

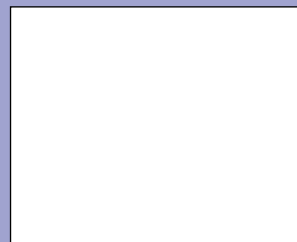
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Pharmafile

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Who's moved where?

This month's appointments (p30)

Just how resilient are you?

Workplace stress can be debilitating if you don't pause for thought, says psychological coach Alison Griffiths

The concept of 'resilience' in relation to our working lives has become widely used in recent years, and individuals and organisations should be aware of what it means for them - and how it can help us deal with stress and enjoy our jobs more.

Stress in the workplace can be potentially very damaging, and result in lost working hours and long-term damage to health and careers. Employers are responsible for ensuring that the working environment and its pressures aren't too high - but that doesn't mean that you as an employee can't contribute to your own well-being.

This is a challenge even when business is good, let alone during an economic downturn and organisational upheaval.

Many pharma companies are in the midst of restructuring and redundancies, and this inevitably generates stress for everyone concerned. But anyone who has worked in a team will know that people vary greatly on how much stress they can handle, and indeed, how they find a way to cope.

What one person may find a stimulating chal-

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lenge, another will experience as extreme pressure - that means each of us should look at ourselves and understand where our limits are.

By doing this we can call on our inner (and sometimes hidden) resources to help us be more resilient. This allows us to reduce stress or recover from difficult situations more effectively, rather than continuing to look externally for things to either change, or for others to fix them.

Realising how resilient you can be

As a professional coach, I find that working with people in times of change and upheaval always uncovers those common factors which can get in the way of our resilience and our powers of recovery.

You may find yourself in a situation where you feel expectations of your performance and workload have reached an all time high.

It is easy to feel trapped, 'out of your control' and fearful of the direction the organisation is heading in, and worried about your own future.

Maybe you could persuade the company to change its decision on resources, even though budgets are tight and the future uncertain.

You may have some influence, but this probably can't be achieved in the short term when you are feeling under great stress.

So what are your options in these situations? You could always leave and find another job in a less stressful environment. But who's to say you won't be faced with a similar situation again?

You could move on every time, but that might well amount to ignoring your part in the problem.

Of course you might find yourself in a very bad work environment which is truly beyond help, and which it is best to walk away from.

But very often this is not the case - and you can instead reassess how you yourself perceive the situation. You can call on your own inner resources to escape that feeling of being trapped.

A recent client of mine was in such a situation and I invited him to turn his attention inward to what elements of the situation were within his control.

At first he resisted this idea, but with persistence, he became aware of how his own attitude and perception of the changes were contributing to his stress. This awareness enabled him to adapt his outlook and cope more effectively with his current environment.

Even if we try to embrace change, you may find yourself resisting it, because of the uncertainties which are so disconcerting.

The source of our resistance generally falls



into one or more of the following four categories:

- Rational - the change is challenging what I believe to be true, and the right and logical way forward.
- Emotional - the change is challenging my values, my principles, how I and others are being treated.
- Behavioural - the change means a different way of doing things, new processes, systems etc. that I may not understand or agree with.
- Political - the change could affect my position, my influence, my status in the organisation.

Making time to consciously examine one's own thoughts and feelings

Doing this allows you to put those thoughts and feelings back into perspective.

You may then be able to see which of them are helping and which are hindering you. In turn,

this positively impacts our behaviour and potential outlook on the need for a change in behaviour.

When embraced fully, it also gives us the chance to explore further what is behind our 'political' source of resistance if present, and allows us to question how helpful or unhelpful this resistance is.

By stepping back and giving ourselves time to become aware of how we are thinking, feeling and behaving (ideally recording it in a personal notebook) we can better understand whether we may be allowing our concerns and negativity to obscure the reality of the situation and our ability to take control and cope within it. 'Within it' because the change or challenge is not simply going on around us, we are playing our part in its system.

I often use the analogy of water - water has a depth to it which we cannot often fully see. It also has a natural ability to flow towards its des-

tion, navigating easily around obstacles.

How can we give ourselves the quality of water?

I have coached many people who at first cannot see anyway out of the situation they are in, and sometimes say: "I won't do too much naval gazing!"

But being open minded and willing to explore an inward approach, often gives them the answers they are seeking.

Having the opportunity to write what you are thinking (i.e. saying to yourself) enables you to speak or record what you are feeling emotionally and physiologically, which in turn allows you to step back and consider whether this is what you want.

And, if not, what you can choose to do about it.

Doing this puts you back in control - it gives the opportunity to adapt language to a more realistic and appreciative dialogue which starts to calm the mind and relieve the physical sensations that naturally protects us from the perceived threat.

The great thing about these techniques is that if we choose to develop resilience in one part of our life, it will have a positive impact on the other areas.

Let's remember, there is only 'now' - and 'now' never stays the same. Something is always changing, moving, evolving.

Appreciating this, helps us appreciate that right 'now' may not be great.

It is important to have something in our routine that we enjoy and enables us to unwind. When we are continually doing, we miss valuable time for just being.

However, our natural evolution means that it won't be like this forever and in the meantime, we can begin to listen to what we need.

I ask clients "what can you give yourself right now that will help you feel or cope better?"

For some this might be leaving half an hour early tonight, for others it is getting back to the gym twice a week, for some it's walking the dog in the evening or simply going for a long walk - they are all usually things that people used to do, and have stopped.

It is important for all of us to have something in our routine that we enjoy and enables us to unwind. When we are continually doing, we miss valuable time for just being. This allows the necessary reflection to raise our awareness of the art we're contributing to our stress and recovery. It also allows new ideas and opportunities to emerge that can help us.

In running workshops on resilience and change, the one aspect of it that all attendees say they enjoy most is the ten minutes relaxation exercise.

It's simple and can be done at work. The exercises can help us feel safe, happy and relaxed. That offers a calmer mind, body and sense of being - it allows us to get back to being human, rather than doing human.

If you can return to the office as a calmer and more balanced person, that will allow you to help others in your team through the challenging times.

A bit like a coffee bean faced with the adversity of boiling water, it stays true to its form, not becoming soft like a vegetable or hard like an egg in the same situation. Instead it influences a wonderfully aromatic and colourful change to its adversary - the boiling water!

Finally, let's not forget the importance of the support of others (our support network) in developing our resilience. It was in fact a great lesson for me when a young member of my family who was facing a huge change in her life from living by the sea to moving to the city announced to her mother:

'Mummy, there's a part of me that wants to go

A part of me that's scared

And a part of me that doesn't know'

She wasn't trying to fix it or change it - simply expressing that it helped her face up to the challenge and what she was experiencing in that moment.

How can we start by getting back to that place of innocence and honesty that can help us cope and support ourselves at difficult times?

The first step is to stop and put yourself as the priority so that you can listen to the inner resource we all carry with us.

Turning our attention there rather than focusing on what others haven't yet done encompasses reassurance, empowerment and allows productivity.

Alison Griffiths is a professional psychological coach and a regular facilitator of Resilience and Change Workshops.

Alison has her own coaching practice: Success Coaching & Development Ltd (www.success-d.co.uk) which is dedicated to promoting effectiveness and well-being in a corporate environment. Contact: a.griffiths@success-d.co.uk