

You're All Stressed Out? That's Great News!!

By Dania Dbaiibo Darwish

It is quite a normal reaction if you're surprised about what the title above suggests. We have been bombarded over the years with messages that "stress" is our enemy. Today, I have some "breaking news" for you - some "great" news. Stress has its upside. There's an emerging trend in scientific research that explores how you can befriend your stress and use it to your advantage. Stress is not the real problem. The way you handle it, or think about it, as I will shortly expose, is the problem. Whether you're an employee, manager, or have any other life role, in our current fast-paced times, overwhelm is common and can dominate our lives. What you're about to read can be life changing. Use it to your advantage. Share it with your friends and fellow colleagues. Apply it as your new way of living; and allow the same effects to rub on those you interact with.

What Happens When You're Stressed?

Stress has been defined in so many ways, but there's a consensus that stress is a perceived threat or inability to cope with the demands of a situation. Stress has two components: a cognitive component (thought processes that evaluate circumstances as beyond one's control) and a physiological response of heightened arousal mobilizing the body into action (i.e. the flight or fight response). Job related stress is the number one complaint in organizational settings. It can be due to too many deadlines, problems with coworkers, enforced multi-tasking, work overload, and the list goes on. What ensues, usually, is a negative evaluation of current circumstances (the cognitive component). Physically, the body is continuously flooded with stress hormones (i.e. cortisol and adrenaline), elevated blood pressure, increased heart-rate and perspiration, muscles more tensed, etc.... No wonder the body gets run down over time; and the dangers of being stressed-out become apparent in variety of symptoms.

There's Danger in Stress (so we were told)

For years, I have been guilty, as many, who deliver stress management workshops warning about the dangers of stress. Most research cautioned of long term stress as having debilitating adverse effects medically and psychologically. The array of related medical illnesses can range from the simplest common cold to more serious diseases, including: heart disease, cholesterol, blood pressure, cancer, and other scary medical problems. Psychologically, stress is the fuel that feeds anxiety and depression to say the least. On hectic jobs, we're supposed to be on a continuous mission: manage arising stress and work on prevention. No one would want to become victim of any of these negative stress effects, right? Stress management techniques mainly included exercise, deep breathing, meditation, seeking social support, time management, and activities like that. These are very helpful indeed. I always used the analogy of each of us being like a "pressure cooker" as we navigate our days and weeks. We need to make the time to blow-off some steam intermittently before we explode permanently. "Beware becoming all stressed out", I warned. "Change whatever situation you have control over", I encouraged, "and if you can't do that, change your reaction to it". Yes, I did touch on changing the way we look at

uncontrollable situations as one helpful way to manage stress, but I didn't know – back then – the great power this had on tipping stress perception into becoming a motivational source (not a destructive one). We fail to notice that stress can actually be a positive force – known as “eustress”; and that it excites us to be our best.

Eustress (Positive Stress)

What happens when you have a deadline and you need to prepare, coordinate, lay the final touches, and then submit your work? You get all hyped-up to do those. The same thing happened as you studied for exams (if you remember), gave your first presentation, started a new job, got a promotion, and even when you were on vacations. Eustress produces increased energy and improves performance. No wonder some adrenaline junkies seek it through a roller-coaster ride, or through watching horror movies. These short term buzzes have a good feel on both body and mind. What is less circulated, unfortunately, are the scientifically researched positive effects stress has in that respect. Did you know that eustress has protective health benefits on the body by enhancing immunity and speeding up recovery? You don't hear such information often, do you? Stress, moreover, enables the brain to be more alert and uses its capabilities more efficiently. Memory and intelligence are, also, enhanced. At greater and even prolonged levels, stress produces mental toughness, better perspectives, a heightened sense of meaning, a sense of mastery, strengthened priorities, deeper relationships, heightened awareness, and greater appreciation of life. Very few would share the good news, right?

The Upside of Stress in General (More Scientific Findings)

Perhaps if you think about these positive effects well, you'll find some real life examples. Your stressful life incidents made you grow; made you mature; made you change. “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger” it's been said. You think about why things happened, and in retrospect, you may find a good reason (or more). This is exactly the kind of view many people adopt of stressful times. And, indeed, in a large representative sample in the U.S. of a long term study examining perceived life stress of nearly 186 million adults and their view on whether stress was harmful or healthy, and after 8 years follow up through public death records, researchers found that participants were at 43% increased risk of premature death if they reported experiencing a lot of stress and viewed that stress affects health badly. Those who reported experiencing high stress levels and had a better view about stress were less likely to die – even when compared to those who experienced relatively little stress levels. Kelly McGonigal – one leading health psychologist – suggests that if we stop believing stress is the enemy, we may actually live longer. Is this general upside view about stress applicable when narrowed down to the organizational setting? Yes, it is.

