Shifting From Stress to S.A.N.I.T.Y. in Your Leadership

Elizabeth K. Pritchard and Christine Burns

Abstract

Stress is a primal physiological response to danger eventuating in a fight, flee or freeze response (Lazarus, 1984). This is a natural survival mechanism, however if we continually experience repeated stressful situations, this can endanger our physiological and psychological systems (Ganesh et al., 2018; Lazarus, 1984). In the workplace we may interpret events as stressful, even though our life is not in imminent danger. When we interpret a situation or conversation as life threatening, we stimulate the body's stress response to release additional chemicals (Lipton, 2011). If we continually interpret events as stressful, this can lead to high levels of sustained or chronic stress and culminate in mental and physical ill-health, relationship breakdown, and poor job performance (Diener, 2009; Seligman, 2012). Chronic stress can also impede decision-making abilities, decrease focus, and decline output and achievements (Achor, 2018).

Literature Review

Stress can be experienced through either a sudden event that elicits our survival mode response, or through accumulative activities and demands that extend over time (Messias & Flynn, 2018). Health professionals and those providing empathetic or caregiving roles, can be more susceptible to compassion fatigue and high levels of long-term stress (Semenova, Palin, & Gurovich, 2016). Long-term exposure to stress responses and release of hormones on a daily basis can potentially lead to burnout (Chang et al., 2017; Messias & Flynn, 2018). Burnout can be characterised by exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy or major depressive symptoms (Messias & Flynn, 2018).

Our emotional reaction to the levels of stress we interpret can be a highly subjective phenomenon (Ganesh et al., 2018; Lazarus, 1984; Lipton, 2011). Aside from the imminent danger responses, research has shown that we can influence the amount of stress hormone release through our thoughts (Chang et al., 2017; Lipton, 2011). If we catastrophise the situation and approach it from a negative response of powerlessness and external focus (beyond our control) then we are more likely to experience distress (Chang et al., 2017; Le Fevre, Matheny, & Kolt, 2003). Equally, people's response to the initial trigger or situation may vary; what one person describes as extreme stress, another may find exhilarating and inspiring (Sapolsky, 1994). There is also a need for some degree of "stress" in ones' life because if there is a total lack of stimulation or demand, we can experience boredom, depression, dis-engagement and further distress (Reijseger et al., 2013).

Occupational therapists and health professionals are in the privileged position of working with people who are experiencing their own response to stressful events – disease, illness, injury, or developmental impairment (Semenova, 2016). People often see the health professional as an expert who can provide guidance and leadership on how to negotiate recovery (Kallergis, 2019). Research has identified that people have a better outcome when the therapeutic relationship is positive and supportive (Kallergis, 2019). This in turn can put pressure on the health professional to provide this leadership, with expectations and responsibilities of modelling 'good health behaviours'

Corresponding author:
Elizabeth K. Pritchard
WALT Institute
Melbourne, Australia
Email: elizabeth@waltinstitute.com

Christine Burns
WALT Institute
Melbourne, Australia

and 'helping' others towards greater levels of health and wellbeing (Kallergis, 2019; Semenova et al., 2016). We therefore have a dual role and opportunity to demonstrate and teach how to manage stress more effectively. Firstly, for ourselves and then for the people we work with. This paper provides the six step method of promoting healthy responses to stressors based on the sciences of subjective wellbeing (Diener, 2009) and positive psychology, to assist health professionals and Authentic Leaders (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004) to develop this process for themselves and then others.

When reframing our thoughts around stressful situations, we can embrace the positive effects of stress, known as eustress (Selye, 1965). Defined as 'good' stress from the Greek prefix *eu* - meaning good, eustress is a positive psychological response to a stressor (Selye, 1987). Eustress can be interpreted as stress that energises the individual on all levels (physically, emotionally, mentally and often spiritually) and supports health and wellbeing rather than depleting it. Another component of eustress is the association with task engagement and absorption, known as 'flow' allowing for higher levels of motivation, personal performance, and achievement (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). When we reframe our stress response from negative distress to a more positive framework of eustress, we will engage the ability to be more productive, have higher levels of energy, and experience greater degrees of health and wellbeing (Brulé & Morgan, 2018; Chang et al., 2017).

