

A Holistic Approach to Managing Work and Life Stress

By

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It's one of those rare rainy mornings where traffic practically comes to a halt and getting to work becomes a test of nerves and bravery. You first need to drop the children off at school. They don't mind the rain and find particular joy and satisfaction in splashing in the puddles, naturally soaking your feet. You now have wet socks and feet that will have to dry throughout the rest of the day. You finally get to your office with a frown on your face, "leave me alone, I'm having a bad day!".....you don't actually have to say it, it's written all over your face. You snap at the first person who approaches you with a problem and the word spreads like fire. "If you know what's good for you stay away from our manager Mr. Grumpy!" Your day has just begun!

If the Lord's Prayer had to be composed today it might say "give us this day our daily stress but deliver us from burnout!"

Increasingly, our work is becoming more and more demanding, immersed in an atmosphere of doom and gloom. Words like national deficit, recession, economic slump, harsh competition, cost cutting, downsizing, resizing, etc. have become the order of the day. In this context keeping our stress at healthy levels becomes a daunting task.

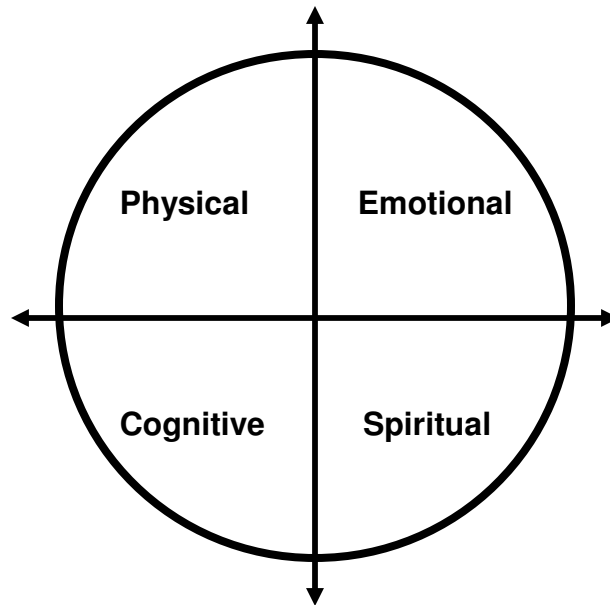
Perhaps the most difficult of all, is the ability to motivate ourselves and others, keeping enthusiasm alive, and being a source of inspiration in difficult times.

People often complain that they are constantly drained of energy without adequate replenishment. When this feeling begins to creep in the words "burn out" begin appearing over the horizon. In this context, we suggest that to be truly successful in our lives we need to invest in a long-term holistic approach to management stress.

For those of us who have a tendency to immerse themselves in their work and identify closely with their career, this is even more important. A new model, of working life emerged in the nineties described by O'Neill (1993) as "long distance winners, sustainable success". He states, "These people are becoming more willing to acknowledge family life, self fulfillment, and service as motivating factors in their lives".

There are of course essential elements for managing stress that can be found in any stress reduction book or programme. Skills such as time management, conflict management, assertiveness, effective delegation, decision making, problem solving, etc. are all fundamental aspects of managing stress in our lives. Holistic stress management takes into consideration the whole person. While it includes all the necessary skills, it is also about attitudes towards life and the integratal development of the physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual domains

of the “self”. These four domains are highly interrelated and have a direct influence on each other, but for the sake of clarity we will briefly describe each one separately.



The Physical Domain: Looking after our body: This is the physical aspect of well being. We all know about the importance of eating healthy food, doing regular exercise, getting enough sleep and enough rest. Unfortunately these things tend to be the first to vanish from our life when we become too busy or stressed. This is when we need them most. Today we know from considerable research that a good diet, regular exercise and adequate sleep have a direct effect on how we think, feel, and consequently behave during the day. They are also good protection against the negative effects of stress. Caring for our body also includes going for regular physical check ups to ensure early detection of anything serious and also to take preventive measures.

At work, we need to take all the necessary health and safety measures that reduce the risk of work-related illness and injuries.

The Emotional Domain: How we feel: This is the emotional aspect of our well being. It deals with our feelings. To begin with, we need to be in touch with our feelings through a high level of self-awareness and self-understanding. This is especially important in times of stress when our emotional state may be off balance and the risk of over reacting to frustrating situations becomes higher. It is also important that we find ways of expressing our feelings constructively. Most of us tend to implode or explode. We need to find healthy outlets to our feelings. Assertiveness, for example, is a great way of showing how you feel and what we want without exploding or keeping everything inside. On an emotional

level it is also important to appreciate who we are and be grateful for what we have.

Finally, our emotional well-being is also related to the type of relationships that we foster in our work, community, and family life. We all need mutual support through friendship, companionship, and intimacy. In other words, love in its various forms.

