



IT'S ANOTHER DAY AT THE SPA, AND YOU can bet your first dollar that someone on your payroll will arrive without a smile on her face. "You can't bring a cluster of human beings together and not have someone dealing with an issue," says Dr. Stephen Brock, president of Human Capital Development and a professor of leadership at Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia. "There's an emotional ebb and flow on any given day as people find out that a colonoscopy has been added to their physical, they won't get a tax refund or their flight to Walt Disney World has changed, costing them a half-day in the park."

Triggers don't need to be dramatic events. Employees may find themselves angry over little things—the car in front of them hesitated too long before driving through a green light, for instance, or one employee set a new retail record and her colleagues resent her success.

According to Beverly Smallwood, Ph.D., a workplace psychologist based in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 20% of Americans have a chronically angry personality while another 20% are habitually calm and easygoing. That leaves the remaining 60% vulnerable to the physical ravages of stress. "When the protective hormones that appear during

episodes of acute stress are produced repeatedly or in excess, they create a steady cascade of physiological changes," notes researcher Bruce S. McEwen, Ph.D., of Rockefeller University in New York City. That could mean bone loss, muscular weakening, memory loss, atherosclerosis and increased insulin levels that cause higher levels of fat deposits in the body.

There's more: Dutch researchers discovered that an uncontrollable stressor (something as common as continuous noise) lasting 15 minutes interferes with the function of cytokine interleukin-6, a substance that helps activate the immune system. Uncontrollable stressors also produce high levels of cortisol, which suppresses the immune system.

For many people, a spa is a place of peace and relaxation. For you, however, it could be where your stressors originate. Dealing with these stressors while running your spa doesn't have to be a daily grind. Here's how management coaches and psychologists suggest that spa owners deal with stressors in their businesses.

# Winning the DAILY GRIND

Management coaches and psychologists explain how to deal with stressors in your spa.

By Julie Sturgeon

### Keeping Your Balance

You step into a treatment room and observe an employee ignoring the cleaning instructions you've given her. Or perhaps you overhear the front desk staff flub the sales script you explained to them during the morning meeting. Managers often see their employees making mistakes and ignoring instructions, and then become angry because they feel out of control, says Carol James, a behavior consultant based in the San Francisco Bay area. "When your mood is dependent on somebody else, your emotions bounce up and down like a yo-yo," she says.

The first trick to creating a more positive workplace lies in giving yourself a new empowering

perspective. Start by asking yourself how you can enhance, improve and uplift a situation rather than mentally lecture your employees over the problem. Smallwood suggests that managers keep a journal of the number of times a day they think angry thoughts or act out aggressively. If there are three or more instances per day, they might want to seek anger-management counseling, she says.

Talking through situations internally can help you gain better perspective as well, but make sure you keep this internal conversation productive rather than belittling, says Redford Williams, director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina. He recommends asking

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yourself four questions when you're angry:

- Is this issue really important?
- Is my anger appropriate to the actual situation at hand?
- Is the situation changeable?
- Is the end result worth taking action?

"Often, stress builds up not so much around what's bothering you but on your capacity to deal with it," points out Michael H. Kahn, Ph.D., a personal coach and psychologist who founded Hardiness for Hard Times in Severna Park, Maryland. "Consider big-corporation CEOs," he explains. "They can't reduce what's pressuring them, but they learn how to function at a high level."

According to Kahn, doctors, managers and other professionals judged by their output can sustain a high level of performance for only 90 minutes at a time. These boundaries can be overrun with caffeine, and sometimes through sheer willpower, but only for a short time. To make things worse, most people's biorhythms dip between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m., which means their mental and emotional capacities aren't sharp then, even under the best conditions. To conquer these slumps, it's advisable

Taking short breaks throughout the workday can help keep the effects of stress from getting out of hand.

to take a 5- to 10-minute break in the morning and afternoon in addition to your lunchtime.

“A lot of people just work, work, work, and they’re worn out at the end of the day. They’re less pleasant because they feel depleted as the day goes on,” says Kahn. “They assume they’ll push through

## Emotional Employees

Have you been tempted to distribute a job-satisfaction survey among your employees to get to the bottom of their performance failures? Forget it, says Howard Weiss, head of the Department of Psychological Sciences and co-director of the

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and take it easy in the evening. But by evening they have a headache, and crankiness has taken firm roots.” He likens this to an athlete in training: Push continuously, and your muscles will break down. Build in spurts, and you’ll develop triceps, biceps and power.



Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana. Such on-paper exercises only capture a specific moment. To prove this theory, Weiss called individuals up to four times a day over a four-week period to inquire about their emotions; without exception, each individual’s emotional states bounced around like a lottery ball. It’s the daily emotional state of your staff that impacts its performance, so to foster a productive day, you must help employees interpret incidents as they happen in real time.

When an employee comes to work merely grumpy, having her talk about it the second she drags herself through the door only fuels her attitude, says Kare Anderson, founder of the Say It Better Institute in Sausalito, California. Redirecting her emotions is your best strategy. Begin by pulling the employee aside and praising a trait you want to encourage. You might say, “I want to thank you for straightening the lobby. The displays look better when they’re organized and clean” or “I noticed that you volunteered to clean the restrooms first today. That set a good example.” Picking a talent or temperament the employee herself values—“You’re so creative” or “You’re so good at seeing details I’ve missed”—goes a long way toward preventing her attitude from backsliding as soon as your compliments wear off.

