

Stress in the Workplace

With few exceptions, physical violence is preceded by verbal violence. This article will attempt to show the link between stress and verbal violence in the workplace.

In October 2003, Health Canada released the report¹ it commissioned from Dr. Linda Duxbury, Professor with the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University, and Dr. Chris Higgins, Professor with the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario. The report is entitled “Work-Life Conflict in Canada in the New Millenium: A Status Report” and is the result of their surveying employees in 100 Canadian companies that had 500 or more employees. 31,571 people responded to their survey.

Four of the factors they examined were perceived stress, depressed mood, burnout, and life satisfaction. For purposes of the study, each was defined as follows:

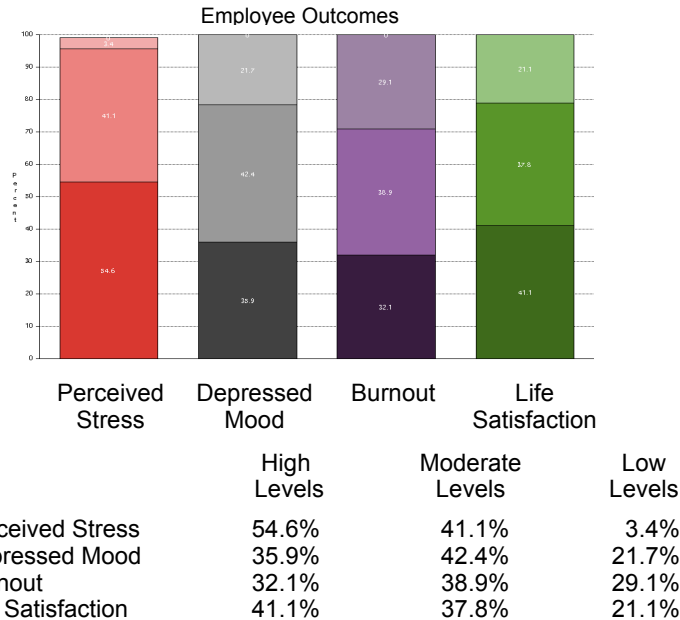
Perceived stress refers to the extent to which one perceives one’s situation to be unpredictable, uncontrollable and burdensome.²

Depressed mood is a state characterized by low energy and persistent feelings of helplessness and hopelessness (Duxbury & Higgins,1998)³

Burnout, as defined in this study, is a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion which is often found in those who are involved with people in emotionally demanding situations.⁴

Life satisfaction provides an assessment of an individual’s overall sense of well-being (emotional physical, social).⁵

When Drs. Duxbury and Higgins studied those 31,571 responses for those factors, they found:⁶

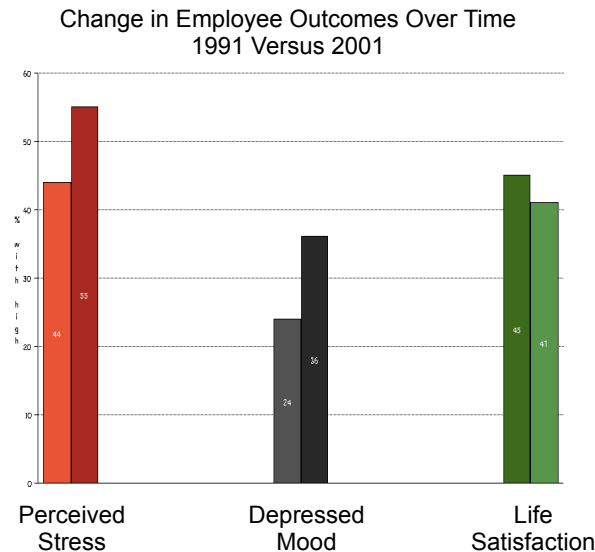


I would suggest that 55% of employees being under high stress levels and 41% under moderate stress levels is significant. When I attempt to show the connection between stress and verbal violence later in this article, the 55% high stress level and the 41% moderate stress level are significant.

