

Stress and the Family

7. Managing Stress on the Job

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE • MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

BY RALPH T. COLLINS, M.D.

To do our best work, we all need to generate some tension, some stress. We need to get the adrenaline flowing in order to "stay on our toes." And so we cannot hope to, nor would we want to, eliminate all excitement and accompanying stress from our jobs.

Many causes of stress, however, originate off the job and only disrupt it. They result in lower and poorer production, difficult relationships with other workers, inadequate attention and concentration, memory lapses, tardiness and absenteeism. Psychiatrists and other physicians who have worked in business and industry report that about 80 percent of the emotional problems of employees are of this nature; yet the good supervisor must be prepared to help with problems no matter what their cause.

Dave, for example, was found one morning by his boss shaking and crying at work on his punch press. Because the supervisor had had some instruction in the early detection, recognition and management of human problems—a sort of emotional first-aid course—he invited Dave into his office and *listened*. The supervisor had learned that in order to get his employees to open up about their problems he had to have "two big ears and one small mouth" and there had to be privacy.

Dave knew that he could trust his supervisor. He told him that on arriving home the night before he had found a note from his wife saying that she was leaving and taking the children. He couldn't sleep all night, and was in no shape to work the next day. The supervisor referred him to the firm's medical department, which arranged for Dave and his family physician, his clergyman and his wife to work out the marital problem together.

A promotion frequently will create added stress that ruins a man's work and spills over into his home life. Some persons welcome and thrive on heavy stress and pressure at work. Some recognize when they have had enough and refuse an advancement—which often confounds people in management. "Doesn't everybody want to be promoted?" they ask.

Most people want the promotion but don't want the added headaches, stresses and responsibilities that accompany it. Such was the case with Frank.

For 15 years Frank had worked as a cable splicer for a telephone company. Because he was known as the best cable man in the company, he was rewarded by promotion to the ranks of management. For the first 3 months he performed as well as could be expected from a person who was a boss for the first time in his life. But then everything began to fall apart for him, on and off the job.

He found he could not keep up with his reports and all his other paper work. It was almost impossible for him to say "no" to requests for favored assignments from his former co-workers. Soon he lost all control of his men, of his desk work and of his good relations with his peers and superiors in management.

I first heard about the problem when Frank's wife phoned me for a private appointment. Frank, she said, had become depressed, inactive, "just sitting around all day staring into space," had no appetite, couldn't sleep and felt there was nothing left in life. She believed there was a connection between his promotion to management and his change in behavior and mood. Later, when I conferred with Frank, he confirmed his wife's hunch. "I didn't really want to be a supervisor," he told me, "but how could I turn it down?"

Perhaps Frank should have refused the promotion for his own good. Some persons are not temperamentally suited to management. But in this case I felt that the deficit was that of the company, not Frank's.

Someone in management should have taken the time to teach Frank the fundamentals of how to be a manager. He should have been helped to make the adjustment from "one of the workers" to "one of the bosses." He had to realize that a supervisor must earn the respect and confidence of his men by being fair and square. He had to try to really know his employees—what they expect from their lives; and something about their families, so that when problems arise on or off the job, they will feel free to come to him and talk over their difficulties.

This kind of preparation for enlightened management works two ways to decrease stress in both manager and worker. To feel at ease in his job, to master it, the supervisor must be guided by the old saying that "You hire the whole man, not just a hand." The employee brings his assets to the job—his skills, training, education, experience and personality. But he also brings with him his home problems, his frustrations and perhaps his bad temper or self-consciousness. A lot of misery for a lot of people would have been spared if Frank had taken a supervisory training course—in his company or in an outside class.

When an employee starts acting strangely, exhibiting signs of emotional or mental upset, the reaction of some employers is to fire the person, thus adding to the burdens already apparent. This might have happened to Mary Lou, 42, an excellent private secretary to a middle-management executive in a large clothing company. But Mary Lou's boss exhibited a modern and human attitude toward her.

