

# "People Just Want to Feel Better, More Often" – The Basis of a Wellness Program that *Delivers*

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## ABSTRACT:

The term 'Emotional Intelligence' has been used in business for some time now. Be involved in a discussion about what emotional management can do for your organisational productivity, health and safety. Learn how it can be used as the basis of a wellness program that makes us well. Understand the basics and hear practical examples for its application.

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## WHERE DO YOU START?

People *do* want to feel better, more often, don't they? But where do you start? These days, more and more organisations understand the benefits of having stress management courses or wellness programs.

Implemented and managed correctly, it helps our staff retention rates, unplanned leave, stress claims (hopefully), and it's a sign of an organisation that cares about its people. But what should we try? What makes up the best type of program? Yoga classes, quit smoking programs, blood pressure and cholesterol checks, or dietary courses and exercise programs, or possibly financial planning advice and time management classes, along with some colourful posters in the workplace, urging employees to 'join in'. What more could they ask for?

Possibly stress management classes? Everybody needs to relax, and stress can kill you, they say, or at least make you unwell or cause you to under-perform

On face value, the above would seem to form the basis of a sound, varied and supportive program. Assuming the 'mix' is right for your organisational culture and the program can be funded now and into the future, (so it's not just another 'flavour of the month' program sent 'down from the top'.

Is all this sounding familiar, or could it be a future worry for you and your pending program? Often, organisations just start with a part of the program. Possibly the stress management type activities, as this seems to be a common complaint in employee's work and home-life. There is a warning at this point. Effective stress management, and the 'traditional' response, relaxation, may not be one in the same.

## ‘JUST RELAX’

Ask a person under extreme stress to ‘just relax’, and you might just have to stand back to avoid the explosion. “Who’s got time for that!” you may hear people say, or “I’ve got real work to do!”

You know others will attend your programs, they will be the ones who are prepared to confront their stress. This is still okay; the program will generate some good internal public relations in the short term. But what about lasting change? What about those really stressed individuals? The ones who deny they are stressed but are clearly under performing, or others who fear time away from the job will just get them further behind. Trying to teach them to relax may cause them more stress.

## BARRIERS TO STRESS MANAGEMENT

The problem with most stress management techniques is that they cannot be done quickly, or used ‘in the moment’, when you need them most. They may define relaxation as a goal, and clearly, some of us do not have time for that. Annual leave and holidays excluded of course. Or maybe not. For some, work is the haven, and home (for any number of reasons) can be where the most stress occurs.

Although this may not be an organisational problem, directly, unplanned leave or other consequences are ultimately borne by the organisation. So, strategies or techniques that work outside of work and at the same speed are also needed.

## FASTER THAN A SPEEDING THOUGHT

If these kinds of intense thoughts, emotions or feelings are barriers to our enjoyment of work and home life, maybe we should also look to them for a solution?

Landmark long-term studies conducted by Dr. Hans Eysenck and colleagues at the University of London have shown that chronic unmanaged emotional stress is as much as six times more predictive of cancer and heart disease than cigarette smoking, cholesterol level or blood pressure, yet,, are much more responsive to intervention.

Part of the answer lies in firstly helping individuals (and organisations) understand two important points:

1. Postponing or ‘compartmentalising’ our stress management to times where we can ‘go do a technique’ or take a break does not stop the physiological stress response.

In fact, it may worsen the stress response because we are unable to take a break to manage our stress. (Like they taught us at the company workshop)

2. Our initial reaction to things that we perceive as unpleasant or harmful is subconscious, and is based on physiology that is at least 100,000 years old.

We cannot stop it, and our brain’s emotional centre will always get information about 80,000 times faster than the Cortex, the so called ‘smart’ part of the brain.

This may begin to help us understand why smart people (like us) can at times, do pretty dumb things. In his book ‘Emotional Intelligence’, Goleman called this ‘an Amygdala hijack’. (The Amygdala is part of the emotional centre of the brain, and is responsible for assessing incoming sensory information for threats.)

