



Stress Is No Laughing Matter ... Or Is It?

By Steve Wilson

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Some of you may be reeling after reading the rash of recently released research reports which reinforce what the rest of us had already realized: there is so much stress in the American workplace that it is making us sick--killing us, in fact-- and costing us a fortune! And, in Japan, that paragon of work efficiency and motivation, 10,000 executives die every year from "karoshi". Not something that goes along with sushi, "karoshi" means "sudden death from overwork!"

I have spent more than half of my life as a psychologist, looking for ways to improve the quality of life at work. Unfortunately, most companies manage employees in a way that lends credence to the widely held belief that work is the crabgrass in the lawn of life. But, more and more organizations are proving the truth of what Confucius taught thousands of years ago, "Choose an occupation that you love and you may never have to work a day in your life". Now there's an idea you can live with, and the corporate culture can make it happen!

The Bad News And Good News About Stress

A survey of 600 American workers, conducted in January and February, 1991, for Northwestern National Life Insurance Co., found, among other sad-but-true discoveries, that more than one-third of employees leave their jobs to try to find a less stressful environment, and for seventy percent of workers job stress causes frequent health problems and made them less productive. The anticipated lifetime disability claim for a 51-year-old worker forced to

quit his job for stress-related health reasons would be \$252,000, and there are thousands of them.

Just a few more bad-news facts, then the good news.

Accountants, as the tax deadline approaches, experience elevated cholesterol levels. Researchers at Ohio State University found that medical students, as examinations approach, will experience reduced disease-fighting immune cells and detrimental changes in other components of the immune system. The same is true of family caregivers of Alzheimer's patients and men and women who have been separated or divorced. And, oh yes, did you know that more people die in this country on Monday between 8 and 9 a.m., than at any other time or day? (And let's just throw in the "Sunday Migraine" phenomenon for good measure).

Okay, The Good News

The same OSU researchers found that positive emotions and support reduce stress and boost immunity, reducing the risk of disease. Dr. David Abramis, Management Professor at the University of California at Long Beach has found that companies that consciously make work fun experience reduced absenteeism, lower health care costs, less turnover, decreased reject rates, and hardy after-tax profits. Hard to believe? Talk to the people at North American Tool & Die, Dreyer's Grand Ice Cream, W.L. Gore & Associates, and Dominos Pizza. Or ask my clients at AT&T, Westinghouse, Ortho Pharmaceutical, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, or a dozen other corporations, hospitals, and universities.

Stress And Burnout

Here is some very pragmatic psychological advice: if you want to achieve your goals, dreams, and visions, and enjoy life, you had better learn to do one thing if you don't learn anything else. That is: learn how to prevent physical and emotional burnout. Burnout is most often the end result of unabated stress.

The secret to preventing burnout is BALANCE: in nutrition, between work and rest, vocation and recreation, and most important of all, balance in your perspective. Dr. Theresa Whiteside at the University of Pittsburgh has clear evidence that stress wears down the immune system and that people under 30 get sick more often in the face of daily stress. Why? Lack of

perspective. The young experience emotions more deeply than the middle-aged or elderly. "They haven't evolved a way to deal with stressful events, and they see them as more threatening," she says.

Buddha said it 26 centuries ago, "All we are is a result of what we have thought". That means stress is not caused by events; it is caused by your perceptions of events. Your worried and anxious thinking about your job will make you sick. Is it worth it? There is nothing about your job that will console your family if it kills you but you were very good at it (karoshi!). What people will say (as they pay their last respects) is that you must have lost your perspective.

There is a great deal of evidence that one of the best ways to maintain a balanced perspective is to have a good sense of humor. That doesn't mean being a clown or a jokester. It means having the ability to see the non-serious element in an everyday situation when it just isn't going right.

Crack Jokes, Not Skulls

Psychologically, humor lets you see another way of looking at things, another perspective, from which things may not look so bad. When your perspective is balanced, you are more likely to crack jokes than to crack skulls. When you are in humor, your brain chemistry changes, and your entire physiology changes to keep you physically healthy! It doesn't mean you should joke about everything; that wouldn't be prudent.

I don't know anyone who has been mauled by a lion or trampled by an elephant, but almost everyone has been bitten by a mosquito or stung by a bee. Moral: it's the little things that get you! Having a sense of humor means not getting "done in" by the dozens of minor irritations which occur daily. Studies show that a good sense of humor, and having fun at work, will help you to stay healthy, live longer, and be more creative, satisfied, and productive, too. So, the next time you hear some terminally-serious soul saying, "Get back to

work ... we're not here to have fun," tell him that your laughter means you are working smarter, not harder!

How Do You Do It?

I have collected more than one hundred examples of ways to have fun at work without turning the workplace into a circus. According to the testimony of dozens of competent managers and executives, each one of these ideas is effectively in place somewhere in America. Some of the things people are doing to stay sane and keep a balanced perspective are just plain silly (jelly-bean fights, barefoot soccer in the halls, belly-laugh "breaks"); some are outlandish (remove an employee's car from the company parking lot and replace it with a wreck, an evening at Chippendales for the women employees, a contest for "Ties you wouldn't wear to I.B.M.11).

Some companies provide instrumental support to reduce stress (flexible work schedules, on-site childcare); and, there are many ways to tie fun to productivity (special celebrations for every occasion from "A Job Well-Done" to "National Popcorn Popping Month" in October, contests about job performance (Dominos' Pizza Olympics), and awards given in recognition of effort (a pair of suspenders for "Upholding The Mission", a raincoat for dealing with a "Foul Weather Customer").

It Pays To Play

The companies that are providing their employees with training in the value of humor and the appropriate ways to have fun are enjoying handsome dividends. Whiteside says that those companies which provide support experience half the burnout rate of companies that don't. Perhaps you are one of the lucky ones and this is going on at your shop or office. If so, may the farce be with you. You see, in all *the recorded history of medicine, there is no evidence that anyone has ever actually "died laughing" but, the term "dead serious" is something you'd better think about. Lighten up!*

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Steve Wilson is a psychologist, author, speaker, workshop leader and consultant who helps people and organizations get the absolute most out of themselves while they love every minute of it. He is the Cheerman of The Bored of World Laughter Tour, Inc. and USA Laughter Clubs. For more information visit his website www.stevewilson.com, or www.worldlaughtertour.com, or phone 1-800-669-5233.