

WELLBEING

Why a healthy relationship with stress is key to your success

FLEUR HEAZLEWOOD- SEPTEMBER 6, 2023

3 MIN READ



I am sure you can relate to some of the following... It is mid-afternoon and you are stressing at work, because after a day of interruptions, you are behind on the day's deadlines. You eat takeaway lunch at your desk in a bid to catch up. You are writing a report but also answering a phone call from a colleague who has been chasing you for two days when you see a text pop up from your partner with a reminder that it is your turn to pick up the kids from school. You check the time and realise you are underprepared and now late for your next meeting, writes Fleur Heazlewood author of leading wellbeing.

You find it difficult to concentrate or contribute to the meeting, despite it being about something you care about and that will impact your workload, because your mind is consumed with your overflowing to-do list and rising stress levels.

You race out of the meeting, hastily scribble yourself some Post-It-Note reminders and then run out the door. You cut it fine to pick up your kids from school and chauffeur them to sport, play dates and a fitting for new sneakers before the shops close. All the while, you try to fit work phone calls and emails into the cracks.

People are wired and over-tired.

We want good balance, health, and wellbeing, but stay stuck frantically juggling multiple balls in the air. We rarely shift back to a state of calm, to rest and replenish before the next fight or flight stress response.

This is also understandable. Our biology is wired to view uncertainty, change and challenge as threatening, which activates our survival fight or flight responses. The last few years have seen intense external pressure with the pandemic and natural disasters, and with the current economic uncertainty and financial insecurity, this pressure on our mental health is still very real.

The way we are working isn't working.

Research is showing that more people than ever are reporting high levels of chronic stress and burnout, and despite increased awareness of mental health issues and available supports, our mental wellbeing is not improving.

Many of us recognise that we can't operate like this anymore, that we need to take control of our health and wellbeing. We can do this by reassessing our values and priorities and developing our resilience skills.

We need to break the stress cycle

I define resilience as your internal resource for adapting positively to stress, supporting mental wellbeing during times of adversity, and maintaining health and energy during prolonged uncertainty and change.

A helpful resilience skill for dealing with stress or low motivation in a healthy way is emotional agility. Emotional agility is our ability to be flexible with thoughts and feelings in order to have an optimal response to the many different situations you face during the day.

Five-steps to defuse stress and create the space to act rather than react.

1. Stop what you are doing when you become emotionally triggered.
2. Notice what is happening in your body (temperature, tension, breathing) and in your mind (self-talk, stories, criticism), creating separation between the emotion and automatic meaning.

For example, anxiety may sound like self-criticism over something you haven't done and feel like a cold sinking sensation in the pit of your stomach.

3. Allow the emotion to occur. Take the time you need to accurately identify the emotion. Give what you are feeling a label. Assess what value had been triggered to create this emotional reaction in you.
4. Pause and breathe to create space between your emotion and (re)action.

Deliberate belly breathing with focus on long exhales taps into our parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) – promoting our rest-and-digest response which promotes calm.

5. Then choose purposeful and compassionate action.

There is a range of actions you can choose to respond with that don't involve an emotional outburst or saying or doing things you may regret later. For example:

- Park it – to give you time to calm down and decide whether to put it down or pick it up later.
- Peace – open up dialogue with options for multiple perspectives and pathways.
- Protest – develop a perspective and path of action that supports your values.
- Persist – acknowledge that your chosen path is tough but worth pursuing.

Over 10-years of research shows that when we prioritise wellbeing and happiness we have better productivity, sales, creativity, relationships, and resilience, and less burnout.

We are well overdue putting the wellbeing back into our day.



Fleur Heazlewood

Fleur Heazlewood author of *Leading Wellbeing*, is a leadership expert, speaker, and founder of the Blueberry Institute. She works with leaders to create healthy, high performing teams and organisations. Fleur has trained over 3000 leaders in mental health mastery, future-fit resilience, and positive leadership skills. Her first book *Resilience Recipes*, a practical guide to better personal wellbeing won best Health and Wellbeing Book for 2022. Her follow up book, *Leading Wellbeing - A leaders guide to mental health conversations at work*, is out now. For information on how her programs can help visit www.blueberryinstitute.com