BC Excluded Employees' Association

MyInfo Sheet

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What's Inside

This MyInfo sheet will be of interest to leaders who want to strengthen their own responses to stress and develop and support the resilience of team members.

Some of the ideas presented in this MyInfo sheet include:

- The Brain and Stress
- Emotional Intelligence
- Mindfulness and Reflection
- Empathy & Compassion Hope
- Tips for Resilient Leaders

How Leaders Can Support Resilience

What Does Brain Science Tell Us About Stress and Resilience

The Brain and Stress

Our brains constantly scan for threats or rewards (five times per second). Common stressors include difficulty at home and work due to multiple pressures, unknown outcomes, or upcoming critical events. Threats and uncertain situations associated with these stressors activate our brain to release chemicals such as cortisol and adrenaline, which trigger the flight, fight, or freeze response. This stress response is accompanied by physical symptoms such as rapid heart rate, dry mouth, and heightened alertness. The brain's amygdala, which is responsible for processing emotions, plays a key role in this response. The amygdala can override the neocortex, the thinking brain, and initiate the flight, fight, or freeze response before the neocortex has time to process the information. This response is automatic and prepares the body to either confront the threat (fight), escape (flight), or go blank (freeze).

Practice Idea

To become more familiar with your response to stress, set an alarm for a couple of times a day. At those times notice how your body feels in a relaxed or a stressed state. Over time this practice will help you gain greater awareness of the signals coming from your body.

When we experience a reward, such as receiving positive feedback or achieving a goal, our brain's reward system is activated. Our brains react to rewards by releasing chemicals, including dopamine, which creates feelings of pleasure and motivation. The reward system is responsible for reinforcing behaviours that are associated with positive outcomes. The release of dopamine in

response to rewards helps to strengthen the neural pathways associated with those behaviours, so that we are more likely to repeat them in the future. This is why rewards can be powerful ways to build resilience and positively influence our behaviour and decision-making.

The brain's response to threats and rewards significantly impacts leadership effectiveness. Leaders can benefit from understanding the physiological and psychological impact of stress on themselves and their team members. By reducing uncertainty in the workplace and providing clear goals and rewards, leaders can help activate the brain's reward system and enhance motivation and performance in themselves and in their team members.

Emotional intelligence: Emotional intelligence involves the ability to recognize and manage emotions in oneself and others. It includes being aware of and empathetic toward the emotions of self and other, and using this awareness to effectively navigate social interactions. Leaders who understand and regulate their emotions can better navigate challenging situations, build strong relationships, and inspire and motivate their team members.

Social Connections: Our brains are wired for social connection, and leaders who prioritize building positive relationships and fostering a sense of belonging within their teams can enhance collaboration, trust, and overall team performance. Creating a supporting and inclusive work environment activates the brain's reward system, leading to increased engagement and productivity.

Neuroplasticity: Our brain's ability to change and adapt, known as neuroplasticity, highlights the importance of continuous learning and development for leaders. By engaging in new experiences, acquiring new skills, and challenging existing beliefs and assumptions, leaders can reshape their neural pathways and enhance their cognitive abilities, decision-making and problem-solving skills.

Mindfulness and Self-reflection: Mindfulness practices, such as meditation and focused breathing, have been shown to activate the brain's parasympathetic nervous system, leading to increased clarity of thinking, reduced stress, and improved decision-making. Leaders who incorporate mindfulness and self-reflection into their routines can enhance their self-awareness, emotional regulation, and overall well-being, which positively impacts their leadership effectiveness.

Practice Idea: Focused Breathing

Find a comfortable position ensuring that your body is relaxed and supported.

Close your eyes or focus them softly. Bring awareness to your breath. Notice the sensation of the breath as it enters and leaves your body.

Take slow deep breaths, inhaling through your nose and exhaling slowly through your mouth. Allow your breath to be smooth and natural without forcing it.

Direct your attention solely to the breath. Notice the rise and fall of your abdomen or the feeling of air passing through your nostrils. Stay fully present with each breath, gently letting go of any distractions or thoughts that arise.

Observe sensations and thoughts without judgement. If your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your breath, without criticizing yourself for getting distracted.

Even a few minutes of focused breathing can have a calming effect. The more you do this practice the easier it becomes to relax.

Empathy and Compassion: The brain's mirror neuron system enables individuals to understand and emphasize with others' emotions and experiences. Leaders who demonstrate empathy and compassion activate this system in their team members, fostering trust, collaboration, and a sense of safety. Leaders can cultivate compassion by showing empathy, helping, recognizing and appreciating their team members' efforts, and promoting a caring and inclusive work environment.

Hope: Hope has a significant impact on our brain and can influence our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. When we experience hope, several areas of the brain are activated, including the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision-making and problem-solving, and the limbic system, which is involved in emotions and motivation. Leaders can support hope in the workplace by setting clear achievable goals, providing support and encouragement, and creating a vision of a positive future. Hope helps inspire team members' motivation, resilience, and a sense of purpose.

Overall, brain science provides valuable insights into the neural mechanisms underlying our response to both rewards and challenges. By leveraging this knowledge, leaders can enhance their self-awareness, and emotional intelligence. Leaders can use these insights to foster a positive work environment, support their team members in managing stress and building resilience, and address the social needs of team members.

Practical strategies such as empathy, helping, giving positive feedback, as well as managing one's inner dialogue and addressing the emotional implications of change, can help drive a more positive and successful work environment.

Tips for Resilient leaders

- Acknowledge and validate emotions
- Communicate openly and transparently
- Provide support and resources
- Foster a positive and inclusive culture
- Lead by example
- Celebrate milestones and successes
- Encourage self-care and self-compassion
- Foster a sense of purpose
- Support and empower individuals
- Foster a culture of learning and growth
- Demonstrate resilience and emotional intelligence.

These materials were adapted from a BCEEA workshop series presented by Heather Lehmann & Associates. This eight-part workshop series provided participants with in-depth information about how our brains and bodies respond to the strain of unpredictable events, how our automatic responses can negatively amplify stress, and how strategies such as mindfulness can be used to reduce the impact of stress.