

Stress management

Optimism leads to resilience

Years ago, in preparation for teaching a course in stress reduction, I read Jon Kabat-Zinn's book about mindfulness, *Full Catastrophe Living*. The title came from a line in the movie, *Zorba the Greek*. Zorba's young companion turns to him at a certain point and inquires, "Zorba, have you ever been married?" Zorba replies, "Am I not a man? Of course, I've been married. Wife, house, kids, everything ... the full catastrophe!"

I couldn't help but think of Zorba two weeks ago as I walked into a scene in my son's home. Six-year-old Sam and 3-year-old Mason were running from room to room, shouting in high decimals while trying out their Halloween costumes which had just arrived in the mail. While emptying the dish washer and trying to calm the kids Chris was on his Blackberry dealing with a work issue. Amazingly, through the bedlam, 4-day-old baby Eden slept peacefully in her mother's arms. In the midst of the chaos, Chris turned to me and said, "Hello Mom, welcome to our nightmare." Chris has a wife, three children, a thriving business, two hundred employees, a five-acre home with two ponds that attract countless numbers of unwelcome geese and two swans that were purchased to keep the geese away but have failed miserably.

At age 30, Chris has "the full catastrophe." His life, not unlike many others, although happy and full, is filled with the challenges and stresses of home, work and providing for his family.

There is not one person among us who does not have some version of the full catastrophe. Kabat-Zinn points out that "catastrophe does not mean disaster, but the

poignant enormity of our life experience, and our ability to come to grips with the challenges and difficulties in life." It is this full life experience, if not embraced, that leads to stress, chronic disease and depression.

Kabat-Zinn's work with mindfulness is again getting attention in the workplace. It is one of three skills taught by psychologist John Weaver in a new workplace initiative to transform anxiety, depression and stress into healthy thinking. Weaver, founder of the Healthy Thinking Initiative, created the program which teaches employees how to prevent anxiety and depression by using the three skills of mindfulness, optimism and resilience.

Depression leads health care costs for business. Medical costs for employees with depression are 70 percent higher than those who are not depressed, yet most wellness programs do not directly address depression or its prevention.

Stress and workplace demands:

- One-fourth of employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives.
- Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than are any other life stressor.
- Workplace stress causes approximately 1 million U.S. employees to miss work each day.
- Sixty-two percent of American workers said that their workload has increased over the past six months and that they had not used all of their allotted vacation time in the past year.
- Seventy percent of employees say you

have to work late and work overtime to get ahead, and 62 percent of employers agree.

- More than 80 percent of employees feel that companies are expecting too much work from too few people.
- The average work week has increased since the 1970s while leisure time has decreased by 37 percent.
- More than 1 in 10 employees will be diagnosed with depression, and 1 in 5 will be treated for anxiety.

Depression and anxiety are expensive. There is evidence, Weaver says, that you can reduce stress, prevent chronic diseases including depression and improve happiness through ongoing mental fitness training. Through the Healthy Thinking Initiative, a team of mental health professionals helps organizations identify and address the root causes of depression and anxiety and teach employees skills in three key areas.

Mindfulness: Simply put, mindfulness is paying attention on purpose in the present moment. When you understand and utilize the skills of mindfulness, you are able to be more focused in the midst of changing circumstances. You are able to experience both the joys and sorrows of life with confidence that you can learn and grow from everything that comes your way. Research has shown that 40 percent of those who are willing to study and apply the practice of mindfulness to manage the symptoms of depression have been able to successfully eliminate their antidepressant medication without relapsing for more than three years.

Optimism: What you say to yourself

about your life, even during stressful circumstances, has an influence on your happiness, your health and your performance. Optimistic people believe that success comes from their efforts rather than just luck. Optimism is associated with high performance, increased happiness and lower rates of depression, and resistance to stress.

Resilience: We can manage and even forecast some of life's occurrences, but much of the human experience including illness, stress and loss is uncontrollable and unpredictable. The ability to handle the tough times in life, the ability to spring back or recover readily from adversity, is a skill that is learned and developed throughout life.

More information about the Healthy Thinking Initiative is available at www.preventingdepression.com. Additional resources for addressing stress and depression in the workplace are available through Mental Health America of Wisconsin, www.mhamilw.org and Wellness Council of Wisconsin, www.wellnesscouncilwi.org.



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