

Busy Business

First published in the November 1999 issue of *Career Success*

Not so long ago I was in a friend's office and from my vantage point I could see his secretary. She was filing her nails. Her telephone rang and to my astonishment I heard her say, 'No I can't do it now I'm too busy!' Yeah right! But have you noticed how today this 'busy' response is a well-exercised form of greeting. When last do you recall someone who answered your polite enquiries into their well-being with anything but an out-of-breath 'I'm SO busy!'? What happened to the good old fallback 'Fine thanks'. Today it's almost unimaginable to admit to not being up to your eyeballs in busy-ness. Obviously it's just not trendy to be less than a fully-fledged stress-junkie anymore.

But before you dash off to be comforted by your dependable little happy-pills, South Africa's emotional intelligence (EQ) authority - Stephanie Vermeulen - offers a powerful rethink on the stress issue. Well known for her work in top corporate circles, she is clear that stress is not about the pressure we're under. It's more about the choices we make. In her book *EQ: Emotional Intelligence for Everyone*, Vermeulen says that many of the habits we've gotten into drain our life force or energy. Without energy we experience stress. And she's quick to point out; these bad habits are not just about our poor physical routines.

As an example, how many people do you know who have a decline come Monday morning and are up, buzzing by Friday afternoon? For sure, TGIF is a weekly ritual. 'What for?' says Vermeulen. 'If you enjoy what you do, Monday simply presents another opportunity to do more of it.' But just looking around the average corporate office makes it clear that not too many people love what they do. This she claims is stressful because it drains our energy. 'Without fuel' says Vermeulen 'life is as heavy and exhausting as having to push your motorcar to work everyday.'

While mind power trainers like Anthony Robbins believe that thinking positive thoughts may be the route to success, Vermeulen believes that they are not presenting the full picture. She says 'Try thinking positively when you're in a real humdinger of a mood. It's virtually impossible.' This is so because our thoughts are fuelled by our feelings.

'Although positive thinking is good for you, it's not enough. Unless you're dealing with the underlying emotions, positive thinking is no better than covering a pile of cow-dung in whipped cream, with a dash of sprinkle spread to pretty things up.' The seemingly never-ending foul mood will inevitably be the proof of the pudding.

When it comes to energy levels, Vermeulen conducts a powerful illustration in the workshops she's well known for. Look at the four categories below and if you indulge in any of the activities listed, these will be draining the energy right out of you.

<p>PHYSICAL: Addictions (alcohol, cigarettes, drugs) Ill health / physical pain Insufficient Sleep Lack of exercise Lack of relaxation Poor eating habits</p>	<p>MENTAL Boredom / Stagnation Complaining Excess Mental Stimulation Guilt Negative Thinking Stress Worry</p>
<p>EMOTIONAL: Controlling other people Dependency (allowing others to control you) Emotional outbursts Fear Not getting your own way Poor self-image Trying relationships (Fights, arguments)</p>	<p>SPIRITUAL: Lack of discipline Lack of faith Lack of trust Life with no meaning nor purpose Poor quality time with yourself</p>

Any of these is like a black hole daily draining your life force or power. The more of these you suffer from the higher your levels of stress and exhaustion. Just changing your choices, claims Vermeulen, will help to plug up the punctures. You'll know when the job's done because you'll start feeling better - perhaps even cheerful once again.

For this reason Vermeulen's brand of EQ involves learning to be relatively happy most of the time. Now if you're thinking 'Nice one Pollyanna!' Read on. 'Being happy is not about doing cartwheels down the passageway all day everyday. Rather it's about being content that you can manage your life. It's a calmer state telling us our energy is contained and can be used constructively.' She claims you simply can't be productive when you're consumed by a bad mood and this is exactly what our emotions give us feedback about.

Vermeulen's research shows that feelings are powerful messages and their language talks directly about the choices we're making. This thinking is what separates her work from the other more theoretical books on EQ. From the innovative emotional dictionary provided in her book, it's easy to see that nasty feelings in particular inform us about energy losses.

For example, anger tells us we're not getting our own way. But losing your temper won't help. It just drains more energy and adds to your stress. Far better is to learn to negotiate with the people who are trying to control you. However, if you go deaf on your feelings, high levels of stress will be a predictable end result. Evidently we need to learn to tune in to our feelings.

Although much has been written about the physical side of stress, many people know that switching from slothful habits to healthy choices is easier said than done. Again Vermeulen relates this directly to the emotions. She claims that it's much like the old joke about how many psychiatrists it takes to change a light bulb. Only one. But the light bulb must really want to change! So if you're telling yourself you *should* make some improvements, but don't really want to, she believes you're wasting your time. 'Because the thought isn't backed up by what you want, the idea is just a head trip making motivation difficult.'

When it comes to the good and bad forms of stress, Vermeulen links these to motivation. While in South Africa we've been bombarded with motivational hype, Vermeulen quickly shoots this myth down. 'Only two things motivate us; 1) moving towards creating the life we want and 2) moving away from the things we don't like or don't want.' The first she claims is more powerful as the second is a bit like driving your motorcar with only the rear-view mirror to guide you!

Good stress she says is the energy we feel when we're excited about who we can become. Bad stress exists when we're disgruntled with our lot. 'The very thing we need to change a bad situation is energy. But too often people don't have much because they've allowed their power to drain right out of them. This is stressful.'

She also claims that one of the biggest energy drains comes from a poor self-image. 'Few people truly believe in themselves and this is often the root of the most uncomfortable form of stress. It means having to hide behind a mask and behaviours like bravado or arrogance are good examples. A lot of energy is wasted to maintain either façade.' Of the opinion that a healthy self-esteem is simply about accepting yourself 'warts and all', Vermeulen believes that befriending yourself goes a long way to reducing this kind of harmful stress.

So when it comes to motivational hype she believes you can yell slogans at yourself all you like, but unless you know where you're heading and believe you can achieve what you want, don't expect to be motivated. Over the years she has trained thousands of people and sadly she says if she's met a handful of people who knew what they wanted out of life, it's a lot. Clearly the rest are suffering from the worst form of stress.

'The problem is that if you don't know what you want, you can't control your life. And if you're not in the driving seat, someone else will be for sure. This will drain even more of your power.' Believing happiness boosts your immunity to stress, she claims that changing these energy-draining habits will help balance the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual components of one's life. If you don't, you too could risk joining the highly stressed in a big rush to go nowhere.

Stephanie Vermeulen of *The Effective Training Corporation* runs practical training programmes on Applied EQ in both business and public forums as well as being an inspiring conference speaker and personal coach.

Her books, *Stitched-up: Who Fashions Women's Lives?* and *EQ: Emotional Intelligence for Everyone* are available from all leading bookstores and online from Amazon and Kalahari. She can be contacted on:

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