Lessons from the Counselor’s Couch

Techniques for stress relief

More people are feeling stress in the world we live and work in. It is a fast-paced place and we fall into the trap of believing we have to be going as fast as everyone else. We need to slow down and learn to relax and reduce stress in our lives. Eustress is a positive stress resulting from an exhilarating experience, such as winning a lottery or getting a promotion, which can be good and motivate us. Distress is stress from losing, failing, or over working and not coping well.

Stress can be external, like the death of a loved one, divorce, financial problems, lack of sleep, or even a simple argument. Stress can also be internal, like your values, beliefs, faith, self-esteem, or expectations of self and others. Some common symptoms can be physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, spiritual, or relational. How do we learn about coping with stress? Do we need to learn better coping skills?

Learning something new can be exciting but it can also feel odd or weird. We may even think learning visualizations or deep breathing techniques are only for those who have significant problems. Millions of people use relaxation techniques around the world and have for centuries.

Common stress management coping skills are deep breathing, exercising, guided imagery or visualization, yoga, being organized, good nutrition, having fun and using humor, journaling, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, Tai Chi Chi, listening to music, prayer, or massage. I suggest trying different techniques and pick one or two that work best, then practice it. I have been meditating for more than 35 years and have found it helpful and enlightening.

Helpful hints to help decrease stress include, knowing your limits, being realistic and setting boundaries. Change your attitude by learning to see stressful situations as a challenge or opportunity. Learn to say “NO.” You can alter, avoid, or simply accept stressful situations.

Here is a simple breathing technique: Inhale through the nose and count to four. Hold and count to seven. Exhale through the mouth and count to eight. Do that four or more times. When using deep breathing techniques it releases serotonin, a stress fighting hormone, which flows into the blood stream and to the brain. Using any of these techniques can benefit us.

Tom Olson, LPCC
Responding to Challenging Employee Postures

As a manager or supervisor you may need to convey potentially upsetting information, say “no” to an idea presented by an employee, or talk to a subordinate who is angry and critical. In these and other sensitive situations, your choice of words can make a difference in how your messages are received and understood. Here are some phrases that can be useful in these challenging circumstances:

“Does anyone else see it the same way?” During a staff meeting, an employee might bring up an idea, make an observation, or offer a criticism. The tendency is to want to respond directly to that person. However, it is important to keep the interaction from becoming a one on one discussion (or argument). So, ask if anyone else sees the issue the same way. You might want to deal with this very differently if it is just this one person, or if it is one-half the staff who perceives the matter the same way. Also, your question will likely encourage others to offer their input, and it is more likely to get resolved effectively by the team.

“I like your idea, but have you considered . . .” If you are going to give a criticism, it’s often a good idea to balance it with something positive. That helps to keep the discussion positive, and also makes it more likely that the subordinate will listen and accept the criticism.

“I see what you mean, but as a supervisor, . . .” In some circumstances, your role as supervisor may require you to take certain actions or have certain expectations that your employees may not be comfortable with. Referring to your responsibility as a leader can make it easier for you to be confident in fulfilling your responsibilities, and easier for others to accept your actions.

“Is there anything else you would like to add?” Your position as a leader often requires you to hear out the problems, concerns, or other issues of employees. These may be difficult, unpleasant, or things you already know about. You may not want to hear all of it, or you may already know about it. But, it is usually a good idea to hear the person out. This way you not only make sure that you are hearing everything you need to know, but that you are also sending a message that you are willing to listen.

“May I make a suggestion?” At times, you may want to give some direction based on your expertise and experience. If you already have the authority, you may not want to act in an overly autocratic manner. If you don’t have the authority, you still may want the person to take your comments seriously. In either case, “May I make a suggestion?” is an effective way to get your point across.

“Nice work.” Research suggests that positive feedback is the best motivator. And, considering that most people do not receive enough praise in their lives, it is important to give credit where credit is due whenever appropriate. “Nice work” is a simple and effective way to do this.
**Professional Update**

**Anticipating the Empty Nest Syndrome**

Have your children so filled your life that the awareness that they will one day be gone leaves you with a sense of anxiety and emptiness? This is what the empty nest syndrome is all about. It signifies a new stage in your life that may be difficult or positive depending upon how you have approached it.

How you feel about your children leaving is probably mixed. You may feel somewhat relieved to know that you will soon have some privacy and time to develop your own interests. But, you may also realize that you are growing older and will now lose the daily responsibility for the children you have cared for and love. You may wonder what you will do with all of your free time. You may also worry about your children's safety and wonder if they will be able to survive without your ongoing guidance and support.

**How to Cope**

The most important thing to do before the nest is empty is to develop and establish your own identity as a unique individual during your parenting years. Set goals that don’t involve your children. Take classes, develop career skills and maintain personal dreams as you engage in a broad range of social, work and family interests.

It is also essential to spend time together as a couple while raising your children. If all you ever talk about is the kids, that mistake will haunt you when they leave home. Rekindle your marriage by creating an ongoing pattern of doing things together and engaging in private conversation on a variety of topics, issues and events.

It helps to let go gradually and to realize that it is a necessary process. And, to also realize that the nest will not be truly empty because there will be many family events in the future. They will be different than your life before, but still pleasurable. It is rewarding to realize that the nest may be refilled with family visits and gatherings, and the coming of grandchildren. You can have a full nest and have the opportunity to enjoy your freedom as well.

**When to Seek Help**

If you feel great loss and depression at the thought of the changes to come, you could benefit from professional counseling. You are at a great time in your life to open new doors. If you only focus on the losses and are unable to take pleasure in what you will gain, it is time to get help in redirecting your life.