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STRESSBUSTERS III: Stressbusting Techniques

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The concept of stress management can be intimidating. To be successful, stress management must be understood as more than a series of activities randomly strung together, working to occupy more time than your stressors. Instead, this management process must be treated as an art, one which – when practiced properly – enables you to encounter stressors and deal with them effectively, while retaining a sense of energy gain rather than energy drain.

Stressbusters I and *II* (10/89 and 11/12/89, respectively) examined the physical and mental responses to stress, the cumulative nature of stress and the multifaceted opportunities stress is given to enter your work and family environments. Our current focus involves the strategic utilization of simple relaxation techniques, ones which are designed to interrupt the cumulative tensing effects caused by stress.

To master the use of relaxation, you must first become skilled in several basic techniques.

- Deep Breathing
- Progressive Relaxation
- Positive Imagery
- Focusing

DEEP BREATHING

Using this technique is as simple as following these six steps:

1. Sit in your chair or stand comfortably but erect.
2. Place the palms of your hands against your stomach
3. Breathe in slowly through your nose, but allowing your stomach to expand forward against your hands.
4. Hold this deep breath for a few seconds.
5. Slowly exhale through your mouth, slightly pursing your lips together, and feel the tension draining.
6. When you have exhaled as much as you can, repeat the technique.

You should repeat this cycle a couple of times at the beginning and work up to taking four or five breaths in this manner after some practice. Be careful not to breathe too fast, as this may cause hyperventilation or lightheadedness. If this is the case even after you have properly performed the technique, contact a health professional. This technique can also be performed during short breaks during your workday, as well as at home.

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

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Progressive relaxation consists of alternately tensing and then relaxing different groups of muscles, forcing you to focus on how it feels to relax. The objective is to break the tense mind-tense muscle cycle. Here are the simple steps:

1. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie on the floor with your feet against the wall, and close your eyes.
2. Make a tight fist with your right hand, hold it for about five seconds and experience the tension.
3. Unclench and let the tension flow out, noting how it feels different to relax.
4. Do the same with your left hand and the muscles in your upper arms and shoulders.
5. Tense your neck, hold and relax, noting the feel of the relaxed tension.
6. Frown as hard as you can and relax.
7. Smile as hard as you can and relax (remember how it feels to smile and be sure to use these muscles more than your frowning muscles).
8. Raise your toes (or push against the wall) feeling the leg tension, and relax. Again notice how the tension drains away.
9. Take a deep breath, feeling the tension in your chest. Exhale and relax. Breathe in again and hold, then exhale and concentrate on how calm you are.
10. Daydream a peaceful, pleasant setting and enjoy it for awhile.
11. Now count slowly to four and open your eyes. You'll be fully alert and relaxed.

A daily session of this technique may take about twenty minutes, but as you practice, it can be much shorter. This technique may be impractical to perform at your work station, but if you take the time and form the habit of using progressive relaxation daily, you will benefit, not only in your work and job satisfaction, but also in your general health and well-being.

POSITIVE IMAGERY

Another less time-consuming but enjoyable method of relaxing your mind is through positive imagery or controlled daydreams.

1. Lean back in your chair and become as comfortable as possible.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose and out through your mouth about ten times with your eyes closed.
3. As you breathe out, say to yourself, "calm" or "relax".
4. After about two minutes, picture a positive, beautiful, peaceful scene from your own experience and imagine yourself to be in it. Keep engrossed in the scene until you feel the tension draining from you.
5. Open your eyes, arise from your chair, stretch, and you will be ready to go.

You may be able to use this technique during office hours, as well as at home.

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FOCUSING

Focusing is another valuable method for identifying and dealing with stress. This technique was developed by psychologist Eugene Gendlin. This is a way of recognizing your body's signals that something is wrong, that your body is reacting to stressors with tensed muscles or gritting teeth. Take a "strain inventory" every day. Check out situations that might be stressful and that keep you from "feeling great." First, you need to recognize how stress affects your body. (e.g. tense neck muscles) Once this is known, you can write down which stressors affect you and to what degree.

You now have the tools you need to interrupt cumulative stress effects, rest your body momentarily, and return to stressful activities with renewed energy and concentration. Now, begin to master the practice of positive relaxation during your work day. Vary these techniques according to the amount of time available in your particular position. For example, during a very hectic work week, if you're unable to take any more than a minute – then use that minute constructively:

1. Close your eyes
2. Smile (relax your jaw)
3. Inhale deeply
4. Exhale slowly

Spending just a minute or two in this manner is known to be quite refreshing. When you have the time to take longer breaks is when you can perform positive imagery.

CONCLUSION

I suggest you post a few notes around your work area to be used as reminders and to prompt you to action. Concentrate on developing this strategy for one month, at which time it will be important to assess your progress. I believe you will be pleasantly surprised, as well as encouraged to maintain the use of these relaxation techniques within your work day.