

Entrepreneurs

Staying Cool On The Job

Maureen Farrell, 10.16.07, 6:00 PM ET

On a recent Thursday at 6 a.m., Daniel Gonzalez, head of Hogan and Hartson's international arbitration and litigation practice, landed at Reagan International Airport in Washington, D.C., capping off a three-day business trip to Argentina. Up next: an early afternoon meeting with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Between his major commitments, he juggled bits of 15 other cases. Talk about pressure.

How do Gonzalez and other stressed-out high-performers like him keep from cracking? For many, relieving stress is about maintaining control--or at least some semblance of it. When Gonzalez travels--between 30 and 40 weeks a year, bouncing between Latin America, Europe, Asia and the United States--he uses both a laptop and Blackberry to impose a little order. "I know I can be responsive no matter where in the world I am at any given time," he says.

Indeed, most scientific research shows job-related stress is most severe when people have high demands and little control, or perceived control, over the forces at play. A production-line worker may have a very defined, repetitive, 9-hour job but still be swamped with stress because the fate of his job is far beyond his control. The greater your feeling of control, the lower your overall work-related stress level will be, says Peter Schnall, director of the Center for Social Epidemiology at the University of California, Irvine.

Eventually, though, the long hours will get to you. Based on data from a 2001 California Health Interview Survey, Schall's research indicated people who worked 51 or more hours per week were 29% more likely to develop hypertension, versus 14% of workers that put in 40 hours a week. Such stress can also lead to heart disease and depression.

The cost of all work-related stress is squishy, but no doubt high. The American Institute of Stress estimates stress costs U.S. corporations \$300 billion annually in health care costs, turnover and absenteeism. A survey by the same institute also reports more than one in four workers say they take a "mental-health day" at least once a year, specifically because of work-related stress.

The first step to wrestling with job stress is to nail down what specifically is stressing you out. "People tend to experience stress in a

generalized way," says Russ Newman, executive director of the American Psychological Association. "There are going to be particular causes and triggers, but unless you take the time to look at them, you're not aware of what you're dealing with."

Sometimes those triggers are hard to pinpoint. One trick: When stress hits, put down the circumstances on paper, says Dr. Paul Rosch, president of the American Institute of Stress. That way, you can go back to your notes in a calmer moment and nail down the source of your stress.

Once you figure out what's eating you, take some quick, smart steps to unwind, says Newman. And by that he means exercising or taking incremental breaks, not chain-smoking or binge drinking.

Next, divide the stress triggers into two categories: those you can control and those you generally can't. Obviously, knock out the ones you can control first.

As for the ones you can't, try to mollify their effects. Some things that seem out of your control may not be. It's helpful to work through these issues with an outsider, like your spouse or a friend, to gain perspective, says Rosch. If the source of your stress is truly immutable, think about changing how you experience it.

Take commuting: If driving to work for hours each day causes stress, and it's impossible to move or work from home, Rosch suggests buying a set of books on tape. Changing the experience--and thereby giving yourself more control over the situation--can lower your stress.

Another way to beat stress: Root out inefficiencies. Matt Grawitch, a professor at St. Louis University who studies work stress, saw this first-hand on a recent consulting assignment at a local hospital. In one wing, the nurses printed patient charts from one of two stations at opposite ends of the hallway. For some reason, when nurses printed charts, it was impossible to specify which printer to use, and thus where the charts would emerge. "The nurses were wasting hours a day walking to the wrong printer and walking back to the right one," he says. Result: A boatload of unnecessary stress.

Planning can also nip stress in the bud. Gonzalez says he carefully prioritizes his

tasks, deciding what is possible to get done in a given week and what isn't. In any system operating near capacity, hiccups create greater problems than those with at least a modicum of slack. "Planning allows me the variable of the unknown, and to accomplish things under the highest-stress situations when emergencies come up," says Gonzalez.

And when in doubt, try a little humor, says Lloyd Greif, founder of the Los Angeles-based mergers and acquisitions firm Greif & Co. (The motto he communicates to clients in times of stress: T.I.G, or "Trust in Greif.") "As an investment banker, you surround yourself with 'type As'," he says. "When things get the most stressful in the office, I'm always going to say something off-the-wall to break the tension. Otherwise, the mood is going to be such that it's tough to get things done." 'Off-the-wall' comments include addressing one of his clients when their deal hits the inevitable bump in the road as 'Muttley,' because, Greif says, the guy snickered like the old Hanna-Barbera cartoon dog.

Dr. Rosch says different people experience stress very differently. He compares stress levels to people's experiences on a roller-coaster. Some people panic, while others love the thrill. And still others are adept at using one to diffuse the other.

Top athletes do this well. Jermaine O'Neal, forward for the Indiana Pacers basketball team and six-time NBA All-Star, puts it this way: "Pressure in sports is nothing. That's the job. When the stage is bigger--the playoffs, for example--that just makes it more exciting. It's like being a kid the night before Christmas. Okay, maybe you do get a little tighter shooting a free throw at the end of a game on the road, with fans going crazy behind the backboard. But you know you've practiced that shot to win. So when you get that opportunity, that's just fun."

One last word on stress: If you're going to vent, do it with caution. Venting should be cathartic--not a way to keep reliving the same stress. "If you go down the hall to vent to an associate, that's okay," says St. Louis University's Grawitch. "But if the next step is to go upstairs and vent to someone else, then you're holding onto the incident, and it can become very disruptive."