

Pearls of Leadership Wisdom: Tuning in to Stress

Hello and welcome to my backyard and Pearls of Leadership Wisdom. You know last month, May, was mental health awareness month, and as a psychologist, I am always keenly aware of others' emotional health and well-being. And despite the fact that our world is beginning to open up, it is still a psychologically stressful time for many. So how do you stay attuned to signs of stress in yourself, or in others, during these times?

First a story: When I was a grad student, I had the very good fortune of attending the seminar with Dr. Harry Levinson, who was a very well-known clinical psychologist, leadership guru, and professor at Harvard. His seminar was on signs of stress and how to recognize signs of stress in yourself or others. In the first stage, Dr. Levinson said "the first sign of stress is that you become even more like yourself." I love those words, "even more like yourself." That is, if you are an extrovert, I can verify this, you become even more extroverted and reach out more. If you are an organized, neat individual, you tend to become even neater. If you are more introverted, you tend to immerse yourself more in books or in a podcast. No matter what it is that's typical of you, you become even more like yourself.

In the second stage of reaction to stress, your personality derailers begin to take over. Many of you have had an opportunity to complete the Hogan Development Survey, which gives you information about your own personality derailers, but let me show you how they might work. If you tend to be cautious, under stress you will become even more cautious and hesitant to act. If you are excitable, it will be far more difficult to control your emotions—they seem to run away with you. Or if you are bold, you'll become even more confident and dismissive of others' ideas. So in this second stage, it is difficult to control the derailers that you might otherwise be able to keep in check.

Dr. Levinson went on to talk about the third stage of stress reaction, which he called the danger zone, and the danger zone is when we become entirely opposite of ourselves. We are not who we normally are. Let me give you an example: The person who is normally neat and orderly shows up for the zoom call sloppily dressed. The individual who was normally highly extroverted and talkative, clams up. Or the person who was more introverted is suddenly highly talkative and animated. Or the person who is normally peaceful and patient seems suddenly angry and critical. Those are signs of the third stage for the danger zone. If you notice that someone else is moving into stage 2 or 3, don't hesitate, go talk to them. An example might be saying something like "I can tell you're not yourself, if there's anything you want to talk about, I'm here to listen. I'm here to support you." That's all you need, no guessing, no blaming, just a simple observation and an offer to help.

What if it's you and you notice that you are in stage 2 or 3? But then how do you help yourself? What do you do when you recognize that your derailers are getting in the way or that you really are not able to bring your best self? I think one of the most important things is to recognize that there is an issue and that you need to talk to someone. It is truly a sign of strength to be able to say "I'm struggling with a few things right now and I would like your help." Don't be afraid to let others know that you want or need their help.



So exercise your mental awareness and be aware of stages of stress in yourself and others. If you put a premium on your own emotional well-being, just like your physical well-being, I know that you will be much better able to bring your best self to all that you do. Thanks for listening.