

Cortisol Soup...(Not So) Good For The Soul

Fifty thousand years ago, our Paleolithic ancestors faced many threats that we modern humans don't face today. Between ferocious predators, inclement weather and rival tribes, it's a wonder that we actually survived as a species. As it turns out, nature has equipped us with a few physiological compounds to increase our likelihood of survival. These chemicals give us that slight edge to increase the chances that we'll make it to see tomorrow.

These survival tools include the reward neurotransmitter, dopamine; the leadership and confidence booster, serotonin; and the "fight or flight" stress hormone, cortisol. Of these, cortisol plays the most significant role in our immediate survival, yet can be the most devastating to our long-term health.

Cortisol is released in response to perceived threats and stressful situations by causing the classic fight, flight or freeze response. Once released, cortisol causes increased respiration and heart rate, constriction of peripheral vision and hyper focus. While all good responses if we're fleeing from a saber-toothed tiger, chronic release of cortisol causes impaired concentration, sleep disturbances, increased blood pressure and lower immune function.

Our modern work environments often create levels of anxiety and stress resulting in a constant release of cortisol. For me, the most common causes of stress include running behind schedule, employees out sick, adoption of new technology and poor cash flow. This "cortisol soup" that we live in results in the same "fight, flight or freeze" response by our team members which creates bad attitudes, lack of cooperation, hard feelings and competition, all which create a less than ideal work environment.

Identifying the root causes of stress in the workplace is crucial to creating the type of culture that most of us want. Your role as a leader is to create the type of environment that reduces anxiety and lessens the likelihood that your team will continue to swim in the toxins of cortisol. Affectively communicating your Vision, creating a culture of trust, and consistently striving to improve communication and teamwork can help accomplish this.

- Mick Kling, OD