Breaking the cycle of high-performer burnout with Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe

June 08, 2022

If you are feeling physically, mentally or emotionally exhausted due to prolonged work-related stress, you may be struggling with career or high-performer burnout.

BLG members recently attended ***The Professionalism Series: Resilience and Wellness in Ever-Changing Times***, led by award-winning psychology and education instructor Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe. In this two-part series, Dr. Robyne discussed how to deal with burnout, stressors and change, and provided practical tools to help high-performers become more resilient while simultaneously increasing productivity.

Strategies for resiliency

Dr. Robyne discussed the relationship linking stress to how we perform in our daily lives, and how high stress eventually leads to burnout, particularly for high-performers.

Dr. Robyne explained that stress is a biological response that causes our bodies to produce the cortisol hormone to give us increased energy, focus, motivation and drive. However, when we have too many stressors, high levels of cortisol become harmful over time. She shared that the three symptoms of burnout are chronic exhaustion, cynicism and decrease in job performance.

Unfortunately, burnout will not disappear on its own; it requires active recovery. To begin treating burnout, Dr. Robyne shared her theory the “Five Pillars of Everyday Resiliency” that can be practiced in both our personal and professional lives:

1. *Belonging*: Having a “home team” (family, friends, chosen community) in your corner for support, encouragement, psychological safety and a foundation of trust. Taking care of these relationships because you know that they matter.
2. *Perspective*: Recognizing what is in front of you. Seeing the big picture and figuring out how to align your behaviour and your work. Having capacity to see the world and identify what matters most. This grows in relation to our lived experiences.
3. *Acceptance*: Deciphering what is controllable in your life. Not depleting your resources on things that are uncontrollable or unchangeable. Using your energy and resources where they can have impact or facilitate influence.

4. *Hope*: Adopting hope-filled practices. Living in hope with others. Protection of morale.
5. *Humour*: Using humour as a biological tool to release and reprieve. When we laugh, our bodies release a natural tranquilizer that blocks our pain receptors.

Mastering wellness changes

Dr. Robyne built on the foundation of resiliency and identified how we can adapt our behaviours to reduce burnout and increase wellness. She explained that we do not necessarily need to get rid of our stressors altogether; we just need to learn to work with what we have.

Based on her research, Dr. Robyne found that six areas contribute to the burden of high-paced, challenging and uncertain work ecosystems: workload, control, community, compensation, fairness and values. Her findings showed that when people started to question whether these aspects of their work life were reasonable, they often found that they were not.

Dr. Robyne explained that change is a necessary factor in adapting our behaviours. When we look at the happiness research, we know that the most desirable human state is progression – we are happiest when we are working towards something. She shared that we must acknowledge that change is hard for many reasons: our individual histories with change, our perceptions of change, the known vs. the unknown, our egos, the expectation or length of change.

Another device used for behaviour change and improving wellness is the concept of psychological safety. Dr. Robyne explained that psychological safety is the freedom to be seen, heard and respected for who we are, and to feel safe from harm, reprisal and rejection. She shared some tools to fostering psychological safety, such as being accountable and following through, being transparent, fostering community, connect and foster feedback culture and having the courage to intervene in difficult situations or conversations.

Dr. Robyne shared the following tips for aligned wellness practices:

- focus on mono-tasking as opposed to multi-tasking, which can make us feel constantly overstimulated;
- write out daily “to do” “to be” and “not to be” lists to set intentions for your day;
- develop a practice or ritual to be present between meetings (for example, hop on the spot before jumping onto your next meeting);
- practice the 20-20-20 screen rule: for every 20 minutes of looking at your screen, look away for 20 seconds and then look 20 feet into the distance;
- breaking your day in quarters (morning, midday, afternoon, evening) will allow you to realize your days are much richer than you think;
- bookending your day to unwind;
- dial in on your morning and evening routines to feel grounded, ready and aware;
- use your individual skills, talents, gifts in a way that can support recovery; and
- practice “light-housing” by using a symbol or word that makes you feel aligned and that reminds you that all is well.

Dr. Robyne left us with these gentle reminders: do not be afraid to make mistakes, practice makes better, and change is hard because it is supposed to be. “If you stumble, just realize you’re not starting from scratch…thankfully, we can all do hard things,” she concluded.

By

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