



Caring for the Caring: Minimizing Stress and Improving Morale for Your Staff

By Sharon Browning, *JUST Listening*¹

I know a lot about stress. Among other major life stressors, from 1989 until 2001 I rode the turbulent waves of a serious auto-immune illness, surviving eight



of those long years with the help of daily doses of morphine to ease pain curiously described in the medical community as “exquisite.” If you can answer the standard question, “Where is your pain on a scale of 1 to 10?” your pain is not “exquisite.” That level of horror

renders one mute and in shock.

Happily, I am completely well now, but the experience taught me a great deal about stress and its effects on our bodies, minds, and spirits. It has engendered a fierce desire in me to help create healthy work environments for my own staff and colleagues; I absorb all I can on the topic. So here are a few observations and suggestions to help managers and supervisors minimize stress for themselves and the committed people who staff legal services offices.

It seems facile to observe that these are stressful times for the public interest community. The double whammy of major funding losses and a sour economy producing a tsunami of people in need of services is creating historic levels of pressure on legal aid attorneys and support staff. Add to this the insanity of a political climate that at best ignores and at worst actively exacerbates the suffering of Americans on the margins, and it is a perfect stress-storm engulfing those who devote their professional lives to ensuring justice for all. As Rachel Naomi Remen observed, “The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”

Stop for a moment and consider your own staff. What are you noticing? What is their level of physical health? Is there more illness than in years past? What

is the mood throughout your organization? Are you seeing evidence of low morale: cynicism, impatience, bunkered, us-them thinking, anxiety, and depression? How are levels of creativity, innovation, energy and enthusiasm for the work?

Before exploring specific sources of and tactics for managing stress in your workplace, let’s look at the physiology of stress. Understanding how our bodies process stress helps us both to understand what we are seeing in co-workers and to select remedial strategies that are appropriate to our particular circumstances.

The effects of stress are well known and documented. Stress arouses the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), activating hormones that induce a constellation of physiological changes: blood pressure is elevated, non-essential neural circuits are shut down, and our bodies are flooded with corticosteroids. All of this works very well for us humans when the stress we are responding to is an immediate and brief crisis, e.g., an unexpected encounter with a dangerous animal or adversary. It is not effective and even potentially harmful when the stress experienced is more sustained: a potential layoff, unremitting demands for services that cannot be met, even empathy-induced grief for a client’s circumstances. Here’s why.

Many illnesses are rooted in chronic over-activation of the SNS including: heart disease, ulcers, diabetes, obesity, hypertension, autoimmune diseases, and cancer. But the body’s normal responses to stress affect not only physical health, impairing the immune system with the consequence of increased illness; they impact our mental health and our *perceptions* of our circumstances as well. Stress colors how we interpret our experiences: we feel more out of control, are more prone to formulate negative beliefs, draw negative conclusions, and perceive threats. Stress diminishes our capacities for learning, creativity, flexibility, and openness, and increases anxiety and depression.

Again, reflect on yourself and your staff; what have you observed? Are people more resistant to or struggling harder to acquire new skills or adapt to new routines? Have some lost their flexibility, their enthusiasm for the work, dispiritedly plodding through their days? Is even good news given a negative spin? I recently overheard someone comment glumly and sarcastically upon hearing of new funding, "Yeah, we got that big grant, but it's not nearly enough given the need."

In their book *Resonant Leadership*, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee note the particularly toxic effect of a common by-product of stress, cynicism:

Cynicism is one of the most destructive manifestations of negativity and dissonance. It causes people to focus solely on what is most wrong with a person, group, or organization, with little or no call on individuals to take responsibility for making positive change. Cynicism is self-perpetuating, breeding frustration and despair—even hopelessness—which in turn breeds more cynicism. In this state, there can be little, if any, movement toward a constructive vision of the future.²

Unless stress is acknowledged and addressed, entire staffs can slide down the slippery slope of depression, creating and hardening a culture of discontent and negativity. I observed the effects of this recently when working with a demoralized, highly-stressed staff whose need for information and reassurance had not been adequately addressed by managers. The staff knew only that the fiscal situation was bad and getting worse; no information, timeline, or plan to address the situation had been communicated. At a day-long meeting, behaviors typical of an activated SNS abounded: one experienced, accomplished senior staff attorney insisted that she could not understand and follow simple written instructions on an assigned task. Support staff grumbled that they were unappreciated, perhaps even superfluous; only the attorneys had status and worth in the program. Victimhood comments were rampant, cynical and even mean-spirited observations were common, and a pervasive sense of impending catastrophe laced itself through many conversations.

Staff members in another office exhibited similar symptoms. Here, there had already been one round of layoffs with another anticipated at some future but

unspecified date. The first layoffs were perceived as arbitrary by many on the staff; there was no clear sense of how those who were terminated had been selected. People were nervously "waiting for the other shoe to drop." It isn't necessary to have all the answers, but it is necessary to eliminate confusion and stop the rumor mill. Communicate whatever information you comfortably can that will give your staff a clear sense of where things stand.

