

Values and Stress

Try this.

Fold your arms and take a few breaths.

Now unfold them and refold them the “wrong” way and keep breathing! What do you notice?

Was it harder to fold them this way? Did you have to think consciously about how to get them to fold the wrong way? Does it feel comfortable?

Now unfold them and fold them back the “right” way.

All done? Feel better? Once you had folded them back did you notice anything at all about the breath you took? If you did that’s great and if you didn’t that’s fine too. It is not unusual for the first breath you take when your arms are back where they belong to be a deeper breath than the others, a breath that releases the tension or “stress” you were under when your arms were folded the “wrong” way.

There is a lot of talk and focus nowadays on stress but what exactly is it?

According to the UK’s Health and Safety Executive stress is “the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them”. Sadly stress is not uncommon. Across the European Union it is estimated that forty million people have reported suffering from stress and whilst stress itself is not a disease if it isn’t dealt with it can lead to physical and/or mental ill health.

What does this have to do with values?

Remember what it felt like when your arms were folded the “wrong” way? Well that is kind of how it feels to live our home and/or work lives out of alignment with our personal values. This discomfort builds slowly, sometimes so slowly that we don’t notice it coming but when it goes away, what a relief!

Writing in the journal *Psychological Science*¹ in 2005 a team of researchers from the University of California described how they have shown through rigorous testing that connecting with your personal values can protect you from the chemical and psychological effects of stress.

Working with two groups of people the team subjected each individual to the Trier Social Stress Task. This involved both a speech on why they would be a good candidate for a job and a mental arithmetic challenge where they had to count backwards from 2083 in 13’s for 5 minutes being harassed to “go faster” every minute – not my idea of a good time.

This investigation had as its primary goal to test whether reflecting on personal values before doing a laboratory based stress challenge could buffer both physiological and psychological stress responses. So to measure the effect of the values reflection

exercise only half of the people who underwent the test also undertook the exercise, the other half – the “control” group – did not.

Results showed that all of the people underwent a comparable increase in heart rate and blood pressure – no differences there, everyone was equally “engaged” in the task.

Was there a positive impact in terms of peoples’ psychological response?

Not for everyone. Positive benefits were seen in the people with good “self-resources” (which is like self esteem, or self confidence) who used the values reflection. Individuals in this group had forecast that they would not find the task very stressful and after completing it they reported that it had not been very stressful for them. People with low self resources, even if they did the value reflection, still reported finding the task stressful.

What about the physiological response?

When researchers compared the two groups of people for cortisol levels (a stress hormone) they found something very interesting. All of the people who had **not** done the values reflection exercise showed a significant increase in cortisol production over all of the people who had affirmed their personal values. So in the case of the hormonal response the values reflection had a positive result for everybody irrespective of their level of self resources.

So it is possible to see how being in touch with and reflecting on personal values can help each of us individually deal with stress in our lives but is there any point in considering peoples values in organisations. Bluntly yes. Employers have a statutory duty to be pro-active and take the initiative in dealing with workplace stress. Where employers have been judged to be at fault in not acting sooner to tackle stress there have been some significant financial settlements - £175,000 paid out-of-court by Northumberland County Council to a social worker who suffered a nervous breakdown - £67,000 awarded by a County Court to an employee of Birmingham City Council for clinical depression linked to a failure to provide support or training requested.

Stress that leads to unhappiness and illness is not good. Gaining awareness of our individual values and thus becoming able to consciously increase the alignment between the things that give us meaning and motivation and things we do each day reduces stress and increases our personal capacity to deal with stress when it arises.

Values and stress – unlikely bedfellows perhaps, but certainly powerful adversaries.

¹Cresswell, JD., Welch, WT., Taylor, SE., Sherman, DK., Gruenewald, TL., Mann, T., *Affirmation of Personal Values Buffers Neuroendocrine and Psychological Stress Responses*, Psychological Science Vol 16-Number 11, 2005 published by the American Psychological Society

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