

“Reducing Stress and Burnout”

Insights and strategies for the helping professions.

Dr. Steve Parese, 2011

SUMMARY: Human services professionals often have a strong desire to help others. Unfortunately, this generous motive often puts us at high risk for burnout, especially when we are overwhelmed by other stressful issues in our lives.

This article will first explore four types of stress which can easily overwhelm helping staff. To remedy this, it offers specific strategies for each type of stress, ideas which help us bring our lives back into healthier balance.

For more information about training in this topic, visit www.WorkinItOut.com or contact the author at SBParese@aol.com.



“Life is difficult.” So begins M. Scott Peck’s classic work, *The Road Less Traveled*. Modern life is full of difficulty, changes, and challenges, all of which inevitably create stress. Stress by itself is not a bad thing, at least when we have the ability to meet the challenges. It is when challenges overwhelm us that stress becomes *distress*. This is especially true for helping professionals, whose empathy can sometimes magnify problems.

Types of Stress

Consider these four types of stress:

1. Anticipatory Stress: Stress over future events; worrying about things that MIGHT happen. When things seem uncertain, it is easy to get caught up in negative “what if” fantasies. While there may be some basis in fact for these worries, such anxieties can grow far out of proportion and become all consuming if we let them.

2. Situational Stress: Short-term stress of the moment; reacting to immediate demands, challenges, or threats. Situational stressors are often accompanied by physical signs such as a stiff neck, headache, tense shoulders, or stomach ache. Generally, these problems and their symptoms pass in a few minutes, but the

lingering effects on our thinking (“I coulda/shoulda/woulda...”) can last for hours or days.

3. Chronic Stress: Persistent, building stress over issues often not in our control. Unlike situational stresses, chronic stress builds over time and does not dissipate on its own. Failing health, growing financial debts, aging dependent parents -- problems such as these can slowly wear us down, eroding away our resources and our reserves.

4. Residual Stress: Stress over past events; unable to let go of old hurts, grudges, or bad memories. Some residual stress can stem truly traumatic losses, painful emotional wounds which have yet to heal. In many cases however, we hold on to issues resulting from bruised egos or wounded pride, unwilling to forgive and forget.

And especially for helping professionals, a fifth type as well:

5. Burnout! Work-related stress which occurs when we day after day we become overwhelmed by work which seems to have lost its meaning.

Burnout is often characterized by emotional exhaustion, de-personalization of clients, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment.

Stress as a Magnifying Glass

Stress often acts as a magnifying glass, making everyday problems seem larger and more significant than they really are. On a low-stress, “good day”, that impatient customer or obnoxious coworker is only mildly irritating, an issue we handle with a deep breath and a shake of the head.

When we are stressed out however, it is easy to lose all perspective and blow problems completely out of proportion. Those individuals are no more irritating today than they were yesterday, but the stress of an unresolved outside issue can magnify those minor problems into major upsets.



Stress Reducing Strategies

There is no doubt that stress can become incredibly debilitating, affecting us at home and work. Not all stress can be easily managed or reduced, but there are many specific strategies which can help bring life back into healthier balance:

Reducing Anticipatory Stress

1. LIVE IN THE PRESENT. VISUALIZE YOUR DREAMS.

Most things we worry about never come to pass. Instead, enjoy your daily blessings and visualize the future you want to have. Articulate your dreams, create your goals, and design your plans. Focus on possibilities, not obstacles.

2. LEARN TO SEE YOURSELF THROUGH THE EYES OF THOSE WHO VALUE YOU.

We often judge ourselves too harshly. We minimize our successes and relive our failures again and again. Instead, forgive yourself for your shortcomings and accept praise for your gifts.

3. PLAN FOR FUTURE EVENTS, THEN LET THEM GO.

Many of us obsess over those what-if's. Instead of worrying, plan. Figure out what you're going to do IF something were to happen, then try to let it go. If it happens, you're ready. If not, learn from it.

Reducing Situational Stress

1. BREATHE.

Reacting to stress by hunching over, gulping air and taking short breaths leaves us oxygen-deprived. Instead, sit up straight. Take a slow, deep breath through your nose. Hold it for a second or two, then slowly release it through your mouth.

2. HYDRATE.

Anxiety often leaves us with a dry mouth. Instead, take a sip of water will immediately make you feel better. Keep a bottle of water nearby all day, and stay fully hydrated.

3. STRETCH.

A hunched stress/survival posture cramps muscles, especially shoulders, neck and jaw. Instead, sit up. Stretch your arms above your head and twist gently from side to side. Lightly massage your neck, jaw, and temples to relieve tension.

Reducing Chronic Stress

1. TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY.

Chronic stress takes its toll on the body over a period of months or years. To reduce its hold on you, take care of your body. Easiest is proper nutrition: drink more water, eat more fruits and veggies, take vitamin supplements as needed. Next, get at least 6-8 hours sleep each night. Finally, exercise daily, even if only a 15 minute walk after lunch or dinner.

2. DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT.

Chronic stress often creates an unhealthy routine. Instead, break out of it by planning a fun vacation, getting involved in a weekly community group, planting a small garden, eating dinner out one night a week, or implementing a family game night.

3. SEEK HELP.

Overwhelming, long-term stress could be a sign that something more serious is wrong. Instead of denying it, seek out professional help for that physical, mental or emotional tune-up.

Reducing Burnout

1. LIMIT WORK HOURS.

Burnout victims often work 9+ hours/day, and work 6-7 days/week. Instead, set a reasonable quitting time, and stick to it. Avoid thinking and talking about business when at home or socializing.

2. SET SPECIFIC GOALS.

Burnout victims often feel like they're accomplishing too little because they get bogged down in too many trivial tasks. Instead, write yourself a list of clearly defined and reachable goals at the beginning of each week, and check them off as you go along.

3. LEARN TO SAY "NO!"

Burnout victims often take on too many tasks because they can't say no. Instead, practice politely saying, "I'm sorry, but I've got too much on my plate right now. You'll have to find someone else." And mean it!



4. LEARN TO DELEGATE.

Burnout victims are often unwilling to let others do a job they KNOW they can do better. Instead, train others to do low-priority or routine tasks and save your energy for the jobs ONLY you can do.

5. TAKE A BREAK.

Burnout victims often work straight through the day without breaks or changes in routine, relying on coffee or other stimulants to keep them going. Instead, take a 15-minute breather halfway through each morning and afternoon. Take a full lunch hour to eat and walk briskly around the building, grounds, or a local park.

Closing

Modern life causes a great deal of stress that everyone experiences, especially those in the helping professions. We exacerbate our stress and magnify our problem when we worry excessively or fail to take care of ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

For more about training in this or other topics, contact:

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