By being intentional and directive, you can minimize the stress of these difficult times and care for the caring people who constitute your staff. Much of the current chaos is external and thus beyond our control, but there are concrete ways to lessen the stress experienced by staff members in the midst of the turmoil. Returning to physiology, the task is to create an environment that fosters the arousal of the parasympathetic system (PSNS). In stark contrast to the functioning of the sympathetic nervous system described above, when stimulated the PSNS releases hormones that create a sense of well-being. We feel positive and happy (even joyful at times); our outlook is optimistic; our ability to solve problems and think creatively is enhanced. As organizational leaders, the best thing you can do to improve morale and maximize the health and productivity of your staff is to create the conditions that activate your own and others' PSNS. Addressing known workplace stressors is a great place to start.

Research on the workplace uniformly identifies three major sources of stress: uncertainty, perceptions of powerlessness, and the belief that one is being evaluated. Anything you do to reduce these specific stressors will improve the health and functioning of your staff.

Uncertainty: Be as appropriately transparent as you can about contingency and future plans. If you are certain that layoffs and work re-assignments are coming, be as clear as you can about the timing and process. Will terminations be performance based? Tenure based? Funding source based? Eliminate as much fear and confusion as you can, and ask for staff input where appropriate. This is a fine line: you don't want to involve staff in details that are your responsibility, but you do want to imbue your staff with a sense of agency and efficacy. One executive director recently informed a staff attorney that his position was in danger because of the loss of a specific grant and asked for ideas about possible funding sources. The attorney used his own network of contacts to secure new and more sustainable funds.

Encourage creative conversations and input from staff about necessary programmatic shifts. Build

community by emphasizing that “we’re all in this together.” Use this time to unify your staff, promote collaboration, and encourage discussions and creative thinking about ways of re-imagining and re-configuring the work. The delivery of civil legal services is undergoing seismic challenges. It is tempting to be reactive and indulge in anxious thoughts of scarcity and victimhood. It is also possible and potentially transformative, however, to greet these difficult conditions with creativity and vision. Now is the perfect time to explore what a fair and equitable justice system ideally will look like in thirty, forty or fifty years, and to begin to build the relationships and structures needed to ensure that the dream becomes reality.

Appropriately involving staff in this way will also reduce *Perceptions and Feelings of Powerlessness* as will a few other simple measures. How much control do staff members have over their own work day and product? Are you utilizing work plans? Do you solicit staff involvement in work plan development? Is there an organizational culture of collaboration and collegiality that encourages the open exchange of ideas and opinions among all, not only senior staff? Are people’s opinions sought and valued?

Employee performance at all skill levels is enhanced when individuals exert appropriately maximum control over their work. The language of empowerment is familiar to our community, especially relative to clients. Extend the concept to your staff and involve them in seeking creative solutions to current dilemmas. As Margaret Wheatley observes throughout her work on organizational dynamics, even in the midst of apparent chaos, the best solutions to emergent issues are local, collaborative, and self-organized. “In organizations, if people are free to make their own decisions, guided by a clear organizational identity for them to reference, the whole system develops greater coherence and strength.”³

Fostering caring relationships among co-workers and encouraging self-care and balance is another key task. Sadly, we often allow our staff to become even more isolated and driven in response to the press of crushing caseloads. This can actually create more dysfunction and discord, enabling workaholic behaviors and creating tension between staffers who work a normal day and those who feel compelled (or even expected) to work longer hours.

It is useful to remember that the human body is capable of performing a total of only five sustained, focused hours of work per day; effort after that is less effective. A refreshed and renewed staff is far more

productive in the long run, and can help create innovative and sustainable responses to current crisis. Care for your staff by encouraging them to have healthy, balanced lives and avoid double-messaging by modeling self-care yourself.

Belief that one is being evaluated: There is no substitute for clear, fair, and consistent personnel policies that delineate the evaluation process within an organization: annual self and supervisory reviews stabilize and reassure employees that personnel decisions are just, not arbitrary. If you do not have a clear written evaluation policy, get one; sample policies are available on the MIE website. If you have one already, be sure that everyone on staff knows what it is and where they can see and reference it. And finally, enforce it. Too often, time pressures result in lack of consistency in performing periodic evaluations. This is fundamentally unfair, especially where job security and advancement may be tied to performance. Erratic evaluation processes undermine employee confidence and sense of fundamental fairness. Conversely, having and enforcing a clear evaluation process has a positive effect on employee morale and confidence.

And while you are caring for your staff, take a good look at your own relationship to stress; are you modeling stress reduction? What are you doing to stay healthy and energized? Self-care is neither selfish nor a luxury; it is essential to healthy, sustainable leadership. If managers and supervisors are not conscious and intentional about their own physical and mental health in the midst of these trying times, there is little likelihood that the office environment will be nourishing for staff. The consequences of this inattention are serious for everyone, and ultimately, for clients as well.

