be better able to cope with whatever's going on, once you've had some time away. Changing the conditions helps you to look at problems in a new way, and often leads to a different, better perspective.

Looking for a good book? Try *Managing Stress: Principles and Strategies for Health and Well-*

Being by Brian Luke Seaward, which includes a CD-Rom, exercises, self assessments, relaxation techniques, and research on optimism.

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