

HOW TO RECOGNIZE *and* MANAGE JOB STRESS



By Ron Rubenzer, EdD, MA, MPH, MSE, FAIS

Man on the Moon! How to “Maintain under Strain”

Neil Armstrong’s heart was racing at an incredible 150 beats per minutes, while wrestling to softly land the Eagle on the Moon. His computer overloaded and he had only seconds of fuel left. He “maintained under strain,” because he had a real purpose—to safely park America’s lunar lander for the first time, in history.

The Take-away—Believe in yourself. With desire and dedication, you too can bring out your own serene power to “maintain under job strain.” (Astronauts actually train out stress— see below). Reframe your stress reactions. Silently say to yourself, “I am not getting stressed, I am just excited about my speech coming up; I am just revving up for my challenge.”

In the Company of Astronauts

Training Out Stress: “Steady Eddie,”¹ a Veteran flight engineer and acquaintance of Astronaut John Glenn, revealed these stresses.

Training Out Tips: remain focused, calm, trusting and learning.

Training Procedures Steps:

1. Stay focused on your task, no matter what you feel like.
2. Then you will calm down.
3. Trust the procedure, people and machines/instruments (in “Steady Eddie’s” case, Enola Gay “type” aircraft). It takes real grit to persist (Only one in six of applicants makes it through all the stress-tests for flight engineers).
4. Remember you can always learn from

experiences, whether good or bad. Under the duress of stress, you can at least be a good role model.

What is Job Stress?

According to the CDC² “Job stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health and even injury.”

Job Stress Management—Whose Job is it?

According to a Harvard Business Review article³ “Managers can no longer choose whether to deal with stress on the job, it has become a legal obligation.” Often your Human Resources Manager can direct you to helpful resources.

Job Stress Symptoms

Harmful physical responses include:

Back Problems. Most Americans will experience back pain sometime in their lives. Back pain is the number one disability claim made by American workers.⁴ Stress headaches abound. Most doctors’ visits have a stress base.⁵

Harmful emotional responses include:

Depression, irritability, insomnia, impulsivity (“I quit”) and the newly confirmed toxic “emotional contagion.”⁶

The Lemmings Effect of emotional contagion

Scientific studies reveal that you

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unconsciously, and instantaneously, catch negative toxic emotions from someone ‘bellowing’ a bad mood (not even intended for you). Think of the Lemmings (myth). An upset boss’s yelling at someone else spikes your stress level.

The long-term effects of negative Emotional Contagion? The problem is no one knows the serious long-term effects of secondary-stress exposure on the human personality.⁷

Going Postal— (the Myth) An extreme response to job stress

Excessive stress is known as ‘going postal’. Karl Vick⁸ asserts that violence at work is tied to loss of esteem. ‘Going postal’ is a misnomer. According to the Bureau of labor Statistics⁹ there were 500 on-the-job shootings for 2016. Only a few were literally ‘postal’.

Chronic Job Stress Health Crisis

150,000 job-related stress deaths may be occurring yearly. Karasek and Theorell¹⁰ calculate that up to 23% percent of heart disease could potentially be prevented if we reduced the level of ‘job strain’.

The American Heart Association¹¹

proclaims “Scientists have noted a relationship between coronary heart disease and stress in a person’s life.”

On October 1st, 2019 in Las Vegas, Senator Bernie Sanders, with no history of heart problems, experienced a heart attack during a campaign event for the 2020 presidency. Senator Sanders stated that he will change the nature of his campaign.¹² The presidential contender suggested he will “dial it back.”

Untreated job stress leads to stress mis-management. Pleasure revenge (i.e., overindulgence) is the path of least resistance. “Retail therapy” (shop till you drop) alone costs nearly 11 trillion dollars per year.¹³

Four Pillars of Job-Stress Relief:

- Purpose
- Preparation
- Performance
- Priorities

Purpose: — Why put up with this job?

Costs vs. Benefits

Your purposes can range from helping others, your loved ones, or to just helping yourself.

