

Executive Health Corner

by Dr. Howard E. Wolin

Coping with stress

Stress assaults us every minute of our lives. Work-related stress is this nation's top health problem and has been conclusively linked to a myriad of illnesses, including heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer and accidents. It's often the underlying cause behind addictions such as alcoholism, drug abuse and obesity.

Don't waste time dealing with what you can't control or change.

We've become very conscious of what stress can do and how our inability to cope with it can indeed shorten our careers or even our lives.

Every day in business we face stress-producing events related to getting to work or managing an office. We can't escape heavy traffic, slow mail, malfunctioning office equipment or unreasonable deadlines. We often can't cope with incompetent employees, slow-paying and demanding clients, appointments that run late and perhaps the greatest business-related fear—losing one's job.

And those stresses occur just in the office! When traveling, business people must contend with sources of stress which are even less under their control.

We know what those stresses are, we know that they're here to stay and we know that we generally can't control these external stress triggers. We also know that if we try to understand the sources of stress and its symptoms unique to us, we can take steps to blunt its potentially debilitating effects.

Internal and external causes

We all have stress-causing feelings that emanate from

within, driven by our specific emotional and physical configurations. We must accept the inseparable connection between the mind and the body. Stress leads to inescapable emotional reactions which manifest themselves through physical expression. Stress leads to an interruption of learned automaticity, which is a function of a smoothly-operating neuromuscular and psychological system.

Physical symptoms of stress are probably familiar to you. They include headache, neck pain, muscle spasms, heartburn, stomach pains, nausea, constipation and diarrhea.

Psychological manifestations of stress can be even more uncomfortable and often are terrifying because the symptoms are more subtle and not as easily identifiable. They include helplessness, irritation, frustration, anxiety, explosive anger, paralysis, empty feelings, flat emotions, withdrawal, burnout, lowered self-esteem, tension and depression.

What can be done

What we can control is how we *react* to these stresses. We can learn to deal with these things and take charge of them rather than letting them consume us. If you know what triggers the stress, you will be able to control it.

What are the types of internal stressors—the ones you CAN do something about—that bring about all these symptoms?

Anyone working in a competitive entrepreneurial environment may be easily consumed by an unrealistic and frenzied drive to meet goals of perfect performance and achievement.

Further, the entrepreneur will often become stressed out by self-criticism and emotional self-flagellation if those goals

remain unfulfilled. These destructive emotions can lead to loss of self-esteem and, ultimately, to some of the previously mentioned psychological manifestations.

It's not the amount of external stress that causes the damage. Our inability to deal with the results of stress is the source of the stress-related harm.

To avoid the harmful effects of stress, you must distinguish between the stress you can't control and that which you can control. Perhaps you've heard the "Serenity Prayer"—"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can't change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

That's the wisest way to control stress: Don't waste valuable time dealing with what you can't control or change.

Rest, exercise, good diet

One good way to minimize the effects of stress is to eat a balanced diet. If you're stressed out, you may be a person who eats, and eats, and eats. Don't. It will only add to the stress you're trying to escape because you'll feel guilty for having gorged yourself.

Another good stress-buster is rest. We all must take time out—if we don't, our bodies, like badly maintained machines, will simply cease to operate. Mini-vacations, either out-of-town or sometimes simply an evening out, can do wonders. Don't be afraid to reward yourself; it will make you feel better and relieve stress. Activities such as movies, TV, music, theater, sports events, and sex help relieve tension.

The best stress reliever overall is exercise. Everyone needs to blow off steam; doing it through exercise provides an

excellent, non-violent means of relieving stress and anxiety. It provides the body with more endorphins, highly-effective stress-busting chemical substances which are produced more rapidly in the brain during exercise.

Exercise also helps "take the edge off," serving a valuable psychological function. A regular exercise program can increase self-esteem by providing a sense of self-control as well as a body that looks better.

You must take care, however, not to overdo it. Too much of an exercise program can cause physical injury and stress.

To control stress, you must set appropriate and reasonable goals; set aside personal time to reflect, relax, exercise or have sex; and establish a strong social support system and circle of friends outside the workplace.

TALKING
TO THE
BOSS