



Episode 49: Two tools to help when others are stressed

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Here's my question today: do the people you work with ever get stressed out? Today's topic answers a question a client asked me: How can I help other people when they get stressed?

Having tools to help others when they are overwhelmed, worried, or angry is important. After all, others people's emotions affect how they approach and interact with us, and emotions are contagious. Stress affects the body and brain, and people often think, say, and do things when they're having a stress reaction that they would not typically do or say when their bodies and brains are calm.

If supporting others is strong value of yours, you want to have ways to support the people around you when they're stressed. In addition to helping them think more effectively and positively, trying intentional strategies will benefit you as the recipient of the person's energies.

Today, let's help you build that leadership skill of helping others shift overwhelm, worry, and frustration into more solutioning, confidence, and clear ways of thinking. Let's talk about two strategies you might try, knowing that while using strategies to help others is in your control, their mindset, thoughts, and actions are 100% out of your control.

Many of my clients work in high-pressure, fast-paced organizations with a lot of meetings, high expectations, and daily metaphorical "fires" that create conditions ripe for stress reactions to unfold. When that happens, cortisol and adrenalin increase, circulate around the body and the brain, and, among their effects, impair the thinking of a part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex.

That's a problem, because this part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, allows us to think effectively. It allows us to see different perspectives, think long term, and make good decisions. Under stress, with impaired prefrontal cortex thinking, we make poor decisions, we're unable to think long-term, and we get stuck in a fixed mindset. Empathy, self-control, and innovation go out the window.

You know what that sounds like. When you're talking with someone who's stressed, they might be thinking in a rigid way – they are right and others are wrong. Or they might be thinking in a chaotic way, not knowing where to start or how to get clarity.

The first step in helping someone who's stressed is for you to recognize it. Awareness allows for choice, and after you are aware someone's brain might be under the influence of stress hormones, you can choose what you say or do. You get to be intentional.

My clients often share stories of being in meetings where someone is stressed. That person might be blaming others. They might be using inappropriate language or tone, or unwilling to hear another point of view.

When you notice these signs of stress in someone else, pause and take a breath. Remind yourself that their brain is not thinking effectively, and that you might want to approach them in another way. Because chances are that if the conversation continues, it's unlikely to be fruitful and possibly even damaging.

When you're with someone else who is stressed, and you can't easily leave, it's important to stay centered and grounded. The calmer and clearer you are about what you want, what your boundaries are, and what your choices are, the more positive the outcome is likely to be and the more empowered you'll feel.

Years ago, when I was in medical school, I was on a rotation in internal medicine and one night in the hospital, a code was called. A patient had stopped breathing and the code was an urgent announcement for help. I was with my senior resident, and she saw me prepare to run down the hall. She stopped me and said, We have to stay calm. Because if we show up stressed, that's not going to help anyone. Instead of running, we walked quickly down the hall, talking through different protocols.

Decades later, I still think of her advice. We can help others most by staying calm and clear-headed ourselves.

So, let's talk strategies. Let's suppose you're in a meeting and someone's getting heated. They're firing questions at you that feel like they're attacking you. They're angry. What can you try?

After you realize their brain is stressed, take a few deep breaths. Then, here's one strategy you can try.

It's called naming the emotion. You can listen for what's going on beneath their words and name the emotion you hear. They might be worried or they might be feeling powerless. How we feel drives what we say and do, and looking for the feeling creating the words and tone can help you understand the source of their behavior.

Here's how the strategy of naming the emotion sounds. Wow, that's a lot of frustration, you might say. Or, it sounds like you're really worried.

Naming the emotion is a neuroscience tool that helps the brain calm down and helps the prefrontal cortex return to its effective thinking.

When people say things to us from anger or frustration, many of us feel like we have to address the words directly coming at us. We feel pressured to defend or explain. Please remember this: You don't have to.

You can try to help defuse the stress by naming the emotion you hear and see if the other person can also recognize the emotion they're experiencing.

Naming our emotions without getting into the reasons behind them helps calm the brain.

The second strategy to help someone who is stressed is to create space and an energetic container for their thinking with a strategy called clearing. At work, this strategy can be especially helpful with direct reports and colleagues.

Clearing is a way for people who have a lot on their minds to speak all of their thoughts out loud in order to clear them out. This makes room for other ways of thinking.

Clearing is similar to venting, in that it allows someone to express their thoughts and feelings. It's different from venting, though, in that with venting, there's usually a judgmental component. When someone vents to you, they want you to agree with them. Isn't that other person horrible? Yes, they are, they want you to say.

Imagine the strategy of clearing is like clearing off a work space that's covered in papers. After you clear off a cluttered desk, it's easier to work. It's the same with the brain. After you clear out the cluttering thoughts in your head, it's easier to return to effective thinking.

Many of my clients who support others find this tool helpful. They tell me that when they try clearing, it allows them to support others in a way that's emotionally easier.

If you're going to offer to listen to someone clear, it's important to explain the process. For example, suppose someone comes into your office already launching into a litany of complaints. You can say something like, "It sounds like there's a lot on your mind. Let's try clearing. I'll set a timer for 3 minutes and you can tell me all of your thoughts. I'll listen without commenting. After you're done, we'll decide what needs our attention."

Then let them clear. Feel free to prompt them with, "What else?" as necessary. Stay silent until the end, and then say, "Now that you've cleared it all, what would you like to talk about?"

Clearing helps someone feel heard, which calms their brain and their thinking so that they can return to being productive sooner.

Let's bring these strategies to your leadership. In the next few weeks, be on the lookout for stress in others. When you hear it, pause, take a breath and try one of your two new strategies: naming the emotion and clearing.

And always remember: it's in your control to invite others to shift their thinking. It is not in your control what happens. Even if they stay stressed, you'll feel proud that you stayed centered and brought your most effective thinking to the situation.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you would like to build your toolkit of strategies, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a complimentary consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!