Try to employ a cost/benefit approach toward working (about 80% of workers surveyed were “stressed out.”¹⁴)

Costs

Job stress costs for workers often include enduring bad bosses, micro-management, deadlines, little control (Center for Disease Control) and toxic “emotional contagion.”¹⁵

Benefits

The clear benefits of job stress are: some degree of financial independence; perhaps an eventual ‘nest-egg’ pension, and insurance (and maybe some friends along the way). Pride in self-improvement and providing leadership are also possible job benefits. Making it to the next ‘coffee break’ might be a useful reward.

Job stress now, buys security later.

Preparation

1. Show up prepared, on time.
2. Try to be agreeable, consistent and conscientious (go the extra mile). See the Big Five Traits success model.¹⁶
3. To inoculate yourself from toxic emotional contagion (which usually flows downhill), be as compassionately detached as you can be; walk briskly, daily. If possible ‘quarantine’ (distance yourself) from the blasting zone of those already stricken with ‘urgency addiction.’ Slow your breathing down to 12 breaths per minute. Have LFT’s (Look Forward To’s) to review in your mind.
4. Practice ‘work attitude’ adjustment. It is counter-intuitive, but sometimes, the more positive you are, the more you aggravate negative people. Trying to cheer up an urgent/critical person is like trying to ‘baptize a cat.’ Example one: You say to Perry Clark, “It’s a good day” and he bellows, “obviously you haven’t heard about today’s round of firings.” Example two: You write a well-received, peer reviewed company article, and the boss, Mike Miserable smirks “well, it’s

not offensive.”

5. Review with your ‘evaluator’ and understand your performance evaluation expectations, how and when to meet them, before you start on the job.
6. Detail your projects so the next person can ‘pick up’ where you left off (in case you win the lottery).
7. Volunteer (publish in your main professional group) Remember—Your Network is your Net-Worth.
8. Go outside, at least during your lunch break, weather permitting. You could use your car as a decompression chamber during lunch if you live in the ‘tundra.’
9. Have a mental escape-plan. Escapism is a highly-used stress antidote. As a nation we spent 72 billion on pets alone,¹⁷ and unbelievably, nine million was spent by 37,000 sky-divers for mere seconds of ‘free-fall’.

Clinical Psychologist Dr. Kathy Platoni¹⁸ found you can sky-dive for only \$180.00 per jump. Indeed, the power of perspective is clear here, as some would consider sky-diving ‘stress-inducing.’

10. Your Personal Job Stress “First Aid” Kit Your Kit items might include: “Maximized mindset” quotes, your prized portable possessions, and peppermints.

Your prized portable possessions might be trophies, awards, vacations and plans, family, your pet’s picture, artwork, memorabilia, etc. (Artwork you post may indeed be unrecognizable to everyone but you. Nationally-acclaimed artist, Kathryn Hansen²⁰ offers a helpful DIY drawing book.)

Peppermints—This is your own private ‘aroma-therapy’. As you smell the scent, you are actually practicing ‘mindful breathing.’

Performance

In general, over-produce and under-complain. Master ‘soft skills’ (appearance,

Maximized mindset quotes:

“Like a super-ball, the harder I am thrown down, the higher I bounce back.”

“You’re a product of your choices, Not a victim of your circumstances” (Morin, 2014).¹⁹

“Work is fun, Change is good.”

“T.G.I.E. Thank Goodness I am employed.”

human relations, corporate culture) because practicing these skills can boost your personal job performance ‘value’ by 40 percent.²¹

Priorities — Ask yourself “Are all my eggs in one basket?”

A Martyr’s work is never done.

The American version of Karoshi is “Work Martyr” Syndrome. Karoshi, coined in 1970, is the Japanese term for overwork-death. Karoshi deaths usually result from stress-triggered heart attacks or stroke.²² The equivalent of a Karoshi victim is the increasingly prevalent Work Martyr²³ who probably works 50 hours per week, takes no breaks or vacations, never unplugs, may well die early and most likely mis-manages stress. Work martyrs are the adult equivalent of Teacher’s pet.

The paradox of being a work martyr is that type A supervisors like and promote work martyrs, easily replacing them as they burn out early, with younger work martyrs. A work martyr would never apply for ‘Stress-Leave’.²⁴ You have to decide, do you “work to live, or live to work.”

In conclusion, remember, the only thing more difficult than Job Stress is Jobless Stress.

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