Strategies to turn the experience of distress into eustress begins with self-awareness, self-regulation, an optimistic mindset and recognising the self-talk that we engage in (Avolio et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2017). These are components of Authentic Leadership (Avolio et al., 2004) where we are fully aware of and can choose our response to the situation, people and events (Avolio et al., 2004). Taking mindful moments throughout the day has also been shown to decrease stress and reduce risk of burnout (Koncz et al., 2016).

Six Steps to S.A.N.I.T.Y.

The six steps to S.A.N.I.T.Y. are based on these evidence-based interventions:

1. Scan and notice: Take a pause to honestly look at the reality of the situation.
2. As-is: Build effective methods of calling the situation 'As-is'.
3. New ways: Plan and do new ways to handle stress.
4. Instigate new habits: New ways of thinking, reacting and being at times of stress.
5. Think differently: Create different phrases and responses that you say to yourself and others.
6. You are worth it: Embed the fact that you are worth finding a way to perceive stress more effectively.

1. Scan and notice: When we take time to pause, and assess what is happening, we stop the negative spiral that often happens when we are experiencing stress. This pause is linked to the positive effects of mindfulness where we can step aside from the emotions we are experiencing and critically look at the situation, in order to select a different way forward. Pausing assists us to slow the release of adrenalin and cortisol (stress hormones) and therefore, we are able to think expansively, focus on options and experience a feeling of control.

2. 'As-Is': This is a strategy that allows for the honesty of the situation to be examined, the emotions of the event to be felt, and a plan to be put in place embracing eustress. This includes being real, honest and accurate about the situation; e.g. if the event is large and difficult, we acknowledge this. If small and we have made it big, we need to recognise our tendency to catastrophise the situation and counteract this with accuracy. As demonstrated through the work of Martin Seligman (2012), we need to view setbacks as temporary, local and changeable. Regardless of the actual event, our immediate level of response is 'temporary' even in the intensity of the moment. The event does not need to be all encompassing of every aspect of life, it is localised to a specific area (local). We are unable to change the event but we are able to change the way we think about it (changeable).

3. New ways: As we begin to look at the situation in a different light, we are then able to plan new ways to respond. We can begin to replace the – 'I can't cope with this', with 'I am learning to cope with this'. To replace the 'this is so huge and impacts everything' to 'this is huge, but there are some areas of my life that are constant'. These principles can be applied to any situation; a paper that is rejected, a redundancy of a job, a loss of a partner, a health diagnosis. They can be applied to the accumulated health incidents as well as the larger single incidents of trauma.

4. Instigate new ways: As we begin to go through these six steps in order, we will begin to instigate new ways of thinking and doing. Ultimately leading to new ways of being. When we notice our response to a situation and our interpretation of it (either a distress or eustress approach), we can influence and change the outcome.

5. Think differently: Research has confirmed the power that our thinking and spoken words have on our cells, emotional state and therefore our actions. If we say stuck in the negative primal stress responses, we will continually flood our bodies with chemicals that will ultimately cause illness and dis-ease. Therefore, we need to recognise the language we are using with ourselves and others, and gently replace with more positive, optimistic and resilient ways of thinking.

6. You are worth it: One trap we fall into is believing that we are not worth it. Not worth spending the time, energy and effort on, to change our stress response. We accept that high levels of stress is the way it is. We give our power away by believing that the external forces and circumstances dictate our response. They do not. When we are able to turn around the negative spiral of chronic stress, and step into our own Authentic power we can do life differently. But first, we must believe that we are worth it.

Conclusion

These 'Six steps to S.A.N.I.T.Y.' are actionable by every individual regardless of their personality, past experiences, roles or job title. Linking with the concepts of 'post-traumatic stress' and 'post-traumatic growth' we can choose to learn from our past experiences and create an optimistic mindset (Seligman, 2012; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). We have options even in times of experiencing a setback, to choose whether we respond to that trigger with an approach of eustress (good stress) or stay stuck in the negative response of distress. As health professionals and leaders of others be they clients, patients, co-workers, family members or students, we have a responsibility to lead them towards a more effective way of managing stress, so they too can shift

from stress to S.A.N.I.T.Y. and experience alternative ways of health and wellbeing in all areas of their life.

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