I would suggest that we need to be concerned that 55% are under high stress levels, 36% are highly depressed, and 32% are highly burned out. This is not a healthy picture. We also need to pay attention to the 41% who are under moderate stress levels, 42% moderately depressed, and the 39% in moderate burnout.

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When Drs. Duxbury and Higgins compared the highest levels of perceived stress, depressed mood and life satisfaction to the results of a comparable study done in 1991, they found:⁷



Perceived stress increased to 55% from 44%.
Depressed mood increased from 24% to 36%.
Life satisfaction decreased from 45% to 41%.

We are – in fact – stressed out!

STRESSORS

Common stressors include noise, crowding, isolation, hunger, danger, infection, imagining a threat, or remembering a dangerous event. Following is a list of work factors that are known to contribute to stress:⁸

Physical conditions

- noise
- poor lighting
- overcrowding
- extremes of temperature
- toxic fumes and chemicals
- badly designed furniture
- poor maintenance
- dangerous equipment
- working with video display units

Balancing the demands of home and work

- poor childcare facilities
- long hours
- need to take time off to care for sick children and other dependents

Relationships in organization

- unsympathetic management
- lack of support
- harrassment (sexism, racism, homophobia, ageism)
- customer/client complaints
- poor communication
- social isolation at work

Job design

- work overload
- machine-paced work
- surveillance and monitoring by computers, videos and listening devices
- repetitive work
- time pressures
- responsibility for lives
- uncertain responsibilities
- excessive requirements
- introduction of new technology
- underuse of skills

Work organization and conditions

- low pay
- lone working
- lack of job security
- shiftwork
- nightwork
- lack of control over work
- continuous changes in work organization
- lack of participation in decision-making
- financial constraints
- rigid hierarchy
- harsh disciplinary procedures
- inadequate staffing
- overpromotion
- underpromotion

There is one category of stressor has been overlooked: **words**. While it is well recognized that poor communication within an organization negatively affects that organization's performance and hence, its bottom line, it seems that how words work – how language works and how our brains process information – are either overlooked or given only cursory attention. That's the focus of FistFree Language™.

When we hear a word, our brain automatically attaches meaning to that word. A large component of that meaning is highly individualistic: we each have our own memories of experiences involving words. For example, in my own case, the word "helicopter" includes memories associated with my father's accidental death while flying a helicopter. It is an understatement to say that my father's untimely death was a traumatic experience for all members of my family. In my case, my meaning for "helicopter" includes "death" and "danger", both of trigger the stress response. So everytime I heard the word "helicopter" (or see a picture of a helicopter, for that matter), there is a little *ping* of a stress response. Over the years, the *ping* has diminished, but I can still faintly hear and feel it when I hear the word "helicopter".

Words can and do trigger our stress response to a greater or lesser extent, even in situations that are not, in themselves, stressful.

THE STRESS RESPONSE

When we are subjected to a stressor, certain automatic reactions happen. The degree of the stress response depends upon the significance and strength of the stressor as well as upon the sensitivity, personality and personal history of the individual.

Stressors trigger the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) system which causes stress hormones to be released. The key stress hormones are cortisol, norepinephrine (noradrenaline), epinephrine (adrenaline) and dopamine.

In response to danger, your heart rate and blood pressure increase in order to get that blood flowing to the muscles in your extremities and away from your skin. The cortisol helps shut down your digestive system. Your blood is diverted away from your skin and your gut to your extremities. You need your legs and feet for running, your arms and hands for fighting, and

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your brain for keeping all your defensive responses working. Your skin feels cool, clammy and sweaty. Your scalp tightens so your hair seems to stand on end.

You breathe more rapidly and stronger, because you need to get more oxygen to your muscles and brain. Your spleen discharges more red blood cells to carry that extra oxygen and more white blood cells for deployment to sites most likely to be injured or infected: your skin, the bone marrow, and the lymph nodes. Cortisol dampens other parts of your immune system.

