

White Paper Series

**Your Relational Intelligence:
The Key to Manage Your Stress & Improve Your Life**

Stress. Ask any of your coworkers to define it and you're likely to get as many different opinions as you would asking for final four contenders in your March Madness basketball office pool. Ask any of your coworkers if they *have* stress themselves and it would be a safer bet than picking who is going to win that basketball pool that they will say, "Yes! Who doesn't?"

But what if you and your coworkers could develop a skill that would not only decrease you stress, but also bring a positive impact on your overall work performance? Even more, what if that skill helped you in *all* of your interpersonal relationships? Read on.

The Research

It will come as no surprise to most folks that stress is on the rise in the workplace. The American Psychological Association (APA) conducts an annual survey on stress in America. One observation from the 2009 report was that 42% of respondents reported increased levels of stress over the previous 12 months. The 2010 study brought out even deeper concerns. APA's CEO Dr. Norman Anderson stated that, "Year after year nearly three-quarters of Americans say that they experience stress at levels that exceed what they define as healthy." In other words, people know they are more stressed out than they should be. The growing concern among those of us in the mental health field is that people who experience long-term, unremitting stress are "putting themselves at risk for developing chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, and depression."ⁱ

Furthermore, this perpetual state of stress not only creates a negative impact on our work performance, but it also generates long-term damaging effect on our families, a reality to which most parents seem oblivious. This same APA survey found that 69% of parents of "teens and tweens say that their stress has slight or no impact on their children," *yet a full 96% of the children reported that they were bothered or negatively impacted by their parent's stress.* In other words, parents do a horrific job of hiding their stress and therefore succumb to what we call the Spillover Effect: What happens at work, both good and bad, impacts what happens at home – and vice-versa.

With all of this, it's fairly safe to conclude that stress can and does have a significant negative influence on our work performance, our physical health, our emotional state, and our relationships. And if you're thinking that an economic recovery that will magically set all of this right and eliminate our stress, well ... I have a more reliable solution.

The Answer

Emotional (EI) and Relational Intelligence (RI) are, yet again, the keys. EI & RI are not only crucial for maximizing the significant relationships in our lives, but are also vital for helping us navigate the stresses and strains that life inevitably brings our way. In a recent study, a team of Belgian researchers linked a person's EI with their ability to effectively process and handle stress. EI is an individual's capacity to identify, understand, and effectively manage their own emotions while they are occurring (not two hours later when the, "I shouldn't have said/done that," syndrome kicks in). Relational Intelligence is the practiced capacity to leverage a person's EI awareness to accurately read the emotional states of others and manage the intertwined relationships toward mutually beneficial results. The Belgian team's findings reaffirmed that people with high EI reported less anxiety and more upbeat moods when facing high stress situations than people with lower EI.

It's critical to note that EI is *not* the practice of forced cheerfulness, nor is it a blind naïveté toward the reality any situation. Similarly, RI is not the manipulation of others to get them to do what you want. Relational Intelligence is, at its core, about understanding, facing, and effectively dealing with the reality of any emotionally charged circumstance.

And that is precisely the reason that the Belgian research team found that accounted for the difference in people with high RI managing stress more effectively than others. It is not that they simply "whistled while they worked" or "put on a happy face;" what they did do was meet the challenges that were creating the stress head-on; they were solution-focused, intent on doing something to mitigate the stress producers, and they were realistically optimistic about the outcome. In short, they refused to sit and worry about a situation but rather chose to do something about it.

Core to this action-oriented approach is the finding that not only did those with high RI manage stress better, but they also physically and emotionally experienced *less* signs and symptoms of

stress than their low RI counterparts. They felt less anxiety, exhibited more positive moods, and worried less. Yes, having a plan of action was part of the reason that they suffered less stress, but that's not the whole reason. You maybe able to learn the entire spectrum of problem solving techniques on the planet – but if you fail to effectively manage your emotions, you're dead in the water. If you have not developed the skills associated with Relational Intelligence, you will never get out of the starting blocks to begin the actions that will lead to a solution because your inability to manage your emotions and the emotions of others will sidetrack you as your stress level spikes.

Finally, a different research team out of Australia linked another crucial benefit experienced by high EI/RI individuals when facing stressful times. Simply put, they don't have to face the problems alone. Individuals with low RI skills will behave and react in ways that alienate others while presenting a persona that does not inspire confidence. Simply moaning and complaining about a situation may create opportunities for a group-gripe session, but that rarely if ever helps lighten the stress, and, candidly, mutual grouchiness is not the basis for genuine friendships. The researchers found that high RI folks were able to “regulate moods in a positive direction to try and establish intimacy,” and that “such behavior should lead to closer friendships and greater social support, which should be of psychological benefit in times of stress and crisis.”ⁱⁱ A good result all around.

It's Up to You

The good news is that, unlike personality types and IQs that are set at an early age, Emotional and Relational Intelligence are aptitudes and skills that can be intentionally developed and improved. The operative word is *intentional*. If you want to improve your ability to manage your stress more effectively thereby reducing the negative effects on your work, your friendships, and your family, then get intentional about improving your Relational Intelligence. You should:

1. *Get an EI/RI education.* Attend a seminar, read articles and books, and get focused on learning all you can about these vital skills.
2. *Get a mentor/coach.* As with many if not most things in life, one of the best sources for learning any new skill is to learn from someone who is already better at it than you are. We want to learn golf from a golf pro, financial management from a proven advisor, and we should seek to discover EI/RI skills from those who already do it very well. Think about it;

you know who they are. Golfing great Jack Nicklaus once said, “Don’t be too proud to take a lesson. I’m not.”

3. *Get feedback.* One of the top (if not the top) techniques used by those with high RI who are continually seeking to develop even further is that they have people who will give them honest feedback on what they are doing well and where they need to improve. As your RI awareness and vocabulary increase, ask others to give you candid feedback; make sure they know they have the freedom to tell you the truth *and* make sure that you don’t punish them for doing so.
4. *Get going.* Practice, practice, practice. Again, it’s about being intentional. Cognitive and behavior expert Dr. K. Anders Ericsson states that, “The differences between expert performers and normal adults are not immutable, that is, due to genetically prescribed talent. Instead, these differences reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, they practice.

I am reasonably sure that neither you nor I are going to find a magical pill or a winning lottery ticket around the corner that will miraculously eliminate all of stress. Even as the economy does improve, I am realistically confident that stress will remain a part of our lives. So the question is not, “*When will things change so my stress will go away?*” but rather, “*What am I going to do now to effectively manage my stress?*”

Intentionally developing your Relational Intelligence is they key.

ⁱ “APA Survey Raises Concern about Health Impact of Stress on Children and Families,” Nov. 9, 2010, www.apa.org.

ⁱⁱ Ciarrochi, et al. “Emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between stress and mental health.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 32 (2002) 197-209.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ericsson, K. A. “The Acquisition of Expert Performance and Deliberate Practice.” Florida State University, 2000.