



RELAX during a crisis? ... Exactly!
by Gregory Lay

"Every day's a crisis," Jeff grumped to his car pool after work. "If it isn't an urgent deadline, then the boss is mad or equipment is on the fritz! I never get to relax, no matter how hard I try!"

From the front seat, Alicia gave a full-throated laugh. "Did you hear yourself? You can't relax because you're trying so hard to relax!"

"When you put it that way, it does sound silly," Jeff admitted. "But it's true. I know that when we're stressed, we make more mistakes, but how do you get over the stress?"

Alicia shifted position to make eye contact. "Working under stress is like swimming in a tar pit. Even if you get to the other side, you're too exhausted to appreciate the achievement."

"That's it. I do a good job, but never have time to enjoy the feeling."

"How do you try to relax?"

"The usual," he said and ticked off relaxation techniques: breathe deeply; drink water; laugh; music; quiet time; stretch; and go for a walk.

"Good activities," Alicia nodded. "What do you think about while you do them?"

Silence told her what she needed to know. "Let's help you relax your attitude as you relax your muscles. I'll bring you a checklist."

What Alicia understands is that stress is a choice. The brain must do something in a pressure situation, but it needs a better plan than just tightening muscles. That makes us look stressed and feel tired, even though we don't realize it's our own unconscious decision. Trying harder to relax does the opposite of what we need! When we try harder and harder, the job gets ... harder and harder!

When Jeff slid into the back seat the next morning, Alicia quietly handed him a folded paper. Opening it, he found five ideas under the heading:

R.E.L.A.X.

Re-direct frustration.

When a situation, co-workers, or attitudes frustrate you, negative feelings don't contribute to a solution. Name The Frustration and tell it that it's now the solution! Energy you were giving to feeling frustrated now goes to feeling motivated! You're too smart to waste emotions on negativity, so invite better attitudes with encouraging words. By choice, lazy becomes mindful, uncooperative turns into independent, or angry comes out as passionate.

When you see your attitude arrow pointing down, use language skills to rewrite it in a positive direction. This thought exercise will improve physical capacity and relationships with your team. Don't feed frustration - redirect it.

Expect positivity.

When stress reigns, we look at anybody smiling and conclude that they don't understand the situation. Optimists must be idiots, we say; this is a situation to take seriously. But 'seriously' takes more energy than 'lightly' and doesn't move any faster. Expect yourself and others to arrive with a positive attitude and keep it all day!

Expect colleagues to respond to your smile and good attitude with one of their own. They probably won't at first; frowning and pessimism are powerful habits. But keep expecting the best of them – that's the positive thing to do – and over time you'll be an instrument of improvement in many lives. To spread positivity, be positive from the inside out.

Lift a ton.

When a 'ton' of work weighs you down – start lifting!

Nobody can lift an entire ton, but pretty much anybody can lift five pounds at a time. Measured progress toward a stressful goal takes attention away from the stress and puts it where it belongs: on your ability. Pick up what you can handle right now and carry it where you want it to be. Then go back for another load. You can lift a ton – and instead of being injured by unreasonable expectations, you'll be strengthened by doing as much as you comfortably can, a little at a time.

People who tie themselves up with stress will urge you to join them in discomfort. Your healthy response is a smile and invitation to help you make reasonable, steady progress as you R.E.L.A.X.

Acknowledge little achievements.

When looking at a ton of a task, it may feel strange to celebrate an ounce of achievement. Waiting until the whole ton is done doesn't provide enough encouragement. Start the applause when the task is begun and keep it going throughout the process.

Recognizing little tasks that have been done well become road signs that guide the team in the right direction. Withholding acknowledgment until you reach a major milestone is limiting the fuel needed to reach that milestone.

X marks the spot.

Treasure maps have an 'X' to show where treasure is buried. Your treasure is a worthy long-term goal. Everybody on the team knows where we're going and why. They want to enjoy the journey a step at a time, but the journey has a purpose and anybody who doesn't keep goals in sight won't stay focused on productive relaxation.

This is positive leadership. Not showing stress is showing your team how to get the job done without frustrating themselves.

Jeff folded the paper and said, "Cool acronym. I see how a relaxed attitude makes the physical actions more effective. Let's see if I remember:

Re-direct frowns to your laugh muscle.

Expect positivity, starting with myself.

Lift a ton, a few pounds at a time.

Acknowledge small achievements.

X marks the spot of a worthwhile objective."

"You've got it!" exclaimed Alicia. "Just remember that the most important time to engage your relaxation attitude is exactly when you don't think you've got time for it!"

About the author:

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