

Sit Down and Relax

...is the type of suggestion usually made by someone who doesn't understand what life's like for the busy owner-manager. But while a degree of stress can be useful, routinely living on the edge is symptomatic of something done wrong. Dr Stephen Booy asks you to take time out and consider stress.

Another Monday morning. A time to think whether you had achieved what you wanted to over the weekend from the list of chores on the wall, a list that seems to get ever longer. Also a time to reflect on whether you have had the opportunity to relax, unwind and recharge the batteries. As I sit here in my window seat in the Embraer jet at Bristol Airport awaiting the routine of pre-flight announcements, crew introductions and the highly important but seemingly consistently ignored safety briefing, I look around at the other passengers and wonder whether they managed to relax during their weekend.

I have long been of the view that you have to learn how to relax. I believe that it is a skill of the mind, the ability to put to one side all thoughts and to focus on relaxation through one means or another. My own job these days is more about thinking and reasoning than the physical application of energy, so mental recharging over weekends is a key part of my life. I also believe that the brain can become 'overheated' so you need to cool it down at times. For many of us in business, this cooling off might be achieved from the undertaking of some physical effort on the weekend that provides this focus of mind relaxation. Perhaps working in the garden, playing golf, or whatever it is that we enjoy doing.

But what is all the fuss about relaxation? Why is it a prescribed expectation of our plans for a weekend, or whenever we have the opportunity to take a break from the toil of routine?

For me, it's about two things. Firstly, I need to give my mind a break. I do believe that during a week, when I am working with my clients I need to keep it in top gear, listening, observing, thinking, reasoning and striving to understand and empathise with my business colleagues on what they are saying how they are saying it, and what is behind their logic, so that I can come up with some comment or creative response that brings them out of their box and encourages them to think in a different way.

The second is about this thing called stress. We all know about stress don't we. It's that thing that some believe is a good thing as it 'keeps us on our toes'.

Dr Kathleen Hamblin, who is a clinical psychologist and lectures on stress management from her base in Berlin, introduced me to some interesting facts about stress. It would appear that it takes seven or eight seconds from the moment we are hit with a 'stressor' for the catabolic hormones needed to arouse the body to be carried by the bloodstream into every cell of the body. Under reasonable circumstances, these hormones are helpful in small doses but prolonged doses can harm internal organs and the immune system.

Apparently, our bodies do try to get out of "emergency mode" as quickly as possible and to bio chemically return to its normal balance and calm. But if the stressor is still present or we are hit with a new one, the body enters the resistance or adaptation stage. We would often believe that we are handling the stress and that our bodies are fine because any symptoms such as tense muscles, racing heartbeat, faster breathing and slower digestion, have past.

The reality is that the body has generated this normal state by drawing on our reserves of hormones, minerals, vitamins and glucose. In time, these defensive resources are depleted and the body then enters a stage of "exhaustion" which can be marked by the actual breakdown of internal organs and the weakening of the immune system. The longer the stress lasts or a chain of stressors, the greater the damage to the body even to its ultimate end!

Frightening stuff, but what are we really doing about it? In the early 1990's, research in the USA concluded that the cost to American industry per year was greater than \$200 billion. Of all industrial accidents, 60 - 80 percent were due to stress incurred by employees. The British Heart Foundation confirms that 21% of all absence from work due to sickness relates to stress-related heart disease. A report from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work has estimated that the so called 'white collar disease' affects nearly one in three EU workers. I would suggest that the statistics for executives in SME's is probably greater than the national average, as each seeks to survive in business in an ever increasingly complex and more competitive environment.

Stephen King, Associate Director at the Exeter offices of Marsh, a leading international risk management and insurance company has seen a marked increase in demand for their stress control services within the South West.

He explains "Although stress remains a growing concern for corporate business, it is by no means limited to them and our work has revealed that all businesses from large corporations to individual start-ups are susceptible", King says.

Even the legal profession is feeling the effect of stress with research commissioned by lawyers Stevens & Bolton revealing significantly higher levels amongst City firms than their counterparts in the regions. The aggravations of commuting into the city and the resulting long hours were deemed as the biggest disadvantages of City working. The research was commissioned to assist the firm with their campaign to recruit top quality lawyers which concluded that 82% of respondents were seeking a better quality of life from a job change and a better balance of work and home life.

Looking around the cabin, now airborne, I can see the expectations of my fellow passengers growing as we await the service of our mandatory breakfast. Surely one of the stress trials of the morning as we try to manage the ergonomic facets of our limbs and try and consume the concoction of delicacies without incurring the tale telling evidence of our competence or otherwise for the rest of the day.

