Perception: living real life... finding real happiness

Self-Compassion: More Motivating Than Ice Cream

The New World of Work: The Impact of Workplace Culture
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Chaired by Dr. Michel Woodbury-Farina, the role of this board is to develop initiatives and communications to serve the stress management needs of all people.

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Stress is everywhere these days. Not only are we constantly bombarded with stressful messages thanks to our 24/7 news coverage, we are also being told just how terrible stress is for our body, mind and spirit. And what do we get as a result? More stress!

One thing often left out of the conversation is the fact that stress is also quite good for us, and may be necessary for our survival. When Hans Selye originated the concept of stress he recognized the need to differentiate between positive and negative factors, or eustress and distress. Yet when we talk about stress, we typically refer to the nagging, destructive type without considering all of the positive ways stress stimulates us to grow, adapt, and even become more aware of what’s most important to us. After all, we wouldn’t be so stressed if it didn’t matter to us, right?

Through his research in positive psychology, AIS Member, Shawn Achor and his team at Good Think, Inc. have connected many of the dots between stress and personal performance, helping clients see the value of moving towards stress in a way that fuels them instead of breaking them down. In our feature article, Achor shares with us one recent study that evaluated the impact of a training program focused on re-thinking stress; shifting focus away from it’s destructive properties to a more growth-based perspective. In a follow up discussion, AIS Member, Judy Martin provides additional insight into the state of the current workplace and challenges organizations face trying to quantify the ROI on such programs. AIS Fellow Alison Caldwell Andrews further explores strategies to shift perception by utilizing self-compassion techniques grounded in exciting new research.

As always, we conclude our discussion by considering both sides of the issue, asking how stress affects you personally and encouraging readers to
reflect on times when stress helped them grow. Keep the conversation going by connecting with us online - tweet us at @ais_stressnews or post your response on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/aistress

Take a moment to reflect on your own perspective of stress as you consider simple mindset shifts that will help you optimize the benefits of what stress may have to offer.

**Friend or Foe?**

Dr. Hanna discusses a recent mindshift that helped her rethink stress on her interview with Emotional Mojo.
Tools, Tips and Techniques to help you live better!

Video: Managing Stress by Brainsmart BBC

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnpQrMqDoqE

Video:
TALKS | TEDX

Shawn Achor: The happy secret to better work
GET INSIDE OUR HEAD

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The American Institute of Stress is a non-profit organization established in 1978 at the request of Dr. Hans Selye (the Founder of the Stress Concept) to serve as a clearinghouse for information on all stress related subjects. AIS Founding Fellows include:

Paul Rosch  Linus Pauling  Alvin Toffler  Bob Hope  Michael DeBakey  Herbert Benson  Charles Spielberger

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This is to certify that Imagine YOUR Name Here, having satisfied the requirements, is hereby qualified and elected as Fellow of the American Institute of Stress and is entitled to all the benefits deriving therefrom.

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The Power of Rethinking Stress

By AIS Member, Shawn Anchor
I’m not arguing that some stress is good for you; you’ve heard that before. I’m hypothesizing that your mindset regarding stress dictates whether stress is debilitating or enhancing. By changing your mindset, you can significantly improve your health and engagement levels at work even in the midst of crisis.

To test that theory, I and two Yale researchers, Alia Crum and Peter Salovey, designed a study at UBS in the midst of a banking crisis. The results were just published in the top psychology journal (JPSP) and a full explanation is available in my new book Before Happiness (Crown Business).

Let me explain how to make stress work for you.
In the crisis of 2009, we teamed up with senior leaders at UBS and enlisted 380 managers to take part in a study. Crum and I showed two three-minute videos to two groups of UBS managers. Group 1 watched videos that contained the statistics typically cited in corporate trainings:

- Stress is related to the 10 leading causes of death in the US.
- 70-90% of doctor visits are due to stress related symptoms.
- An estimated 1 million workers are absent on an average workday because of stress-related complaints.

The second group watched a video that painted a different picture:

- Stress boosts performance on cognitive tasks and memory.
- Stress can increase cognitive processing.
- Stress can create mental toughness, deeper social bonds, strengthened priorities, and a sense of meaning, a phenomenon called post-traumatic growth.

These researched facts, though less well known, are equally true. Doctors at Stanford University have even found that stress causes the release of growth hormones, which help rebuild cells, synthesize protein, and enhance immunity.

