ONT Employee Relations Mental Wellness Newsletter

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Building Resilience

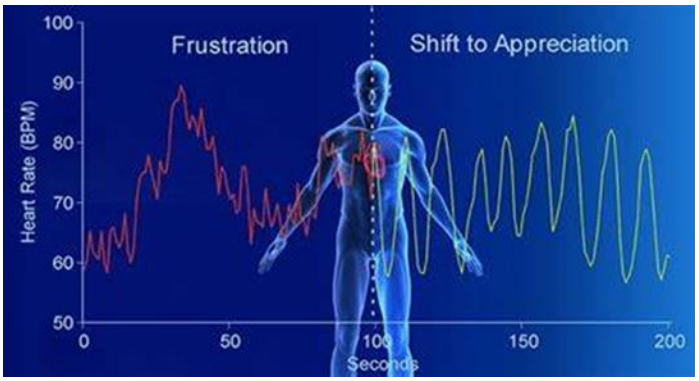
Studies have proven that being angry for as little as 5 minutes can suppress main chemicals in our immune system for the following 6 hours! So, short bursts of anger can have a significant affect on our physiology. Time and time again studies have proven that turbulent emotions drain us, so it stands to reason why we are more likely to get sick after a stressful event. Negative emotions such as fear, frustration, impatience, anger and sadness are costly. The research is clear that experiencing these emotions for just 20 minutes to an hour will have a direct impact by reducing muscle mass, cause brain cell death, impair memory, accelerate aging, impair mental function and diminish performance.

But there is good news - Research has proven we can counter these negative emotions by learning how to accumulate resilience and store it up for later life events. If you are high in resiliency you can counter stress, fear, frustration, hopelessness and burnout and more quickly re-establish a balance in your energy.

When we think of resilience, we understand it as our capacity and ability to recover quickly or bounce back from challenges, adversity and difficult circumstances. While this is true, Dr. Rollin McCraty, an author, speaker, scientist and Director of Research at the HeartMath Institute (HMI), professor at Florida Atlantic University and psychophysiologist, challenges us to look at resilience through a different lens.

McCraty sees resilience as much more than just bouncing back from adversity and encourages us to view resilience as an active, preventative state, not a passive, reactive state.

Think of yourself as an energy system that uses and renews energy throughout your day. That energy is divided up in four domains: the physical, the emotional, the mental and the spiritual. Each of those domains will deplete energy at varying levels, and also require renewal of that energy at varying times.



To be resilient and live optimally, we would need to learn how to intelligently manage the expenditure and renewal of all four energies.

Of the four energy domains, McCraty has identified the key to building a storehouse of resilience rests on how intelligently we self-regulate and manage our emotional energy. Studies have increasingly shown that the practice of positive emotions and attitudes such as courage, care, love, appreciation, adventure and enjoyment is important to maintain and balance this system. He calls this your emotional diet. If the quality of your emotional diet is healthy, then you will increase the flexibility and resilience of your emotional energy and you will recover faster in times of stress and adversity. This healthy diet is key to your resilience. Moreover, the level of your resilience correlates to what HMI refers to as your 'heart coherence'.

According to a Journal in Global Health and Advancement in Medicine (2012), your 'heart coherence' can be measured by monitoring the rhythmic patterns seen in the variability between each heartbeat. This is called your Heart-Rate Variability (HRV). It is essentially the changes or variances between each heartbeat in your heart rate. The study goes on to state that "positive emotions such as love, appreciation, and compassion generate a heart-rhythm pattern that is more ordered and coherent, whereas negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and fear generate a disordered, incoherent heart-rhythm pattern. Ongoing feelings of

impatience, frustration, irritation, worry, or blame throw our inner rhythms out of sync and have a negative carryover effect on our hormonal and nervous systems."

Below is a simple yet effective exercise recommended by the HeartMath that prevents emotional drain and helps to create a more orderly 'heart coherence'.

HMI Heart-Coherence Exercise: Building Resilience

Once a negative emotion has gained momentum it takes effort to deploy a positive emotion to shift and restore balance. Your goal is to reduce the intensity of that attitude or feeling and to intentionally elicit a more positive response. In order to change your current state, you will need to genuinely have a desire to replace, change, shift or counter that negative emotion.

First, build a practice of just noticing. Just begin to notice subtle feelings of impatience, frustrations, irritations, nervousness, fear or deflation. We are not looking for exaggerated emotions like anger or anxiety. Your goal is to build a habit of recognizing when your inner self is out of sync and when you are experiencing inner conflict. Becoming attuned and aware of your internal body language is the first step to improve self-regulation and shift negative emotions.

When you begin to experience inner conflict, stop and take time to reset. Find a quiet location and slow your breath. Imagine that you are breathing through the area of your heart that is causing you stress (impatience, fear, frustration, anger or sadness). You can place your hand on your heart to help you focus your breathing in that location. Set the intention of replacing that attitude or feeling with an opposite more positive emotion to counter the negative one. Deepen your breathing (inhale for 5 secs and exhale for 5 secs) until you have shifted the negative emotion and inner conflict.

Here are some examples – if you struggle with:

- Impulsive outbursts: replace with thoughts / feelings of self-restraint and tolerance.
- Impatience: replace with thoughts / feelings of patience and compassion. Change the filter that you are viewing your world through.
- Fear: replace with thoughts / feelings of courage. View your future through a hopeful, exciting and adventurous lens.

McCraty recommends that you try this for a week or two. According to the research, the most optimal times to incorporate this technique is before you start the day, after lunch and before going to bed.

Studies have shown the more you practise this technique the more you build a coherent state that is optimal for your heart and mind to operate. Additionally, your physiological health, immune, hormonal and nervous system functions will improve. And, you will be able to build up a storehouse of resilience to help combat the future stressors of life.

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