## THE REAL MIND/BODY LINK

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, ‘Pull the Plug on Stress’, the authors demonstrated a link between a major organ in our body, the heart, and the effect our emotions had on its rhythms. Different heart rhythms, as viewed on a heart rhythm monitor, can be associated with perceptual clarity, clear thinking, good decisions; or the exact opposite, poor judgement and bad decisions.

Although further discussion is outside the bounds of this paper, it now may be easier to understand why stress is so invasive, if your emotional reaction can change the rhythm of your heartbeat. See Figure 1.

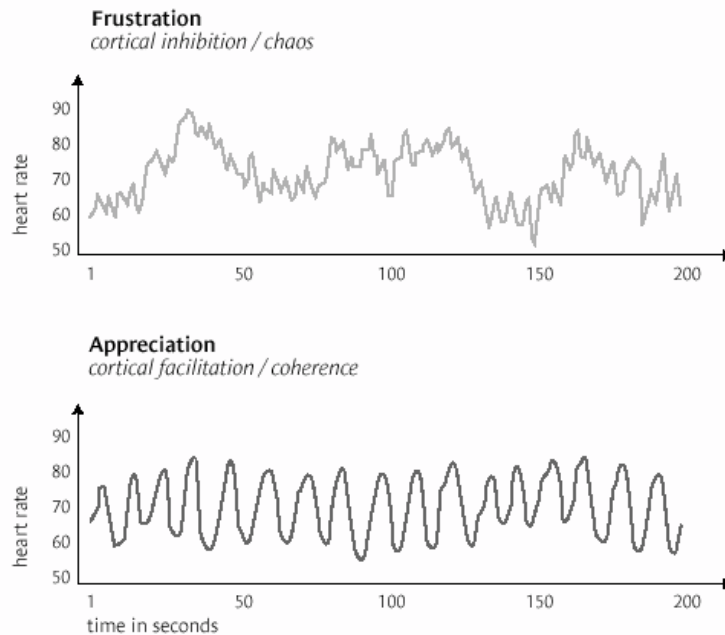


Figure 1. Heart Rhythms © IHM

Results of a laboratory heart-rate variability analysis show how different emotions affect heart rhythms. So-called negative emotions such as frustration cause more chaotic heart rhythms, part of a physically harmful chain reaction. However, focusing on a positive emotion such as appreciation creates smooth (and beneficial) patterns. Negative emotions create cortical inhibition, or ‘chaos’, whereas positive emotions generate cortical facilitation, or ‘coherence’. When physiological coherence occurs, the brain associates it with feelings of security and wellbeing. That’s why simply taking several slow, deep breaths can quickly diminish the feeling of stress –breathing modulates heart rhythms. (Reproduced with permission from the authors)

## SMART PEOPLE CAN DO DUMB THINGS

Often, we are unable to ‘think our way’ out of a stressful situation. This is why pilots reply on checklists. They know that they may not be able to think clearly in the moment it really matters.

If we perceive (subconsciously) that something is unpleasant or at any level, harmful, our ‘smart thinking’ can be shut down. This can lead to ‘negative thinking’ and may cause us to react in a way that, with the benefit of hindsight, was inappropriate.

If we do not possess skills to help us recognise that this is happening, we may get stuck in a perpetual state of stress around a particular situation or circumstance. Leading to long term stress, because we just can’t see a way around the issue or situation. Often, we choose to do nothing. Maybe it will just go away? Often, teamwork or cooperation declines and laying blame becomes the goal. Watch out teamwork!

## RELAXATION v's EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT

So relaxation techniques, while great for relaxing, may not have much to do with 'in the moment' stress reduction. In fact, an article that appeared earlier this year in the Wall Street Journal stated that "this binge-and-purge approach to stress management is coming under scrutiny". "The relentless exposure to daily, chronic anxiety is the most toxic form of stress. It can actually be poisonous, wearing down the immune system and increasing the risk of everything from colds to cancer. Stress can damage neurones in the brain, causing memory problems; it can interfere with sexual performance and lead to heart attacks and premature death."