Then we re-assessed the employees using several measures, including the Stress Mindset Measure (SMM), the Work Performance Scale, and the 77-question Mood and Anxiety Symptom Questionnaire (MASQ), which evaluates individual physical and mood-related symptoms. Those who had watched the video highlighting the enhancing rather than debilitating effects of stress reported a 23 percent drop in physical symptoms such as headaches, backaches, fatigue. And on a scale of 1 to 4, productivity assessment moved from 1.9 to 2.6—nearly a 30 percent increase.

The lesson? Stop fighting stress. Stress is a fight-or-flight response, and when you fight or flee from stress, you only make it worse.
How can you make stress work for you?

We then trained UBS employees in a program called Rethinking Stress (rethinkingstress.com) using this 3 step approach, “Say it, Own it, Use it.”

Acknowledge the stress.

Reconnect to the meaning in the stress. Why does this matter in the first place?

Channel the heightened response toward that meaning.

Stress disconnected from the meaning seems to be what causes the negative affect we see at on productivity, engagement and health. I’m not claiming that stress is always positive, or trying to debunk the literature that stress does indeed have negative effects. I’m simply trying to show that there are multiple ways of looking at the effects of stress, and that one’s mindset regarding stress may determine which response will be produced. Stress at work is a reality. But while stress is inevitable, its negative effects are not.
Perception Of Workplace Culture Carries Weight

By AIS Member, Judy Martin
As the work-life balance debate roars on with employees wondering whether to lean-in or lean-out these days, perception is everything. In fact, it could be the saving grace for a work place culture currently writhing with stressors like economic uncertainty, increasing workload, lack of control and burnout from overwork.

Perception, Shawn Achor argues, is the special sauce that can brew tangible results, making for a happier workforce. In his new book, Before Happiness: The 5 Hidden Keys to Achieving Success, Spreading Happiness and Sustaining Positive Change, the Harvard educated researcher says that seeing work through a positive lens can change ones experience at work and even boost performance and an ability to better respond to stress.

Achor’s expansive global research suggests that before happiness, comes ones perception of the world. Achor says, creating a positive reality at work is not just about being optimistic, but instead, creating a mindset in which you inherently believe change is possible through summoning your own intellectual and emotional resources to create positive change.
Current Snapshot of the Workforce

But that kind of reality has been hard to muster for many working in a culture where the bottom-line has often trumped employee well-being and chronic stress has become the norm. If workers don’t have the tools or mindset to change their perception of stress, manage long-term stress, or learn to cultivate resilience – chronic stress at work renders employees ineffective, unproductive and pained. Consequently for example, 65% of workers cite work as a significant source of stress (APA, 2013).

Flipping perception of workplace stress, as Achor suggests in his research, is a significant discussion as companies wrangle with trying to boost engagement, which is desperately in need of a perception shift. Gallup’s 2013 State of the American Workforce Report, found 70% of full time workers are either disengaged or miserable.

Fostering a Perception of Valuing Employees

In the face of dwindling engagement and happiness at work, perception of being cared for in a workplace culture that encourages wellness, just might boast a more committed and happy workforce.

A survey by Virgin HealthMiles Inc. and Workforce Management Magazine, suggests as much. 77% of employees responded that “health and wellness programs positively impact the culture at work.”

HealthMiles, a workplace health engagement company and part of Sir Richard Branson’s Virgin Group, surveyed about 1,300 businesses and 10,000 employees for its annual survey. The study found a strong link between the wellness and vitality of an organization, and the wellness of employees. The result of which was increased job morale, satisfaction, commitment and performance.

“Creating a culture-first mentality is a critical step for employers when it comes to building a highly engaged workforce,” said Chris Boyce, CEO of Virgin HealthMiles.

But measuring a culture of wellness in terms of spreadsheets still evades the bean counters to a degree. And while quantifying the bottom-line impact of
such programs is challenging, Boyce says the trends in the survey are key to the bigger picture.

“Employees become much more motivated and productive when they know that their employer cares about their total quality of life, which goes beyond traditional wellness and includes physical, emotional, financial and social health.”

Those are metrics that David Ballard PsyD, MBA is very familiar with. He is the director of the Center for Organizational Excellence, of the American Psychological Association.

“The impact of well-being on the bottom line can be difficult to tease out, since human behavior is complex and determined by multiple factors,” says Ballard. But he adds that quantifying such efforts also requires a change in perspective. There are employers he says, who understand that well-being and performance are inextricably linked, although a (not sure what word should be here... thorough?) return-on-investment might not be directly revealed on the spreadsheets.

“Forward-thinking organizations are re-evaluating work practices and providing employees with resources that support well-being and performance. They are creating psychologically healthy workplaces that are diverse and productive, resilient and successful,” says Ballard.

