

Is Stress Nibbling Away at your Bottom Line? (Part 2)

By Steven Alper

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To fully understand how stress undermines employee and corporate health and wellbeing, and eats away at profit margins, we first need to understand exactly what stress is and how it contributes to illness or health. Hans Selye, the pre-eminent stress researcher of the 20th century, defines stress as "the non-specific reaction of an organism to any pressure or demand." On the simplest level, stress is life -- or the capacity to respond. Put another way, stress is not what happens to us; rather, stress is *how we respond* to what happens to us. It is the nature of our response to what happens that contributes to either vitality and health, or distress and disease.

Because stress is not what happens to us but how we respond to what happens, the "mind/body" connection is a key ingredient in understanding stress response. Particular perceptions, thoughts and intentions lead to corresponding bodily reactions and actions. Gary Schwartz, a researcher at University of Arizona Medical School, has developed a useful model for understanding the mind/body pathway through which stress contributes either to health or illness in individuals (Jon Kabat-Zinn. *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1990.) In my experience, Schwartz's model is equally useful as a paradigm for understanding how organizational responses to stress contribute to an organization's vitality and health, or to organizational dysfunction and disease.

Here is Schwartz's model of how stress (via the pathway of the mind/body connection) contributes to illness:

Disattention —> Disconnection —> Disregulation —> Disorder —> Disease

In the first stage, **Disattention**, we perceive an irritating stimulus or pressure of any sort (stressor) and choose to ignore it. Disattention may seem quite reasonable and practical. Perhaps we are unable to alter a situation. Perhaps a particular irritant seems unimportant or trivial. Perhaps something more important requires our attention. Whatever the rationale, if disattention persists, then Disconnection ensues.

Disconnection means that we have habituated to the stimulus, so it is no longer accessible to awareness. For example, we may choose to disattend to traffic noise in the city, and before long we no longer hear it. However, if we take a vacation in the wilderness and return to the city after being gone for a few weeks, the noise may seem deafening and irritating. In the same way we may not notice air pollution in the city unless we leave and then return.

When disconnection persists, **Disregulation** ensues. This is potentially a tremendous problem because we are almost entirely self-regulating organisms. We eat in response to hunger, sleep in response to being tired, drink in response to thirst, rest in response to fatigue, protect ourselves in response to the perception of threat or pain. When we disconnect from moment to moment experience, we become unable to self-regulate. For instance, think of a time when you were working hard on a project and mid-morning realized you were hungry. Perhaps you were on a roll and chose not to interrupt the work to take a break for a snack. After a while the sensations of hunger disappeared. Around one or two o'clock in the afternoon you became aware of being headachy, irritable or tired. Your body upped the ante because the initial hunger stimulus was ignored.

We self-regulate in thousands of more subtle ways as well, involving emotional and interpersonal cues that have physiological correlates and consequences. This simple truth is

reflected in the idiomatic language of the body. Think of all the expressions you know that involve emotion and bodily reactions: "pain in the neck," "stiff-necked," "shouldering a heavy burden of responsibility," "all choked up," "gut-wrenching decision," "gut check," "hard-hearted," "warm-hearted," "taking a stand."

If states of disregulation persist over time, then states of **Disorder** ensue. For instance, eating poorly over extended periods of time can lead to fatigue, immuno-suppression, and a variety of gastrointestinal disorders. Ignoring emotional and interpersonal cues can lead to relationship problems and emotional and physical problems of various sorts, including hypertension; headaches; back, shoulder, and neck aches; anxiety; depression; and other stress-related disorders.

When states of disorder persist over time, eventually **Disease** processes ensue. Stress seems to translate into disease wherever we are genetically or culturally most vulnerable. If you have a family history of alcoholism, or depression or heart disease, then for you stress becomes a risk factor for those specific illnesses. Additionally, we can see the contributions of cultural forces in channeling stress in the disease process. Examples include the epidemic of eating disorders among women in late twentieth century America, as well as the increase in incidence of heart disease corresponding both to increasing societal and workplace stress and changes in dietary patterns (the advent of fast food, for instance, in the 50's and 60's).

Schwartz's model can also be helpful in understanding how *organizations* become dysfunctional. Beginning with disattention, perhaps simply because so many important problems compete for our attention we cannot address them all. Perhaps perceptions are distorted, or we have blind spots, or priorities are not clear, or the implications of particular situations are not understood. For whatever reason disattention occurs, if it persists then disconnection, disregulation, disorder and disease ensue as surely in organizations as they do in individuals. This is because organizations, like living organisms, are self-regulating systems, dependent on perception and feedback.

Think of a major problem in your organization - in Human Resources, Finance, Customer Relations, Sales, Information Technology, Manufacturing, Management, and etc. How did the problem begin? Can you identify the phases of Schwartz's model (disattention, disconnection, disregulation, disorder, disease) in the development of the problem? Did the problem progress all the way to the disease stage or were you able to interrupt its progression prior to the disease stage?

If you completed the above exercise, you probably noticed that the prerequisite for interrupting the progression to the disease stage is bringing attention to bear on the problem. This simple act is the first stage of Schwartz's model of how stress works through the mind/body connection to contribute to health and wellbeing, as depicted below:

DisAttention —> **Disconnection** —> **Disregulation** —>
Disorder —> **Disease**

Paying close attention with a clear, unbiased awareness is a solution that can be applied at any stage in the progression from disattention to disease. Although it sounds simple, paying close attention without interference from conditioned bias and emotional reactivity is far from easy. Can you think of an example from your own life in which paying attention and reconnecting with your experience allowed for renewed self-regulation, order and ease? Can you think of a business example?

"Mindfulness" is the term used to describe the *moment-by-moment, interested but unbiased awareness* that is required to reverse the progression from disattention towards disease in Schwartz's model, and back towards self-regulation, order and ease. Mindfulness can be difficult, due to the intense conditioning that distorts individual perception and pre-disposes us to react more from habit, on automatic pilot mode, than by free choice. This is further complicated in large organizations by the difficulty in simply seeing the forest for the trees and understanding what is happening. Fortunately, mindfulness can be cultivated through disciplined practice, as surely as strength can be developed through weight training or cardiovascular fitness through running. Mindfulness training thus can be extraordinarily helpful in developing the calm composure under pressure, and clarity of perception in chaotic situations that allow for skillful response.

With regard to organizational stress reduction, mindfulness training develops leadership capacities, and enhances teamwork, the capacity for innovation, and the ability to respond and adapt to changing business conditions. Mindfulness training enhances interpersonal awareness and emotional intelligence. These are invaluable in creating an organizational culture in which employees feel appreciated and valued, and in which attention to individual growth and development of key employees is viewed as a central feature of the organizational recruitment and retention strategy. Less employee turnover equals less organizational stress. Happier, more motivated employees equal less absenteeism, fewer workers comp claims, and greater productivity.

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