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GOOD STRESS VS BAD STRESS

NOT ALL STRESS IS CREATED EQUAL. THE GOOD NEWS IS, STRESS CAN SOMETIMES BE YOUR FRIEND.

AT A GLANCE

A moderate level of stress on a daily basis can help guard against “oxidative damage” associated with disease.

Stress is often rooted in fear. To an extent, this fear can motivate, but if it starts to take over, it can cause indecision, irritability and stress, leading to destructive workplace habits.

A key tactic in keeping stress at a manageable level is establishing clear boundaries between work and home life and identifying activities that

Most of us, at one time or another, have experienced the debilitating impact of stress first-hand. With the global pandemic blurring the boundary between work and home, and business closures and redundancies affecting a range of sectors, it is no surprise that many workers are feeling overwhelmed, anxious and burnt out.

The term “burnout” has entered society’s lexicon for the long term, with the World Health Organization labelling workplace burnout an “occupational phenomenon”, falling just short of classifying it as an illness.

According to psychologist and author Dr Amy Silver, stress is the direct outcome of “taking on too much work or expecting too much of yourself”.

“And that stress is always rooted in the fear that people are feeling,” she says.

DISTRESS VS EUSTRESS

Not all stress is created equal, however, and not all stress is damaging to our health and wellbeing.

A landmark 2013 study, published in *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, found that moderate levels of daily, manageable stress may help protect against “oxidative damage”, commonly linked to disease.

Many psychologists and coaches also differentiate between negative “distress” (associated with traumatic events such as a relationship break-up) and good stress, “eustress” (associated with exciting events such as starting a new job).

Barbara Clifford, founder of The Time Tamer coaching business, says this distinction is important.

“The notion of everyone being stress-free is wrong, because we all need some level of stress to function,” Clifford says.

“The problem is when the pendulum swings too far the other way and people burn out, which can often involve not being able to concentrate, being irritable and feeling tightness in our body.”

Silver agrees and notes there is a difference between “good fear”, or good stress, that motivates us, and the crippling fear that induces anxiety.

“The good fear is what helps us to succeed, and it is what makes us try hard,” she notes.

Fear only becomes destructive when it takes over and assumes the role of a highly critical inner drill sergeant that controls our thinking, rather than the other way around.

“When this inner voice is really loud, it can interfere with action and moving forward, and we can get caught in doubt, in indecision, in irritability and stress,” Silver says.

Too much fear, according to Silver, is what causes people to adopt destructive workplace habits, such as perfectionism and micromanagement, as well as experience imposter syndrome and fear of speaking out.

DEFINING BOUNDARIES

One of the key tactics in not letting stress cross over into the danger zone is to define clear boundaries around your home and work life. “We used to rely on



the office structure to create boundaries, but now we have to find ways of managing that ourselves,” Silver says.

Silver recommends identifying the key activities that you enjoy and that help take your mind off work. For some, this may be exercise or mindfulness, while for others this may be a cognitive distraction device, such as a crossword or a Sudoku puzzle.

“The trick is to do something with your brain that shifts your attention off that source of pressure,” she says.

Silver also advises her clients to choose what they pay attention to.

“If watching the news means that you end up consumed by bad stories, then it’s worth limiting that,” she says.

Clifford also suggests workers schedule rest periods as part of each day – as well as after finishing major projects – to give their brains and bodies time to recover.

Finally, when the workday ends, end it, and don’t check Teams messages or emails, or think about work, until the following day.

“I have an alarm on my phone that tells me every evening to switch off,” she says. “It simply says, ‘Tools down’.”

STRESS-BUSTING TECHNIQUES

The ability to take a break is crucial for keeping stress at bay, according to Clifford, and yet so many of us work through the lunch break.

“People think this makes them more productive, but if you don’t stop and have a break, your mental capacity will slow down,” she says.

If that break happens to include time in nature, all the better.

“Nature is ideal for reducing stress, so, if you can, go outside and sit in the park, because it reduces the stress-producing hormone cortisol,” she says.

Another important factor is knowing your limits – the point “where you hit the ropes”, as Clifford puts it.

“Try to understand your boundaries and know when you need to ask for help,” she says.

No matter how much you want to be the oasis of calm for others in a stressful work environment, it is important for everyone, from the CEO to junior staff, to acknowledge and work on reducing their own stress levels.

“I find some people get overwhelmed because they are taking on everyone else’s stress and not managing their own,” Clifford says.

“They fall into the trap of people-pleasing and not wanting to let anybody down.”

If all else fails, and stress still feels overwhelming, stop and take a big, deep breath. It will do wonders, Clifford says.

“A good practice to cultivate, particularly in a corporate environment, is to just breathe deeply for five minutes after you finish a project,” Clifford says. “It will anchor you.” ■



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