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## **A Journey to Managing Stress: My Story**

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For over four decades, my wife and I would like to think we have practiced principled leadership while serving in highly stressful occupations...Kathy as a teacher and I as a school administrator. This essay addresses the reasons and outcomes of workplace stress for both aspiring and established leaders along with preventive measures to avoid the deleterious effects of stress. Although a person's stressors may be different than those found within the field of education, they are, unfortunately, inevitable but hopefully can be managed positively.

Throughout my career, I always seemed to recognize particular incidents which triggered stress: unruly students, long hours of preparation, or even supervisor comments. Over time, these stressors have continued to grow — the unruly students, hard work, time spent on preparation, and even the “boss” remain but many of the stressors have become magnified. For example, additional stakeholders have entered into the stress equation, such as the parent who believes their child can do no wrong; the school board insistent that it is more knowledgeable than those better trained; the principals who place unrealistic demands on employees; governing entities establishing and perpetuating low compensation (in many geographic areas); and yes, even the politicians. This cumulative array, together with ever increasing school safety issues, have all taken center stage, exacerbating stress levels for workers in the education field. Most people can define relevant occupational stressors particularly if they are in leadership roles and are committed to service. Due to these challenges, many young people refrain from entering certain occupations, leave their jobs after only a few years and change careers, and/or opt for early retirement.

What follows is “my story” and through this, I hope helps in both understanding and managing those triggering variables. In essence, one chooses his or her profession voluntarily - likely for admirable reasons - and hopefully my experiences will help the reader find new meaning in those chosen professions while achieving success - without compromising personal ethical tenets.

My interest in the impact of occupational stress and its management occurred while working as a high school administrator. During this time, a labor dispute with air traffic controllers was occurring, claiming stress as its core, and my interest peaked when I saw a proposal request from a professional association to study burnout in their members. I was working towards a doctorate and wondering if burnout existed, so I submitted a proposal. Thinking that it would

never be accepted due to my lack of credentials, I was quite surprised when the acceptance came. This truly scientific study was conducted and I proposed to my dissertation advisor that I use the topic for my dissertation. The organization accepted my study findings but never published them, and my dissertation was accepted. The organization expected the study to conclude that their members' jobs were so stressful that burnout would be measurable. However, the study concluded that the members practiced coping measures that minimized the adverse effects of stress. This conclusion convinced me to develop a plan to assist both myself and others in stress management to avoid debilitation,

The plan that follows was fully researched and developed, as well as augmented by life stories – all designed to provide guidance in life's decision-making (Luft, 1969). In opening up the Jo-Hari Window, I can offer a chronology of my involvement in the study of stress management which will highlight the importance of establishing and nurturing personal and professional relationships (Ramsay, 2004). All of us are formal or informal leaders; opening up our “window” to be as transparent as possible will enhance our relationships with others and improve our respective leadership styles (Covey, 2008).

My journey began with interviewing workers in several highly stressful occupations: police officers, corporate executives, and air traffic controllers. I was met with positive greetings from police departments and regional banks in my tri-state area while turned away from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Ironically, the FAA approved of my style, even offering me a position as an Organizational Development Consultant. However, “politics” apparently forbade the agency to even discuss stress in the workplace.

Many occupations are very stressful, and the ability to achieve optimum performance is crucial to maintaining employment. Some of the contacts I made were cynics. In fact, one Major League Baseball (MLB) player thought it was ridiculous and, after thinking about it, declined the offer. He was ultimately traded for subpar performance and left the career several years later. Others were willing participants - anything to gain a competitive advantage. Many have become friends, rather than clients, over the years. Similar results might be replicated in various professions.

The plan begins by reviewing the work of Hans Selye, M.D., of the University of Montreal. Known as the father of stress management, Selye categorized stress into two categories: “eustress” and “distress” (Selye, 1974). Think of when joyous occasions such as weddings, the birth of a child, or a job promotion caused stress. Dr. Selye termed this “eustress.” The times when stress negatively impacts life, Selye terms as “distress.” In either case, if stress is left unchecked, it can cause deleterious physiological and psychological effects - at times compromise the immune system; increase susceptibility to the common cold, certain forms of cancer, and heart disease; and furthermore, upend personal and professional relationships (Petticrew, 2011).