Mary Lou's husband had died 2 years before; she was the sole support of her four school-age children. When the youngest developed pneumonia and lay seriously ill for weeks, the added stress and responsibility changed the mother's entire personality. Normally friendly, warm and gracious on the job, she became suspicious of the other persons in her office. She came to believe that the office was "bugged" and that others were talking about her, saying nasty things. Finally her employer persuaded her to see her company physician who referred her to me in my private office. Mary Lou was hospitalized and treated for a few weeks in the private psychiatric wing of a general hospital and improved rapidly—as did her ill daughter. She returned to work after an absence of 3 months and was her old self again.

Mary Lou reacted to a situation in her life by becoming seriously ill. Fortunately, her boss was understanding, helpful and supportive of her and her children through the ordeal—thus lessening her stresses on the job early in the illness and after she returned to work.

Technological change, which many managers view only as a blessing, may appear as a threat to workers—especially older workers who have carved out a niche in the old system. Calvin, for example, aged 62, had worked as a designer for a small optical company for 30 years. He had always loved and excelled in his work, for he was personally involved in the creation of a new product from beginning to end. Then along came technology with automation, computers, programmers, new machines and new methods; younger men trained in their use passed him by, leaving him discouraged, anxious and defeated. Though he remained on the job, he complained, "I'm an old horse put out to pasture" and asked for early retirement, which was granted.

Physically, Calvin was up to his job. Emotionally, however, he was beaten. Perhaps with compulsory retirement looming in the near future, he saw no sense in readjusting to a tomorrow in which he would not participate. Or perhaps he was simply one of many in life who fail to remain flexible. When changes come, these persons are defeated—not by change, but by their own rigidity.

These days, many an experienced executive comes to work one day to find that administrative change—a merger or reorganization—has left him or her in a "dead-end" job. The resulting reaction to such a stressful situation can be catastrophic if the executive cannot adapt to it. Some quit, some get sick—physically or emotionally—and some accept it and stay on, trying to improve their skills or knowledge with the hope that they may be transferred to a job with better opportunities.

Establishing priorities and sticking to them is one good way to organize one's life to defeat stress. One couple I know did just this. When the husband became vice president of a large firm, they decided not to be swallowed up by the company or enmeshed in the "cocktail circuit" of their city. They purchased a house in an area where no other company top-management people lived. To defeat "briefcaseitis" he refused to take work home but instead got to work early so he had an uninterrupted hour to go through his "In" basket, to dictate, think and plan before others arrived and the phone began to ring. He chose two community interests (church and Boy Scouts) and refused almost all invitations to speak or join various groups. They socialized mainly with people outside the company and they and their children lived a full, joyful and enriching life.

This was an instance of preventing stress on the job and at home. It reminds me of the "Chair of Life" described by a speaker I once heard. The Chair of Life, he said, has four legs—vocation; avocation; rest and recreation; and the fourth leg is religion. If one leg, such as work, becomes longer than the others, it will throw the Chair of Life off balance, with unfavorable results.

Each of us needs an outlet for pent-up emotions of anger, frustration, hostility and discouragement which develop from life's situations. Too often ill feelings are passed along in epidemic fashion, as described in an old *Saturday Evening Post* cover with four panels, in which (1) the boss bawls out the husband, (2) the husband angrily shows the wife an undarned hole in his sock, (3) the wife screams at their young daughter and (4) the daughter ends up scolding the cat. We should all choose some safety-valve activity, be it a sport, hobby, music, reading or even just a long relaxing walk to cool off after a harder than usual day at work.

Cooperative Extension Service Programs are open to all without regard to race, color, creed, or national origin. Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Gordon E. Guyer, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI 48824.

Reprinted with permission from *Stress*, copyright 1974, Vol. 25, No. 1, by Blue Cross Association, Chicago, Illinois.

Adapted by David R. Imig, Ph.D., Family Life Specialist, Michigan State University

Michigan State University Printing