

Stress Management (Emotional Self-Defense)

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The term, “stress” can be applied to any force that results in an imbalance that requires a reaction to re-create the normal, stable state. Some examples of physical types of stressors include heat, cold, exertion, starvation, dehydration, infection, drugs, dietary excess, and injury.

Stress management is a huge topic best covered in books, audio files and websites devoted to the subject. Perhaps a helpful introduction is through the discussion of disease. “Dis-ease” is a lack of ease. When a stress acts on an organism, it pushes it out of balance. The natural response of a living organism is to try and recreate that balance through a process called “homeostasis.” Homeostasis is the organism’s self regulating, automatic process of creating or re-creating stability in levels of various molecules or functions in the organism. Inability to recreate stability in the body leads to dis-ease.

For example, when you eat something that causes your blood glucose to increase, your body will release insulin into the blood stream to cause the cells of the body to take glucose out of the blood into the cells until the blood glucose levels reach their normal levels again. If the body has trouble regulating the blood glucose over a long enough period of time, you develop the symptoms of diabetes.

The control of blood glucose is conducted automatically at the molecular and cellular level. The control of a process like regulating body temperature is conducted at multiple levels. It may begin with feedback from the skin receptors feeling cold air triggering a conscious behavior to close a window, put on a sweater or seek out a warmer environment. The cardiovascular system may constrict the flow of blood to the skin and outer tissues of the body to conserve heat in the body core. The nervous system may trigger shivering activity in the muscles to generate more heat. If these processes are not effective, then core body temperature may drop resulting in system wide dysfunction from hypothermia and ultimately death.

The process of homeostasis regulates levels of a countless number of molecules and functions in the body. The body functions best when these levels remain within a certain

optimal range. If an imbalance occurs in any one of these areas for a long enough period of time, disease and death can result.

The feelings of cold, heat, thirst, hunger, and pain are a few of the many symptoms that we may feel when there is an imbalance in the body. These feelings tend to naturally motivate us to seek out fairly obvious solutions to the imbalance such as warming up, cooling off, drinking, eating, or avoiding a painful stimulus or activity. Ignoring these basic needs for long periods of time leads to harmful consequences.

Likewise, the emotions of anxiety, fear, frustration, anger, depression are also symptoms of imbalances that need resolution otherwise disease will occur over time. However, the solutions to these imbalances are sometimes not so obvious. Often, when we refer to “stress” we are often talking about negative life events like financial difficulties, relationship problems, health issues, legal situations, long lineups, traffic, etc. The stress stimulates the “fight or flight” response of the sympathetic nervous system which will immediately raise the blood pressure, increase muscle tension and interfere with digestion amongst other things. The effects of chronic stress can lead to physical diseases like high blood pressure, back pain, tension headaches, ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, etc. It can also lead to psychological diseases like anxiety and depression.

I like Harvard’s “Help Guide” [<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm>] for identifying and dealing with sources of stress. They talk about “changing the situation” by “avoiding” the stressor or “altering” the stressor. If that is not feasible then “change your reaction” by “adapting” to the stress or “accepting” the stressor.

Obviously, removing or reducing a stress is the ideal approach but is sometimes not possible. Alternatively, how we look at things can have a big impact on how we feel about something. The classic example is the glass that is 50% occupied by water. Is the glass half full or half empty? If you are thirsty, looking at it half full may feel better than looking at it half empty. Same facts. Different feeling.



Perhaps you are in hurry and the driver ahead of you is barely driving the speed limit. You may feel frustrated and angry because this driver is slowing you down. However, if that

driver were your best friend's kindly mother, would you feel the same? Would you be more patient if it were your favorite great aunt up ahead? Maybe this driver just lost their job or a loved one. Maybe being slowed up for a few moments is not such a bad thing and you can give the driver ahead of you the benefit of the doubt. How you look at something can have big affect on how you feel. You could go from the stress of being extremely frustrated to feeling calm and grateful that your loved ones are safe and that you have a job.

Emotional Self-Defense

Maybe someone is yelling at you for something you did not do. You could get defensive or even offensive with the "fight or flight" process in full swing. Or, as Steven Covey suggests, you could "first seek to understand, and then to be understood". Listen and find out what that person thought has happened. Then explain what really happened. I call this "emotional self-defense".

In martial arts we learn to block a punch. However, that sometimes hurts almost as much as getting hit by the punch. We can deflect or redirect the punch which usually hurts much less. Or we can sidestep the punch and let it harmlessly go by and it doesn't hurt at all.

If you are often in situations where "verbal punches" are being thrown at you and hurting you emotionally, there are things you can do about this. You could block, retaliate, and escalate the situation into a fight. You could try to deflect or redirect the person's anger onto someone or something else through excuses or blame. Or you could side-step the anger of the words while focusing on trying to understand where the anger is coming from. and try to problem-solve the situation.

