

## Stress and Flow

In an earlier newsletter (*see November 2006*), I wrote about the concept of *flow*. This month's newsletter will build on that idea and discuss how stress management affects flow.

While in a state of flow, people often have a great sense of clarity and effortlessness; they feel they are performing to the best of their abilities. Flow is important because it can enhance the quality of our work, our relationships, and even our leisure time.

Flow is more likely to occur when we are working toward something that is challenging and requires concentration and commitment. The best results occur when we work on tasks that provide us with a challenge at our current skill level – not so easy that we find them boring and not so difficult that they cause us stress.

Truly understanding the concept of flow can help us reframe the way we view the stressors in our lives. By understanding that we need a certain amount of pressure to perform at our peak levels, we can begin to view stressful situations as challenges and

opportunities to grow rather than as negative threats.

One of the important ways in which we can master our stress is to feel as if we can take back control of our lives. This can be done in two ways:

- 1) By making tangible changes to reduce stressful situations, or
- 2) By mentally taking control over the way we choose to respond to these situations.

Making tangible changes is preferable, wherever possible, because it allows you to deal with the source of the problem and often prevents it from recurring. You may find

that when you start to look for solutions, it is easier than you think to make these changes; we get so accustomed to *the way things are* that we often fail to see opportunities to make even minor modifications that could substantially reduce our stress levels.

One exercise that can be very useful in managing your stress is to keep a stress diary. At regular time intervals, monitor your stress levels and make notes about what's happening that might be causing stress and how you are responding to these stressful situations.

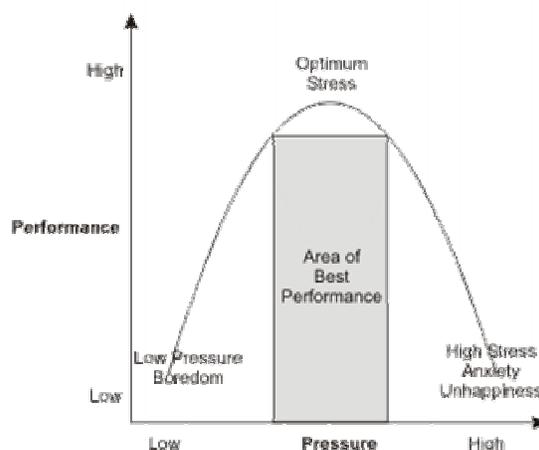
Try this exercise for a week and then examine your stress

*"If you ask what is the single most important key to longevity, I would have to say it is avoiding worry, stress and tension."*

~ George F. Burns

*"Write it on your heart that every day is the best day of the year."*

~ Ralph Waldo  
Emerson



The Inverted-U relationship between pressure and performance

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diary to see if there are patterns arising from it.

You may find that there are some predictable patterns occurring that you can immediately take some action to resolve.

For example, you may find there is a certain task that you dread working on—is it possible to delegate that job to someone else? Or perhaps there is a way to do the task that will make it less stressful for you, like starting it earlier to avoid pressure caused by tight timelines.

You may also find that some of the items that are causing you stress are issues for which you don't feel your skills are adequate. Is it possible that much of this stress could be resolved simply by taking a class or reading a book to learn some new skills?

You will likely also find that there are some issues on your list that are not so easy to resolve. These situations often involve other people or simply require action that is beyond your control. These are the issues that will require you to *take control of your responses*.

One of the great things about being a mature adult is that we can make decisions about how to respond, based on our logic and problem solving skills.

However, many times we choose not to respond in this responsible manner and, in

doing so, give away our control.

Think about these phrases for a minute:

- “She really made me mad”
- “He hurt my feelings”
- “You’re stressing me out”

Do you really believe that anyone can make you do or feel anything unless you give them permission?



By reclaiming your control to choose how you respond to situations, you will begin to feel much less stress. For example, if you find your stress levels increasing each time you speak with a specific person, you may challenge yourself to keep your cool in your next interaction with him/her.

Perhaps you will choose to concentrate on breathing deeply and listening intently to what that person is saying, rather than immediately putting up a defensive wall.

Whatever your response is, it is important to realize that *you have chosen that response*. Therefore, if you are unhappy with the results

that occur (for example, feeling stressed out, causing arguments with loved ones), you must realize that those results are also within your control.

This is where the concept of flow can be very useful: Make it an exciting challenge for yourself to find the best way to deal with situations that are causing you stress—either by taking tangible action to resolve the situation, or by recognizing that regardless of the situation, you are always in control of your response.

By reframing these situations as challenges and opportunities for growth rather than problems that need to be fixed, you can

reduce the anxiety level around many situations you face. This reframing will also increase the likelihood of flow occurring in your daily activities.

It may take a while to begin to see the different outcomes that can occur when you choose to consciously respond to stressful situations; but in the end, the difference will be powerful for your health, your relationships, and your peace of mind!

Could you use some guidance with this challenge? Call Denise for a free 30-minute coaching session. Start living *your* strengths!

“There would be nothing to frighten you, if you refused to be afraid.”

~ Mahatma  
Ghandi

Do you have suggestions for upcoming newsletters or success stories you want to share?

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