

EDUCATIONAL COUNCIL

Educational Council is sponsoring two seminars focused on Balance, Wellness and Life Success For any Franklin County School District Staff.

Check out our website to register for and get information on these seminars:
www.edcouncil.org

- Optimal Balance
- Changing Habit for Life

Stress Inoculation for Peak Performance

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Stay tuned for next months article on
Chronic & Acute Stress

This month's topic is designed to help you prepare and protect yourself for extraordinarily stressful points in your life, which you can reasonably expect will happen in the future. Rather than ignoring upcoming stressful periods, or only responding to them as they occur, this month's newsletter will explore things you can do in order to not only survive, but even excel in these stressful situations!

"God I Hate This Time of Year!"

Have you ever said that to yourself before? For a teacher it might be when grades are due at the end of the term; for an accountant it might be the days leading up to when income taxes are required to be completed; and for a person with seasonal affective disorder it might be anytime during the cold and dark winter season. The point is we all have times during the year when we feel especially "stressed out," whether it is due to

unique work tasks, global requirements we all face (i.e. taxes), or even seasonal times of the year. The question, therefore, becomes how we *handle these stressful times and learn to cope effectively* rather than allow ourselves to become defeated by the circumstances we inevitably face.

Stress Inoculation

Stress Inoculation is a therapeutic tool, developed by Dr. Donald Meichenbaum, used by mental health clinicians designed to help clients prepare themselves in advance to successfully handle stressful situations with a minimal amount of personal disruption. Similar to how a vaccination works to make people resistant to the effects of a particular disease, stress inoculation, in theory, helps people prepare for challenging situations resulting in greater resistance when these situations eventually occur.

For example, if a leader is required to make an annual "state of the company" type of address to various important stakeholders, it is likely that many different opinions will surface (and also likely that some opposite views will emerge as well). In these types of situations, it is quite normal for the leader to feel "stressed out" by trying to spontaneously communicate ideas and solutions that are attractive to all parties involved. Using this example, stress inoculation might involve the following:

- Prior to the meeting, take time to draft as many different types of responses the leader is likely to face, as well as the pros and cons of each of these responses so that a professional rebuttal is ready to go. For example, if finances are a likely target of differing views, the leader may consider discussing some of these concerns even before they are voiced so that her audience is aware that she has fully prepared for this issue. This type of preparation is a form of **cognitive stress inoculation** (also a form of mental rehearsal).
- A second type of stress inoculation is **behavioral** in nature. Using the same example of a potentially stressful meeting, the leader might consider learning a behavioral technique to have on-hand for when things get dicey in the meeting. One example of an arousal-reducing technique is deep, systematic breathing that will slow the body down and guard against debilitating anxiety. The leader may wish to practice this technique days/weeks leading up to the meeting so that she can stay poised and in control for when the first opposite opinion surfaces.

How Stress Inoculation Helps Us Cope

Stress inoculation can help people in a number of ways, but primarily by providing an additional sense of **personal control**. When people feel as though they have personal control over situations, they are far less likely to fall victim to negative stress. For example, if you had a reasonably confident expectation that an upcoming meeting was going to be especially difficult, by knowing ahead of time that you have both cognitive and behavioral techniques for handling the situation you will likely be more confident (and at the same time less nervous).

Stress inoculation also prompts people to be **proactive** and think through potentially stressful situations *before* they occur. If nothing else, this type of planning is certainly healthier than simply being reactive to difficult situations as they occur. Stress inoculation relies on having people think ahead and rehearse what stressors they might likely face, as well as appropriate means for handling the stressors.

More Information

Each month Dr. Chris Stankovich writes a newsletter for the Educational Council of Franklin County along the topics of balance, wellness, and life success. To learn more about his products, counseling services, or professional consultation, please visit www.drstankovich.com or email chris@drstankovich.com

Stress Inoculation Techniques

There are a number of stress inoculation techniques a person can use to guard against unhealthy, distressful situations. A brief list of three very effective techniques is provided below:

- **Imagery.** Simply seeing in your mind situations that are likely to be stressful will help your mind strengthen neural connections for immediate, automatic, conditioned responses when problems occur. Imagery also includes senses beyond vision, including tactile, auditory, and kinesthetic to name a few. By putting yourself in difficult situations (in your mind) and using as many senses as possible, your body will be prepared for when the real stressors emerge.
- **Self Talk.** A very simple, yet incredibly effective tool is self talk. Making it a point to say positive, healthy things to yourself will lead to healthy emotions and increased levels of confidence. Keep your internal dialogue positive and productive and your spirits and attitude will follow, giving you greater resiliency during difficult times.
- **Deep Breathing.** Perhaps the easiest and most effective way to control nerves is to engage in deep, systematic belly breathing. Rather than breathe in through your lungs (as you would normally), try taking a deeper breath directly into your diaphragm. The result of deep breathing is more oxygen into your body, resulting in an automatic calming response for your entire body.

Tips & Strategies

- Forewarned is forearmed. As a leader, make it a point to proactively prepare ahead of time for likely stressful situations rather than going into situations only prepared to react when problems occur.
- Develop a personal approach to stress inoculation that is suited to your personality. For some people cognitive techniques like imagery and self talk are most effective, while others prefer to slow their bodies down with systematic, rhythmic deep breathing.
- Imagery can be an incredibly powerful tool for a number of reasons, but perhaps most importantly because it literally puts your mind in a situation before it has even occurred, allowing your body to react more confidently when the real events take place. Consider using imagery days and weeks before a big event, as well as moments before you are required to perform.
- As we discussed in the last newsletter, keep in mind how personal perception plays into the stress response cycle. Keep reminding yourself that situations can be viewed as challenges rather than threats, and your body will respond with confidence rather than fear!
Remind yourself that personal control is the arch enemy of stress, and by taking control of situations you will minimize negative stress!

Additional Links

http://www.apa.org/divisions/div12/rev_est/sit_stress.html (Dr. Donald Meichenbaum, founder of SIT, further elaborates on it's uses)

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