How to manage stress before it manages you

COVID-19 has raised all our stress levels, but what can we do? Follow these tips to stop stress from overwhelming you and your teams, and strengthen your collective resilience.

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Headaches, insomnia, lack of concentration, feelings of anxiousness. Noticed any of these symptoms of stress lately? If so, you're not alone. According to Dr. Jorge Pla Vidal, a specialist in psychiatry at the Clínica Universidad de Navarra in Spain, stress is the colloquial way we refer to the heightened state of alertness, vigilance and preparation we feel in adverse life situations. And with the ongoing pandemic — a situation on the extreme end of the adversity scale — many have become vulnerable, especially those in positions of responsibility and

management.

A certain amount of stress is no bad thing, says Pla Vidal, insofar as it generates a state that allows us to face perceived threats in a better condition. His colleague, Dr. Oscar Beloqui Ruiz, head of the Check-Ups Unit at the Clínica, notes that senior executives are often quite well-prepared to manage stress because they have had time to develop coping mechanisms over the course of their careers. Additionally, the discipline and timetabling required to stay on top of their game at work can be applied to their personal lives, so they are more likely to eat well, go to the gym and be able to afford certain comforts that lessen the stress relative to less resourced managers.

However, COVID-19 has proved challenging even for those executives who traditionally remain on top of it all. According to a study in the *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, this may be due to them being forced to perform "illegitimate tasks." These are tasks we consider to be outside the scope of our professional role or at odds with our level of experience, expertise or authority. The 2020 study found that an increase in such tasks during COVID-19 raised levels of distress, anxiety and depression among managers and was a predictor for identifying managers vulnerable to mental health issues. A significant correlation was also found between the degree of downsizing an organization went through during COVID-19 and symptoms of stress among managers at the highest level (board members).

Other risk factors predicting stress are age, relative income and work status. "Stress tends to occur more between the ages of 40 and 50," says Beloqui. "That's generally when people feel overloaded, both at work, where professionals are busy building their careers, and at home, where children still require a lot of their parents' attention."

This chimes with research that people's happiness forms a U shape over their lifetime, hitting its lowest point in their late 40s before rebounding.

Beloqui cites a different Clínica Universidad de Navarra study that found stress and anxiety higher among women *under* 40, which is precisely when many are either having children or have school-age children at the same time as they are taking on greater responsibilities at work.

Social media can also contribute to a sense of status anxiety, making us feel inferior relative to our peers. Indeed, the *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* study found that *relative* income "had a significant negative relationship with anxiety and depression, suggesting that

managers who are relatively poorly compensated might be particularly at risk." This situation may be even worse in the U.S. where there are bigger income and equality gaps and fewer social safety nets.

Beyond one's personal or professional roles and responsibilities and the contexts in which they carry them out, Pla Vidal underscores that how one responds to stress ultimately has a lot to do with people themselves — that is, their way of being, physically, mentally, emotionally and even genetically.

Many diseases, including anxiety disorders and depression, have genetic roots. Recognizing this, Beloqui's unit launched a Genomic Checkup — the first of its kind in Spain — to screen patients' genetic traits and identify potential links to more than 650 diseases. Armed with this information, patients can take better care of themselves and know what to avoid with respect to the particular health risks they may be predisposed to.

None of this is to say that our mental health destiny is already written. There are plenty of things we can do, in addition to the tried-and-tested methods of balancing our diets, avoiding toxic habits such as smoking or drinking too much, engaging in regular physical exercise and avoiding working long hours, which in the end reduces effective performance.

The key, according to Alberto Ribera, professor of Managing People in Organizations and director of the Coaching Unit at IESE, is to develop resilience. Ribera — who introduced a course on stress management as part of IESE's MBA program — believes resilience isn't something you're born with, but can be developed with the right training.

Pla Vidal agrees. When it comes to facing any specific problem in life, "training usually helps." It starts with physical resilience, from which all other resilience (emotional, mental and spiritual) stems. "You have to get enough good quality sleep," he insists, "and that means not taking your problems to bed with you."

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many more people have reported "doomscrolling," the masochistic ritual of ending each day on their phone, searching for relief from their anxieties by, oddly, consuming more bad news. As a *Wired* columnist observed: "Two hours of excess Twitter every night. . . will only cause burnout and a decline in mental health among the people whose level-headedness is needed most."

"Turn off digital interruptions," advises Ribera. And not just at night but during the day. "Unless you need them for the meeting or task at hand, switch off phones, social media, email notifications and the like. A great misconception is that we are able to multitask. Yet

studies show that dividing attention, including tech distractions, decreases productivity and increases stress. Be in the moment. If you focus your attention, doing one thing at a time, it makes dealing with a multitude of problems much easier."

"Develop healthy self-awareness," adds Pla Vidal. This means knowing your limits and not exceeding them. You're able to say no — to deadlines you can't meet, to colleagues who delegate back, to the urgent things that hijack you from taking care of what's truly important. "With self-awareness, you're able to recognize the initial symptoms of stress and know what you need to do to renew your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual state, and thereby avoid failure."

"It's not about becoming superhuman," says Ribera, "but accepting when you feel fragile, and asking for help, if necessary, to overcome it."

This latter point is key. As the happiness research indicates, we tend to rebound from the low point of the U when we start to prioritize relationships and connect with others. "We all need contact with others," says Ribera. "So ask for help, whenever needed, connecting with your loved ones who can help you leave your stress behind."

Stress interventions for yourself

Seek meaning and purpose. This can change your perspective, enabling you to endure some temporary stress as you envision and work toward a better future.

Take off the rose-colored glasses. Be more realistic, seeing things as they are, without exaggerating or living in denial.

Don't be stubborn. Rigidity makes us less resourceful.

Be aware of cognitive distortions. Avoid overgeneralizing, labeling everything in black-and-white terms or framing negative events as permanent defeats.

Recognize your own power. Change *have to* and *can't* to *choose to* and *choose not to*, to remind yourself that you always have a choice.

Cut down on *should*, *must* or *ought*. These words trigger feelings of guilt and shame when directed inward, and frustration when directed at others.

Actively cultivate compassion and gratitude. Less blaming yourself and others. Count

your blessings more.

Stay in the present. Listen to your body for physical warning signs. Identify and build on the current activities that give you the greatest energy and joy in the here and now.

Source: "Cognitive behavioral therapy for stress relief" by Nia Plamenova and Alberto Ribera (2020).

Stress interventions for your team

Reframe adversity. Rather than overdramatizing a crisis, treat uncertainty, stress and change as normal parts of life and work.

Build a culture of trust. Provide a safe space where people won't be punished or judged for vulnerabilities.

Make resources visible and usable. Influence people's perception of the available resources, and encourage them to use those resources for viable solutions.

Give people purpose. Give visibility to the contributions people are making to the organization and the positive impact of their work.

Promote realistic optimism. Nothing is completely good or bad. Encourage others to see difficulties as learning opportunities rather than as catastrophic events.

Leverage social support. Show compassion and empathy to create and maintain a sense of community, so people know they're not alone.

Reinforce communication and transparency. Getting everyone on the same page is always important but even more so when facing difficulties.

Foster a growth mindset. Reward effort and proactivity, so that adversities are recast as opportunities for innovation and growth.

Celebrate successes. Acknowledging what is going well, despite the challenges, gives people a sense of control over the situation, creating a positive upward spiral.

Source: "Resilience," a technical note (DPON-348-E) by Nia Plamenova and Alberto Ribera (2020).

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