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Stress and Performance

Awareness regarding the role stress on performance. From Sports Psychology model translated for business and work life.

Written by L. John Mason, Ph.D., Author of the Bestseller; Guide to Stress Reduction.

Effects of Stress on Performance

Too much stress can contribute to health problems. This is not a new statement. Stress can also reduce your ability to perform at the highest levels. The negative effects of stress can impact profitability and quality of life.

The Physical response:

The Stress Response will:

Increase heart rate, speed breathing or you might hold your breath, tightens muscle to prepare to fight or to flee, directs blood to brain and major muscles (away from digestion, hands/feet, Reproductive organs), releases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, slows or stops digestion, causes the brain to be more reactive/less thoughtful, increases perspiration, reduces immune system response. Any of these systems can become your habitual way to respond to stressful situations.

Symptoms of Stress can include:

Tension headaches, neck/back/shoulder pain, tight jaw, TMJ problems, sleeping problems, fatigue, loss of concentration, learning problems can increase, irregular or rapid heart rate, migraine headaches, poor circulation, Raynaud Syndrome, high blood pressure, sexual dysfunction (in men and women), digestive problems, upset stomach, ulcers, colitis, hormone imbalances, reduction of immune system function, over reaction by immune system (allergies or autoimmune diseases worse), increased asthma activity, increased aging rate, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, poor habit control, over-eating, low energy, prone to accidents or mistakes, can impair communication, poor performance, etc.

It is not so much the amount of stress, but how you respond to it. Some people thrive on stress and may be addicted to the adrenaline rush that accompanies high stress or dangerous activities. Most people develop a "habit pattern" from an early age as a response to stress. Sometimes we inherit a physical pattern from our parents or we may learn a way of responding from our immediate family or friends. These can include the muscle tension that you get when you respond to a physical or emotional stressor. The expression "uptight" comes from the tension to certain muscles groups, particularly the neck/shoulders, jaw, and back. It can make you look rigid. This muscle tension can also create muscle spasms that take the form of tension headaches, soreness in the neck and shoulders, and increased back pain. Lesser amounts of muscle tension can also cause fatigue (from wasted energy) or sleeping



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problems when the muscle do not relax and this irritation keeps you from falling asleep, returning to sleep if you awaken, or resting properly when you are asleep. Small amounts of muscle tension can exist below the level of your awareness. This muscle tension can be distracting when we must concentrate on our work or our activities. If we lose focus when this distraction occurs we can slow down or make mistakes that require more time and energy to correct.

Competitive athletes have been aware of the negative effects of stress on their performance. Tight muscles can drop their time in a track and field sprint by fractions of a second. This can be the difference between winning or losing an event. Since the Eastern European athletes began their mental training in the 1970's, world class athletes have begun spending as much as 70% of their training time in mental preparation for controlling stress during competition. I have coached golfers, tennis players, softball players, pilots, even law students preparing for the state bar examinations. Their performance has been enhanced with the use of a program that includes stress management, visualization, and skill development. This process has also worked for managers, executives, policemen, professional sales people, teachers, and even dentists.

Increasing Profits:

Learning to control your response to stress and to "Get out of your own way" has saved companies money, increased production, encouraged creativity, enabled teams to communicate more effectively, reduced the anxieties which surround the process of change, increased the pace of professional learning and development, and even reduced accidents and harassment claims.

If your organization needs to save money, reduce turn over, increase sales and productivity, or just improve the quality of work life, you should give consideration to the return on investment of stress management coaching or training. Every organization is different and requires a tailored approach when installing an effective program. When the process is most successful, I find the commitment and "buy-in" to this program is supported by "top-down" leadership involvement. (The process will work without full leadership support, but it takes longer and may reach its full potential.) Leaders who are familiar with the beneficial results of Executive Coaching are often open to the successful uses of these techniques (combined with stress management consulting) and can see the achievements of their business goals.

The process can work with individuals, teams, departments, or companywide. It is recommended that you test the process by working with a sampling from the departments from the company. The process may require time for assessments and benchmarking, and then implementation. Obviously, some departments such as sales, can show improvement in solid dollar figures. Results from other departments may require different metrics to define and then demonstrate positive change.