

CareerSuccess

for administrative & office professionals

Volume 28 Issue 2

**Own
yourself**
*with
pride*

Communication
**tools for your
boss**

**corporate
gifts made
easy**

*Handling
Multiple
Managers*

PLUS

PA of the Year
Annual PA Summit
Review

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MICHELLE LONGMAN

has worked as a PA for over 25 years and is an outspoken advocate about the importance of

a natural balance between work and family life.



S O N J A

BOHLANDER is the Personal Assistant to the Senior Vice President of Sasol's Sasolburg Operations, as

well as to the Vice President Site Services. She has been with Sasol for 35 years and has more than 30 years of senior secretarial experience. Sonja was a finalist of the PA of the Year in 2012 and is the chairperson of PAFSA's President's Committee.



CHARLOTTE MASSEY-HICKS

was a finalist in the 2011 PAOTY competition. She has 12 years' experience as

an Executive PA and obtained her Certified Administrative Professional Certificate (CAP) in 2006. Charlotte joined Digital Identity and Unique Impressions in 2012 where she runs the Admin for both companies. Digital Identity specialises in Corporate Gifting and Branding and Unique Impressions are Wallpaper Specialists.



ESMÉ VAN DER MERWE

is the Executive Assistant to the CEO of Exxaro Resources Limited and has been in the secretarial

profession since 1981. Career highlights include working in the government office during the CODESA I and II negotiations towards a new constitutional dispensation in South Africa, being President of the Johannesburg Chapter at Large of the International Association of Administrative Professionals since its inception in February 2010 to June 2012, being a judge in the National PA of the Year competition from 2008 – 2011, and currently being a member of the Presidents Committee of the Professional Association for Secretaries and Administrative Professionals (PAFSA) in South Africa. She acts as mentor for various young office professionals and is involved in community upliftment projects. Esmé was a finalist in the South African National Office Professional of the Year in 2005 and has a passion to transfer knowledge. She has presented at several PA conferences and in-house PA forums in South Africa. She published industry-related articles in various South African publications.

When I first started working on this article, my research was largely around stress and the impact this has on the body. But then I came across an interesting book “Worried Sick:

Our Troubled Quest for Wellness” and it clearly explained how some emotions can deeply harm us and I decided to pursue this angle instead. What follows is an outpouring of my learnings from Dr Arthur Barsky, the author of the aforementioned book, as well as my own experiences. [Please see the notes, at the end of this article, which details some of the stresses I have faced in the last ten years.

It’s not unrealistic to believe that by changing our minds, we really can change our lives. As Dr Barsky so aptly writes, “We **‘burn’** with anger, we **‘tremble’** with fear, we feel **‘choked up’** with sadness, our **‘stomachs turn’** with revulsion”. You see, it’s not uncommon to experience disagreeable emotions as unfriendly physical symptoms i.e. we feel physically distressed when emotionally distressed.

Fortunately, we are empowered with the ability to change negative thoughts and feelings into positive, rational and motivating thoughts; thereby helping to create a healthy mind in a healthy body.

The connection between a healthy mind and a healthy body is not new to science. History shows that, as far back as 4,000 years ago, Chinese physicians became aware that patients, after a period of illness, often became frustrated. Nowadays, this is a given and much has been written on the strong influence our emotions, life events and coping skills have on our physical well-being. We know these factors as stress.

ESSENCE OF STRESS AND ITS IMPACT

- Stress is a normal part of life as our bodies have been designed to experience stress and react to it

In pursuit of Happiness

MICHELLE LONGMAN HAS WORKED AS A PA FOR OVER 25 YEARS AND IS AN OUTSPOKEN ADVOCATE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF A NATURAL BALANCE BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY LIFE.

- whether it be physical, mental and/or emotional reaction.
- Stress can be positive ensuring we are kept alert and ready to face what might come our way.
- Stress can also be negative - and can become very negative when we face continuous challenges without relief or relaxation. In this case, we then become overworked and experience stress-related tension viz. distress.
- Stress can lead to physical symptoms of which the severity can differ; these can range from headaches, stomach problems, high blood pressure, chest pains, lack of sleep, anxiety and depression.
- Stress can be dangerous especially when alcohol, tobacco or drugs are used to alleviate some of the stress. Understandably, these substances do not actually return the body to a relaxed state [which is what is required], rather the body tends to stay in a stressed state and will cause further physical and emotional problems for the person
- Weight gain or loss
- Destruction of the body’s resistance to cancer, infections and other illnesses
- Infertility and sexual dysfunction
- Exacerbate diabetes [whether type 1 or type 2]
- Make us more prone to suffering a heart attack or stroke.

I am sure we all agree that these are conditions we would all prefer to avoid, where possible.

STRESS IS EVERYWHERE

Life in the 21st century is complicated and difficult and presents modern-day-humans with a large variety of stress triggers. Some of these might be:

- Medical conditions
- Financial troubles
- Difficult family life
- Emotional relationships and/or
- Work-related situations

While doing research for this article, I naturally gravitated to Google and was saddened when the following statement popped up: “Stress is die grootste moordenaar”. Loosely translated “stress is the biggest killer”: This statement saddened me to the core and is an acknowledgement of the seriousness of stress and the impact it has on people’s lives.

