

Posted Mar. 10, 2008

OPINION

When stress turns to distress

Returning to work following a vacation can be stressful. Fighting traffic can be stressful.

Stress pops up even at the best of times, making them the worst of times.

First, a disclaimer: Some stress is actually good for you. Deadlines, assignments, goals, teamwork and achievement – none of these come without some stress. Plenty of people thrive on stress, and many claim they work better under pressure. After all, the only difference between a diamond and a lump of coal is that the diamond had a little more pressure put on it.

When you feel the frustration levels going up, it might be time to take a break or take a brisk walk and focus on something that makes you happy. You should try to remember you don't have to accomplish everything in one day.

These days, who doesn't need a little stress relief? We all seem to be hurrying some place important most of the time. The Center for



Spirituality & Healing at my alma mater, the University of Minnesota, offers these 10 stress-busting tips:

- Be completely present for whatever you are doing.
- Include something you consider beautiful in your life on a daily basis. For example, fresh flowers.
- As often as possible, participate in activities you enjoy.
- Keep your pace relaxed – that includes walking, working and eating.
- Take a break after meals to relax.
- If possible, go outside once a day and enjoy the simple things in life – the scenery, the weather, etc.
- Take notice of the tension in your body during the day. Breathe deeply and gently stretch any area that feels tense.
- When you catch your mind racing and worrying, breathe deeply and gently shift your focus to something in the moment.
- Wear comfortable, loose clothing whenever possible.
- Don't hold your feelings in day after day. Find a safe place where you can express and embrace them.

Dealing with your stress is central to your well-being, both on the job and after hours.

It's important to recognize the signs of an unhealthy level of stress. In "The 10-Minute Guide to Stress Management" (MacMillan, 2000), author Jeff Davidson identifies some of the symptoms: anger, irritability, anxiety, depression, muscle pain or tension, headaches, high blood pressure, sweaty palms, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, cold hands and feet, shortness of breath and chest pain.

I'm not trying to stress you out with this list, but you need to be aware of what's happening if stress is seriously affecting you. Don't neglect your physical symptoms or your health. That only adds to your stress.

How much control do you have in a stressful workplace? More than you may think. Sometimes it's as simple as a change in attitude or getting away from co-workers who complain about everything. Eliminate procrastination from your vocabulary. Organize your workspace so that you aren't frustrating yourself looking for items or information that should be at your fingertips. Ask for help when you need it, and offer your help to others when appropriate. Concentrate on the end result instead of the annoying details. Break projects into workable parts that aren't so overwhelming. Try to remember why you wanted this job to begin with, and if those reasons are no longer valid, think about a different work situation.