

The Power of Simplicity**Reduce Work Stress for Yourself and Employees**

Why does society seem so stressed? According to Srikumar S. Rao, Ph.D., CEO and founder of The RAO Institute, it's because we have a rigid idea of how the universe should be — and it's not cooperating. At work, this tendency presents itself as an endless quest to control aspects of our environment and careers. But control is an illusion.

"We have no control. We never had control. And we never will have control," said Dr. Rao in his session "Happiness at Work: Be Resilient, Motivated and Successful No Matter What" at the 2018 SHRM Conference and Expo.

If your vision of how things should be doesn't happen, remember that you were never fully able to determine the result. It may help you move on in a more positive mental direction.

Here are 15 other concepts from Rao's SHRM session that may help you and your company's employees reduce work stress:

- 1. Listen to mental chatter** — Many people try to ignore the conversations going on in their head, and work around them. This is a mistake, according to Rao. "We don't live in the 'real world,' we all live in the world created by our mental chatter." Instead, tune into these conversations with yourself to help put things in perspective and navigate stressful issues.
- 2. Be aware of your mental models** — Our minds naturally create models of how we think the world works, but they're just notions. The more we invest in our mental models, the more we think life really works that way. Eventually, we create a silo around ourselves from which we can't break free. When an unpleasant situation persists, consider whether you're using one or more mental models that aren't serving you well.
- 3. Choose your emotional domain** — You have the power and choice to determine the emotional domain you're going to occupy when a difficult situation arises. We make assumptions and judgments about people who are causing us stress, but the fact is that we don't really know their own situations. Ultimately, you have the choice of how you respond — with stress, or without.

For example, if you know a person will act in a way that aggravates you, try not to let it trigger your stress the next time it happens. You knew it would happen; it's no surprise. You can choose to deflect the stress caused by those actions rather than let them control your response.
- 4. Act with appreciation and gratitude** — We are privileged. We know that we're going to eat, have a place to stay, and likely won't be put in physical peril. Yet we don't feel privileged. We feel harassed and stressed, and we put much of our emotional energy into those areas. Focus instead on those parts of your life that are going well and it will help you feel more grateful.
- 5. Be other-centered** — The world doesn't revolve around us. Focus on what's going on with other people. Be empathetic, and don't evaluate someone else's experience solely based on how it affects you.
- 6. Find a good reason to get up in the morning** — Become part of a cause larger than you that brings something positive to the greater community. Create positive goals for your day rather than count the reasons you wish you could just stay in bed.

7. Don't get caught in the details — Rao suggests trying to live simultaneously at the "6 inch level," the world of texts, emails and meetings, and the "50,000 foot" level, where you ask the big questions, like "Where am I going?" and "What am I going to do to get there?" This is a learnable skill.

- 8. Ask yourself, “Good thing, bad thing, who knows?”** — The consequences of a negative event could become positive over time. Consider whether there’s anything you can do to help create good from a bad experience rather than dwell solely upon the event itself.
- 9. Invest in the process, not the outcome** — Don’t focus on failure, focus on the path. Goals are important because they set direction, but once your direction is set forget about the goal and focus on what you need to do to get there. That way, you can enjoy the journey on your way to success.
- 10. Laugh** — As simple as it sounds, keeping a sense of humor can make a difference in your stress level. Remember to reflect often on the absurdity of life and work.
- 11. Be mindful** — By focusing on the present moment and opening yourself to your thoughts and feelings, you can reduce stress and improve the effectiveness of the other stress reduction techniques, according to Rao.
- 12. Act as if every interaction is your last** — Treat every interaction with others as important. It helps you focus on your work relationships and it makes others feel that what they have to say is important to you.
- 13. Feed the dog, not the wolf** — A parable tells the story of two forces fighting within each of us, a kind dog and a vicious wolf. By consciously “feeding” the dog more than you feed the wolf, kindness will eventually come to dominate your actions.

A work example of feeding the wolf might be whenever we try to top someone complaining of their bad day at work. “You think *you’ve* had a bad day? Mine was worse...” Instead, empathize with your coworker and let them know you understand.

- 14. Be a civil engineer** — Rao explains that when a civil engineer builds a bridge, they don’t get angry with the mountain, village, or swamp in their way. Treat the obstacles in your life the same way, whether they’re specific situations or coworkers. You still need to build your bridge. Don’t bother getting angry at the difficulties, figure out how to solve them.
- 15. It’s a long journey** — After each interaction, think, “Is this a journey you want to take?” Don’t waste your time and energy stressing about things that ultimately aren’t worth it to you.

While many employees deal with stress at work, it’s possible to focus on what makes you stressed and find ways to be resilient. By using concepts like these, you may be able to deflect stress for yourself and create a culture of stress reduction across your entire workforce.