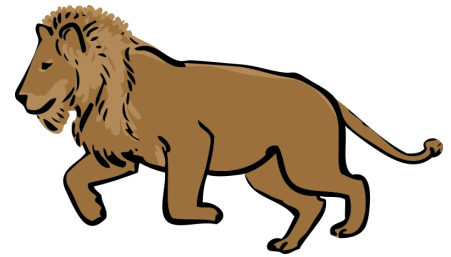


complete the stress cycle

What are your modern day “lions”?

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What are you doing to address the stress?

What should you be doing to address the stress?

What do you think the lions are for your labor force?

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What are your employees doing to address the stress?

What should they be doing to address the stress?

7 ways to complete the stress cycle

Written for *The Point Blog* | Nov 16, 2021 | By Mary Ila Ward

We've been looking at all things workplace wellness throughout the fall, seeking to provide insight to ourselves and our clients about how to create workplaces where people can thrive. A lot of the impetus is put on individuals to manage their wellness and stress. This has its place but is also up to organizational leaders to help create systems and structures that give people the ability to survive and thrive at work. This will impact how they also thrive in all aspects of life given that people do not live and operate in silos.

A thought-provoking book that is geared towards the individual management of stress is a book called *Burnout: The Secret of Unlocking the Stress Cycle*. Although it focuses on how individuals can "complete the cycle" the book provides insights to organizational leaders on the difference between stress and stressors and how to complete the stress cycle in ways that can be incorporated into workplaces.

First, what the book describes as stressors:

Stressors are what activate the stress response in your body. They can be anything you see, hear, smell, touch, taste, or imagine could do you harm. There are external stressors: work, money, family, time, cultural norms and expectations, experiences of discrimination, and so on. And there are less tangible, internal stressors: self-criticism, body image, identity, memories, and The Future. In different ways and to different degrees, all of these things may be interpreted by your body as potential threats.

It's worth noting that as another book, *What Happened to You?* points out that we may be cognizant of these stressors happening to us, but more often than not, we aren't. As this book describes, our lower order brain- the brain stem then the diencephalon then the limbic system- takes in input from the inside world of our body and the outside world through our senses and processes stressors and reacts to stressors often before our high order brain, the cortex, ever receives it and is able to THINK about it. That's why you sweat when you're nervous when you don't even realize it, or you flee or "attack" someone when they smell in a way that is associated with a bad memory.

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Likewise, we often don't even realize what we are doing or why we are doing it in reaction to a stressor. We often do not connect the dots to the linkages between our stressors and our stress.

As *Burnout* describes, stress is:

...the neurological and physiological SHIFT that happens in your body when you encounter one of these threats. It's an evolutionary adaptive response that helps us cope with things like, say, being chased by a lion or charged by a hippo.... It initiates a response to help you survive.... Your entire body and mind change in response to the perceived threat.

As the book goes on to state, what we've been conditioned to do when we experience the lion is run! The book quotes Robert Sapolsky as saying " *...the core of the stress-response is built around the fact that your muscles are going to work like crazy.*"

But we aren't doing very much running these days in modern workplaces. We aren't involving our muscles to help alleviate and eliminate the stress we feel. We are, however, experiencing a lot of modern-day "lions."

So what do we do?

1. So first and foremost, one thing workplaces need to incorporate into practice to help their employees complete the stress response is to **initiate movement into the workday**. Especially when a situation is anticipated to be stressful or a stressor has occurred.

For example, one day I knew I was going to have to have a conversation that was going to induce a stress response with someone I worked with. Instead of sitting down across the desk from her, I said, "Let's take a walk." We walked and talked instead of sitting and staring. I know it helped to reduce my stress about the situation and I think it did hers too.

We need to be encouraging people to move and allowing time for movement during the workday. The book suggests that most people need twenty to sixty minutes a day to walk, run, swim, dance, or anything that involves physical activity.

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2. In addition, in the modern-day workplace we live in, we may think that dealing with the stressor deals with the stress. **We need to realize dealing with the stressor doesn't necessarily allow us to complete the stress cycle.** Take for example a “jerk” you’re dealing with at work. Maybe he or she is not a lion, but they’ve been elevating your stress level at work, so much so that your natural response is either to literally fight the lion, I mean jerk, or to flee from him/her. But, you can’t come across the table at the person literally like your body might be telling you to do, so you play nice. (As the book states, social appropriateness- or being taught to be “nice” at all costs- really impedes the natural stress cycle- it makes us get stuck). Or maybe you even act and go talk to your supervisor and/or theirs about it, or you go home and vent to your spouse about it. But, dealing with the stressor, aka the jerk/lion, doesn’t mean you’ve completed your body’s natural response to the person and situation(s) he or she creates.

So we need to help people, again, move to help complete the stress cycle. But we can also create workplaces where other things happen regularly- all that involve engagement with our bodies and minds- to help deal with the stress, not just the stressor. These are:

3. **Breathing.** “Deep, slow breaths help regulate the stress response.” Encouraging people to breathe is a very simple thing that can help change the tone of a conversation, meeting, or a person’s outlook on a situation. Asking people to inhale deeply for a count of three to five and exhale at the same or longer cadence is simple, and sometimes seems silly, but it may be the small thing needed to get people to a point where they can access their higher-order brain to be able to think clearly and respond appropriately.
4. **Positive social interaction.** Things to include in positive social interaction are opportunities for laughter, affection (hugging and kissing- encourage this at home, not at the office-!), and also can include interaction with animals, like petting a dog or a cat.

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5. **Allow time for creative expression.** Incorporating sports, arts, music, theater, and storytelling in all forms can help with this. Some of the work your organization does may naturally incorporate creative outlets. We incorporate coloring sheets, fidgets, and role play at times into training to help initiate this. Asking people to start a meeting by sharing something- in other words, something that is going to allow for storytelling can be a good way to start things off on the right foot. Like, “Tell us about a time when you...” where the question and response is tied to the meeting’s purpose.
6. **Allow crying.** Crying is one critical way for the body to release stress, yet we label people who cry, especially at work. At the very least, keep a stigma around crying that is neutral and do not punish people at work when crying happens.
7. **Help people pay attention to their body’s response to things.** This is necessary to know when stress is taking place and also to know when the stress cycle has been completed due to one or more of the interventions above. It’s like knowing you’re full after you’ve eaten. Some people are more in tune with it than others and we need to equip people with the mindfulness to pay attention when we are “hungry” or “full” when it comes to stress as well. Some questions or actions you may help people engage with this is to encourage people to check their heart rate, monitor their body for tension, sweating and other responses that show us we have not completed the stress cycle and need to “eat” to initiate an action to help our bodies do so.

How do you deal with stress at work and how does your organization incorporate systems and actions to help people complete the stress cycle?

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Source: *The Point Blog*

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