As a result of our lives being so incredibly busy and stressful, it's important, very important, to choose which stresses we are willing to allow into our lives (both at home and at work), and then find a way to manage these constructively.

For example, a child's chronic medical condition is not necessarily something that can be changed, but how we choose to manage it will strongly influence the level of stress we experience. Ditto with financial problems. Taking action is vital to survival – and the pun here is intended!

STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Whether one is working for a conglomerate or a small business you face situations which are stressful such as unrealistic working hours, transport challenges, difficult colleagues, a manager who is more stressed-out than you, deadlines that forever keep changing and a belief system that expects us to work like robots, never stopping for a breath of fresh air or for some nourishment.

And where does this leave us?

We start to become less effective due to headaches, backaches, lack of sleep and anxiety. We become emotional in the office, we respond to other people's drama and start to accept stress as the norm...and sooner or later, we develop serious stress-related diseases.

This is not an acceptable state!

We have to identify the items that are causing us stress and work towards improving these situations. These can range from something as practical as an uncomfortable chair that needs to be changed; avoiding a difficult colleague; asking help regarding a project you do not understand, and even potentially having to accept that you are not cut-out for the role you're in.

Obviously some of the bigger challenges cannot be corrected overnight and often require planning and tools to help us



solve them, but these require that clear goals be set to improve the situation!

In my case; when I found that my mornings were just too busy and thus very unpleasant, I made a number of changes to improve this viz. from waking up a little earlier to persuading my manager into accepting that manager I would start work a little later. These seemingly minor changes resulted in my having an extra hour in the morning and thus a major change to my well-being and ability to concentrate.

PURSUE HAPPINESS

Dr. Coral Arvon, Director of Behavioural Health and Wellness at the Pritikin Longevity Center in Miami, suggests some of the following techniques to help cope with the various aspects of stress:

- **Calming the mind and the body:** By calming the mind and body, people with severe stress are likely to find themselves in a better place and in a better position to cope. The combination of *healthy eating*, taking part in *regular exercise* and

some type of *relaxation techniques* are an excellent source of stress management.

- **Stress Hardiness:** Stress hardiness, also referred to as a *healthy personality*, is the term given to an overall approach to life that helps individuals buffer the impact of stress. This approach can be summarised as four personality traits -

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- **AS A PA, THE MOST CRITICAL THING YOU WILL LEARN, IS THE NEED TO CREATE SPACE IN YOUR MIND FOR A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE.**

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- ✓ **Commitment** - an attitude of curiosity and commitment to yourself, your loved ones, your work, and the world.
- ✓ **Control** – the belief that you can respond effectively to situations that arise in your life, rather than feeling hopeless and incompetent.
- ✓ **Challenge** - the ability to see change as exciting and an opportunity for growth rather than viewing it as frightening and fearing failure.
- ✓ **Connection** - the enduring assurance that you are understood and validated by those you are closest to.
- ✓ **Emotional disclosure:** Individuals who have successfully navigated their way through a variety of stresses, found that keeping a journal and/or speaking to others, helped them disclose their emotional status

and these individuals were found to have less physical manifestations of their stress.

- ✓ **Happiness:** Wikipedia defines happiness as “a mental or emotional state of well-being defined by positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy. The United Nations declared 20 March the International Day of Happiness to recognise the relevance of happiness and wellbeing as universal goals”.

And then there's a sense of humour

A sense of humour has been demonstrated, time and time again, to have “stress-busting” qualities which reduces the body's physiological response to stress. Although I am definitely not suggesting that making light of every situation is a good idea, humour is good strategy for survival!

Professor David Myers then and now

During a recent clean-out of some very old files, I came across some notes that I typed up from an article printed in the December 1998 issue of the Readers Digest. The article was written by Jeremy Daniel and in it he quotes David Myers. [David Myers is now a well-known professor of psychology at Hope College in Michigan, United States and is the author of over 15 books.] At the time of the publication, he was studying happiness and suggested some simple steps to happiness. These principles resonated with me then, and still resonate with me today.

Here they are:

1. Savour the moment: Live in the present: treasure the smile of your child in the morning, the satisfaction of helping a friend, the pleasure of curling up with a good book.
2. Take control of your time: Happy people set big goals, then break them into daily bits. This principle can be applied to any task.
3. Accentuate the positive: There is plenty of evidence to suggest that negative emotions lash back at us, while positive ones can boost the body's healing process. Happy people take steps to keep their negative emotions in check.
4. Give priority to close relationships: People with close friends, spouses and partners cope better with stresses such as bereavement, job loss, illness or even rape.
5. Act happy: Experiments show that people who put on a happy face really do feel better. It seems that the facial muscles used to smile widely actually trigger happy feelings in the brain.
6. Don't vegetate: Don't engage in self-absorbed idleness or plonk yourself in front of the television. Get involved in something that utilises your skills.
7. Get moving: Aerobic exercise is an antidote to depression and anxiety.
8. Get rest: Happy people exude vigour, but they also reserve time for sleep and solitude.
9. Take care of the soul: Research on faith and wellbeing shows that people who are actively religious are happier than those who aren't.