

# EAP Matters

## *How to Stay Calm (Part Two)*

Research confirms that stress helps our performance. But stress is also known to wreak havoc on our physical and emotional health. A Yale study found that prolonged stress causes degeneration in the area of the brain responsible for self-control. The ironic thing about stress (and the anxiety that comes with it) is that it's an absolutely necessary emotion. It's difficult for our brains to take action until we feel at least some level of this emotional state. Performance peaks under the heightened activation that comes with moderate levels of stress. As long as the stress isn't prolonged, it's harmless.

A study from the University of California, Berkeley, found that the onset of stress stimulates the brain into growing new cells responsible for improved memory. However, this effect is only seen when stress is intermittent. As soon as the stress continues beyond a few moments into a prolonged state, it suppresses the brain's ability to develop new cells. Our complex brains have developed the ability to worry and obsess on events, which creates frequent experiences of prolonged stress.

Besides increasing your risk of heart disease, depression and obesity, stress decreases your cognitive performance. Fortunately, though, unless a bear is chasing you, the majority of your stress is subjective and *under your control*. Here are some additional coping strategies you can employ under stressful circumstances:

**Sleep**—The importance of getting enough sleep cannot be overstated. Sleep is crucial to increasing your emotional intelligence and managing your stress levels. Your brain literally recharges when you sleep. Your self-control, attention and memory are all reduced when you don't get enough—or the right kind—of sleep. Sleep deprivation raises stress hormone levels on its own, even without a stressor present.

**Squash Negative Self-Talk**—The more you ruminate on negative thoughts, the more power you give them. Most of our negative thoughts are just that—thoughts, not facts. If you find yourself believing the negative and pessimistic things, it's time to stop and write them down. Once you've taken a moment to slow down the negative momentum of your thoughts, you will be more rational and clear-headed in evaluating their truth.

**Reframe Your Perspective**—Stress and worry are fueled by our own skewed perception of events. It's easy to think that external events are the reasons we're so stressed all the time. You can't control those events, but you can control how you respond to them. Be wary about making broad, sweeping statements, such as "Nothing is working out," or "Everything is going wrong." Instead, list what is actually going on and this will reduce the scope of the stressors.

**Breathe!**—If you can breathe, then you have the power to calm yourself. The practice of being in the moment with your breathing will begin to train your brain to focus solely on the task at hand and get the stress monkey off your back. When you're feeling stressed, take a few minutes to focus on your breathing. Close the door, put away all other distractions, and just sit in a chair and breathe. If your mind wanders, think about how it feels to breathe in and out; just bring your focus back to your breathing. If staying focused on your breathing proves to be a real struggle, try counting each breath in and out until you get to twenty, and then start again from one.

**Use Your Support System**—It's tempting, yet entirely ineffective, to attempt tackling everything by yourself. To be calm and productive, you need to recognize your weaknesses and ask for help when you need it. This means tapping into your support system when a situation is challenging enough for you to feel overwhelmed. Asking for help will mitigate your stress and strengthen your relationships with those you rely upon.

*(Information excerpted from a LinkedIn post by Travis Bradberry, Ph.D. **Contact your EAP at 320.484.4555**)*