Side stepping the anger helps you avoid taking things personally and being hurt. It helps prevent escalation of the confrontation along with keeping your mind clear of fight-or-flight emotions than can cloud your judgment. If you truly "seek to understand" then you have something to focus on that will help pull you away from the emotion of the situation so you can be more objective.

If you determine that you are responsible for the anger, then own up to it. Offer to fix the situation, provide restitution, or bring in an independent arbitrator to come up with a fair solution. This often diffuses the confrontation fairly quickly and everyone feels better, even you, although you may have a price to pay later for your actions.

If you determine that you are not responsible for the anger, you can still acknowledge what the person is feeling. You can re-state back to them a basic summary of their concerns to show that you understand what they are saying. This will help diffuse the person's anger because they feel their communication has been successful and that they are being understood. If you have additional knowledge to explain the situation, then this might diffuse the situation further. If you do not, you can ask what they think would make the situation better, offer to look into solutions for the situation, or offer to bring in a third party who may be better at problem-solving the situation.

Sometimes the angry person is someone who has higher authority than you and it should be their job to find solutions, not yours. For example, you missed a deadline or a quota.

However, the reasons for this are systemic in the organization and out of your control. It is very important to understand when you are in this kind of situation! Trying to take ownership for something you cannot control will end up wearing you down to the point where you become sick with physical or emotional illness, unable to work and of little use to yourself, your loved ones or the organization.

The key question to ask yourself is this: “Are you doing the best you can with the resources you have under the circumstances? The key words here are “under the circumstances”. For example, as a trained physician, I may be able to save lives with the right equipment and assistance. However, if I come across an injured person on a hiking trail by myself in the woods, maybe the only thing I can do is basic first aid, CPR and call for help. I won’t be as successful at saving lives in the wilderness and I have to accept that I can only do my best “under the circumstances”.

If you feel you are not doing your best under the circumstances, then offer to “up your game” and outline to your supervisor what you think you can do better. If you are already doing the best you can under the circumstances, trying to do more is not going to be sustainable. It is your obligation as a conscientious person to communicate that to your supervisor. For example, it may not be in your job description to notify your supervisor in a situation where the basement of the building is flooding. However, it is the expected thing to do. If you do not have the resources to fix the flooding yourself, you have done everything you can do other than offer to help. If you believe something is systematically wrong with the organization that is leading to deteriorating performance or an unsustainable situation, then it is your obligation to report it, not necessarily to fix it. Even after you may have given a verbal report, it is also important that you document the situation in writing to your supervisor. Keep copies of your documentation in your personal files. The purpose of this is four-fold. One is to remind your supervisor that the situation is serious enough for them to follow up on. Two, if they follow through then a potential source of ongoing systematic stress to you and your organization is being mitigated. Three, if the problem is not resolved and the supervisor comes back to talk to you again, you can remind them you are doing everything you can, and the problem is in their “capable” hands. Four, if down the road “push comes to shove” you can sleep better knowing you have proof in your personal files that you have done everything you can.

The process of emotional self-defense can immediately help to reduce your stress. Ideally your actions may lead to a correction of the underlying problems. If not, the responsibility for those problems are at least partially removed from your shoulders.

The purpose of emotional self-defense is not only to protect you from experiencing unnecessary stress and improve relationships through better communication, it also helps to give you clearer focus at the time of a stressful situation to better help you diffuse and problem-solve it. Ultimately, it will help to reduce the causes of stressors in your environment.

Generally, your response to a stressful situation is automatic and immediate. There is often not much time to think about your response because your reaction is often reflexive even if you regret it immediately after you have done it. To be any good at emotional self-defense or any other stress management strategy you need to practice. To begin with, you could

review a past experience in your mind and imagine a different response. Practice that different response a number of times in your mind so that next time you are exposed to a similar stress, you have a better reaction. Another way of practicing this could be in role play with a friend or family member.

There are many cognitive strategies and relaxation techniques that you can use to minimize the effects of stress on your well-being. Information about these strategies and techniques can be found in self-help books, CD's, DVD's, apps, websites and courses on stress management; relaxing activities like Yoga, Tai Chi or Chi Gung; relaxation or meditation classes; biofeedback training; or seeing a psychologist or counselor. If you don't like how you react or how you feel in stressful situations, then you have to take the responsibility to change your reaction or get help with it

Keep in mind that it takes energy to cope with stress. When you are tired, "molehills turn into mountains" more easily. You are more easily aggravated or upset by day-to-day events that you might normally handle in your stride. Stress can certainly affect your sleep. Likewise, poor sleep can result in making you feel more stressed. Thus, the recommendations on this website for improving your sleep will also help your stress.