If one's chosen career has a high level of serving others, particularly in a leadership role, stress can take its toll. This concept of “servant leadership” adds a new stressor to life as it relies on constantly striving to authentically address the needs of those guided and requires maintaining a high level of ethics, trust, patience, and honesty while preserving personal core values (Hunter, 2017). Keeping a steady disposition even when challenged keeps things in perspective and allows for balance. Losing this equilibrium inevitably creates more distress in life (Lynch, 2016).

To assist in maintaining a balanced life, it is essential to recognize certain “fights” that can be conquered and other “fights” that will be lost no matter the effort. Selecting goals carefully and knowing how to accept defeat are important to maintaining balance in life. Selye (1974) alludes to the “fight or flight” response that causes stress to be viewed as either a positive or negative force. For some, it may be more attractive to escape a devastating defeat by not fighting the battle in the first place. However, there is often no escape due to the position held whether a formal or informal leader. Yet if an actual loss is necessary, one must accept the defeat, learn from it, and prepare for the next fray.

What follows are the six steps to positive stress management that, if regularly practiced, will create and maintain a happier and healthier life.

**Step 1: *Breathing exercises.*** Take three deep breaths per hour during the day. Do you ever recall that when you are in a nervous situation, you may take a deep breath to cut the tension? Taking these regular deep breaths generally increases oxygen levels and often reduces blood pressure and heart rates as it serves to cut daily tension and stress (Ramsay, 2004).

**Step 2: *A regular exercise program.*** This is defined as twenty minutes per session three times per week. First, get clearance from your physician, then start your program: five minutes of stretching and warm up, ten minutes of a cardio workout, and five minutes of a cool-down session (Rosenman, 1974). This short session is known to assist the body in recovery from stress and can also serve as a physiological and psychological coping mechanism.

**Step 3: *Diet and nutrition.*** Eating regularly and eating healthily makes a substantial difference. Never skip breakfast or lunch. Also, read the ingredients to avoid high salt content as it increases blood pressure and as such, can negatively affect physical disposition while increasing irritability (so avoid eating that bag of potato chips before going to bed at night). If you find yourself overeating or in minor gastrointestinal (GI) discomfort, you may find researching a GI “exercise” and using it can be helpful. With a nutritionist’s assistance, taking a reputable multivitamin along with other supplements as suggested by a nutritionist or physician is also helpful. Another ingredient in this healthy lifestyle is a yearly physical with appropriate age-level screenings by one’s medical team as a preventive measure (Ramsay, 2004).

**Step 4: *Deep relaxation.*** There will be times when stress will try to get the better of you. But if you practice deep relaxation techniques or meditation, distress can be reduced. Either method can be used for on-the-job relaxation (for a power boost in ten minutes) or at home to assist in falling asleep. Athletes have long used visualization to relax, rejuvenate, or fall asleep. What the mind believes the body achieves and deep relaxation or yoga can create a relaxed mind to produce the mentioned results. Search the web for simple relaxation and/or yoga techniques. Choose one you feel comfortable with, practice it, and then incorporate it as a part of your life. Relaxation, rejuvenation, and sleep will result from what your body tells your mind is needed (Ramsay, 2004).

**Step 5: *“You” time.*** Everyone everyday must carve out time to recharge. This must be done without guilt. Most successful people have Type A personalities, making relaxing difficult, much less relaxing *without* guilt. Type A personalities are identifiable by positively responding to things like: do you have a tendency to finish sentences for people, speed up

at traffic light-controlled intersections, or refuse to delegate? (Rosenman, 1974). Relaxing without guilt is essential to any stress management program (Ramsay, 2004).

Steps one through five help prepare for the demands of personal and professional life. In addition to assisting physically, they assist in maintaining composure and resetting objectives so that a positive attitude prevails.

