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Low Stress & Great Success

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Reframing Stress Dumping Interactions

How frontline workers can reframe stress dumping interactions through 6 steps

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The Problem

What do you do when someone dumps their stress all over you?

Frontline workers report an uptick in negative interactions, from hotel front desk staff to contractors, call center agents, cashiers, customer service, and other public-facing jobs. The people they serve often have high expectations of service, low patience, and a lack of understanding of what is possible in staff shortages and supply line challenges.

Great frontline workers are usually empathetic, which, unfortunately, makes them more susceptible to stress dumping. There is a good reason for that.

"Stress is contagious"

There are a couple of explanations for this second-hand stress reaction. First, mimicking other people's stress is part of how our brains create empathy, which is why it can feel awful to have someone dump their stress all over you. In an article entitled, **I Feel Your Pain: Mirror Neurons and Empathy** researchers discuss how "Empathizing with another person's pain activates areas in our own brain that typically get turned on while we ourselves experience pain." They conclude that mirror neurons elicit the same emotions in your body, triggering a stress reaction.

Second, chemicals released in one stressed body alert the rest of the group to danger, a response that comes in handy if we all need to escape a burning building, but not when it leads to collective burnout or a tense marriage. This second-hand nature of the stress reaction is one reason stress is known as the "new smoking."

This second-hand stress often follows those workers home. It makes them more likely to have physical and psychological consequences due to increased levels of the stress chemical cortisol, such as high blood pressure, depression, weight gain, anxiety, headaches, dull-headedness, and indigestion. They are also more likely to leave their positions to seek a less stressful environment - even if they really love the organization or mission.

Reasons we experience a second-hand stress reaction

Our brains create empathy by mimicking other people's stress

Our stress chemicals are designed to communicate danger to the group

The Solution

Eliz Greene's research and work with high-pressure public-facing occupations, such as hotel managers, call centers, and relocation professionals, reveals how to protect your sanity, well-being, and performance from stress dumping through 6 steps to reframe the interaction.

Step #1: Recognize the signs of stress dumping.

1. **Pay attention to what you see and hear.** What is coming from the other person? Are they expressing themselves with big emotions - anger, sadness, or anxiety? Does their tone sound conversational or confrontational?
2. **Notice your physical reaction.** What is happening in your body? Is your heart racing? Are you feeling shaky or cold? Your body and brain sense a rise in cortisol in others and will increase the stress hormone in yours too. That rise can create physical symptoms such as:
    - racing heart
    - tummy troubles
    - feeling cold or hot
    - sweating
    - tearing up
3. **Notice your psychological reaction.** What are you feeling? A rise in cortisol can trigger symptoms such as:
    - anxiety
    - fear
    - anger
    - irritation
    - helplessness
    - worry
    - frustration

When you recognize a stress-dumping interaction, move to step #2.

Step #2: Reframe the interaction to validate the client's experience and define your role.

1. **Start with validation.** Even if the person's reaction seems over the top, validate what they express. Begin by letting them know you hear what they are saying and that their response is reasonable. A phrase such as, "That's a lot to deal with. I understand why you'd be upset," defuses the situation and puts you on their side.
2. **Put the interaction in context.** Some people may just need to talk about what is causing them stress, even though it sounds like they are asking for your help.
    - **Frame your role** by asking**,** "Do you need my help with this situation, or would you like me to document your experience?" This question can set expectations for your reaction to the interaction and limit your emotional response.
    - **Ask permission** before launching into "problem-solving mode." The phrase, "I can start our resolution process, are you ready to do that?" is constructive.
    - **Be curious.** Ask for more information, especially when the other person's reaction seems out of proportion to the situation. Again, start with validation, "I can hear how frustrating this is. I'm not sure I understand the full picture. Can you help me understand?"

Step #3: Reframe your side of the interaction to short-circuit your stress reaction.

