

HEALTH & WELLBEING

WITH
DR DORIAN DUGMORE



STRESS, PERFORMANCE AND THE MODERN MANAGER

ALTHOUGH STRESS IS generally (and, to some extent, correctly) perceived as a negative thing, we all need some level of it in our lives. Stress can bring focus, energise us and drive us to succeed. Without it, there would be no desire and with too little stimulation we can become bored, frustrated and even depressed.

One of the pioneers of research into stress, Dr Hans Selye, identified what can be called good stress or 'eustress', where we experience heightened energy and motivational levels that enable us to function to our optimum. On the other hand, too much stress reflects an inability to cope with mounting pressure. Stress can be thought of in terms of a violin's strings... when they're taut, they make sweet music; stretched too tight, they break.

The immediate physical response to stress is an increase of production of the body's stress hormones: cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline. This, in turn, causes a cascade of responses; stored fats and sugars pour into the bloodstream to provide fuel, breathing quickens, heart rate and blood pressure rise in preparation to carry extra oxygen, and digestion slows down to make extra blood available to muscles and extremities. Blood clotting mechanisms can also become activated in anticipation of injury.

Many of these responses were evident in the 2002 *Tonight* TV


documentary on stress and football management, where the vital signs of Sam Allardyce (then Bolton Wanderers) and Dave Bassett (then Leicester City) were monitored during a match. The heart rates and blood pressures recorded were higher during the game than when they'd both been pushed to exhaustion some weeks earlier on a treadmill in a clinical setting.

The constant and relentless 'lash of ambition' that most managers experience can have a physiological and emotional effect on the body. The end result is a series of changes that can result in a manager almost being permanently 'switched on'.

The long-term results of stress range from elevated cholesterol (due to a slowing of the liver's capacity to prepare for cholesterol excretion as blood supply to the internal organs is compromised), an increase in the production of the amino acid homocysteine (potentially promoting the inflammation of blood clots), and an increase in the 'stickiness' of blood platelets, all of which can contribute to blocked arteries and premature heart disease.

So what's to be done? The first step is to recognise there's a problem (see 'Warning Signs', opposite), the second is to manage it by recognising the level of stress under which you can function safely. Only then can you develop ways in which you can control stress above the level that suggests you are potentially unable to cope.





“Stress Itself is not a health hazard; It’s our response to it that’s potentially dangerous”

Dr Barry Franklin

WARNING SIGNS

EXCESS STRESS LEVELS CAN BE HERALDED BY THE ONSET OF SOME OR ALL OF THE FOLLOWING SYMPTOMS (MANY OF WHICH CAN OCCUR SIMULTANEOUSLY)

- Increased muscular tension (neck and back aches)
- Stomach and intestinal problems (irritable bowel syndrome)
- Numbness or tingling in the arms or hands
- Chest pains or shortness of breath
- Skin eruptions and cold sores
- Loss of self-esteem or a feeling of worthlessness
- Difficulty making decisions, trouble meeting deadlines
- Sense of paranoia, increased sensitivity to criticism, short tempered
- Feeling of fatigue, boredom, unhappiness and sadness
- Hard time concentrating, being productive and creative
- Moodiness, depression
- Trouble sleeping, raised resting heart rates, sweating during sleep
- Poor memory, rigid behaviour
- Poor lifestyle habits, overeating, abusing alcohol, too tired to exercise
- Oversleeping or not getting enough sleep

“Laughter Is an Instant vacation”

Milton Berle

EXPERT COMMENT

“The past 20 years have produced significant breakthroughs in understanding the stress/performance/health equation. Ironically, even though the heart often suffers due to relentless, prolonged stress, it can also be our ally in our fight against stress. Research conducted at the Institute of HeartMath in the US has proven that learning to manage stressful emotions can not only improve heart function and overall wellbeing, it can also dramatically enhance brain function, decision-making and professional effectiveness. New ‘cardiofeedback’ technology can assist the manager to create a new foundation of healthy function and effective, sustainable high performance.”

Bruce Cryer, HeartMath LLC, California, US

STRESS ANTIDOTES FOR MANAGERS

- Learn how to produce a relaxation response by using the HeartMath technique (see ‘Expert Comment’). This one-minute technique helps an individual to quickly stop the stress response and move to a state of higher physiological functioning. This is achieved through a combination of paced breathing and reflecting on a positive experience.
- Even if you can’t change things, you can change the way you perceive them. Positive perceptions (even to a crisis situation) can change body chemistry, reducing production of stress hormones.
- Keep a journal. Note your emotions – ‘a trouble shared is a trouble halved’.
- Practice positive self-talk; no self-defeating comments.
- ‘Write your own epitaph.’ Do you want to be remembered as the great manager who was always stressed?
- ‘Tranquillise with exercise.’ Moderate exercise is driven by endorphins, the feel-good hormones.
- Breathe deeply and meditate for ten minutes daily; this promotes stress-reducing chemistry.
- Get enough sleep. Most people need eight hours for body and brain chemistry repair.
- Practise progressive muscular relaxation; contract a group of muscles for a few seconds then release. This promotes stress-relieving chemistry during relaxation.

Dr Dorian Dugmore is founder of the LMA’s Fit To Manage programme, run in association with Wellness International at the adidas Wellness Centre in Stockport, funded by the Barclays Premier League