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Coach's Corner: Stress Test

Do you know how to manage it through the daily choices you make?

By Diane Costigan

The good news is that stress isn't necessarily bad. In fact, much like building a muscle, stress can promote growth. The challenge is in not allowing ourselves to be overcome by it, which can be detrimental to both health and performance.

More good news – we are empowered to decide how stress will affect us through the daily choices we make. Stress can be managed by implementing small but strategic measures to keep one step ahead of being fully overcome. In other words, don't avoid stress, manage it.

One of the best ways to do that is to adopt systematic practices during moments in between times of stress that help regain energy and focus. In their groundbreaking book "The Power of Full Engagement" (Free Press Paperbacks 2003), authors Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz hail the importance of "recovery" to performance. For them, recovery is momentarily disengaging from whatever you are exerting energy or focus on to rest, reset yourself and come back re-energized and re-focused.

Likewise, "renewal" is one of the habits in Stephen Covey's national bestseller "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" (Free Press Paperbacks, 1989). Covey likens renewal to making sure to take the time we need to keep our skills sharp. He uses the image of someone working frantically to saw down a tree with a dull blade, claiming that she doesn't have time to stop and sharpen the saw. Clearly, taking a break to sharpen the blade will make the cutting process faster and more efficient.

These authors also agree that maintaining balance among the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions of our lives is fundamental to maintaining overall personal effectiveness. Here are some ways this concept relates to stress management.

Physical: Stay hydrated and properly nourished. Mild dehydration can cause headache, fatigue and irritability and can often be mistaken for hunger, prompting us to eat unnecessarily. Eat healthy, well-balanced meals and avoid junk food. Digestion is the function of the body that requires the most energy; when we eat unhealthy foods, we require our bodies to use energy that could be used more productively elsewhere. Getting enough rest and regular exercise are also critical to physical renewal.

Mental: The ability to maintain focus and attention on the task at hand can become compromised when our brains get overtaxed, whether we are being asked to focus on too many things at once or just one thing for extended periods of time. Regaining mental clarity is often made possible by taking a break or shifting focus elsewhere.

Meditation and positive visualization can be helpful. If that's not your thing, other options include gazing out the window, getting a change of scenery or taking deep, cleansing breaths (ensuring a healthy flow of oxygen to the body) for a few minutes.

Emotional: Moods are infectious. If you surround yourself with people who are persistently stressed out, their negative energy will have an adverse impact. Unfortunately, with the way legal projects work, entire teams can experience stress and anxiety at the same time. Seeking out people in your life you know to be positive can energize your mood. You also have the ability to keep your own mood upbeat and positive. Listening to a song or looking at a picture with which you have a positive association can help improve your mood.

Spiritual: Think of spirituality as activities that help you be the best person you can be by giving you access to your values and the principles you choose to live by. This need not involve religious practice. In truth, you get to define what "spiritual" means for you. It might be spending time with your loved ones; doing a hobby that you enjoy; engaging in an artistic outlet; indulging a passion. This dimension acknowledges who we are as individuals – a concept that can easily get lost in stressful times.

With the hectic professional lives that lawyers lead, these four dimensions can easily fall out of balance. Thankfully, recovery doesn't have to take long and can be multitasked. Taking care of each of the dimensions above can also serve as a recovery technique. For example, getting up to refill your water bottle or to get a healthy snack can be an adequate form of recovery. Spending a few minutes catching up with a loved one who will positively impact your emotional state is another.

You don't have time to take breaks, right? I would argue that, like the person with the dull saw blade, you can't afford not to. The backlash of being overcome by stress due to lack of recovery (fatigue, irritability, illness, alienation of loved ones and other important people) can cause more inefficiencies than taking breaks.

Even something as simple as a bathroom break can have a positive effect. I've heard a lot of complaints about all levels of attorneys in my 14 years at law firms but never about anyone going to the bathroom too much. Use this to your advantage the next time you find yourself saying you don't have time to sharpen your saw.

Of course, the challenge for lawyers is to be able to identify opportunities for recovery or to proactively create them when they are needed. Loehr and Schwartz recommend a recovery activity every 90 to 120 minutes. While optimal, this is challenging for most busy lawyers. However, many of the skills you employ to practice law, such as observation, analysis, problem-solving, negotiating, critical decision making and persuasion, are helpful tools when it comes to stress management.

For instance, you can observe your depleting energy levels and loss of focus. You can then determine the cause – lack of food, water or breaks – and the probable impact. Then, you can solve the problem by deciding your next effective stress management steps which may well entail negotiating and persuasion. An easy tool to remember this is **SNAP**: **S**tep away when you recognize you are about to be overcome by stress; **N**ame what's going on; **A**nalyze why you are stressed; **P**lan a stress recovery activity.

Crazy schedules don't always allow for balancing all of the dimensions in any given day. That's OK – view it weekly if that makes more sense. Take note of how long it's been since you've had spiritual recovery and make that your next priority when the opportunity presents itself. One of the best times to work on your stress management is when you're not stressed. When you do find yourself with some time on your hands, invest a few minutes reviewing your stress management and recovery techniques and make any necessary changes.

One of my clients, a busy partner at a large law firm, recently confessed that she was fascinated to find she had been doing the exact opposite of what she needed to do to manage her energy and focus. “Old habits die hard but I feel the difference when I eat more during the day and walk around, and I am probably more productive.”

It takes about 28 days to break a bad habit and replace it with a good one. Challenge yourself to implement one or two recovery techniques over the next month. Once they become automatic, add two more over the following month and so on. Go for the low hanging fruit first (like breathing) and take it from there.