Fluids are diverted from non-essential areas. Your mouth gets dry. Stress can cause spasms of the throat muscles, making it difficult to swallow.

Neurotransmitters signal the amygdala and hippocampus to store the emotionally loaded experience in long-term memory. Epinephrine (adrenaline) especially makes the memory of a traumatic event a very strong, permanent memory.

The catecholamines (norepinephrine, epinephrine and dopamine) suppress activity in areas of the neocortex (at the front of the brain) concerned with short-term memory, concentration, inhibition and rational thought. Your ability to handle complex social or intellectual tasks and behaviours is diminished.

Cortisol interferes with verbal declarative memory. In other words, cortisol makes it difficult for you to remember details, words and phone numbers. Cortisol also reduces your attention and focus. Instead of thinking along 4 or 5 lines simultaneously, as you do normally when not under stress, you can only think along 2 or 3 lines, depending upon the degree of stress. When you are in danger, you need to have your total attention on that one thing that is creating problems for you.

When we are under stress, we perceive that our thinking is sharper and more focussed. It is certainly more focussed but probably not sharper, since you can think of only 1, 2 or 3 lines instead of 5 and your short-term memory, concentration and rational thought capacities are reduced. A person who keeps insisting on dealing with only one item may be highly focussed, but that focus is probably the result of stress and may be counterproductive to resolving the problem. If you've ever tried to get a highly stressed person off their pet peeve or their hobby horse, you can appreciate the strength of the effects that cortisol has.

Given that the stress hormones reduce your short-term memory, concentration, rational thought and abilities to think along multiple lines of thought and to handle complex intellectual tasks, it becomes apparent that your ability to process language is also reduced.

With a dry mouth, tense throat muscles that control your vocal cords and possibly throat muscles in spasm, it becomes difficult to speak. When you do speak, because your throat muscles are tense, the pitch of your voice will be raised. Because you are breathing harder, your voice will be louder.

The person you're speaking to hears a loud voice. In a higher pitch. And sounding slightly tense. Sounds like you could be angry. And that will trigger a defensive response and a stress response in them. The vicious circle begins.

VERBAL ATTACKS

One of the by-products of a stressful environment is toxic language. Remember that the stress hormones interfere with your rational thinking processes. Cortisol makes it difficult for you to remember words, details and phone numbers. And the catecholamines negatively affect your ability to handle complex social or intellectual tasks and behaviours. This is frustrating. And your language behaviour deteriorates. Swearing is almost automatic. Profanities slip off your tongue.

Verbal Attacks are the hallmark of the toxic language environment. You will observe belittling, badgering, smart remarks, off-colour or cruel jokes, name-calling, obscenities, demeaning comments, put downs, and even yelling.

Verbal Attacks cover a wide range of hostile language behaviour, from the inadvertent slip-of-the-lip Malpractice of the Mouth through to vicious Verbal Violence in which the speaker deliberately and intentionally inflicts damage on the victim to destroy them.

With Malpractice of the Mouth, there is often no intention to even say the words used. They just slip out. If the words are intentionally spoken, there is no comprehension that they

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could actually hurt someone. The harm is an unintended consequence of the words that were spoken and/or the way they were spoken.

Verbal Abuse is “language that does harm and is not an accident”.⁹ Sometimes, words are used as a tool to manipulate or control another person in order to achieve a desired goal. The Verbal Abuse is deliberate; the harm is a by-product. The speaker may be wilfully blind and deaf to the harm inflicted, because they are focussed on the end they want to achieve. At other times, the main goal is to hurt the victim. With Verbal Abuse,

With Verbal Violence, words are deliberately chosen because of the harm they will inflict. The whole purpose of the exercise is to inflict punishment or otherwise harm the other person.