A study conducted by the Institute of HeartMath in the US showed that it can take up to six hours for our immune system to return to normal after just a five minute period of anger. See figure 2. I'm sure most of us could do five minutes of anger on the way to work, reading e-mails or on the telephone, and on a 'good' day, on the way home again!

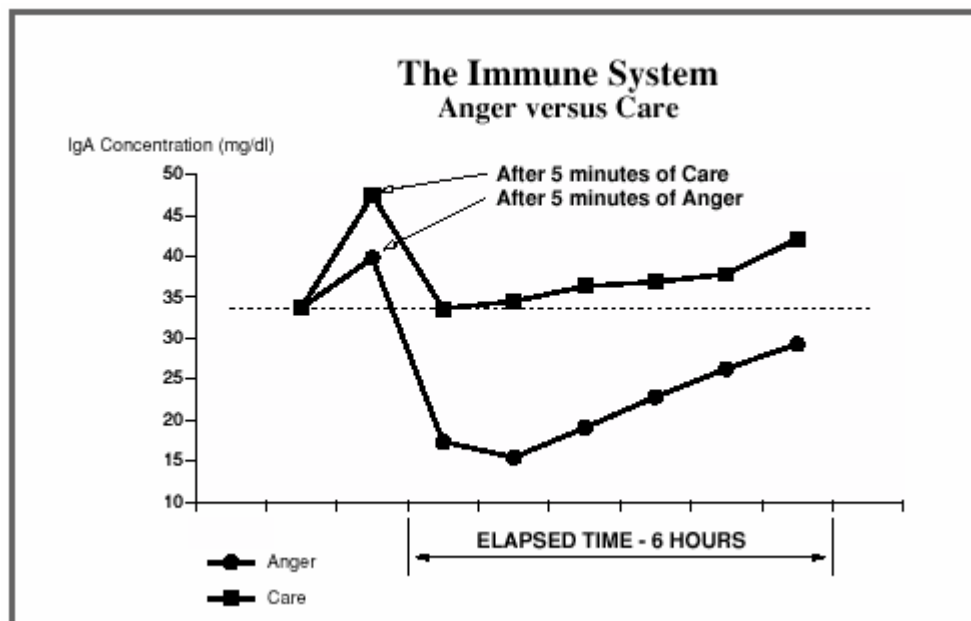


Figure 2. © IHM. This graph shows the impact of one 5-minute episode of recalled anger on the immune antibody IgA over a 6-hour period, (30 adults). The initial slight increase in IgA was followed by a dramatic drop which persisted for six hours. When the subjects used an emotional management technique and focused on feeling sincere care for five minutes there was a significant increase in IgA, which returned to baseline an hour later and then slowly increased throughout the rest of the day.

Until recently, it was thought that it was okay to put up with 'normal stress' as long as you got some rest when you needed it, and took a holiday once in a while. The problem is though, when under stress, we don't make good decisions, and may not be able to tell that we need a break. And when we do get a break, are we reversing the effects of stress on our health and wellbeing, or just 'catching our breath', just enough so that we can then go back and do it to ourselves again?

Emotional management on the other hand, is less of a 'band-aid' and more preventative in nature. It can help deal with the cause, not just the effect.

Not only can managing your emotions help lessen the physiological stress response, it helps you think more clearly. It helps prevent those 'amygdala highjacks'. (So you won't have to benefit from hindsight so often.)

## EMOTIONS, HEALTH AND HORMONES

In another Institute of HeartMath study a group of forty-five healthy adults, with fifteen acting as controls, had their Cortisol (a key stress hormone) and DHEA (the so-called anti-stress hormone) levels measured before thirty of the group were taught several emotional management techniques, which they used for one month. A random sample of twenty-eight of the group one-month later showed a 100% increase in DHEA and a 23% decrease of Cortisol.