Finally, Step 6: *Getting along with people*. Whether at work, around and about, or at home, contact with others can be stressful. Most of this stress can be distressful, especially when it involves others requesting something from you that is impossible or impracticable to achieve. This could be in the form of a work request, a disciplinary issue with an employee, a “request” from your own child, a “demand” from a significant other, or even a trying situation while driving. There are even times when these situations cause anger. When someone makes you angry, they are in control of you. The Dalai Lama writes and speaks about the phenomena of anger and states that if someone makes you angry, you then place them in charge, and you no longer are in control of yourself or the situation - the person making you angry, is (Dalai Lama, 2020). The management of these stressors is a most difficult task and takes practice.

First, it takes the understanding that everyone might be programmed differently through their life experiences. Second, it takes figuring out who the person is with whom you are dealing and creating a way to connect. It is just like situational leadership - not everyone wants or hears the things that you want or say (Hersey, 1984). Therefore, if you change your leadership style to suit the other person’s needs, the outcome will be more positive.

Prior to interactions, learn as much as you can about both the situation and the person and create the approach that creates a bridge of understanding. This is not giving in but rather putting the other person in a position of open and responsive communication. It also requires reprogramming to treat others the way they want to be treated (Massey, 1979). This part of the plan is the most difficult but without it, the rest of the plan falls short. In essence, part six is the glue that holds the plan in place.

The goal of this stress management plan is to assist in maintaining a happy and healthy lifestyle. Complete living is a very satisfying result of one’s endeavors. The basis for this satisfaction is in professional and personal success that can be attained while expanding horizons. Maintaining focus on goal setting and skill development while maintaining personal perspective on life is the key to success. Rosenthal (2003) discussed the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy: if you think positive thoughts, positive things will happen, while if you think negative thoughts, those things will happen. Start the day knowing you are going to have a good day, visualize a happy and joy-filled day at the beginning of the day, and continue those thoughts even during trying times.

Life in and of itself is difficult, particularly when expected to handle multiple priorities at work and at home. “Urgent and important” is a way of life that creates stress. Steps one through five are simple to implement, but those steps alone cannot be an entire stress management plan. Step six ties all the others together because it is directly connected to one’s stressors and daily activities. Practice all six and see how life changes for the better. A balanced lifestyle, achieved through both monitoring and managing stress, keeps one moving in a positive direction. This can be as simple as in the old children’s book *The Little Engine That Could*: “I think I can, I think I can, I know I can” (Piper, 1984).

In closing, a catastrophic health issue came to my family not long ago, and I was conversing with a friend and colleague about my situation. I mentioned to him how fragile life was and that although our situation, over time, will improve, difficult times make one think about work and how much time is spent on it. I told him a quick story about how for about five years and for three months at a time, I literally left home on a Sunday and came home Friday and missed so many things with my family. Over the years, I have come to regret these absences. These had lasting negative effects on relationships. Life without balance can be stressful during that time and carried over to the future. I have learned that with balance, success can still be achieved both personally and professionally. I learned that with a state of imbalance, professional success can be achieved, but many personal relationships may suffer. So, the moral of this story is to practice the plan and, in addition, keep a balance in one's life. In essence, be sure to stop and smell the roses along the way as if you do not, the roses will not be there when you do have the time. As the song recorded by country music singer, Kenny Chesney, says "Don't Blink" (Beathard, 2022).

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## About the Author

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Dr. Lynch has been an educator for over three decades and most recently retired after serving 13 years as a Superintendent of Schools. Currently, he serves as the Senior K-12 Leadership Consultant for the Education Leadership Research Center at Texas A&M University and as an associate for Hazard, Young, Attea, and Associates. He previously served as an Organizational Development Specialist for the Federal Aviation Administration and has been a consultant to banks and police departments as well as an executive coach to professional athletes and coaches. He holds a doctorate from Rutgers University, a Leadership and Management Certificate from the Wharton School, a green belt in Six Sigma, and has trained in a variety of leadership programs. He has taught at the graduate level in both the schools of business and education and has presented on numerous occasions at the state and national levels to a variety of organizations. He is the author or co-author of articles on leadership and has co-authored a book on leadership with Dr. Jack Ramsay. When not working he enjoys spending time with his wife, two children, and six grandchildren and is a baseball aficionado.

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