

Beware the Dreaded “Stress Spiral”

Its 3:30 in the afternoon, your boss pops his head around the corner and says “Yeah, we’re going to need you to present the findings on the “Wellness Program” at tomorrow mornings board meeting...oh, and can you include some stats on its impact on our staff”...Gulp... your thoughts race “present to the board...tomorrow morning...I don’t have any stats.” Then you start thinking, “How am I going to get this all done? I have to reply to about a 100 voice messages, pick up the kids, get supper on the table, drop Billy at practice, and somehow get this presentation ready for tomorrow morning. Your heart is pounding...your stomach knots...your body tingles (not in a good way)...Welcome to the wonderful world of **stress**.

Stress is everywhere. And the trend seems to be getting worse. Workplace stress is at an all-time high and this is having a huge impact on our health. Stress leave is rapidly becoming the number one cause of workplace disability. In fact, between 80 and 90% of doctor visits are for stress-related issues. (Source: Allen Elkin, New York Stress Management Centre)

So why is stress reaping so much havoc these days? It’s all connected to something I call the dreaded “stress spiral”.

What is a “Stress Spiral”?

When ever I deliver a stress workshop, the first thing I share is that stress always starts in our mind, with how we think about an issue. If we think negatively, we feel stressed. What we often don’t understand is that every time our negative or frantic thinking triggers stress, our body tries to help us calm down and feel good by releasing its natural feel-good fluid, serotonin.

If we are under constant stress or go through a high-stress time in our life (like a big change at work, loss of a loved one), our body keeps trying to help by releasing more and more serotonin. The problem is that we don’t have an endless supply. As our body’s serotonin gets depleted, our mood gets worse. When we are in a bad mood, we tend to think more pessimistically, continuing the negative thinking process and further depleting our serotonin levels. This back-and-forth effect starts to catch us in a stress spiral, making us think and feel worse and worse until we finally do something about it.

Four years ago, I learned this lesson the hard way. After not doing anything about the stress I felt, I found myself in the middle of my own stress spiral without even realizing it. I was not feeling well, nor could I concentrate. I became way less effective at work and was not fully present for my wonderful wife and two special children. Fortunately, I found feeling this bad lit a fire under me to find out why. The more I looked into it, the more I understood the things that can be done to reverse the stress spiral.

Reversing the Stress Spiral

The best approach is to ensure that we are addressing both the thinking-side and the physical-side of the stress spiral.

On the thinking-side, we need to learn to shift our thoughts from “Oh no, I have to present to the board in the morning” to “I’ve presented to the board before, it went okay. Maybe I’ll ask Pat to give me a hand.” By learning to catch our frantic thinking before it spirals and choose a better thought, we can start to reduce or even avoid feeling stressed altogether.



ISSUES FORUM (continued)

On the physical-side, there are things we can do to naturally support our serotonin levels. For example, each time we have our morning coffee, we are depleting our serotonin levels. Things like sugar and white flour-based products deplete our levels even more. On the flip side, protein and vegetables actually help to boost our serotonin levels and sunshine is the key to starting our body's serotonin-making engine. Taking steps to build our serotonin levels actually puts us in a better mood and makes us more resistant to stress.

Manage Stress Before it Manages Us

When we understand what is pressing our stress buttons,

it makes it much easier to take action. It also makes it easier for managers and companies to offer support with this process.

Quite simply, the sooner we start to manage our stress, the easier it is to reverse the dreaded stress spiral. Most importantly, this helps us to think and feel our best so we can be more productive at work and fully present for the special people in our life.

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