Interestingly, DHEA is the precursor to the human sex hormones estrogen and testosterone. (Lower DHEA levels means less estrogen or testosterone). Its physiological effects include enhancing the immune system, stimulating bone deposition, lowering cholesterol levels and building muscle mass. DHEA has been found to be deficient in individuals who suffer from many diseases, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, Alzheimer's, immune deficiency, coronary artery disease and various autoimmune disorders. Cortisol is involved in protein, carbohydrate and fat metabolism and is widely known as the 'stress hormone' because it is secreted in excessive amounts when people are under stress.

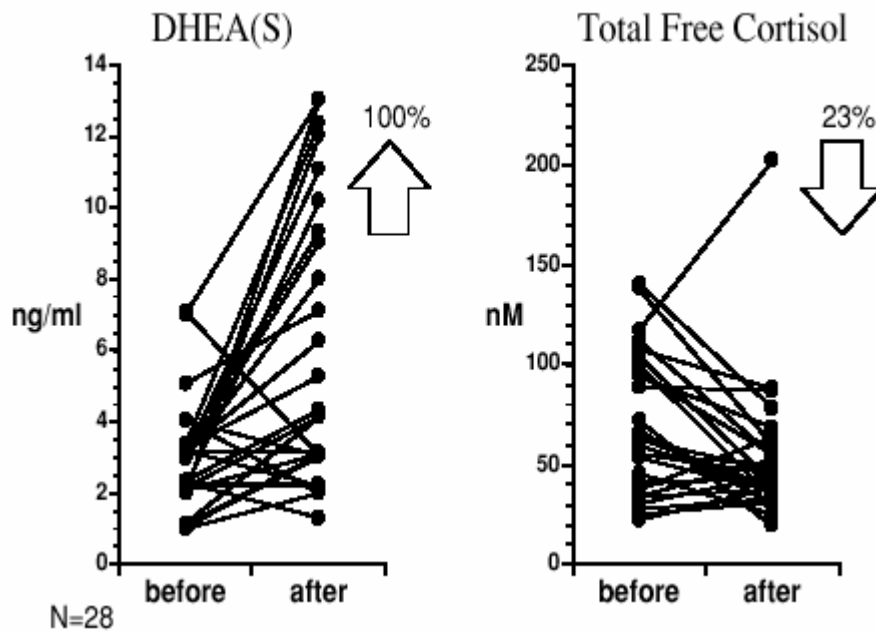


Figure 3. © IHM. DHEA and Cortisol values before and after subjects were trained in and practiced several emotional management techniques for one month. There was a 100% average increase in DHEA and a 23% decrease in Cortisol. Forty-five adults in study, with 15 acting as controls, 28 of total selected at random for post intervention measurement.

## AN INTELLIGENT MODEL

There are many models for developing emotional intelligence. Some aimed more at measuring it, than developing it. Hopefully, this paper will serve to convince the reader that no matter what level of emotional intelligence we start with, we can be taught uncomplicated skills that will enable us to exhibit greater levels of emotional management.

These skills are not intellect dependant, and over a short period of time, will become a beneficial subconscious response. The norm, as apposed to the exception.

An ideal model training would first develop an understanding, then introduce skills or techniques for emotional management. Such a system would, ideally, provide objective feedback of not only emotional wellbeing, but also physiological wellbeing.

This combination of features will enable individuals and organisations to interrupt the stress cycle to reduce stress, increase performance, at work and at home, and also build teams based on emotional and physiological wellbeing.

A past President of the American Institute of Stress, Dr Graham Burrows, once summarised millions of pieces of information on stress in just one sentence. He said, "Stress is a problem in either perception, or communication".

Knowing that the communication style we use in any given circumstance largely depends on our initial perception of a situation, it would be easy to agree. It also lends support to the argument for a robust, data driven, emotional intelligence driven employee wellness program.

Thankyou.

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