



Can you really afford to be stressed?

IT'S A 'NORMAL' PART OF SOCIETY; IT'S ALL AROUND US, IT FEELS OUT OF OUR CONTROL AT TIMES AND IT ULTIMATELY MAKES US VERY UNWELL. STRESS. WHAT IS IT? WHY DO WE TOLERATE IT? WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT? KAREN ROSS HAS SOME ANSWERS.

Who wouldn't admit to being stressed at least occasionally in their week? Not many and certainly not many business owners. Running a business was never for the faint of heart, but it's time to find new ways to run a business successfully whilst taking care of our wellbeing at the same time. That way we do a better job and make more money.

It's time for the business world to catch up with what athletes have known for a long time: the importance of being on top of your mental and emotional game to be at peak performance. Athletes don't tolerate stress.

Getting on top of stress is not only a health matter, it also makes business sense. The World Health Organization estimates that by the year 2020, stress will be one of our biggest health issues, second only to "ischemic heart disease".

Definitive research on the cost of workplace stress in New Zealand is minimal right now, but numerous surveys and studies estimate work stress costs US industry more than \$300 billion a year. That equates to \$947 per person annually. In New Zealand terms (per capita) this suggests it could be costing the country over \$4 billion per year.

Stress is not a performance state

Our incredible bodies are designed to handle all manner of challenges. When we're active it is natural for

our body to circulate more blood and oxygen to our muscles, for our heart rate to increase, and release small amounts of adrenalin to provide energy for us to move. You could say these are normal and natural 'demands' on the body.

On the other hand, when we find our body triggered into more of a stress response (the polite word for fear or fight/flight), more adrenalin is released, along with cortisol, preparing us to fight, fly, or freeze (play dead). It is a survival response hard-wired to protect us. Unfortunately in a work situation (eg. a sudden issue with an important customer order) our body can react as if it is truly in danger (think tiger about to pounce). Blood and oxygen move out to your arms and legs, non-essential activities such as digestion and immune-system processes go on standby, adrenalin and cortisol are released and your body is primed for action. Now, consider this: you're about to talk to your customer about the problem with their order, or brainstorm creative solutions with your production team – how helpful is it to have all your resources out in your arms and your legs right now?! Not so useful.

Cortisol is not the kind of energy required at a time like this. We are rarely at our most intelligent when we're stressed; we need a clear head with blood and oxygen flowing through our brain. We are much better off in a calm, flow state when we need to problem-solve and communicate effectively, simple as that. Life is busy enough without taxing our bodies with this psychological stress.

TIP #1:

Lower your tolerance to stress

Get to know your triggers and get into the habit of interrupting your 'stress' responses. What would happen if you took three slow deep breaths? Imagine a beautiful beach scene while sitting in traffic. Why not?

Wearing our stress like a badge of honour

Whether we're consciously aware of it or not, the Kiwi psyche has a fair bit of 'you need to slog your guts out' mentality at its heart. Perhaps it's a throw back from our pioneering history where life wasn't always easy, or perhaps it's in our puritanical European roots. Whatever the case, it has meant that being busy, working all hours and feeling stressed has been seen as a rite of passage for most business owners – a badge of honour.

Fortunately many are starting to see the light, and the trick is to make conscious what has been quite unconscious: the various beliefs inherent in our culture that hold stress in place, including:

- Stress is normal. Everyone is stressed. Get over it.
- I need it to perform – I work better under pressure.
- I need to do, do, do, and slog my guts out to be a success.
- I haven't got time for a laugh, it just distracts from good performance.
- The more I work, the more worthy I am.

These (largely unconscious) societal beliefs make stress a normal, acceptable part of our life. Imagine dumping every one of them. We can still do a good job and achieve results without putting this kind of pressure on ourselves. I clearly remember the day I decided I never again wanted to answer the question "How are you?" with "Oh, really busy". What a revelation.

TIP #2

Keep an eye out for getting caught up in these old beliefs.

Look out for where these beliefs

show up in your decisions, your 'rules'. Notice where they show up in your conversations with friends and family. Are you enjoying sounding 'busy and important', or do you want to celebrate getting home a little earlier to have a walk on the beach?

An (outrageous) invitation

If you are truly ready to change your stress patterns for good, one of the simplest things you can do is make your state of mind the most important thing in your day. This means in every situation you find yourself in, and above your clients, deadlines, spouse, kids, colleagues, and staff – everything and everyone.

Having issued this invitation to numerous clients, including roomfuls of business owners, I know what you're thinking; they often stare back at me – incredulous or with wry amusement – a silent "yeah, right" beaming forth. Then they try it and it works!

Outrageous, yes. And the reality is that when we take the time to be our most resourceful self, we bring a much better version of ourselves to others and our work.

TIP #3

Make your state of mind the MOST important thing in your day

Here are three simple steps:

- Notice when you're starting to get stressed or wound up,
- Pause and take a breath,
- Shift your state by taking a few slow deep breaths, take a walk, make a cuppa, or use the Mood Mover to shift your state in seconds (<http://youtu.be/6Y6--re3BOo>). Free tools are also available online at www.avaraconsulting.co.nz/resources/.



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