

Developing resilience

A new approach to stress management

BY CONNIE ROETHEL, for SBT

In our attempts to prevent illness, disease and aging, we toss around a lot of definitions for health. My favorite comes from medical writer David Morris, who describes health as *"The manner in which we live well despite life's inescapable illness, disabilities and trauma."* This definition defies the concept that we can control stress, illness and other life events. Certainly we can manage and even forecast some of life's occurrences, but like the weather, much of the human experience is uncontrollable and unpredictable.

A recent event in my own life reminded me how unexpectedly life can change, and of the resilience of the human spirit. On Sept. 15 at 3 a.m., I got the call that is the ultimate terror of any parent. The voice on the other end of the telephone began, *"I regret to inform you..."* The military officer went on to say that my son, who is 25 and an Army Ranger, was involved in a serious training mission accident. During a night-time airborne jump, he and two other soldiers hit the ground with deflated parachutes from a height of four hundred feet. With the grace of God and his Ranger training, Anthony survived the fall.

Despite his critical injuries, the death of his buddy and the permanent disability of his roommate and close friend, Anthony recovered. On Dec. 2, two and half months after the accident, Anthony left home where he had been recuperating, and drove himself

back to Fort Lewis, Wash., to rejoin his unit.

In the face of extreme physical, emotional and psychological trauma, Anthony not only survived, he will most likely go on to thrive

Resilience can be learned

It would be easy to say that this kind of resilience comes only with youth. The fact is that it can be learned and developed throughout life. The concept of resilience is getting a lot of attention in companies that are looking for ways to keep employees healthy.

Resilience is traditionally defined as *"strength in the midst of change and stressful life events: the power of springing back or recovering readily from adversity."*

In a special report from the Wellness Councils of America (WELCOA), Larry Chapman suggests that teaching employees about resilience encourages

the empowerment of individuals rather than their dependence on their employer. He suggests that integrating resilience into an organization's wellness program can have a positive affect on an organization's overall health and wellness.

Resilience programming

A local manufacturing company has taken this suggestion and through innovative programming has incorporated resilience into its wellness

tional approach.

The company added resilience as a theme for its 2006 activities.

Kathy Poteet, director of human resources, said, "Physical health in terms of avoidance of illness is critical, but there are so many more factors that contribute to overall well-being. Until now, our wellness programming has primarily targeted the traditional aspects of health and wellness, such as exercise and nutrition. The focus on resilience as an underlying theme is an effort to recognize that long-term good health involves more. It involves, even requires, the ability to bounce back from the setbacks of every day life. Resilience provides a context for good health choices that resonates with just about everyone and enables us to look more broadly at issues related

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activities. Wacker Corp., a 600-employee Menomonee Falls based manufacturer of light construction equipment, started its wellness program three years ago with a tradi-

to health and wellness."

Patty Heying, registered nurse, and coordinator of the Wacker program, recognized the importance of including this type of programming as

she worked with employees one on one.

“As we went into the third year of our program, it became apparent through individual follow-up and wellness coaching that employees needed more than what we had been providing. There is more going on with these folks than what they share, deeper issues about how they are handling the everyday stresses and difficult issues of life.”

To meet those needs, Heying and the Wacker Team on Wellness developed a series of classes and activities that revolved around four core values identified in resilient individuals. They are:

1. Taking responsibility.

2. Adapting empowering interpretations of life events.
3. Having meaningful connections and relationships.
4. Moving on in life by focusing on what is ahead, rather than behind.

Response to the program has been very positive. “It has created a new level of employee interest and involvement in the wellness program,” Heying said.

The future

Today’s changing workplace requires people to be adaptable and skilled in dealing with the stress of change. The perception of stress cre-

ates the least resilience. Research shows that employees who perceived their jobs as full of stress are the least resilient employees.

It isn’t the event; it is how we react that determines our resilience. Whether it is recovering from the death of a loved one, getting a cold or flu, sustaining an injury, changes in company plans and policy; a new manager; or extended working hours.

People who become emotionally upset about difficulties, blame others for their feelings and dwell on their unhappy feelings are the least resilient and have more illness.

Chapman believes that teaching resilience to employ-

ees makes sense.

“It provides a new way of addressing the traditional core area of stress and stress management, as well as preparing people to function more effectively in the ever changing and increasingly challenging process of work.”



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