Hawley (1993) Talks about shyness about the “L – word” in business: Love. He goes on to say, “So we stumble along trying to vanish into “toughness”, unaware that real love resides there also. And all too often we fall into the real opposite of love: fear. We lumber through life at a pace fast enough not to get caught by love, and the real thing is effortlessly pacing beside us all the way. Though elbow to elbow with it, brushing against it, we seldom recognize it.”

At work, it is important that we create an atmosphere of support, trust, friendship, and teamwork. These characteristics go a long way in buffering work related stress and creating an emotionally healthy working environment.

The Cognitive Domain: How we think: This is the area that deals with the way we process information and make sense of what we do and what happens to us. It is also the area of intellectual development. Although thinking positively has become an overused cliché, it still makes a lot of sense. In today’s reality it is very easy to get caught in a negative mind-set failing to appreciate what is positive and as a result missing out on many opportunities. Positive thinking is not fooling ourselves that the negative does not exist. Rather, it is choosing what to do with the challenges that life gives us. Every challenge is an opportunity to learn and become a wiser person. From this perspective we take a reflective/proactive approach to life and regard ourselves as works in progress constantly learning and evolving. A good exercise in gauging our cognitive health is to become aware of the nature of our conversations with others and of our inner dialogue. To what extent are these positive, hopeful, and proactive? Today we talk a lot about learning organizations. These are organizations that regard themselves as dynamic organisms that are in a constant process of change and learning. They focus on developing their people in what they do best, providing opportunities for learning new skills and applying them to their work.

The Spiritual Domain: Care of the soul: In this context we regard spirituality in its widest sense: a belief system that helps us give a deeper meaning to life than the superficial, material things. A sound spirituality keeps us in touch with our deeply held values and helps us to live according to them. In his best selling book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”, Stephen Covey (1992) explains that we all need to have a personal mission statement that guides our daily actions and short and long-term decisions. This can only happen if we dedicate time and energy nurturing our spirituality through ways that work for us. Our work needs to be a place that respects the value of every individual and to every possible extent makes work as meaningful as possible for its employees. This can happen through constant communication of how the larger picture

relates to the work they do and through the appreciation of the importance of their work.

The more we develop and nurture the four domains, the more integrated we become, thus being in a stronger position to be effective with ourselves and others. The holistic nature of this model ensures that every aspect of well being is developed, thus bringing our “self” into balance. In this way, we can be more effective in our work and sustain ourselves longer, even under the inevitable pressures of work and life in general. The table below describes some of the skills or competencies we need to develop to help us grow in each of the four domains.

Domains	Positive Actions. Competencies & Skills
Physical	Regular exercise, healthy diet, adequate sleep, regular general physical checkups, relaxation techniques, yoga, pilates, tai chi.
Emotional	Self-awareness, self-expression, communication, assertiveness, creative work, music & art, intimacy, friendship, support.
Cognitive	Positive inner dialogue, challenging faulty beliefs, constant learning, problem solving, lateral thinking.
Spiritual	Meditation, prayer, spiritual retreats, upholding positive values and principles, clear mission statement, integrity.

Finally, a note for employers and organizational leaders. In a study that pointed at the best fifty companies to work for in the U.K., the ones that were ranked highest by employees were all household names or leaders in the field. The top ten were Cisco Systems, Microsoft, Capital One, Timpson, Asda, Intel, Abbott Mead Vickers, Bacardi Martini, Morgan Stanley and Pret A Manger. What made these companies rank among the highest was not only the working conditions such as salary, benefits, security, etc. but the quality of life at work. The most important aspect was respect for the individual and a friendly atmosphere at work. Following closely was the presence of trust between management and staff and the absence of excessive monitoring. Finally people gave importance to the opportunities for training and professional development.

In another study among retail stores by the Gallup Organisation, the most productive and profitable stores had an average of sixty percent more employees saying that they strongly answered yes to all the questions in the “Gallup Organisation 12Q”. The striking point is that all the questions point at organizational practices that reduce stress and increase job satisfaction.

The Gallup Organisation’s “12Q”

1. Do I know what is expected of me at work?
2. Do I have the materials & equipment I need to do my work well?
3. At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
4. In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
5. Does my superior, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?
6. Is there someone at work who encourages my development?
7. At work, do my opinions seem to count?
8. Does the mission/purpose of my company make me feel my job is important?
9. Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?
10. Do I have a best friend at work?
11. In the last six months, has someone at work talked to me about my progress?
12. This last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

If you can answer yes to most of the above questions, then most probably you are working for an organization that values and respects you as a person and

takes your overall well-being seriously. This is a very important aspect of managing stress at work and life in general.

Patrick J. Psaila BA (Hons) M.Ed. will be delivering an evening course on Holistic Stress Management on the 29th November, 1st & 3rd December 2004, from 5.00pm to 8.00pm at FHRD House, 1, Triq il-Kampanella, San Gwann. Dr. Katie Birch will be a special guest on the 3rd December and she will be talking about body/mind techniques to manage stress. For booking or more information e-mail pjpsaila@workassistmalta.com or call Patrick Psaila on 7988 7982.