

The Cost (and How to Counter) the Stress of 24/7/365

By **Isabelle St-Jean**

YOUR CELL PHONE BUZZES ON A THURSDAY EVENING IN THE midst of family time. You answer and once again, off hours, are swept into work mode, compelled by the responsibilities of your professional role. Sound familiar?

Driven by technology, time and the “do more with less” corporate ethos, many employees and even HR professionals are under pressure to be “wed-to-work” 24/7/365. This can bring about a pervasive sense of pressure and increasing erosion of boundaries between personal and professional/business lives, which often leads to chronic stress. When faced with diminishing downtime to recover from the nearly incessant demands of work, employees’ mental health is at risk—the true cost of which continues to be researched through various surveys and studies.

In their 2014 national mental health survey, Morneau Shepell confirmed the prevalence of stress and mental health issues in the workplace. Key findings revealed that 33 per cent of working Canadians are now suffering or have suffered from a mental health condition such as depression or an anxiety disorder. Additionally, 27 per cent of employees reported experiencing significant symptoms of stress.

When Attitude and Perception Matter

In a January 2018 article, “The Stress Factor and its Impact on Employees’ Mental and Physical Health,” Morneau Shepell’s researcher Dr. Bill Howatt, PhD, EdD confirms that the greater source of stress among employees is the result of too many work-related hours and demands. He also explains that attitude and the ability to take responsibility in responding to challenging events, greatly affect the extent to which one is affected physically and mentally.

Consider the following. One employee is self-aware, proactive and able to discern what they can and cannot control while responding mindfully to a negative workplace event; they take charge of their attitude, emotions and behaviour accordingly. In contrast, the other employee lacks self-awareness and the insight necessary to take self-responsibility; they lack the ability to identify and reflect on what is within or beyond their control. As a

result, the second employee suffers an overwhelming amount of stress, while the first does not.

These contrasting examples bring to mind the results revealed by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who asked almost 29,000 people to rate their stress level over the past year. Subjects were also asked to what extent they believed that their stress negatively impacted their health. Over the next eight years, findings showed that people who reported having high levels of stress—and who believed stress had a large impact on their health—had a whopping 43 per cent increased risk of premature death. On the other hand, those that experienced a lot of stress, but did not perceive its effects as negative, were amongst the least likely to die as compared to all other participants in the study.

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The Struggle to Stay Focused

While striving to perform and to be “on” nearly 24/7, in any given workplace moment, it is increasingly difficult to remain adequately focused without succumbing to multiple distractions. Not knowing how to optimize our focusing capabilities can further compound the sense of pressure and stress within our minds.

In *Staying Sharp: 9 Keys for a Youthful Brain through Modern Science and Ageless Wisdom*, authors Henry Emmons, MD and David Alter, PhD, point to the example of a middle manager in midlife challenged to stay focused in meetings or on tasks while responding to disruption coming through calls, texts, and emails.

By simplifying the complexity of our biological system of attention, Emmons and Alter explain the four main functions that play a part in the process of focusing and sustaining our attention:

- First, we select what matters most out of a myriad of things to pay attention to;
- Secondly, we suppress environmental stimuli outside of our intentional focus;
- Thirdly, we exercise the ability to sustain our attentional staying power; and
- Lastly, we shift our attention according to changing circumstances or what might present itself as suddenly more important in the realm of our attention.

These authors recommend cultivating mindfulness to become better able to remain present from moment to moment in a day's work and to stay on purpose through the power of intentional attention. Through mindfulness practices, one can learn to become poised and to maintain a relatively calm and focused mind. In this state, we can better manage untimely interruptions, unexpected crises and the many challenges of the "always on" workplace.

Shifting Culture to Maintain Personal/Professional Boundaries

Tammy Reid, HR consultant for the City of Vancouver, confirms that, as would be expected in such an organization, some of their employees, such as exempt staff, have to be "on" and choose to carry two cell phones at all times. Reid also acknowledges that the boundaries of personal and professional lives occasionally cross in critical moments when the general manager or mayor's office might urgently reach out after hours.

However, Reid points to a subtle shift in the City's current culture to further encourage and recognize that employees' personal lives must be protected. Given that the City has been a Best Employer for several years, the bar is high and it must be maintained this way to retain good employees. Making the most of their lives in the Lower Mainland, Reid says that many of the City's employees lead very active lifestyles, which include enjoying the great outdoors. "They work hard, and play hard," she said, which also helps them to de-stress in healthy ways.

Beyond Work-Life Balance

Given our 24/7/365 challenges, it seems increasingly difficult to try and reach, let alone maintain, the elusive work-life balance we have been talking about for the last few years. Instead, what if we were to consider a larger perspective on this matter, as proposed by author David Whyte in *The Three Marriages: Re-Imagining Work, Self and Relationship*? Whyte asserts that the concept of work-life balance is overly simplistic, and that by limiting ourselves to its pursuit, we could end up trying to barter or trade parts of ourselves, as if they were salable commodities.

Instead, Whyte suggests we can hold a space in mind for a larger, complex conversation in which we learn to integrate, even if imperfectly, the three commitments of human lives: to self, to work and to our significant other.

By being rooted in the ground of authentic self first and foremost, we are more likely to engage in work as a calling or a vocation that can perhaps challenge, but inevitably and continually renew us. This allows us to truly engage, and in turn fosters the ability to become more proactive, responsible for ourselves and mindful, thereby reducing the risks of becoming overly stressed or burned out. **D**

Professional speaker, author and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC (inspiredmomentum.com) brings to her clients two decades of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions.

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