

# The Sand Paper

Spring 2011



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## If You Don't Take Care of Yourself, Who Will?

by Dr. Gretchen Stein, President & CEO of The Sand Creek Group.

When being interviewed for a new job or a promotion, I was always prepared for the two standard questions "What are your greatest strengths?" and "What is your greatest weakness?" Easy to answer, I addressed the first question with a humble but sincere rendition of my skills and talents, and then answered the second question this way: "I am a workaholic". It is a rare employer who didn't want an employee whose fault was that she worked too much or was too dedicated to the job.

We now know that lack of balance in one's life leads to many problems including stress and burnout, lack of productivity, relationship problems, and many health concerns. It is a rare employer who will tell you to slow down and not work so hard. It is also the rare partner or family member who will tell you to do less for them. It is human nature for people to take all we

are willing to give to them. Knowing we are out of balance must come from within us. Whenever our schedules become disproportionate, our energy drops. Lowered energy creates the illusion that there isn't enough time in the day, so a vicious cycle of time limitation ensues. If you feel overwhelmed by your responsibilities, stop and assess your balance between work, play, spirituality, exercise, and relationships.

This quarter's Sand Paper has much information to help you readjust your life balance. As we age, life places us in the position of caregiving for our loved ones. The first article helps you reevaluate the many decisions that go into family caregiving. The second article helps us learn more ways to fight off stress as we ward off illness. There is an insightful article for supervisors on working with defensive employee behavior and a short but sweet article that talks



about the importance of exercise, just a little each day, as a way of improving our mood and feelings of depression.

It is time to take better care of you. If you can't do it for yourself, just remember there are lots of people around you who are counting on you to stay healthy and happy.

If finding balance is difficult for you, please call your EAP and talk to a counselor who can help you find time for all the important things in your life...including you.



## Still Managing Your Life While Being a Caregiver



*“Being a family caregiver is never easy, but how you approach it – with a glass half full or half empty – is a choice you can consciously make.”*

People often become caregivers suddenly, without warning: a husband is diagnosed with cancer, a child is in a car accident, a parent has a stroke. At other times, caregiving may creep up on you: you know that Mom is forgetting things, and you slowly start taking on some administrative tasks and calling more often until one day you realize that Mom no longer has the capacity to live on her own.

Regardless of how you became a family caregiver, it most likely included elements of surprise and emotionally demanding moments. In the chaos that follows a moment of crisis, amid the reorientation of your schedule, the search for resources, fears about the future and day to day demands, you may not have had the chance to stop and think about what has happened. That means that you probably haven't had a chance to devise a plan that takes into account everyone's health and well-being, including your own. Many of us just go on automatic pilot after a crisis and start to do, and do, and do.

Somewhere along the way, however, it is vitally important that you stop, take a breath, and try to gain some control over the situation rather than letting the situation control you. Even though you don't have the power to control everything that happens to you or your loved ones, you do have the power to make active choices about how you are going to deal with the caregiving circumstances of your life.

One of the most important choices to make is how you are going to approach life from here on out. Being a family caregiver is never easy, but how you approach it – with a glass half full or half empty – is a choice you can consciously make. This decision sets the stage for everything else that you do. Particularly with long-standing caregiving there may be many ups and downs of attitude. Having a way to catch yourself on the downward slide of negativity is so

important, and it can be helpful to have someone in your life that can help you with feedback about your attitude.

Knowing your own strengths and limitations is also part of the equation. There may be physical as well as emotional limitations that you have at any given time. Knowing this about yourself allows you to set boundaries of saying “no” as well as knowing when to ask for help. Both of these behaviors are hard for many family caregivers until they are at a point of total exhaustion.

Another helpful component is to take the time to try and be proactive as much as possible. This means looking ahead and trying to plan to the extent that it is possible. One example of that is making sure that you and your loved ones have the legal paperwork necessary for making critical medical decisions. It's not easy to have these conversations, but ultimately having this information in place is a stress reducer for everyone.

One other proactive element is to do the research to learn as much as you can about the illness or condition that exists with your loved one. Having greater knowledge is a powerful tool in conversing with medical professionals. Using the internet is a great way to gather information. This is also an opportunity to ask for help from someone who is willing to do the research.

Having as positive an attitude as possible, understanding your strengths and limitations, being proactive, and gathering information are just a few of the ways to try and take control of a situation that can feel so out of control. Also, having a place to talk about what has changed, its impact on you, and what you want to do differently can also be extremely helpful. Consider using Sand Creek EAP as that resource in your life.

