

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2024 Edition

Ask The Expert

Leading from an Emotionally Regulated Space

Learn how to manage acute stress**Gail Boone**
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Q | **Everyone has their moments. Being managers, we should be leading by example. How do we emotionally regulate in these stressful circumstances?**

A | Managers have moments when circumstances get the better of us. We all have moments when we lose our patience, get frustrated and feel like walking away from the situation. It's in those moments when our ability to emotionally regulate becomes extremely important. We need to be able to lead by example.

Develop the self-awareness to know when your body is telling you that you are activated or stressed. Our body has a natural and healthy way of responding to short-term stress. It gets us ready to respond. Our brain is the first to notice when our body is exposed to something that causes stress. It prepares us for fight or flight by sending an alarm signal to the adrenal glands located at the top of our kidneys. These glands are responsible for secreting the stress hormone called cortisol. Cortisol is distributed throughout and causes the whole body to respond. Our heart rate speeds up. Our breath becomes shallow and fast. These work together to move more oxygen throughout our body. Digestion slows because it is not necessary when we need to fight or flee. When this happens, we cannot think clearly. Our prefrontal cortex, the executive functioning and decision-making part of our brain, is temporarily short-circuited by the work of the amygdala, our emotional response center. We don't make good decisions when we are stressed. Period!

Know what's normal. In short-term or acute stress, as the body releases stress hormones and we respond appropriately, the stress hormones get used up, and the body returns to a natural steady state (rest and digest). This is normal. Chronic stress occurs when there is a consistent state of stress and overwhelm. When chronically stressed, the cortisol is not all used up, gets stored in the tissues and adverse health effects result. Our bodies are not designed for chronic stress. In chronic stress, fight-flight never gets turned off. Our foot is always on the gas and never touches the brake.

Notice your thinking. What we think also affects the body's response. Our brain acts differently depending on how much control we feel we have over a situation. If we believe we have greater control, our body will release less stress hormones than if we feel we don't. How much is released relates to what we think about the situation.

Name the emotion. Accept that you are emotionally activated. Identify what you are feeling and develop the understanding that you are not the emotion. Emotion is information from the body asking you to pay attention. Don't make it wrong. Instead, choose how you will respond in the moment. Noticing one is angry is not the same as behaving in an angry way. Noticing and naming allows for an appropriate response.

Learn strategies to influence the body's response. One way to influence our body's response to stress is to learn to control or manage our breath. Controlling or managing our breathing can affect how we

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respond to stress, calm our amygdala and help us shift our nervous system from fight or flight to rest and digest.

Practice coherent breathing. Coherent breathing involves shifting our breath's rate, depth and evenness. Breathing coherently means breathing low, slow, with an even flow. Low means breathing deeply into our belly, with the stomach rising on the 'in breath' and collapsing as we 'breathe out.' Breathing this way will take practice because most of us naturally breathe into our throat or chest. We typically ignore how we breathe unless we do yoga, the many types of martial arts, dance, swimming, singing, meditation or some other activity that requires us to be aware of and control our breathing.

"Slow" means extending the inhales and exhales to a count of 4, 5, or 6. So, when you inhale, count to 4, 5, or 6, and then exhale for a count of 4, 5, or 6. "Even flow" means that the inhale and exhale are the same length, without a pause between breaths. Ideally, you would be breathing through your nose, which boosts the amount of oxygen distributed as it humidifies and filters/warms the air entering your body.

Seek other strategies to help you find calm. Find something else to combine with coherent breathing to help influence your ability to respond to stress. Mindfulness, meditation, walking, taking breaks, listening to music and those mentioned above will all help.

We all face situations where our body kicks into gear to respond to an acute stressor. Learning how to manage acute stress in a healthy way helps prevent the onset of chronic stress. Once we learn about ourselves, it becomes easier to understand and embody the strategies that will help us move to rest and digest and display emotionally aware leadership.

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