The Upside of Stress at the Work Place (when researched)

Shawn Achor from Harvard and Alia Crum from Yale teamed up and uncovered that most corporate training on stress seemed to unintentionally raise it. They experimented on some 380 managers by exposing them to a 3-minute scientific video either showing the debilitating effects of stress, or the

enhancing effects of it on both body and mind. The results were significant when the view on stress was rigged to its positive effects. Not only did these managers embrace their stress levels, their existing distress about it was diminished. When managers' perceptions about stress were tipped more positively, they felt more productive and energetic (to name a few); moreover, they reported less physical symptoms typically associated with stress (e.g. headaches, fatigue, and backaches). In a follow up study, Achor and Crum, trained 200 managers to rethink stress positively and use it to their advantage at work. The process involved 3 steps: awareness of stress, finding the meaning behind being stressed, and then redirecting that energy to improve productivity and job satisfaction. The results of such training were even more dramatic than the first study. With more focused intent, these managers reported similar diminished distress, and an enhanced view about stress that raised their work effectiveness and improved their health. So how does the magic happen?

What's Going On Exactly? (The Physiology Behind It)

Studies show that one physiological change resulting from the stress response is that one's heart pounds faster to get more oxygen to the brain. In a similar vein, when one experiences happiness, joy, or courage, the heart pounds faster to prepare one for action, but a healthier cardiovascular profile is observed. The difference between either condition is that the stress response results in a decreased cardiac efficiency and constricts the heart's vasculatures in preparation for damage or defeat. Such constriction is not reported in healthier more positive responses. The heart pumps more blood, alright, but the blood vessels remain relaxed. This is what's known as physiological toughness that suggests that the physiological arousal facilitates better coping and enhances performance. Changes in how one perceives stressful situations results in changes in physiology. Not only that, one other component among other stress hormones released during the stress response is "oxytocin" (known as the "cuddle" or "bonding" hormone). Oxytocin is not only triggered upon intimate interactions, it's, also, released during the stress response. It pushes the individual to seek human connection and talk about their problems. No wonder we turn to friends, colleagues, or others during hard times. We seek validation, acknowledgement, and support. Oxytocin release acts as a natural anti-inflammatory that dilates the arteries and regenerates heart cells; thus, facilitates healing from any stress-induced damage. This is what makes one resilient and bounce back from difficult times especially if they actually receive support from others. To sum it up: One new thought in your mind; one word from another can make all the difference. Rings a bell?

Lessons We Can Learn (On the Job)

What is widely known, by now, is that employees don't just leave organizations. They leave bad managers. Wide scale surveys in organizational settings do point out that words of acknowledgment and praise are way more powerful on the job than any monetary reward. Linking it to my exposition above, these words transform the "meaning" of working hard, right? You can be stuck with a manager who does not empathize. You may find yourself trapped and can't quit because your options are limited, or costly. So what can you do? Re-assess: how can you make this situation work for you? Should you engage in an aggressive job hunt campaign to change things? Would it help to learn some effective

communication techniques to deal with difficult negative people around you? Who can you resort to for support? What could be a more powerful motivating meaning you can give to your current “stuckness”?

And what if you were the manager who’s organizing the work of close to burn-out subordinates? That, too, can be over-whelming, but if you become more compassionate and caring, and use that oxytocin release to help them out, you’d be actually doing yourself a favor. Acts of kindness – as reported by many studies - strengthen your own resilience (not only that of others). If you top it up by enabling your subordinates to view their stress differently, it will lead them to peak performance. Support them become better at stress by changing their perceptions from “threat” to “challenge”; from being invaluable to highly contributing. Enable them chase better meaning of “overwork”, for instance, instead of just avoiding discomfort. Change their minds and this will change their whole bodily responses. Remember to do the same for yourself, ok?

That Earlier Ignored Stress- Buster

It’s not enough to take breaks to escape day-to-day stress by removing oneself temporarily from situations no matter how helpful these may seem. For all I know, some situations you can’t easily escape at all. Even if you return from a vacation, you’ll find nothing has changed. The real deal would be to target the evaluating thoughts of different stressful situations. Thoughts that determine situations as “threatening” will evoke the typical stress response. On the contrary, thoughts that consider situations “challenging” will evoke the “having courage” response with all its ensuing positive effects. Courageous people firmly believe that they have the required capabilities to deal with circumstance they’re in. In their heads, they hear a voice yelling “I CAN do this”, “I AM in control”, etc... Perhaps the word “stress” has been repeated often enough in this article to make you feel highly aroused already. How about we make proper use of para-linguistics (i.e. the power of words used on our emotions)? Let’s change the word “stress” to “all hyped-up”. My body is rising to help me be up to the challenge. It’s my opportunity to demonstrate toughness. I’d like to think of life as a boxing match. You’re not defeated if you’re knocked down. You’re only defeated if you refuse to get up.... Rise and fight again harder each time!! You CAN do it!!

Your Personal Coach

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