(Information excerpted from "Caregivers: Choosing to Take Charge of Your Life." National Family Caregivers Association 2011)

# How to Fight Stress and Ward off Illness

## What you can do to protect yourself:

Today scientists are looking at how stress makes people ill and what can be done to help prevent illness caused by stress. "This new science is forcing the medical community to take more seriously the popular notions of the mind-body connection," says Esther M. Sternberg, M.D., Director of the Integrative Neural Immune Program at the National Institute of Mental Health. "In response to stressful events, our bodies pump out hormones. These hormones aren't necessarily harmful and can be very useful", says Dir. Sternberg, author of *The Balance Within: The Science Connecting Health and Emotions*. "The problem is when the stress response goes on for too long," she says. "That's when you get sick. Hormones weaken the immune system's ability to fight disease."

## The dangers of chronic stress:

Unhealthy levels of stress come in many guises. You may have to take care of a chronically ill person or you may be stressed from being in constant pain. Work related issues, relationship or family problems as well as financial difficulties can generate chronic stress. Severe chronic stress can damage our bodies in many ways. "Chronic stress has been shown to prolong wound healing, decrease response to vaccines and increase the frequency and severity of upper respiratory infections," Dr. Sternberg says.

Stress also can aggravate existing health problems. It can worsen angina, disturb heart rhythm, raise blood pressure and lead to stroke. It can spark asthma and may affect the digestive system, making ulcers, acid reflux or irritable bowel problems worse. Stress can play havoc with your nerves and muscles, causing backaches, tension headaches or migraines.

## Take yourself offline:

"If you feel stressed all the time, you need to take yourself 'offline,'" Dr. Sternberg urges. "We reboot our computers when they are overworked, but we don't seem to do it with our bodies. If you're exhausted from constantly working on deadline or care giving, take a vacation – they're not luxuries, they're physical necessities. Find a place of peace where you can stop, look and listen"

If vacations are out of the question, Dr. Sternberg suggests meditation to rest body and mind. "Evidence shows that meditation bolsters immune function by reducing stress hormones that dampen immune cells' ability to fight infection" she says. Exercise is a great way to improve your mood and it changes the body's stress response, she says. If starting an exercise program seems too hard, then go slowly, she advises. "A few minutes are better than no minutes – you can gradually increase how much you exercise every day. You



don't need to go jogging – walking has significant health benefits"

Yoga helps many people relax, while others find peace of mind through prayer, music, reading or art. "We need to find our place of peace and try to go there every day," she says.

Getting enough sleep is very important for protection, Dr. Sternberg emphasizes. "Lack of sleep can change moods, cause irritability, weight gain, inability to perform and poor memory."

Because it takes energy to change behavior, sometimes we stick with our habits and routines that keep our stress level high just because we don't believe we have the energy to make a change. If you are concerned about the chronic nature of your stress level and would like help in looking for different coping options or a different way of responding, consider giving Sand Creek a call. There are so many aspects of life that we cannot control, but how we respond to life's events is one choice we get to make.

Content adapted from Vimont, C. (2008, Winter). How to fight stress and ward off illness. *NIH MedlinePlus: The Magazine*, 3(1). Retrieved February 16, 2011, from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/>

# Supervising Employees with Defensive Behaviors

by Diane Johnson, MSW, LISW, CEAP.

One of the things that defensive behaviors can accomplish, when they are effective, is that they result in pushing someone away, avoiding responsibility or diverting attention elsewhere. All of us have some style of defensiveness that we may use when we feel criticized, our back is against the wall, or we feel challenged. The behaviors and intensity vary widely and may include such things as tears, silence, sarcasm, blame, anger, threats, denial, or minimizing. Some of us rarely become defensive and others live with defensiveness as a way of life. We also each have certain defensive behaviors which may bother us more than others. The result of this is that we can end up avoiding an employee who has a defensive style that we don't know what to do with or we consistently get hooked and escalate with our own behavior. Either way, the result can be a challenge to supervise certain employees because of their response and then your own discomfort. Keep in mind that the more you back off from giving the feedback or buy into the employee's defensive style, the more reinforcing it is of their defensive behavior.

A large number of the calls that we get from supervisors who are having difficulty with an employee involve a defensive behavior that the supervisor may not even be aware of. They just know they are feeling ineffective as a supervisor and a situation doesn't seem to be getting better in spite of their efforts. **One of the first steps is to recognize what the behavior is that is problematic for you and how you get hooked by the employee's communication style.** Think about a time when you felt like you lost control of a meeting with an employee and came away knowing that you didn't say what you wanted to say. Consider what the employee's behavior was and how you responded.