Perception and Recruitment
Perception of a company’s attitude toward employee well-being is becoming a talking point in recruitment circles as work-related stress continues to be a point of discussion. The Virgin Health-Miles/Workforce survey found that about 87% of employees said they consider health and wellness offerings when choosing an employer.

Perhaps that’s a harbinger of things to come in a competitive global marketplace where attracting and retaining skilled talent is crucial for the bottom-line. Still, as Achor discusses in his book, perception of a happy working environment might have less to do with choosing ones next employer, than it does with individuals allowing for a new perception to emerge toward creating a more positive reality.
Change Your Perception of Yourself

Self-Compassion: It's More Motivating Than Criticism or Ice Cream

By Alison Caldwell Andrews, MD, FAIS

Gaille walked into my office feeling beat up by life. Prone to too much guilt and struggling against anxiety and depression, she just felt like she could never become the person she “should” have been already. She told me she couldn’t reliably keep commitments to herself or her family. She became visibly uncomfortable when talking about letting someone down “yet again,” and it was painful to hear her bitter self-criticism.

Reminds me of one of my favorite quotes, though I cannot remember the source: "No one wakes up in the morning thinking I’d like to suffer the whole day. Not even French intellectuals."

When Gaille came to treatment, she had asked for help in learning how to actually do what she already knew she needed to do. But what she really needed most was self-compassion. Here’s an analogy: If Gaille was a building project under construction, self-compassion was the needed rebar in her foundation.

Gaille wasn't raised to be kind to herself. Her parents were hard on themselves and they had high expectations of her. She agreed with those expec-
tations, and contrary to popular magazine “wisdom,” the solution to her self-described failure wasn’t to change what she wanted of herself by lowering expectations. Rather, the solution was to strengthen her so she was able to reach higher. Previously, every time she stretched she would sink a little farther. Firming up her foundation was the first step in helping Gaille achieve her goals.

Rather than first toning down depression and anxiety, we began therapy by cultivating positive emotions. Foremost was self-compassion, an emotion that has been shown to reduce the negative impacts of stress-induced cortisol and increase the soothing power that comes from relaxation-inducing hormones such as oxytocin. Self-compassion is a relatively new therapeutic component that has received a fair amount of attention in England, thanks to the work of Paul Gilbert, and a lesser amount of attention here in the United States despite the valuable work of researchers such as Kristin Neff at UT-Austin.

Like many women (and women tend to struggle with self-compassion more than men), Gaille responded in three ways that are typical of people who are low in self-compassion behaviors: She criticized herself, in some cases harshly and incessantly.

She increased her sense of isolation, thinking things like “Nobody else is this bad” or “I don’t deserve these friends.” She was stuck in a cycle of endless rumination (worrying).

In fact, Gaille would often lay awake in bed, going over and over the problems she saw in herself, and feeling horribly about her apparent inability to just “get over herself” and make positive changes. The shame, guilt, disappointment and anger she felt not only reduced her ability to be kind to others, but was also destroying her health. It was not surprising that she had trouble with irritable bowel syndrome, or that her frequent colds interfered with her work and attempts at exercise.

Suffering is hard and we all do too much of it. Some of us were taught to suffer by parents or grandparents who were probably simply doing their best. But this legacy not only feels emotionally crippling, it can also get in the way of our long-term growth and goals.

Over the past several decades, we have jumped on the hope that self-esteem is the answer to an impoverished sense of self. We prop up our self-disregard with affirmations, we create artificial successes so our children will feel good about themselves, and at the end of the day we still feel empty.

This is because we are facing a spiritual problem, not a success problem. Part of the spiritual problem we have is that we do not understand how to treat ourselves with compassion, nor do we even know what that means. All the affirmations in the world won’t fix a lack of self-compassion. And all the self-esteem in the world won’t help you when you are faced with repeated discouragement and you are unable to find the motivation to do what you know would help you.

The key is simply this: the way to get yourself to do what you need to do isn’t
to beat yourself harder. Rather it's to learn to be self-compassionate.

Now before you jump to conclusions about what that actually means, let's talk about a few things that self-compassion isn't. Self-compassion isn't self-indulgence.