Boyatzis and McKee have identified three indispensable qualities for effective leadership which also, not coincidentally, activate the parasympathetic nervous system: mindfulness, compassion, and hope.⁴ Developing and nurturing these essentials in ourselves is good not only for us personally, but benefits our staffs and organizations as well. Although a thorough discussion of these elements is beyond the scope of this article, it is worthwhile to briefly consider these traits in the context of personal and organizational health.

Mindfulness: Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” Mindfulness encompasses awareness and intentionality. To be mindful is to be conscious and reflective rather than reactive.

Research has demonstrated that our species

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spends 95–99% of our waking hours living in our limbic brains, the “middle” brain that is the repository of memory, habit, prior learning, emotion, and unconscious reaction. The problem with this is that there is nobody home in the limbic brain; we are not consciously driving our own bus. Our responses to our environment are unconscious and automatic.

We rarely take the time to consciously access those parts of our neo-cortices where our capacities for intentionality and consciousness reside. Look at your own typical day. How many times, if any, do you have a *conscious thought*, a moment when you intentionally stop, step back, observe your own behaviors and activities? For most of us, this is rare. Our days flash by in a flurry of activity; because we are busy we think we are productive. But most of the time, we are simply on auto-pilot, too pre-occupied with our to-do list to even ask whether the list itself is valid, necessary, useful, or resonant with our deepest longings and aspirations.

The capacity to reflect is cultivated; we have to practice it. There are dozens of ways to do this; explore what methods are appealing to you and play with them. And the next time you notice your pulse or breathing quickening with anxiety, or find yourself awake at 3 a.m. ruminating about what your, your staff’s, or your client’s futures might be — stop. Just stop. Consciously summon and access your brain’s phenomenal ability to witness your own behaviors, emotions, and responses. Recognize that there are positive, life-giving ways of framing your issues and taking action that can help you live peacefully and hopefully, even in the midst of great distress. And then, with conscious, deliberate intention, choose them.

What about your staff? Do you create space for and encourage your co-workers to take time to be thoughtful, to reflect deeply on issues facing your clients and organization, to listen deeply to the promptings of their own wisdom and that of their colleagues? Something as simple as regularly taking five or ten minutes of a staff meeting to invite reflective discussion can provide a

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tangible shift in attitudes and behaviors. More rigorous and sustained efforts to engage in these practices yield even greater results.

Compassion: Most of the people working in legal services offices are there because they want to be. They care deeply about others and see their work as helping to create a more just society. Acknowledging and celebrating this in yourself and your staff can be heartening and help build community. Provide people with an opportunity to discuss why they do the work they do, what motivates and sustains them, what they are passionate about.

Acknowledge too the depth of grief and loss that co-workers often feel. Work in the public interest sector is emotionally rewarding but also extremely challenging. A healthy workplace honors the depth of employees’ experiences and supports healthy expression of and management of the powerful emotions that often accompany the work.

Hope: There are many definitions of hope, but we can probably agree that hope has two elements: an expectation of positive outcomes, and a belief that those outcomes are possible. Hope feels good, is contagious and empowering. Boyatzis and McKee identify three essentials for the cultivation of hope in the workplace:⁵ The leader:

- needs to have dreams and aspirations, but also be in touch with those of the people around him or her. This helps to form the desired image of the future.
- needs to be optimistic and believe in his or her ability to make change.
- must see the desired future as realistic and feasible.

In my experience, these are the qualities needed not only by leaders, but by others in the organization. Social change is a corporate endeavor; none of us can do it alone. Lead by example, but engage those around you in the process of change; draw inspiration and strength from your colleagues and companions on the journey.

David Hall has noted that “Justice is a journey, not a destination.” No matter what is happening along the way, the work of justice itself is energizing and engenders hope. Now more than ever, justice in the workplace is a high-stakes, high-impact undertaking: ensuring sanity and health in our own workplaces is as much an act of justice as anything else we do. It is an essential and indispensable part of the justice journey, and can bring new life to the workers and the work.

1 Sharon Browning currently has her own consulting and training project, JUST Listening, fostering social and

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personal change and transformation through just and mindful communication and workplace interaction. She is the former Executive Director of Philadelphia VIP (Volunteers for the Indigent Program), the hub of pro bono legal services in Philadelphia. Sharon also taught in the Sociology Department at Chestnut Hill College, Philadelphia, PA concentrating on issues of poverty and inequality, and has served as the consultant for the American Bar Association Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service National Celebration of Pro Bono. She provides coaching services and facilitates workshops and training, staff retreats, and “difficult” conversations, for lawyers, law students, mediators, judges, social services workers, teachers and healthcare professionals whose primary work is with vulnerable individuals and groups. Sharon may be reached at sbrowning@justlistening.net, www.justlistening.net.

- 2 Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *Resonant Leadership*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA 2005, 55
- 3 Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order In A Chaotic World*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA 2006, 87
- 4 Boyatzis and McKee, 8
- 5 Boyatzis and McKee, 152



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