

Too Stressed to Innovate? Take a Breath

By Isabelle St-Jean

GIVEN THE NUMBER OF E-MAILS, TEXTS, meetings and “to do’s” that fill a typical day, is it really surprising to find so much research pointing to the rise of stress in the workplace?

In a world that is constantly connected, there is the perception that we too are expected to be ‘on’ 24/7. Moreover, five years on from the cautionary tale of 2008 the mantra of ‘do more with less’ remains, adding further tension for organizations and individuals alike.

A recent study completed by the BC Mental Health Association confirms what has been suspected—mental health in the workplace is being eroded at an alarming rate. This study suggests that chronic stress often results in periods of depression when the levels of stress become debilitating.

The multiplicity of demands alone can trigger states of chronic stress that carry significant costs for any organization. On the most obvious level, the cost involves a loss of productivity and drop in staff morale.

Less visible, but no less concerning, is the stasis such stress creates and the loss of innovative possibilities it brings. Innovation might be born of necessity in some instances, but it can not thrive where chronic stress has a hold. Without innovation though, we just don’t move forward, either as teams or in our own development.

With this in mind, how can we cultivate conditions that counter the risks of chronic stress, foster a healthier workplace and regenerate mindsets conducive to innovation? From the micro (individual) to the macro (workplace culture), a few insights, questions and solutions are discussed herein.

Putting the Science of Stress to Work

Turning to neuroscience, we can better understand how stress impacts our professional lives and the bottom line. In *Power Up Your Brain*, authors D. Perlmutter and A. Villoldo clarify what renders us less creative or apt to innovate. They explain that chronic stress is associated with the production of the hormone cortisol and its

impact, minus the scientific terminology, is simple—learning and creativity become almost impossible.

What occurs as a result is that we revert to a survival mode wherein we tend to operate on auto-pilot and/or hover in the status quo. We get stuck in the routine and ruts of old patterns. When this happens, our innovative contributions to the workplace are simply not available. More troublingly, the wider workplace suffers from the atmosphere of stagnancy that chronic stress can bring to bear on any one individual.

Be Mindful of the Moment

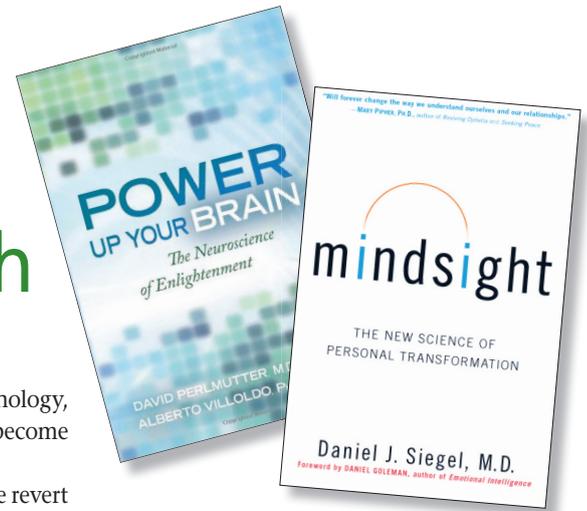
Without doubt, organizations have faced bigger picture challenges of their own, particularly in recent years. When an organization becomes temporally out of balance and overly focused on striving to control outcomes, it generates an added tension that further exacerbates stress.

In this kind of workplace, people are implicitly encouraged to bypass the present in pursuit of the future. This focuses people away from their immediate point of power and action: the now.

Our most inspired thoughts and efficient actions occur in the moment. If we train our minds to be more attuned to the present, stress levels diminish and innovative potential is unlocked once more.

Jon Kabat-Zinn who founded the renowned Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School defines mindfulness as the confluence of intention, attention and present time experience. Alongside an ever-growing body of research, the practice of mindfulness is currently being integrated, as an effective antidote to stress, in all areas of mainstream life and work.

Essentially, it is the art of becoming a non-judgmental observer of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Over time, this practice can significantly counteract the racing habits of the mind, rearrange the neural networks in the brain and help to regulate our emotions and energy expenditure.



A Few Deep Breaths

In the field of mindfulness, we are reminded that breathing is the key to opening our awareness. The simple act of taking a few deep breaths periodically throughout the work day can change the chemistry in our brains. Breathing is something we do so reflexively that we do it unconsciously, and often poorly.

Taking a moment to focus on the most basic of acts—a few good deep breaths—brings immediate benefits. It brings us access to the reflective faculties of the prefrontal cortex, calms our nervous system and makes us more aware, observant and apt to think creatively.

In *Mindsight*, Dr. Daniel Siegel explains that through practicing skills of awareness, intentions and attention, we can better integrate life’s experiences from a more useful perspective. This allows us to develop what Siegel dubs FACES in acronym, those resourceful states of mind that serve ourselves and organizations best: flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. Siegel asserts that these resourceful states help to counteract stress where it originates—in our brains and in our minds.

As a life and business coach for the past ten years, I have repeatedly witnessed clients clearly impacted as much by the story they tell themselves as the impact of any one particular event. A lack of awareness typically combines with a narrow perspective from which the interpretation or meaning is made about an event, which generates a stress response in turn.

While such recognitions are often gained in hindsight, it is in the moment that the greatest gains stand to be made. By learning to anchor ourselves in mindful states, we strengthen our resilience, expand our interpretive perspectives and better tap the higher functions of our brain – those that foster creative solutions and innovation. **D**

What Drives the Innovative Workplace?

By Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, ACC

In *The Charge: Activating the 10 Human Drives That Make You Feel Alive*, author Brandon Burchard has a healthy respect for our five most basic drives—control, competence, congruence, caring and connection. Grounding, these drives help us meet our basic needs.

However, the five 'forward' drives—change, challenge, creative expression, contribution and consciousness—are the precursors to living with game-changing enthusiasm which in turn fosters innovation.

Burchard affirms that "creative expression is the grand driver and amplifier of satisfaction in life". Knowing this, can we counteract the tendency of some of our workplaces to inadvertently crowd out creativity by increasing standardization and conformity?

Indeed numerous workplace surveys indicate that employees often cry out for more channels through which they can contribute their unique insights and ideas. What if award programs were to be developed among teams for innovative ideas of practical value?

Located in Vancouver, SAP Labs Canada is a good example of this kind of workplace. Managing director Kirsten Sutton explains that as a global company in a competitive marketplace, SAP Labs Canada has initiated numerous programs to stimulate and reward innovation among employees.

One such example is the quarterly Passion Award—presented to a manager who goes beyond in demonstrating

one of the company's six core passions: success, accountability, professionalism, integrity, teamwork and trust. SAP also has a fellowship program that enables high-performers to take on a six month assignment in another discipline or department. This generates new levels of enthusiasm, a stimulating sense of re-engagement, and a great deal of out-of-the-box thinking.

What's more, SAP does its best to help employees counter stress while fostering the conditions conducive to innovation. Yoga classes, on-site wellness, fitness programs, "Lunch on Us" and flexible hours are among popular initiatives. It may seem like a daunting challenge for some companies to emulate SAP's forward-thinking workplace culture. It might seem beyond the scope of the workplace to others. Results say otherwise. Such programs and thinking are increasingly available, and fundamentally effective in reducing workplace stressors.

However, our greatest ability to reduce stress in the workplace stems from within. The challenges that mindfulness presents are as real as the moment itself, but ultimately exponential in their rewards.

As Burchard would say, challenge is the most powerful drive for advancing our lives and for keeping ourselves inspired—in life as at work. 

Professional speaker, author, life and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, ACC, brings over 20 years of communication, leadership and personal effectiveness experience to her audiences, readers and clients.

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