This is probably the most common misunderstanding about self-compassion that I run into. If you increase your level of self-compassion, you won't be in danger of ditching work, eating chocolate cake and watching the Price is Right all day. That's self-indulgence (well, self-indulgence for some, punishment for others!). You'll actually find your motivation increasing because you're reacting to attempts at achievement with encouragement rather than criticism. Self-compassion is not entitlement or self-pity. Ever notice how we tend to say

“when things get back to normal?” What is normal anyway? When I take a look at my life, the elusive “normal” doesn't happen often enough to technically qualify as “normal!” Instead, I find myself in the midst of challenges and frustration. And when I really take a moment to think about it, I prefer it this way. Life has a lot to teach me, and I'm not going to learn it sitting by the pool while someone else fills my drink!

We're all in the same boat. The times in our lives that are filled with peace and prosperity, love and success, are not common moments. Bad things happen to all of us. If I want to comfort myself with a bowl of ice-cream, that might be morally okay but it shouldn't be confused with self-compassion. Self-compassion isn't about what you “deserve” or about entitlement. And self-compassion isn't the same thing as self-pity, where you focus on your own problems and tend to forget that those around you experience problems too. Life is difficult for everyone and remembering that we all share the human experience will not only increase your compassion for others, but will also help you be more gentle with yourself.

Self-compassion is not artificial. You don't tell yourself things you know aren't true. You don't tell yourself you are...
good at something when you don't feel this is accurate.

A self-compassionate mind doesn't feel sorry for itself, and doesn't justify or excuse itself. If you're late for an appointment, self-compassion will suggest that instead of saying “I’m such a jerk,” or “I can't help it, I'm always late,” you might say: “Okay I figured out what got in the way of getting to my appointment on time and now I know how to fix it.” You'll feel encouraged. You might have some regret but no self-recrimination.

See, the thing is this: getting down on yourself is like putting a hole in your gas tank. It just leaves you with less get-up-and-go and you can't make the changes you need to make. It's entirely ineffective as a problem-solving method. And it's hard on relationships – you end up using others to prop yourself up, and this can wear out friendships. In addition, self-criticism can become seductive. We may believe that it will help us avoid worse harm, or will keep us safe on the straight and narrow. Bringing up the painful incidents over and over in our memory only makes the problem worse – we become vulnerable to depression and we end up essentially paralyzed and unable to change or let go.

Many people have the belief that the ticket to achievement is to be hard on themselves: If they are tougher on themselves, they will be more likely to take action and make the needed changes. But this kind of self-talk actually increases anxiety and hopelessness, and it erodes motivation. It's like using a cattle prod – in the short run it will get the cattle moving, but it doesn't create lasting motivation. So instead of kicking yourself when you make a mistake, try instead to gently understand why you might have made that mistake. Accept your inherent mortality and humanity, and recognize that you are not alone. We all make mistakes. (Sometimes even two or three! Per year!)

Self-compassion is not the same thing as self-esteem. Self-esteem is feeling good about oneself, often in a way that
relies on recent achievements, self-confidence or superiority. Self-compassion, however, is the behavior of treating oneself kindly, respectfully and with empathy. It promotes emotional resiliency in a way that self-esteem cannot. It's doing what's in your own best interest, gently and without letting yourself off the hook. People with high levels of self-compassion tend to take more personal responsibility than people with high self-esteem, and they have a more stable sense of self-worth. Because kindness to self doesn't fluctuate based on external circumstances, people with self-compassion are better able to buffer themselves against life stressors, are less likely to get angry at others, and are more able to tolerate opinions that differ from their own.

So what IS self-compassion?

Self-compassion is acceptance of oneself as you are, both your limitations and marvels.

Self-compassion is treating yourself with warmth, respect and empathy, the way you might treat someone you really love. Imagine you disagree with a close friend or you are disappointed by his or her behavior. You probably don't outright reject that friend just because you had a disagreement. The compassionate approach would be to respect your friend's differences, and continue to accept him or her with respect and empathy. So it is with yourself. You might disappoint yourself sometimes – and if so, I give you a hearty welcome to the human race – but there's no use in rejecting

Dr. Neff, self-compassion researcher at UT-Austin (www.self-compassion.org) proposes three key components:

**Self-kindness:** being warm and understanding about your own difficulties and pain, rather than being harshly self-critical

**Common humanity:** recognizing that as humans we all have imperfections and make mistakes. It's framing our frailties in terms of our shared humanity.

**Mindfulness:** taking a non-judgmental stance toward any emotions you might have and seeing things clearly without ignoring and without exaggerating.
yourself and wallowing in shame. This kind of suffering just gets in the way of change.

Self-compassion is essentially a way of living that involves doing what is in your own best interest. Hear me clearly: this is not to be confused with selfishness. Self-compassion allows you to focus on living more effectively by doing what works. Often this means taking better care of your body, being kinder to those you love and generally being a nicer human being.