**The second step is to take a deep breath, slow your own reaction down, and be prepared to comment**

**directly on the defensive behavior.** An example of this would be having an employee who is sitting in silence while you give feedback about a performance concern. Because their silence makes you nervous, you talk more and more, and at the end of the meeting you feel stressed, don't know how the employee was responding to the feedback, and dread your next conversation with this employee. An alternative response when you recognize the silence would be to say to the employee, "I don't know how to interpret your silence. Because I want to hear your thoughts and reactions to my feedback, I would like us to end our meeting at this point but let's meet again later today. Give yourself some time to think about this, and when we meet again, I would like you to comment on your reaction to my feedback and your thoughts about addressing the behavior." The goal is to acknowledge directly whatever the defensive behavior is and not get emotionally hooked and derailed from your own message.

It is easier said than done and often takes some practice and reassurance about how to intervene. It also helps to anticipate what the employee's reaction may be, based on past behavior, and use that information to strategize a different response. Some supervisors even write down a few key words and have the paper in front of them to help them stay on track with their own new behaviors. These can be tough situations to sort out on your own and it is a great use of the EAP to consult about challenging communication. There is no cost to you and your call to us is confidential. We have had the opportunity to talk with hundreds of supervisors from a variety of settings over the years and value being able to share the learning as well as support you in your effort to be as effective a supervisor as possible.

## You Don't Have to Knock Yourself Out to Feel Good

Couch potatoes, take heart. You don't have to exercise until you drop to reap mental benefits.

Psychologists studying how exercise affects mental health are discovering that how much or how intensely you exercise isn't the key factor in relieving depression and anxiety. In fact, they say that less is more, or at least just as good.

In one study, depressed people used stationary bicycles. Participants'

depression declined, even when they weren't biking all that hard.

In another study, people reported how they felt after a 10-minute brisk walk or a 45-minute workout. Those working out for 45 minutes said they were less tense and that their energy at first declined and later rebounded. Those who just walked said that they felt less tense, and they also reported more energy right away.

**Source:** The American Psychological Association (APA) Help Center: <http://www.apahelpcenter.org>

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## Dear Sandy,

I am having trouble with three of my co-workers who appear to not care about when they get here, how long their lunch is, or how much time they spend on the internet. We are a small office and it is impossible to not notice what everyone else is doing. I try to not focus on it but it is really, really bugging me, and I am sick of no one seeming to care but me. In this time of tight budgets and too much work, I know that the three of them could easily be doing more to contribute to the work load than they are and bottom line, it just isn't fair! I have talked with my supervisor but nothing has changed and I know that I have started to have a bad attitude and am more withdrawn. Help! What are my options do you think?

– Frustrated

## Dear Frustrated,

One of the things that we hear about a lot at EAP is the difficulty of employees having too much information about what co-workers are doing or not doing. It seems easy to have that information particularly when space is limited and you can't help seeing or overhearing conversations. One of the common reasons conflict occurs at work is the difference in values about how work gets done or how time gets managed. It sounds like you definitely started down the right path by speaking with your supervisor about your frustration. You don't mention how recently that was. One of the things I know from talking with a lot of supervisors is that they may be intervening in employee situations but it may not be evident to others. A suggestion is to go back to your supervisor, let him or her know that you understand you can't know what they are doing with other employees but the behavior, from your perspective, continues. Then identify what the impact is on you. It is OK to ask if your expectation of different behaviors is realistic. If your supervisor doesn't have a problem with their behaviors, then it is a different issue. The goal in these kinds of situations is to try and stay focused on the parts that you

have control over and gather information about what may change and what may not change. If it isn't going to change and there is no accountability for the behavior, or your supervisor's perspective is different than yours, then the challenge becomes how to live with it, alter your behavior, or decide to take your concern to a different level. I would encourage you to speak with your supervisor again about your frustration. Ask for help and ideas in what you might be able to do differently and whether or not you can expect anything to be different with your co-workers. Good luck and if you would like to talk more about this, give us a call at EAP.

*Sandy*



Send your inquiries for Sandy

to [info@sandcreekeap.com](mailto:info@sandcreekeap.com).

We may not be able to

publish all inquiries, but all

will be responded to via

email. Thank you.

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## About Our Organization

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offers free, confidential assessment, short-term counseling, referral, and follow up. Professional counselors are experienced in helping people identify and find solutions to personal issues such as:

- Relationships
- Parent/Child Issues
- Substance Abuse
- Gambling
- Loss and Grief
- Financial Concerns
- Depression
- Job Stress
- Childcare or Eldercare
- And Other Life Concerns

Sand Creek EAP is your program. It's completely confidential, provided at no cost to you, and available to both you and your household family members. When you need help with personal concerns, we're the place to turn.

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