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Coping with stress

Who's calling the shots? You or your job?

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, *For Small Business Times*

Question: Maybe it's just me, but I'm having a hard time getting beyond the pessimism I feel about where things are going. Looking around, I see long faces and worn-out expressions. We're all doing our best and trying hard, but the results just aren't there. It seems like we're beating our heads against a brick wall. I don't have any more magic words to keep the troops fired up, either. I'm having a hard enough telling myself that things are going to get better without trying to mouth a bunch of empty words that I don't even believe. What am I supposed to tell my employees? How do I guard against having my pessimism bring them down even more?

Answer: At the risk of stating the obvious, your question is a sign of the times. Last year was a tough one for most companies. That followed a tough 2001.

Yes, we are due for some positive momentum, but who knows

what 2003 will bring. Like it or not, we live in complex times. Uncertainty abounds—economically, nationally, militarily, etc. There seem to be a lot of storm clouds and not many silver linings.

Under such circumstances, it is easy to feel depressed, skeptical, etc.

Knowing that many people feel as you do probably is not very comforting, either. We live in an achievement-oriented society. As achievers, we want to move forward, succeed, profit, thrive, etc. When that does not happen, we get frustrated. And, we feel the effects of stress. That is what I am sensing in your question — frustration and stress.

As you might expect, stress-related problems are widespread in the United States. Some studies have suggested that as many as one-half of the working population consider their jobs to be extremely stressful. Over the past decade stress-related disability claims have doubled. One in three working adults has considered quitting their jobs because of stress. And nearly three-quarters of workers indicate that stress at work reduced productivity and negatively impacted morale and mental health.

Of course, each of us responds differently to stress. Those individual differences have been extensively studied over the years. Here are just some of the factors that have been studied and some of the findings:

Type A personality – Type A personality refers to the tendency to be competitive, preoccupied with time, demanding, and immersed in purposeful activity. The converse, the so-called Type B, may be just as ambitious as Type A but typically exhibits few of the other negative characteristics. Type A behavior is associated with anger, hostility, and depression and an elevated risk of heart disease.

Hardiness – Hardiness is a personality variable that has to do with “hanging in there.” Hardy individuals are people who believe they can control the events in their lives and persevere in the face of adversity. There is an inverse relationship between hardiness and the

perceived amount of stress – the more hardy a person is, the less stress they report.

Negative emotions – People who see the glass of water half-full tend to be more stress resistant than those who see it as half-empty. Individuals who focus on what has gone wrong, punish themselves for mistakes, etc. tend to report more stress than people who have learned to “roll with the tide.”

Type of occupation – The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has identified the jobs with the highest stress levels as follows: laborer, secretary, clinical laboratory technician, nurse, first-line supervisor, restaurant server, machine operator, farm worker, and miner. Clearly, the kind of work you do and the stressors to which you are exposed do affect your physical and mental health.

Gender differences – Women report feeling more stress than men. Is this because women have different “hard wiring” than men? No, when it has been scientifically examined, what has emerged is the finding that women are exposed to more stressors than men. In addition to being the primary caregivers at home, women who work must navigate through a host of obstacles including unequal pay, sexual harassment, and stereotyping.

Yet, our bodies are built to be resilient. In the short term, we can do a pretty good job of persevering and coping with the various stressors to which we are exposed. Over time, however, in the face of sustained stress, we do less well at coping. Eventually, if things do not get better, we become burned out.

When we suffer burnout, we become apathetic and disenchanted. We lose interest. We begin to find fault with all aspects of our work environment, including our colleagues. Three characteristics that typify burnout are:

- Emotional exhaustion – Feeling emotionally drained and empty
- Depersonalization – Feeling callous and cynical, even where others are concerned
- Reduced sense of personal accomplishment – Feeling that

your efforts are a waste of time and/or worthless

So, what are you going to do about your situation? What are you going to encourage others to do? There are many ways of coping. Talking to a friend or trusted other. Vacationing. Exercising. Ignoring/minimizing it. Drinking alcohol and/or taking drugs. Smoking cigarettes. Dumping/unloading on somebody else. Clearly, some ways of coping are better than others. It is important to recognize the kind of coping strategies you (and your colleagues) gravitate toward. Choose health-enhancing strategies whenever possible.

Research has demonstrated that the most important thing you can do is to build and access a social support network (and encourage others to do the same). It is health enhancing to tap into satisfying, enriching experiences outside of work with other people. This is particularly important when things are not going well at work.

One final observation is that when you have done all that you can and you still see yourself dragging down, sinking, burning out, etc., it is time to think about making a change (i.e., finding a new job). Sometimes a change of scenery can make all the difference.

When you reflect on the fact that you might spend 40 or more years of your life in the pursuit of work, that is a lot of time. Work occupies a central place in your life. But who is calling the shots? You or your job? And what is your life all about? Are you living to work or are you working to live?



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