

It's All in Your Head...Sort Of

Part I – Doing Stress Well

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“Do it Well. Make it Fun.”

This is the first of two articles on stress management. In this article, Ron discusses the stress process. In the second article, he describes how to use humor to manage this process.

After five weeks of needles, bedpans, and green hospital Jello (not in that order) and six weeks in a leg-hip-leg cast, I had finally graduated to crutches. The final step of my recovery from a compound fracture of my femur was physical therapy. For a ten year-old, it had been a long, hard road and I wanted to get back to kicking my sisters.

The physical therapist, Dr. Ed Hill, resembled a bouncer on steroids. He wore a tight t-shirt with rolled up sleeves, had a large tattoo of the Navy insignia on his bicep, and always gnawed on the stub of a cigar. It was 1971, before smoking and cruelty were prohibited in hospitals. Dr. Hill instructed me to lie on the exam table and then politely asked me to bend my leg as much as I could. After being immobile for 11 weeks, my leg had forgotten how to bend. I grunted and groaned and achieved approximately one degree of movement.

“You can do better than that,” he said.

“No. That’s about it.” I said, smiling.

Before I knew it, he punched me in the stomach and instinctively, I drew both knees to my chest. My leg screamed in pain. I screamed in fear.

“Good,” he said, “I knew you could do it.”

On subsequent visits to see Dr. Hill, about a mile from the hospital, I would notice a pronounced tremor in my hands and sweat on my upper lip. Luckily, today, at age 48, the nightmares have almost completely disappeared. But physical therapists still scare me more than just about anything...except clowns.

Perhaps this was Dr. Hill’s “normal” technique. I suspect that wasn’t and instead, he had experienced some stress in his life and it was leaking out in his work. So, ultimately, his stress became my stress. Does this sound familiar? Have you seen it in yourself, your family, or your coworkers? That’s because it’s normal to experience stress and while you can’t change what happens to you, you have complete control over what you do in response to stress. Humor can help - as long as you understand the context of stress itself.

The Process of Stress

As a social worker, I am well versed in a variety of stress management techniques. From relaxation to meditation to hypnosis, drugs and heavy drinking, I've tried it all. The challenge, however, is that most healthy stress management techniques require laser clear focus *and* regular practice. To be honest, I have never been good at the whole focus thing because I am too easily distracted. For instance, if I need to relax and try to visualize my "happy place" by imagining a sunny beach or a mountain cabin, my mind quickly begins to wander and before I know it, I'm watching a shark attack or a scene from *Deliverance* in my new very *unhappy* place.

Humor, on the other hand, is a great way to manage stress and for me, it's a much easier technique to use on a consistent basis. Even though it requires focus and regular practice, it's a more fun and makes the whole process more enjoyable. But before we get into the specific humor techniques, it is important to understand this beast known as "stress" first.

Did you know that stress is not inherently inherent? In other words, the stressor (that thing that causes the stress) is not in and of itself stressful. I know, it sounds crazy but work with me on this one. You see, our cognitive interpretation of the stressor and then our subsequent reaction to it are what cause the stress we experience – not the stressor itself. Maybe a visual will help. Here is the formula for I'm describing:

IMPACT OF STRESS = Stressor + Our Interpretation + Our Reaction + How We Cope

So we experience stress when the formula plays out like this:

STRESS = Stressor + Negative Interpretation + Negative Reaction + Bad Coping Skills

To illustrate this further, here are two examples:

1. Suppose your spouse suggests that you could lose a few pounds. Immediately, the insecurities of your body image rise to the surface and you hear your mother's voice from your childhood saying, "You need to go on a diet" or "Why are you so lazy?" or "You're wearing that?" You react with anger, but since anger is not a pleasant nor socially acceptable emotion, you turn the anger inwards and become depressed. And whenever you're depressed what do you do? You eat – which causes guilt, stress and more eating. If on the other hand...
2. Someone asks why your hair is green and you know full well that your hair is not green; you assume the person is mentally imbalanced and disregard his/her comment immediately. Once it's disregarded, it's gone from your mind, you have no reaction whatsoever and experience no stress.

In the first example, the interpretation of *what* the comment means or represents leads to deeper issues on which you then focus. That leads to stress. If, instead, you did not “read” too much into the comment, you would experience less stress. In the second example, you have no emotional connection to the comment and thus no stress reaction. The interpretation is critical to the stress we experience...or don’t.

I am not suggesting that you disconnect completely from any stressor. However, the more you focus on the negative aspects of any situation, the more you will experience stress. Also, it’s important to understand that some major life stresses are inherently stressful. The death of a loved one, a serious illness, or when your mother made you wear that ridiculous flower outfit for the school assembly when you were in 7th grade and were already concerned about what people thought of you are probably going to cause stress. That last example is just a hypothetical one.

Once we recognize that there are several steps along the stress pathway that can be stopped, then we can look for ways to use humor as the brakes. In Part II of this topic, we’ll take a look into the interventions more specifically.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP is a former hospice social worker, middle manager, and senior manager who helps mission driven organizations tap into the power of combining excellence with humor. Ron is the author of ***Do it Well. Make it Fun., Is Your Glass Laugh Full?, and My Kneecap Seems Too Loose.*** Find out more by visiting www.RonCulberson.com.