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3 Steps to Short-Circuit Stress

July 24, 2012

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Good leaders want to be healthy, focused, and energized to solve problems, make an impact, and enjoy life. Yet, for many people who are otherwise fully prepared to succeed, stress is a subtle and tenacious obstacle to meeting goals and finding satisfaction.

Stress is the body's nonspecific, fight-or-flight, physical and mental reaction to threatening stimuli. It is an overwhelming reaction and often feels like something done *to* us. But in fact, we are our bodies and minds, and stress is something *we* do. It can be a struggle to stop ourselves from reacting to a looming deadline as if it were a snarling predator.

The consequences are clear: The effects of short-term stress include knotted shoulders, a distracted mind, and the short or explosive remarks that damage relationships with people who matter. As stress becomes chronic, it erodes the body's ability to prevent illness and heal, contributing to asthma, back pain, gastrointestinal disorder, and heart disease, not to mention depression, pervasive unease, and impaired judgments, perceptions, and overall cognitive function.

The good news is that, with practice, you can short-circuit stress and minimize its effects by choosing to respond deliberately rather than react with those habitual fight-or-flight instincts. The shift is subtle yet transformative. And it's the kind of strategy powerful leaders at every level use every day. Start your practice by mastering three simple steps.

1. Be Present

Replace tension and clutter with clarity and focus by concentrating on the present moment. This is simple but not always easy. Notice the quality of your breathing. Inhale more fully and exhale more deeply, releasing your forehead, shoulders, back, neck, jaw, and hands. Find places in your body where you hold tension and experience stress. Move to help release this tension and disrupt a stress circuit. Reach your arms up to the ceiling, or curl forward and reach down to the floor. If this type of movement isn't appropriate for the setting, shift in your seat and lengthen the spine.

This is essentially taking a time out, and anyone who has raised a child or trained a puppy knows that a brief removal of stimulus can create calm and help manage behavior that is spiraling out of control. It's the same with adults, except that the "acting out" is internalized as well as manifested externally as poor behavior.

Like the mechanism that trips in your outlet when you are using too many appliances, being present interrupts the current of stress. Being present—that is, focusing on the stressful moment as it occurs—allows you to shift from a fight-or-flight response to problem solving. Then you can prioritize, focus, and follow through.

2. Shift Gears

In times of stress, it is easy to get stuck. Thoughts and behavior become circular, obsessive, or otherwise out of whack. Once you have become present, consider shifting gears by asking yourself these questions:

Would it help to find a new angle or take a break entirely? Finding a new angle often means looking at a problem differently or reevaluating the entire strategy. This can give you a fresh perspective, leading to new insights and previously unimagined solutions.

On the other hand, sometimes you know a break is in order, but you can't bear to step away. Try turning to something else on your to-do list like going for a run or organizing your desk.

Do I need to gather information before I make a decision, or do I need assess the information I already have and make a decision now? Here, you're shifting your cognitive function from data gathering to decision making or vice versa. Everyone has a prewired stress response that leads to overdoing one or the other. Notice what yours is, and then do the other.

Would it help to be alone or with others? While the balance is different for everyone, we all need both reflection and interaction to do our best thinking and function effectively. Imbalance is inherently stressful and can lead to poor analysis and decision making. Determine whether you have had too much time with people or too much time alone. Then make the shift to the other.

3. Check Your Gut

If stress is still a serious issue after you have implemented the strategies in the first two steps, it is time for a gut check. Consider whether you are avoiding an important issue. Do you need to have a difficult conversation, make a hard decision, or accept an unpleasant situation that you worked hard to prevent but has become a reality? Resisting the inevitable has an exponential effect on stress. The only answer is to deal with it, whatever it is. Find those 20 seconds of courage and take action.

Don't let stress overtake you. To increase calm and focus and gain insight into your own triggers, try short-circuiting stress preemptively. Consider how to fit the three steps into your life every day, perhaps in the morning or before you go to bed at night. Put stress under your control rather than letting it control you.

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