

What Happens When You Connect the Dots of Stress, Mindset and Values?

Behavioural and neuroscience research is turning how we think about and deal with stress on its head. By helping employees rethink their approach to stress, companies can improve the wellbeing, confidence and performance of their people.

01 STRESS Something we care about is at stake.	02 MINDSET Our beliefs shape how we respond.	03 VALUES Meaning helps us use pressure more constructively.
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Resilience has become a buzzword in recent years, both in and outside the workplace. Yet it means different things to different people. The most common definition from employees we see is “the ability to bounce back”.

It's worth taking a moment to clarify what we mean by resilience. Resilience is a facet of the wider concept of mental toughness and the 4Cs model - Control, Commitment, Confidence and Challenge - as defined by Clough and Strycharczyk.

RESILIENCE

Control + Commitment

The ability to control our emotions and commit to our goals and purpose.

IN LAY TERMS

The ability to achieve what we set out to do by controlling how we deal with the bumps along the road.

The good news is that resilience can be measured and developed.

Research over recent years has shed light on how mindset and values play a significant role in a person's ability to deal effectively with the long-term stress that is part of modern working life.

RETHINK THE RELATIONSHIP

Stress Is Not Simply the Enemy

The old saying “If you can’t beat them, join them” is very apt when it comes to the new approach to dealing with stress. To date, stress interventions have largely focused on avoidance strategies. This is often impossible, as much of what causes us to feel stressed is beyond our control and is sometimes what we value most.

Stress is what happens when something we care about is at stake.

Embracing the fact that we care about whatever is the source of stress can become one of the best ways of dealing with it. The amount of stress a person faces isn’t a predictor of how well they will deal with it.

Research is now showing that the biggest single predictor of how we fare under stress is our beliefs about it.

CHANGE THE BELIEF

Mindset Changes the Experience

To improve our ability to deal with stress, we first need to change our mindset about its source. The prevailing view has been that stress is detrimental to both short-term performance and long-term health. Stress has been shown to adversely affect cognitive performance and immunity, but it is now also being shown to enhance immunity simply by changing our mindset.

THE RESEARCH

A study conducted by Professor Alia Crum of Harvard University involved 400 people from an international financial institution.

Those with a “stress-is-enhancing mindset” demonstrated better health, greater life satisfaction and better work performance than those with a stress-is-debilitating mindset.

A subset of the 400 people was shown a series of three-minute videos over the following week. The videos illustrated either a stress-is-enhancing or stress-is-debilitating view. Those who watched the stress-is-enhancing videos demonstrated significant increases in wellbeing and work performance.

Another study demonstrated that people with a “stress-is-positive” mindset used productive strategies to deal with stress rather than negative avoidance strategies.

Changing our mindset is a relatively easy, quick and long-lasting thing to do. Numerous studies show that simple and relatively inexpensive tools, such as videos, short e-courses and writing, can have a powerful and lasting effect on mindset and our ability to deal with stress, thereby enhancing resilience.

In simple terms, stress is bad because we think it is. If we can show employees a different way to view and use stress – a growth mindset, in Carol Dweck’s terms – we can help build their resilience.

CONNECT PRESSURE TO PURPOSE

Values Change What Stress Means

Building resilience in the face of stress can be more powerful when we connect the source of stress to the values that are important to us or to the company.

The more meaningful the work we are engaged in, often the more stressful it is – because we care about it. Conversely, the more stress we can cope with effectively because we care about it.

A meaningful life is often a stressful life. This is the stress paradox.

When we can identify and connect our purpose with the source of stress, we become more positive and enthusiastic. It helps take us out of the moment, gain perspective on the source of stress and avoid being swallowed up by negative emotions.

THE PURPOSE QUESTION

What is the reason I do the work I do?

Companies, managers and supervisors who can help every person answer this question – and find personal meaning in that answer – will see lower levels of stress and improved performance.

The organisational challenge

The challenge for HR, leaders and managers is how to help people connect their personal values with those of the company and the work they do. It means identifying the bigger impact the business has and the good each person does through their work.

Facilitating this clarity will support people to perform under pressure and be more resilient through tough times.

This requires a holistic approach encompassing senior leadership, HR and communications teams.

STRESS Notice what is at stake and why it matters.	MINDSET Challenge the belief that stress can only be harmful.	VALUES Reconnect pressure to meaning and purpose.
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FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

How Can Your Organisation Connect the Dots?

Stress is not a single problem with a single solution. How people experience pressure is shaped by what they believe about it and what it means to them.

01	NOTICE THE STRESS	What is creating pressure? What do people care about that makes this feel important?
02	EXPLORE THE MINDSET	What beliefs are helping or hindering people? Is stress seen only as damaging, or also as information and energy?
03	CONNECT THE VALUES	How does the work link to personal meaning, organisational purpose and the difference people want to make?
04	BUILD THE RESPONSE	What practical support, conversations and learning will help people use the insight under pressure?

THE AQR WAY

Find the friction. Focus on what matters.
Measure the difference.

Understanding the connection between pressure, belief and meaning can help organisations support resilience without pretending stress can simply be removed.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

If you would like to explore how your people respond to pressure - and what may help them perform more effectively - talk to AQR Consulting.

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