The ABCs of Stress Reduction

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“So what if I learn to manage stress?” The answer to that question is that you will live a longer, healthier, more successful and more enjoyable life. Neglecting stress is hazardous to your health. The health-enhancing effects of positive stress management are clearer than ever. In fact, it has been shown that you can turn back the hands of time on your biological clock by 16 years by managing stress. (Roizen, 2003; Roizen, 1999). Twentieth-century clinical studies now prove that:

- Twenty percent of people with heart disease also have depression (Harvard Medical School 2003).
- Stress exacerbates gastrointestinal disorders For example, stress can worsen Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) aggravating irregularity and abdominal pain (Somerville 1996).
- One out of four visits to the doctor’s office deals with a physical illness that started off with stress.
- Attitude can influence survival time for people with terminal illnesses (Markle 2000; Schrock 2000).

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Stress management is good medicine according to breakthrough medical findings (Cousins 1989; Marucha 1998). The good news is that techniques such as relaxation, group support, imagery, meditation and prayer can alter the course of some illnesses, decrease symptoms and reduce hospital stays and medication.

Stress management makes you smarter, according to Dr. Herbert Benson (Benson et al. 1994). Using the “Relaxation Response,” developed by Herbert Benson, M.D., at Harvard Medical School, improves mental performance. Basically, the relaxation response involves concentrating on one single thought for 20 minutes. The Harvard mantra is the word one. That is, just concentrating on the word “one” could be used as a focal thought for the relaxation response. This is the 25th anniversary of Benson’s book, “The Relaxation Response,” which has sold four million copies (Benson& Klipper 1976). His work on the relaxation response has revolutionized our understanding of the mind-body relationship.

Even the aviation “geniuses,” the Wright Brothers, took the day off to relax before making their worldchanging, first powered airplane flight (Moolman 1980). The bestselling author, Norman Vincent Peale, advised, “Keep relaxed. The relaxed person is powerful (Peale 1975).”

Learn Your ABCs
Dramatic, instant stress control can be boiled down to the simple ABCs: Attitude, Breathing and
Give yourself time to “unwhine,” but use common sense.

Attitude

“Believe in yourself,” advised Norman Vincent Peale (Peale 1992). Say to yourself with confidence, “I know I can!” Your own attitude is the only thing you have complete control over. To see if you need an attitude adjustment, I recommend the “Get Tough Test,” available from Mentally Tough Corporate Training Programs (LGE 2002). If you have an Employee Assistance Program available at work, take advantage of it.

Avoid “staff infections” by watching the company you keep. That is, a whining staff member can infect you with his or her negative attitudes within minutes. The best antidote against staff infections is to seek the company of positive and humorous people.

Everyone needs a little time to “unwhine” or vent, but use common sense. In many circles, whining is considered unprofessional and counterproductive, and most people consider whining to be boring and annoying.

Convert bad stress into good stress just by thinking about it differently. Instead of saying, “I feel so stressed out,” you can say, “I am so excited about the chance to....” Visualize perfection, such as your perfect vacation or a sweet victory.

Athletes commonly consider the feeling of “butterflies in the stomach” to be an indication of excitement and anticipation, not stress. Concentrate on improving your personal best, and don’t worry about the rest. Get guidance if you need it. Finally, remember that a single job activity is rarely “life or death.” You are judged generally on patterns of behavior and your ability to deal honestly with problems.

Breathe (Slowly!)

You must be breathing if you are reading this advice; so, to calm down, just slow down your breathing. The most basic instructions for relaxation breathing are contained in the number sequence 2-4-6. Breathe in through your nose to the count of two (one-thousand one, one-thousand two); breathe out through your mouth to the count of four (one-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four). Then repeat this sequence six times. That is, breathe in through your nose to the count of two, next breathe out to the count of four, six times. Of course, if you have any medical concerns (for example, asthma) ask your doctor if this relaxation breathing is OK for you.

Choice

Choose to control your work, not people. Lack of control is the number-one source of job stress. Not surprisingly, good time management is a key to job success, and job success reduces stress. Concentrate your efforts on job tasks and skills that will yield a high “return on investment” (ROI). Master “soft skills” (appearance, human relations, corporate culture) because practicing these skills can boost your personal job performance by 30 percent to 40 percent according to C.J. Taylor, President of The Mirror Ltd. (2003).

Highly effective leadership takes a high tolerance for stress. Calm leaders are more effective. A calm, effective leadership style can be learned. The government bet on this fact with millions of taxpayer dollars funding the National/State Leadership Project in the 1980s. These future national leaders were taught to have a spirit of calm “unwarranted optimism” when facing problems.
(Tannenbaum 1983).

**Conclusion**

You are the architect of your own future. Use the positive power of the ABCs (healthy Attitudes, Breathing and Choices) to reduce job stress and enjoy success.

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**References**


Relaxation Response explained at [http://www.ucop.edu/humres/eap/relaxationrespone.html](http://www.ucop.edu/humres/eap/relaxationrespone.html)


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