

An Objective Approach to Motivation and Stress on the Job

by Michael J. Hurd, Ph.D.

This column is not a substitute for professional, individualized psychological help.

Question: I suffer from stress in my job. Though I really like the work, I often experience fatigue, resentment, and a hard time motivating myself. How can this be?

Answer: Sometimes the way a person looks at his work affects the level of stress he experiences. Consider an example. A man works very hard for many years to establish a successful business. After years of effort, he finally achieves both the income level and the types of clients he desires.

At times, however, the man notices emotions of frustration and irritation over how busy he is. He even feels resentful of his clients. Sometimes he wishes that his demanding clients would "go away." He might snap at them, or act less than professional towards them. In the process, he violates his own high business standards and harms his self-interest. He understands the irrationality of his behaviors, yet finds himself continuing to engage in them.

In effect, this man forgets that he's doing the work he loves and *chose* to do. He set an ambitious goal and is now achieving it. This is cause for rejoicing—not misery! By not allowing himself to feel pride, happiness, and a sense of self-worth, he defaults to stress—rather than joy—at doing the work he loves.

Why does he not allow himself to feel pride, self-worth, and happiness in his work? Numerous explanations are possible. Perhaps he's losing perspective, or not seeing the full context. Productive, detail-oriented people often fall into this trap. Maybe he finds it hard to recognize his overall progress, because he values excellence and wants every detail of his work to be perfect. If he does anything in a less than perfect way, he quickly becomes demoralized.

While there is nothing wrong with pursuing excellence, the man ought to respect reality as well. He should strive to be excellent at the possible—not the impossible. Excellence is not the same as infallibility. He can treat his errors as opportunities for learning rather than disaster.

Guilt is another factor. Perhaps this man was taught (like so many of us) to believe that pride is a sin or a vice. Intellectually, he might recognize that pride is healthy, appropriate, and moral. Nevertheless, he does not always feel this way on the emotional level. A part of his mind slams shut at the first feeling of pride. His subconscious mind erroneously tells him, "Don't be a braggart! Pride is a deadly sin. Don't let yourself feel it for even a moment!"

He might also worry that if he allows himself to feel pride, he will slip into mediocrity and inefficiency. Again, he must try to remember that excellence and infalli-

bility are not one and the same.

The man's emotion that pride is somehow improper represents "stale thinking" from his past. He needs to vigorously "talk back" to the stale thinking. He must repeatedly show his subconscious mind the errors in the mistaken emotions each time he experiences them (or at least as often as possible). He must teach and re-teach himself that pride and accomplishment are virtues, not vices. Introspection and self-reflection, including psychological counseling if necessary, can help him accomplish this task. [See *Effective Therapy* by Michael J. Hurd, Ph.D., New York: Dunhill Publishing, 1997.]

If you identify with any of this man's problems, then try the following exercise as an experiment. At the end of each day, spend a few minutes writing down everything that you did well. You might write, "I finished all the paperwork on my desk." Or, "I handled my difficult client with calm, poise, and professionalism." The possibilities are limitless. The important thing is to thoroughly identify the facts of your accomplishments—what you did well—each day.

The exercise, if done consistently, will give you a sense of perspective, of seeing the full factual context. Perspective and objectivity are tremendous antidotes to stress. Stress causes people to lose touch with the positive facts of reality. They see the objectively negative facts but not the objectively positive ones. Staying in touch with reality includes recognizing positive facts, particularly about your own performance.

From time to time, allow yourself to stand back and look at your recent accomplishments. Doing so will not compromise your commitment to excellence. It's OK to tell yourself, "These are the things I did well today," so long as you also ask yourself, "How, if at all, can I do even better tomorrow?" Contrary to what you might believe, the pursuit of excellence does not mean a refusal to ever compliment yourself.

Imagine, for example, that you hire an employee. Suppose you only tell the employee what he does poorly, while you never tell him what he does well (even though much of what he does is, in fact, very good). What kind of loyalty and hard work can you expect to inspire in him?

The same principle applies to your relationship with yourself. If you always criticize yourself, but never identify your good points, your motivation will suffer and your stress level will increase. Without positive feedback, you won't work well for yourself. The result: heightened stress.

In summary, remember the "three P's" for reducing stress: pride, perspective, and positive thinking.

For more details, see Dr. Hurd's article on stress management at <http://www.drhurd.com>. Dr. Hurd invites AOB News readers to send their questions directly to him. Selected questions will be answered in future columns. Identity of the questioner will not be revealed, and questions may be submitted anonymously. Contact Dr. Hurd either by e-mail at drhurd@drhurd.com, or by U.S. mail at P.O. Box 221, Columbia, MD 20145-0221, U.S.A.