

Stressed If You Do, Stressed If You Don't

By Anna Wells, Editor, IMPO

Although it's an instance that is becoming more and more rare as we grow older and our responsibilities increase, my friends and I like to get together on the occasional weekend night and spend hours at a long, lavish dinner out. We give ourselves time for wine and coffee and dessert, and do our best to catch up. Inevitably, we discuss our careers—it can't be avoided. When you want to know "what's new," it at least somewhat implies that "what" we spend 50 hours a week doing. Invariably, we devolve into heavy sighs over project deadlines and expectations asked of us and others... the *stress* of the day to day.

I stumbled across an interesting "slide show" on CNN.com the other day—one of those bite-sized e-news mediums for us busy, stressed out people. This was a list of the top "high stress" jobs relative to pay, with a link to another group of slides—those with the lowest stress level. The way these levels were determined was through feedback—X percent of folks with said career found their jobs stressful. The interesting (read: scary) part of these statistics were the inflations. While I didn't expect any no stress jobs, the low end of the low stress jobs started at a 40 percent stress rate. Though it's hardly enviable, it made me wonder: is it accurate? I sometimes wonder if stress has become too closely aligned with some sort of manic productivity that we've all lumped in our pie-in-the-sky ideals of success. The thing I love about manufacturing is that lean has taken this concept and overturned it. It takes the unnecessary motion out of the equation—i.e. removing the concept of work for work's sake.

That said: The concept doesn't remove the stress, does it...? At the end of the day, I spend 45 minutes on a treadmill trying to place a pleasant gap of steady breathing between my brain and my desk. Don't get me wrong: I love my job, but I'm certainly not immune to days where I bang my head against the wall.

But it certainly raises the question: Is my job stressful for me simply because I care? And to take that one step further, does the stress tell me—somewhere deep in the cavities of an over-active brain—that I am doing a good job? If the reverse were true, and I didn't feel overwhelmed and exhausted on occasion, I think I'd stress over a fear that I'm not adequately doing my job.

So maybe you're stressed if you do, and stressed if you don't.

It took me a few years in the workforce before I realized that the number of hours I was putting in was only tenuously tied to the actual level of the work I was putting out. Eventually I got better at my job, and was able to accomplish the same tasks in a shorter period of time. But throughout that process, new tasks were acquired. It goes this way consistently, and I have to admit—I like the struggle. But what I need to constantly remind myself of is that stress is my own response, and therefore, my own responsibility.

The important part is not blowing it out of proportion, and creating anxiety for its own sake. When I think of a high stress job, I think of workplaces like emergency rooms and oil rigs. Nowhere in this CNN slide show was a picture of my own desk,

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lined pleasantly with photographs and smelling of lemon cleaner. Gee... why not? I think my new goal should not be to de-stress my life, but to redefine what stress actually is. If it's doing a good and thorough job and occasionally working through puzzles and objectives at night when my brain is still running, then I ought to consider myself lucky.

Do we overuse the concept of stress? Email your thoughts to anna.wells@advantagemedia.com [1].

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