1. **Re-envision their behavior.** Lower the pressure of the stress dumping incident by asking yourself three questions about their behavior:
    - **What if this is the best they can do?** We can all sit in our perception of the “right” reaction to a situation. This belief can cause intense judgment and usually a healthy (or quite unhealthy) dose of anger. But what if you take a breath and consider that maybe this is the best decision they can make or reaction they can have right now? Even if it doesn't seem right, can you let go and give them some space and grace?
    - **What if there is something I don't understand?** We all bring different life experiences, beliefs, world views, and family histories to any situation. What if something about their experience doesn't fit your view of the world?
    - **What if it isn't about me?** Other people's choices and behavior can feel very personal. It can feel like they are consciously taking their pain out on you - or even choosing not to consider your feelings or well-being. But what if you aren't even part of their consideration?
2. **Release some cortisol.** Your brain works better without a large cortisol load. Tell your body it is time to release cortisol with one of the following signals:
    - **Lengthen your breath.** Taking 5 to 10 longer, deeper breaths can do the trick.
    - **Move your body.** Stand up, shift side to side on your feet, pace, shake your hands, swivel, or scoot back and forth in your chair.
    - **Change your focus**. Move your eyes to another place - bonus points if this place is a window, a photo of nature, or getting outside.
    - **Drink something hot or cold.**

"Lean into the calm. If you are calm, you control the interaction."

Step #4: Reflect calmer neurons.

1. **Pay attention to your vocal tone, pace, and word choice.** Fewer words delivered slowly in a soothing tone allow you to reflect calm and create space for the other person to come down from big emotions.
2. **Create a safe space for the interaction.**
    - If you are in person, move to a more private or comfortable location. Even just moving out of line to the end of the counter may help. Both of you walking can reset emotions as well.
    - If you interact on video, shift your body position or physical location. Touching your face or arms and leaning forward indicates interest and attention. Going to a cozier or more private space helps too.
    - If you are on the phone, changing your body position while letting them know they have your full attention can create that space.
3. **Take audible pauses and breaths.** Acknowledge what they've said with "I hear you" or "Got it," then pause and take 2 or 3 calm deep breaths before continuing. (Making typing sounds while doing this may ease your discomfort)

Step #5: Focus on the fix.

1. **Create a road map.** Let them know you will do your best to solve the problem and what the next steps will be. (I'll need to collect some information, verify the product, and then I'll know what our options are)
2. **Be a person, not a cog.** Make some small talk as you complete some of the more mundane parts of the process. For example, during an auto insurance claim call, an agent exclaimed, when told that the other driver's name was James Brown, quipped, "Do you mean to tell me that the King of Soul rear-ended you in a Kia Soul?" The laughter on both sides helped make the process lighter. It is harder to be unpleasant to a person being pleasant and kind to you.
3. **Deliver bad news with compassion**. "I know this isn't the answer you were hoping for, but the best I can do…"
4. **Create boundaries.** Abusive language and threats are not acceptable. Draw a line with a firm statement, "I'd like to help solve your problem, but I cannot continue this conversation if you are going to use that language and tone."

Step #6: Actively bring your system back to normal.

1. **Disconnect from the source of stress.** While stress is contagious, so are laughter and calm. Think about it. Aren't there some people who always make you feel better just by being around them? A short amount of time spent with calm, encouraging people effectively limits the impact of second-hand stress. Eating lunch with someone who lightens the mood is a great strategy. In a pinch, there are always funny videos to reset your stress levels. Try searching for "cats don't like things." The point is to find a way to disconnect from the source of stress. **You can find a quiz to find out what activities may be most effective for you to disconnect in this post: Discover Your Stress Recovery Personality: Are you an IGUANA or a BORDER COLLIE?**
2. **Process cortisol out of your system.** Ordinary activities, such as standing up and taking a quick walk once per hour, can significantly lower your cortisol level. This activity is good for your heart and has added benefits such as increased attention and better blood flow to the brain, supporting creativity and critical thought. You can find more tips to lower cortisol, reduce stress, and improve your quality of life in my book **Stress-Proof Your Life**.

The roadmap for reframing stress dumping interactions