

Q & A

Employees Find Daily Stress Levels Reaching New Highs

Feeling stressed out? Lots of people in business do. Psychologist Dr. Layne Longfellow notes that that's bad business: the most productive people in the long run are those who don't surrender to stress. Longfellow, whose doctorate is from the University of Michigan, owns his own consulting firm, Institute for Human Skills, in Prescott, Ariz. He talked recently with business writer John Gallagher.

POST-STANDARD:

How did you become aware of the problems of stress in business?

LONGFELLOW:

I'm a psychologist. I began dealing with stress when I was working at the Menninger Foundation, as Director of Seminars for Executives. The seminar program did not deal with stress originally, but we began to see so many highly-stressed people that it became a necessary topic.

POST-STANDARD:

Can you describe what stress is and how it's affecting people?

LONGFELLOW:

The basic notion is really a very simple one. Stress amounts to any demand that is placed on the body, mind or emotions. The stress response is a physiological response; it has to do with responding to demand. If I go out for a six-mile run and I am accustomed to a six-mile run, that is a demand to which my body is prepared to adapt. And that is stress, but it is positive stress. It facilitates the development of the body. If I go out for a six-mile run but I'm only accustomed to walking a few feet a day, that's a demand I'll not be able to handle. That's a negative stress — "distress." In the popular jargon, we've collapsed all that into the single word "stress."



POST-STANDARD:

You said that stress is clearly getting worse in recent years?

LONGFELLOW:

I don't think there's any question that levels of distress in this country are increasing steadily. And a principal reason for that, forgive me for saying it, has to do with the unrelentingly negative impressions about the nature of life that are presented by the media. I really do think that there is a background level of societal demand that is using up the capacity we have to adapt.

And there's another background societal issue that I think must be addressed. We in this country are addicted to stress — we are addicted to the adrenalin rush, we are addicted to a state of hyper-arousal, a state of hyper-stimulation.

In the younger generation, that tends to manifest itself as an addiction to electronic media. Throughout all of the history of human beings on Earth — until about 25

years ago — we did not have access to anything like the level of stimulation that we now consider normal. Twenty-four hours a day now, we can turn on MTV [Music Television, playing 24-hr. hard rock videos.]. And it is no accident whatever that the MTV motto is: "Too Much Is Never Enough!"

In the ambitious '80's, we really want to be turned on all the time. And we pay the price of distress without noticing the connection between the two.

POST-STANDARD:

Well, with all this as background, let's try to move it toward the business world. When you give your seminars, how do you approach it?

LONGFELLOW:

The way I see it, the people of my generation — I'm a pre-WWII Depression Baby — are, for the most part, addicted to another kind of stimulation. We have our own hyper-stimulation, which is our work. We love the adrenalin rush as much as anybody does, but we don't get it through 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.' We get it through work deadlines. We are people with severe Type A conditions — the tendency to equate success with a state of continuous hyper-tension and over-commitment.

There's a sharp and radical difference between hard work and tension. People who are tense limit their productivity, because they limit their ability to think clearly. The stress response is a very primitive, regressive response. It severely hampers creativity because it limits flexibility.

POST-STANDARD:

So the people who like to see everybody running around frantically and always on deadline are misguided?