Both Verbal Abuse and Verbal Violence are intentional. Both seek confrontation.

WHY VERBAL ATTACKS ARE USED

Verbal attacks are used because they work. In most cases, we have been taught – at home and in school – the best, if not the only, way to handle disagreement is with verbal confrontation.¹⁰ Dr. Deborah Tannen in her book, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*,¹¹ shows how the ARGUMENT and WAR metaphors pervade our thinking and affect all facets of our society. In our culture, we tend to approach all things as having two opposing sides, whether it is a news story or getting a product into the marketplace. The Argument Culture also explains our tendency to thrash things out when trying to resolve problems, which is often a counterproductive approach.

Consideration also needs to be given to those who use verbal attacks as a way of grabbing your attention.

These factors and the context within which a Verbal Attack is made need to be taken into consideration when formulating your response.

RESPONDING TO VERBAL ATTACKS

Direct Verbal Attacks are easy to spot: “You lazy dog.” “That wasn’t too bright, now was it?” The Verbal Attack Patterns Dr. Elgin identified are easy to mistake for a simple use of guilt: “If you r-e-a-l-l-y cared about your health, you’d quit smoking.” When your doctor said that, you were surprised how quickly the two of you got into an argument. And yet, you’d made the appointment specifically to discuss that new medication you’d heard about that really helps people quit smoking!

Malpractice of the Mouth. Verbal Abuse. Verbal Attack Patterns. Verbal Violence. How do you handle these? Particularly when they cause a stress reaction in you? There are definitely sound, proven techniques that will help you.

It is important that when you respond to a Verbal Attack, you address the real issue, not just what appears on the surface, and that you do so in a manner that demonstrates respect for the other person.

If the person who is verbally attacking you is angry, your first priority is to convey to that person that you recognize they’re angry. Given the array and quantity of stress hormones that have flooded the angry person’s brain, it can be a challenge to convey that message without inflaming the situation further.

SUMMARY

When 55% of employees are under high levels of stress, the stress hormones will negatively affect their comprehension and speech. And the 41% who are under moderate levels of stress will also find their comprehension has been reduced. People under stress will often use basic language strategies that produce immediate, observable reactions, such as those produced by profanities and Verbal Attacks. Unfortunately, the use of such toxic language only creates further stress in those who are exposed to it.

FistFree Language™ can help reduce the toxic language in your work environment. Your employees will benefit from reduced stress levels, and there will be fewer

miscommunications. The bottom line will improve because the costs associated with employee illness, turnover, and warranty claims for mistakes will be reduced.

Anne E. McTavish, B.A., LL.B.
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ENDNOTES

1. Dr. Linda Duxbury and Dr. Chris Higgins, "Work-Life Conflict in Canada in the New Millennium: A Status Report" (Health Canada, October 2003) rpt_2_e.pdf found at www.hc-sc.gc.ca. Drs. Duxbury and Higgins surveyed 100 Canadian companies with 500+ employees, and 31,571 people responded to their survey.
2. *Ibid.* at p. 50.
3. *Ibid.* at p. 52.
4. *Ibid.*, at p. 53.
5. *Ibid.*, at p. 54.
6. Source: "Work-Life Conflict in Canada", Figure 13 on p. 51.
7. Source: *Ibid.*, Figure 14 on p. 51.
8. The list cited is from a publication entitled, "Hard Labour", which can be found at www.lhc.org.uk/members/pubs/books/hl/hl02_02.htm.
9. Dr. Suzette Haden Elgin, *Training Manual For The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense (Level One & Two)*, (Huntsville, Arkansas: Ozark Center for Language Studies, 1990), p. 1.
10. Dr. Elgin articulates this throughout all her writings on the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense. For example, the section entitled, "One Small Step - The Connection Between Verbal Violence and Physical Violence" in her book, *Staying Well with the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* (New York: MJF Books, 1990) at p. 115.
11. Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990).

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