

my career

Plug the drain of stress

Stress is often accepted as a reality of the workplace but it can be transformed into a helpful form and brought under control, says Karen Ross.

MOST of us get stressed from time to time, and some of us, from time to time, don't get stressed.

We talk about stress. We worry about it. We have beliefs about it. "It helps me keep my eye on the ball," a client once said to me. "Everyone else at work is stressed too, it's normal."

What he soon realised was that when he wasn't in his stress mode he could think clearer and more creatively, and ultimately be more productive. He could then also enjoy work again – a vital ingredient in our overall happiness!

Richard Carlson, author of *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, says stress is "nothing more than a socially acceptable form of mental illness".

Because stress is so normalised in our society we can get complacent about dealing with it, and when you spend most of your working week feeling rushed, overwhelmed or anxious, it becomes your (new) normal. It's easy to forget what it's like to feel relaxed and in the flow at work when it's been so long since you've experienced it.

It's fairly widely understood now the pressure stress places on the immune system (flu anyone?), digestive system, heart (high blood pressure anyone?), blood sugar levels, and the list goes on.

Stress also takes a toll on our mind and therefore our effectiveness and performance. Ask any top athlete what happens when they get stressed; they know most of their performance on the day relies on a focused calm mental state.

Stress often triggers our fight or flight response – blood and oxygen flow out of our head to our limbs. Our brain is not left with many resources to think – beyond

protecting ourselves or running away. Not exactly an ideal state for thinking creatively, problem solving or communicating effectively.

Hence, when we have a deadline looming or a challenge to deal with, getting our state of mind in order first will help us get the situation in order.

All of this is not to say a buzz of adrenalin or excitement before a big meeting or presentation isn't of benefit; it can energise you.

STRESS-LESS TIPS

- Get back to basics: Drink plenty of water through the day. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Be mindful of your breathing (I have one word to say about this: yoga).
- Exercise – if not every day for 20 minutes, then three times a week at least.
- Sleep early and rise early – be in bed by 10pm whenever possible.
- Awareness of your stress triggers is hugely helpful – get to know what sets off your stress and take the opportunity to interrupt your response – take a breath, move your body, focus on something else.
- Don't let it go for too long before you make changes or get some help. The sooner you do, the easier it is to bring balance back into the mind and body.
- Inject fun in to your week. Make plans for play. Make sure those plans are compatible with getting to bed early most of the time.

The difference is whether or not it gives you a good zing of energy, or drains your mental and emotional (and consequently physical) resources. Get to know the difference.

Stress is not a conscious process – it's an unconscious response in the body. Stress states build up over time in adrenalin-based neural networks that run automatically. This explains why it can feel very challenging to "chill out" and "go with the flow". Basically, if you could, you would, but you are programmed with that

response. Fortunately it's possible to collapse those networks so that they no longer run automatically.

We can change the settings by changing our habits, which creates new programming over time, and we can clear out the old settings with specific techniques.

Regardless of what is going on around us, it's our internal response that causes stress. When we're more in control of what's



Karen Ross: Hamilton workshop next month.



Stretched: Stress is not a conscious process – it's an unconscious response in the body. Stress states build up over time in adrenalin-based neural networks that run automatically. Photo: FAIRFAX

happening inside of us, we can more effectively influence what's happening outside.

■ Karen Ross is a transformational coach, trainer and speaker, specialising in wellbeing in

the workplace and bringing performance and enjoyment back into work. She is holding a two-hour workshop in Hamilton on July 2 where she'll be sharing tools on how to transform stress

and improve effectiveness and enjoyment at work and home.

■ See www.avaraconsulting.co.nz for more details

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