Humor and exaggeration also work well to diffuse tension. “Even an absurd comment like, ‘Wow! You’re in a great mood today. Teach us how we can be like you’ helps put the irritant in its proper place,” James explains. However, make sure you deflect the emotion with a touch of goofiness

An employee’s emotional state can vary widely from day to day, so encourage staff to use perspective on a daily basis.

## Your employees' job evaluations should include their daily attitudes.

rather than judgment. Invalidating how she feels with an airy, "Oh, you shouldn't feel that way!" makes her believe you don't care about her, putting her in a defensive

mode that worsens the stress.

If you're afraid to use the wrong tone, nip an employee's bad mood in the bud by simply agreeing with her. "Saying, 'You're right' matter-

of-factly takes the wind out of her sails because complaints are used to defend her position," says James. "When you acknowledge she's right, what else can she say?"

A third strategy involves spelling out the rewards for paying attention, improving performance or setting straight whatever has gone awry. By simply stating, "Let's get this inventory project done in the next hour while other employees are here to help out with the workload," you avoid mentioning the mood specifically.

Occasionally, trying to redirect negative energy won't work, and only then do you want to pull the employee aside to ask how you can help, says Anderson. "One of our biggest failings is that we want to talk things out. If we find ourselves discussing every bad mood, that's the main way our employees remember us. So even if you solve your employees' problems, you'll be associated with those problems for the rest of your relationship with them," she says.

Your clients' body language will tell you when it's time to intervene. If you see a client tense her body, stand with her arms folded tightly across her chest or back up from your employee during a routine conversation, step in.

But to foster the best employee attitudes from the start, state your goals clearly. Your employees' job evaluations should include their daily attitudes. "It's astounding how much of the time managers leave their expectations vague and open to misinterpretation," says Price Pritchett Ph.D., CEO of Pritchett LLC, a consulting firm in Dallas. "Telling people what they should do to move toward the performance you expect is a powerful tool." The more specific



The first step when dealing with an angry person is to use words that validate his feelings.

the better, adds Smallwood. Clear instructions like, “I want to see smiles on your faces” give employees useable information about what you expect as they reflect on their attitudes.

### **Taming the Tantrums**

Mr. Spock-like characters with completely logical reactions exist only in science fiction. At times, a crabby employee may explode and exhibit unacceptable behavior like slamming down objects or verbally abusing others. “We’ve done a lot of research on anger over the last five years or so, but most of us still use the same outdated tools to communicate with angry people,” says Ken Haseley, a counselor with The Ammerman Experience in Houston.

The key is that all spoken messages—even ordinary, uncharged conversations—pass through the brain stem where emotions live before they

reach the cerebral cortex for translation. Statements that elicit trust and believability are more readily accepted. Ammerman's studies show that 50% of one's credibility stems from empathy and caring, with the remaining half divided equally between commitment (*Does she seem to care about this discussion?*), competence (*Does she seem to know what she's talking about?*) and honesty (*Does she appear approachable?*).

During a person's rant, reach out with connecting phrases such as, "I'm sorry to hear that" and "I can see you're upset. I'm glad you came to me to express those concerns." Once you give proper validation to the

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employee's first emotional response, you'll allow her brain to absorb more logical statements such as, "We established the break policy because studies show our biorhythms need a rest."

You also convey commitment, competence and honesty when you prevent your own brain's emotional triggers from firing. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth while listening to an employee rant. Some managers find it helpful to mentally repeat phrases like, "I will remain calm" and "I will not let this bother

## Take a Break

It's important that both managers and employees take regular breaks. Designate a space for your employees to take 15-minute paid breaks in the middle of their shifts, and encourage them to walk outside when weather permits. Michael H. Kahn, Ph.D., a personal coach and psychologist who founded Hardiness for Hard Times in Severna Park, Maryland, advises his clients to stock their break rooms with nutritious snacks like protein bars or fresh fruit (rather than coffee, chips and doughnuts) to feed the body's biorhythms during this time. Other consultants recommend providing a comfortable sofa or reclining chair to allow employees to nap for a few minutes.

Include room in your training budget for employee workshops that address stress-fighting exercises like yoga, team-building seminars and personal enrichment programs. "Most people don't know that if they're in a bad mood, they can get out of it by changing their thinking," says Carol James, a behavioral consultant based in the San Francisco Bay area. "They assume they can't help how they feel. But that just isn't true."

me.” And don’t interrupt the venting for the first minute or two. “The key phrase is ‘a minute or two,’ because most people can unload in that amount of time. It makes no sense to allow venting to continue beyond that point, however, because employees will wallow in the problem rather than try to solve it,” Haseley adds.

will prompt her to answer cognitively—and calmly. If your employee doesn’t move to this state, ask her to take a break isolated from the spa’s main traffic areas to calm down.

When you show your employees that you value them and genuinely support them through their moods, you’re likely to reap a lower

## Statements that elicit trust and believability are more readily accepted by the brain.

Once the initial storm passes, use your credibility to trigger the employee’s adult ego state. The quickest way is to ask for potential solutions, says Brock. Your employee will likely throw out some irrational responses to questions like, “How would you change things?” or “What would you suggest we do?” But typically by the third open-ended question, her cerebral cortex

turnover rate, Kahn assures. “Your employees will also relate better to your clients, who will come back not just to receive a competent service, but because they can count on having a pleasant, calming experience at your spa.” ●

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