As I cautiously tuck in, I start to think about all the causes of these 'stressors'. It is soon very clear that we all have our own unique recipe of causes of stress, but I do believe that many are self-inflicted. Near the top of the list must be our inability to remember that, as Stephen Covey says in his highly acclaimed "Seven habits of highly effective people" that we are solely and completely in control of how we decide to react to situations or comments from others. How many times I have reminded my students of this fact. Whether it be the boss, an overenthusiastic young upstart, or the mother-in-law, we constantly seem to forget that we control what comes out of our mouths and of our body language. Reactivity, especially in its negative form, must be one of the most common instigators of stress.

We are all faced with increasing volumes of information and decisions, fuelled by technology's ability to not just make us more efficient, but to flood us with even more complexities as we continue to work long hours - an average of 1,731 hours in the year for 1997. We also have to cope with those cultures in business where it is considered macho to be able to cope with high stress levels, or at least to be giving an external portrayal of coping. There is no doubt that some people are addicted to adrenaline but as Dr Kathleen Hamblin said to me "Stress interferes with abstract and complex thinking, so it is vital to realise that these individuals are not doing their best work in this state".

Maybe we ought to complete a stressor audit, a list of those things that generate stress for us. We can easily recognise the kinds of changes in our bodies under such circumstances:-

- **Increased heart rate and blood pressure**
- **Tensing of muscles which stay tight so that muscle functions are strengthened**
- **Faster breathing**

- **Increased perspiration**
- **Blood rushes to the brain**

Perhaps we could then review our list and evaluate which are those within our control and which are those beyond our control.

In the last few years, I have become increasingly aware of the power of the mind, and in particular that area that involves the way we will instinctively solve problems and make decisions. Whilst the facets of the mind are interlinked, our personality and cognitive domain (which is made up of the range of intelligences), tend to be battered around through our experiences and learning. By contrast the Conative domain is more the hard-wiring of our mind and is innate and unchanging. I have discovered logical reasons why some people are energised by challenges while for others, the prospect of change will add a series of 'seven seconds'. It has been fascinating to work with different teams and executives across Europe and to establish whether they are 'working in their grain'. Clearly, this is where the greatest personal productivity is realised. I feel proud that through my intervention and with the application of the American based Kolbe System, we have been able to diagnose the reasons behind many personal and team stresses and conflicts.

As we reach our journey's end, I feel the urge to shout out that we must all take personal responsibility for reviewing and acting to reduce our stress levels, and an ethical accountability to encourage this for people we may lead or manage. As the need to retain our valuable people begins to bite over the coming decade, it is those companies that take this issue seriously that will reap the benefits. I cannot understand why more organisations do not set up alliances with local sports and health spa centres to provide the framework for executives and employees to take control of their own stress management. Ultimately, our own productivity will benefit, not only at work but at home.

John Woolf, Proprietor and Osteopath at North Devon's Premier Retreat and Natural Health Centre, based in Northam, draws people from all walks of life and all parts of the country to their body and mind rejuvenation and stress relief sessions. "Many of our clients come to us in a highly drained state and it takes a combination of treatments, often including acupuncture, to relax them so that their mind and body can start to recuperate" Mr Woolf explains. "If they only could appreciate the value of more regular relaxation, perhaps a session in the floatarium tank once a month, or an invigorating back massage, we would be able to manage the implications of stress far more effectively" he added.

Mr Woolf proclaims that we often aggravate our stress by the combinations of foods we eat. "Some foods or drinks introduce toxins into the body which can often heighten our stress levels, especially when taken in abundance.

Drivers of Stress

But there is no single answer, each of us are unique and we need to understand our own individual drivers of stress and what fuels them, so that we can help our minds and body manage stress and to reduce the potential of long term harm", expresses Mr Woolf.

For me, the lessons from reviewing this experience may be summarised by the following keys:-

- **Learn to be able to recognise when we feel stress.**
- **Reflect on the combination of circumstances that cause us stress.**
- **Take time to understand ourselves better so we can differentiate between positive and negative stressors or challenges.**
- **Change the way we respond or react to those circumstances that we control.**
- **Schedule time on a regular basis for relaxation and recuperation, try out a range of different tactics and exploit those that make a real difference.**

There is no doubt that the mechanisms exist and are available to help us manage our own cocktail of stress factors better. We will never be able to remove it permanently and there are some aspects that are beyond our direct control. But can we afford to ignore it, or are we prepared to take the risk of the seven second multiplier and to end up as another statistic?

Dr Stephen Booy is a resident of Devon and works with organisations as an Executive Coach and Mentor. A member of Faculty of MCE, Brussels and ELF at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, he is Managing Director of MBF International, where he provides solutions towards individual and team improvements in productivity.