

Stress and Recovery in a Down Economy

By
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According to the World Health Organization's, mental disease including stress related disorders will be the second leading cause of disabilities by the year 2020.

The United States is number one in stress related illnesses, but Sweden is not far behind. Having lived and worked in Sweden for two years, it amazes me how the Swedes are starting to live more like Americans. They are working longer hours, they are taking less vacation time, and they are experiencing higher levels of stress and burnout. And when they do take their vacations, they bring their Blackberries along, so they are never truly unplugged. Many don't take their full week of sporlovet, but meet their families for the weekend. Many fathers don't take their pappaledighet, but continue to work.

I have been a member of the Georgia SACC for several years now, and I have noticed that stress and burnout is becoming more and more of a problem for companies worldwide. This is a topic of discussion at many meetings.

In this tough economy, we are being asked to do more with less. Many have taken cuts in pay, which add to financial stress. They are frantically trying to procure work. In addition, as work ramps back up, companies are reluctant to hire immediately, which puts the burden on the remaining employees. The physical and mental demands are tremendous. Many employees are working 60, 80, even 100-hour weeks, sometimes for extended periods of time.

Many of the so called first world societies are developing stress related illnesses such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes at an alarming rate. Many use both prescription and over-the-counter medications to control the symptoms of stress such as headaches, stomach problems, allergies, pain, fatigue, difficulty sleeping, diminished libido, and irritability. It is much easier to pop pills rather than address the underlying stressors, which were the cause of many of these symptoms.

The smart companies are beginning to wake up to this reality and address these issues. One way to monitor stress is through emotional intelligence. The emotional intelligence evaluation we use for personal development measures stress and burnout by measuring such traits as stress tolerance, self-actualization, happiness, and optimism. That way, we can determine if

stress and burnout are problems and deal with them before they manifest themselves in the form of sickness, low productivity, absenteeism, and chronic disease.

What if companies started offering more vacation time, more flextime, and more ways for their employees to recover? The costs would be minimal compared with the results. Most people we interviewed said they would take a substantial cut in pay to be able to have more time off. Just by investing a little bit into their people, companies would have happier, less stressed, more loyal, more productive employees.

One very effective way to renew the body is by doing yoga and meditation. During our courses, managers are taught these basic techniques as a way to reduce stress and create better focus. The more we study the brain, the more we see the connection between the mind and body. When we reduce stress, we reduce cortisol, a hormone that is secreted during the "fight or flight" response. Cortisol shuts down the thinking brain because when you are being chased by a lion, it is not in your best interest to over-analyze the situation. Without this hormone rush, we are able to think more clearly and solve problems more readily. We are able to be in a concept called "flow", where body and mind are in harmony with each other and both work as efficiently as possible. This results in fewer sick days and more stamina.

Study after study confirms what we already know to be true. If we are sharp mentally, we function better physically and vice versa. Companies are starting to realize the importance of addressing these health issues for their workers not only to make them more productive, but also to curb high healthcare costs. In an article titled, "Wellness Program Cures Rising Health Care Costs" □, Cianbro Corporation, a large heavy civil and industrial contractor, addressed rising healthcare costs head-on. In 2001, they paid \$11.5 million in healthcare costs, but these costs were projected to reach \$20 million by 2004. So, in 2001, they started a voluntary wellness program for their employees. They reduced the percentage of smokers from 46% to 20%. 34% of their employees are exercising on a regular basis, and there has been a 20% reduction in hypertension and a 25% reduction in high cholesterol. Since 2001, instead of almost doubling, their healthcare costs have remained flat. They conservatively estimate that they get a \$3.50 return per every dollar they invest in the wellness program, and this money goes straight to the bottom line.

Companies must pay attention to this epidemic in stress and burnout and take it very seriously if they want to emerge from this recession and be able to compete. To put it very simply, healthy, happy employees contribute more to the bottom line. They have less sick days and are more productive.

So, if you own a company or you are an individual, what are you going to do starting today to change your approach toward the stress in your life?

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