How the Brain Responds to Social Stress in the Workplace

Social stress is the brain and body’s natural response to threatening or undesired interpersonal interactions or the social environment in general.

Examples of Social Stress at Work
- Walking into any new client site
- Giving/getting performance feedback
- Organization change efforts
- Boss micromanaging
- Peer bullying
- Major presentation or workshop
- Giving bad news to higher ups or investors
- Hostile tone e-mails
- Ignoring

Effects of Social Stress at Work
- ↓ memory
- ↓ linguistic skills
- ↓ quantitative reasoning
- ↓ fluid intelligence
- ↓ higher level thinking
- ↓ focus
- ↓ creativity
- ↑ risk of depression
- ↑ sick days
- ↑ cardiovascular and immune diseases

Social stress in the workplace is likely contributing to a variety of work-related emotional and physical distress, as well as work disengagement.

- CDC: 80% of our medical expenditures are stress-related.

- Gallop (2013): 70% of employees not engaged or actively disengaged on the job.

- Monster.com survey (2013):
  - 60 percent of workers from around the world say they experience stress in the workplace daily.
  - 81% of working adults want to find a new job. Among the job seekers, 97% say respect and appreciation among the highest desired traits of a new job.
An understanding of key principles about the brain’s functioning demonstrates why many common workplace processes and practices are not brain-healthy.

The brain is a social organ

The brain always seeks to minimize threat and maximize reward

Neuroplasticity: the brain continues to grow and change throughout our lives

Emotions hijack cognitive processes

Revitalizing with the brain in mind acknowledges that time is not linear for the brain. The brain is capable of experiencing the past and future with the same biochemical processes and emotional responses that it experiences the present. Important cognitive and psychological activities are occurring across time.
Revitalizing with the Brain in Mind: Taking Care of the Self

- **Frame shift.** A frame shift or reinterpreting means checking one’s perceptions and taking on a new view point. By putting yourself in another’s shoes or finding humor in a tough situation at work, threat is minimized and negative emotions dwindle (Rock, 2009).

- **STOP.** An emotional labeling practice to stop the biochemical cascade of the emotional hijack. The steps are: **S:** stop what you are doing; **T:** take a mindful breath; **O:** observe your body and feelings; **P:** proceed. (marc.ucla.edu)

- **Engage the brain-body connections.** Visualizing with the brain in mind involves developing the skill to engage your body and your senses when you visualize. Imaging an action is equivalent to actually carrying it out because the visualization activates the same areas in the brain (Knauper).

- **Create micro-moments.** A micro-moment is a social connection between two people, with open sharing of thoughts and feelings with ease. Because the brain is a social organ, seek out opportunities in your workplace to connect with others in an open and mindful way (Fredrickson).

- **Document the positive.** To counter-act the brain’s negativity bias, reinforce positive experiences through a gratitude journal (Seligman, 2011), an accomplishments list (Cameron), or a log of your daily social connections (Fredrickson). Spend 5-10 minutes every evening remembering what went well that day and make a list of the top few things. You don’t need to journal about them; merely documenting is enough.

- **Take care of your body.** Because the brain and body are connected and share the same energy resources, revitalizing depends on taking care of your body. Eating well, exercising and sleeping are three of the best ways to keep the brain healthy. (Medina, Norden)

- **Learn something new.** Neuroplasticity shows that learning occurs throughout life. Taking on a new body of knowledge can make you feel more engaged and creative at work (Rock).

- **Practice mindfulness.** Research has shown a variety of brain-healthy outcomes among people who regularly practice mindfulness-based meditation (Rock, Siegel).

- **Reduce multi-tasking.** The brain works at its best when focusing on one thing exclusively, so eliminate the bad habit of multi-tasking. You can get as much – or more – done by doing one thing at a time, disconnecting from e-mail, prioritizing, and setting a schedule with your peak times in mind. (Rock)
Revitalizing with the Brain in Mind: Leaders Taking Care of Others

- **Assist your staff with strategic sensemaking.** The brain will naturally seek to make sense out of ambiguous, confusing or threatening situations. Managers can engage their teams in conversations that interpret organizational actions and create group-level meaning (Rouleau & Balogun).

- **Allow voice in the workplace.** Leaders can assume that employees have prior experiences of being threatened in the workplace and will seek to minimize threat by keeping quiet or “going along to get along.” Counteract this by setting and modeling workplace norms that allow for open discussion of opinions and dissent. (Amabile & Kramer, Detert & Edmondson).

- **Be a prospective orchestrator.** The brain is constantly simulating the future, considering multiple possible pathways in light of complex and ever-changing dynamics. Leaders who take the role of the prospective orchestrator not only develop their skill of accurately predicting the future but also by sharing their prospections with others to move groups towards a common future state (Seligman, 2013).

- **Encourage collaborative teams.** When you interconnect your thoughts, emotions and goals with other people, you release oxytocin, a pleasurable chemical that is the neurochemistry of safe connectivity. Collaborative teams also set up the environment where insights can be made more easily. (Amabile & Kramer, Rock, 2008)

- **Minimize situations of social pain.** Social pain occurs from being excluded from desired relationships or being devalued by desired relationship partners or groups. Leaders must be vigilant against in-group/out-group preferences, cliques and bullying in the workplace (Eisenberger & Lieberman).

- **Maintain autonomy.** Avoid micro-managing and let people solve their own problems (Rock, 2008).

- **Give feedback so the brain can hear it.** Best practices asking permission, providing a clear context for the conversation, generating employee insights, and engaging the employee through skillful questioning to improve status, certainty and autonomy (Dixon, Rock & Ochsner, 2010; Whiting, et al., 2012).

- **Imagine conversations with positive outcomes.** Mentally rehearsing difficult work-related conversations with a positive frame of mind can help leaders develop more conversational options and say things in a more diplomatic fashion. When rehearsing the conversation, imagine the best case scenario, and all the words, gestures, and feelings that go along with it (Thompson, Honeycutt).

- **Master the art of facilitation.** Resist the urge to be the driver of a meeting so that team status is built and autonomy is protected. Let participants set meeting
expectations, add to agendas, actively contribute their ideas, and suggest stretch goals (Whiting, et al., 2012).

**Revitalizing with the Brain in Mind: Brain-Health Organizations**

- **Tell stories.** The brain is more likely to remember stories, especially ones that have an emotional hook. Tell the organization’s story in ways that generate positive emotions and a feeling of belonging to a larger purpose (Cozolino, 2013; Sapolsky, 2010).

- **Keep workplaces emotionally safe.** The brain responds to social stress the same way as physical stress, by activating the survival response which increases fear, anger and anxiety. Organizations must implement and enforce policies that foster productive interchanges and disallow threatening social behaviors such as bullying (Rock, Liu).

- **Common vision and goals.** Engaging employees in the process generating common vision and goals creates social connections and increases neuroplasticity. Remember to use “we” language when discussion the organizational vision and goals (Rock).

- **Manage change well.** Keep the brain in mind when designing organization change activities. A brain-healthy approach to organization change allows employees to maintain status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness (Rock, 2008).

- **Cultivate Social Inclusion.** A sense of inclusion in a larger community and uplifting interpersonal interactions can have positive effects on individual performance and engagement. Design organizational culture and work processes that facilitate social inclusion and affiliation (Amabile & Kramer, Eisenberger & Lieberman).
References & Resources


