Personal support 5: Stress and time management for people with multiple responsibilities

Anita Houghton advises on how to manage your time and reduce the stresses in your life

There is no one who cannot benefit from some concentrated effort on reviewing, organising, and planning their lives. The average medical life is so busy there is rarely time to stop and take stock, let alone make careful plans for how to spend your time. And some people not only run a hectic work life, but they rush home in the evenings to relieve day nurseries, nannies, or childminders of equally tired children, who just can’t wait to put their parents through their paces. And intelligent people rarely have one gift, so doctors are often putting their energies into activities outside work—sport, voluntary work, drama, painting, or music. You name it and you’ll find doctors doing it.

If you can help your co-mentor to make their lives more manageable, get more done, and still have time to relax and enjoy themselves, they will be eternally grateful.

**Diagnosis**

For all of us certain aspects of life are especially likely to cause us stress, and this will be related to our personal style and preferences. Some things, however, cause stress to almost everyone. Box 1 lists a few of these.

To tackle any problem you need to understand its nature, so it makes sense to find out what your stressors are, which you can eliminate, and which you can ameliorate.

This article gives just a few of the many techniques that are available for just that. Try one or more of them out with your co-mentor.

**Do a stress diary**

For one week write a daily diary of all your main activities, and document your stress levels in relation to each. You can do this by giving a score 1-10, where 1 is blissfully calm and 10 is extremely stressed. Seeing which ones create the most stress for you can be interesting, as sometimes sources of stress turn out to be quite different from the ones you expect (see box 2 for an example).

**Work out what’s important to you and what brings you satisfaction**

Something that reliably reduces our quality of life is doing things that are out of line with what we value and enjoy in life. A quick way of finding out what is important to you is by answering the following questions:

- What would you do if you won the lottery?
- What would you do if you had six months to live?
- Suppose you had a good long life, what would you do if you won the lottery, for example, or had only six months to live, what’s stopping you doing those things now?
- And if you spend most of your time at work doing things you don’t enjoy, how could you change that?

**Treatment**

Just working out the root of the problem will often generate obvious solutions, but you and your co-mentor might like to try one or more of the following techniques for getting your lives under control.

**Turning mountains into molehills**

If you’re feeling overwhelmed with all you have to do, sit down and make a list of absolutely everything you think you have to do within the next month.

Then go through your list and for each one ask, “What will happen if I do this, and what will happen if I don’t?” If there are no obvious benefits from doing something, or if nothing much will happen if you don’t do something, why not cross it off your list? Or decide to do it less often?

For the things that are important that have to be done, ask yourself, “Does it have to be me who does it?” Delegating can be hard. An unwillingness to delegate is one of the most frequent criticisms of leaders and it is also responsible for a great deal of stress.

There are two main reasons for people not wishing to delegate: they don’t trust the other person to do the job properly, or the role is an important part of their sense of self worth, or both. I have often heard women say that they can’t leave their children with their husbands for any length of time because they wouldn’t be able to cope. In men it is more likely to be “the office or hospital will fall down without me” syndrome. Neither is true—the men will cope, and the hospital won’t fall down.

The price people pay for refusing to delegate is stress, and lots of it. What they have decided, whether consciously or subconsciously, is that the pleasure of thinking they are the only person in the world who can do a job properly is more important than the overall quality of their life.

For the items that you really do need to do, and which nobody else can do, the secret lies in scheduling (box 3).

**Finally, a little maths**

If x represents the things that cause you stress and y represents the things that enhance your life, then for the next week do two fewer of the things that cause you stress and one more of the things that enhance your life. Repeat as necessary.

\[ (x-2) + (y+1) = \text{quality of life} \]

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