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How To Overcome Executive Stress

18 Feb 2016

Wow, 2,340 of you have read this.

Dennis had good cause to celebrate. So why was he feeling anxious, stressed and upset? Six months earlier he'd achieved the goal he'd been working toward for 4 years - a promotion to the executive team of his organization. But nothing in his business experience had prepared him for the complicated mix of emotions that seemed to come with the new job. The stress was really getting to him and he didn't know how to handle it.



Sources of Executive Stress

Decision making

Dennis was now in the driver's seat. It was easy as a team member to criticise the boss and pick apart the decisions taken. He found it quite another thing to be in control, calling the shots, and answerable up the organization.

Status

Dennis was not used to being the 'boss'. He felt like he was wearing the emperor's new clothes.

Exclusion

Dennis had been popular, was well liked and enjoyed doing things outside of work with his colleagues. All that changed the day he stepped into his new executive role. Suddenly he wasn't invited to lunch or to after work drinks. He felt socially isolated. He went home feeling quite sad and lonely. Everyone thought him one lucky person, so he couldn't talk to anyone about how he was feeling. This just added to his sense of isolation.

Financial accountability

Budgets and forecasts were now Dennis' responsibility. He found this responsibility overwhelming.

Managing People

Dennis was now responsible for managing a team of 8 people. He did not have any idea about how to manage and motivate. He found it difficult to communicate clearly. He found himself getting short-tempered and easy to anger when his direct reports didn't understand what he wanted. He didn't know what to say when someone was clearly upset. He found himself bossing people around and being unkind. People seemed to be afraid of him and he did not know what to do about this.

Dennis was experiencing many of the symptoms of stress. They were spilling over into his home life, affecting his relationships at work, interfering with his enjoyment of his job and making it difficult to get his work done.

Symptoms of Executive Stress

- Negative feelings; feeling low or sad.
- Unable to make decisions.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Difficulty going to sleep or staying asleep.
- Loss of self-belief.
- Feeling inadequate; a fraud.
- Feeling isolated and lonely.
- Increase in alcohol consumption.
- Increasingly using fear tactics to control people.

People in executive positions often believe it is a sign of weakness to admit to feeling stressed. Executives do not like to be seen as struggling and are likely to try and hide their difficulties. Rather than ask for help they will dig their heels in and pursue strategies that are not working. Trying to toughen anxieties out can lead to even more stress. When stress becomes untenable it can have disastrous consequences. Emotional problems can get the upper hand and when the going gets tough some executives succumb physically to the stress.

It's all in the brain

Executive stress is a fear-based response to perceived threats and dangers.

The human brain is hard wired with specific fear circuits to scan for, and respond to, threats and dangers. When fear runs amok it can cause untold damage - both physically and mentally. Neuroscientific understandings of the neurobiology of fear underline the importance of calming the stressed and anxious brain.

Tips on how to deal with executive Stress

- Build periods of relaxation built into each and every working day.
- Taking a break every 90 minutes; the brain can only sustain focus for 90 minutes.
- Taking a 30 minute walk every day. Walking has psychological and physical benefits. Walking reduces anxiety and lifts mood.
- Deep breathing exercises taught in meditation, yoga and relaxation training drive increased heart rate levels down, reduce elevated blood pressure, and calm nerves.
- Mindfulness training - uses meditation, relaxation, and breathing to reduce and manage anxiety.
- Build HOT working relationships.
- H = Honest
- O = Open
- T = Trustworthy

Joan Kingsley is an organizational psychotherapist and, along with Dr Sue Paterson and Dr Paul Brown, co-author of a new book about how to eradicate fear in the workplace named *The Fear-Free Organization: Vital Insights from Neuroscience to transform your business culture* (see the [website](#) for more information) - published by Kogan Page.



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