Self-compassion isn’t weakness. In fact, research demonstrates that people who are kind and gentle to themselves are better able to handle stress, and they recover more quickly from difficult life events. People with higher levels of self-compassion have a higher sense of self-efficacy and are less likely to fear failure. Even better, they tend to be more successful in achieving personal goals (such as quitting smoking). And of course, people with higher levels of self-compassion are much less likely to be depressed or anxious. A quote from Dr. Neff adds a further dimension: “Another advantage of self-compassion is that it is available precisely when self-esteem fails us – when we fall flat on our face, embarrass ourselves, or otherwise come in direct contact with the imperfection of life.”

Self-compassion doesn’t just drop on you out of the sky. It’s a behavior that anyone can learn. Really. It’s just a matter of practice. Even if you are beginning with very little self-compassion, this can change. I guarantee it – if you practice this behavior correctly, and often enough, you will develop the skill of self-compassion.

And your life will, indeed, get better.

Both Sides of the Issue

By Elizabeth Scott, MS, DAIS

At AIS we know that many of the issues you face in your daily life have two sides. Here we explore both sides of an issue that impacts your Daily Life balance.

How Do You View The Stress In Your Life?

Much of our experience of stress has to do with the way we perceive what we are experiencing, and many factors can impact this perception. One of these factors is personal control. For example, if we feel that we have some choice in our situation, whether it is the ability to be creative on a job, the power to decide between two challenging obstacles to take on, or the choice to take on a stressor after mentally preparing ourselves, we tend to feel less stress in tackling the challenge. We can often take on even more, when we feel we have a modicum of control, than we would be able to handle if circumstances were thrust upon us, and we are often more successful in our endeavors because we are more empowered, more optimistic, more proactive, and less reactive.

It is not always possible, however, to have choice in our circumstances. Sometimes we have to face challenges now and not when we feel mentally prepared. Oftentimes, we do not get to choose what we take on, or infuse our own creative ideas into the work we must do to make a living. Fortunately, our perception of our stressors, and thus our experience of them, is also based on our attitude, our beliefs about ourselves, and even the labels we choose in our self-talk.

This is demonstrated quite nicely by the research of Shawn Achor, in which managers who were shown a three-minute video detailing the performance-enhancing benefits of stress performed better and felt less stressed after the viewing than did managers who watched a three-minute video detailing the debilitating effects of stress. The simple shift of focus and perception—that stress can be helpful rather than harmful—created a physical difference (the fight-or-flight response was not activated as it would have been had the fear-inducing facts been the focus) as well as a difference in performance. It did not take away all of the challenge of the situation, but it created an immediate and significant difference in the experience and outcome of these managers.

This principle is also shown by research
from Dartmouth College in which sub-
jects who viewed their stressors as “threats” tended to feel more stressed when facing the same challenges as did those who viewed the same situations as “challenges.” Personal resources were responsible for some of the distinction between whether the “threat” label or the “challenge” label was given, but when the situation was perceived as a threat, the fight-or-flight response was activated, and subjects tended to feel more stressed and overwhelmed. (In changing your perception of a stressor from “threat” to “challenge,” a useful trick is to remind yourself of all the re-
sources you have at your disposal, recall all the times you’ve faced similar chal-
 lenges and succeeded, and visualize yourself succeeding at this new chal-
 lenge as well.)

The study of optimists can also shed light on the difference perceptions of stress can make. Optimists, particularly “realistic optimists” who have a realistic view of their odds but a sense of hope nonetheless, have been found to be not only more happy, but more successful, healthy, and vital. They live longer and have more friends. They feel less stress because they focus on opportunities, and that often brings results. Stress is more often experienced as “excitement” or “exhilaration” than as “anxiety” with optimism. Again, the physical toll of stress is lessened because the positive aspects of stress are embraced.

So how does stress affect you? Do you view stress as a tool that you can use in our life for the better, or an obstacle to health and happiness? And when you have been able to use stress to your ad-
vantage, how have you done it? What has worked best for you in the past? We want to hear from you!

We’ve opened up the discussion, and here are some responses we’ve had so far:

“In college I learned of research where people were given a placebo and told that it would bring on the symptoms of public speaking stress: rapid heart rate, sweat, etc, and the because they expected these symptoms and attributed them to the pill, they spoke better and stressed less than those who weren’t told to expect that from the pill. That immediately helped me with public speaking, and it ended up helping me with stress in general. When I feel those symptoms, when I’m taking on something that is stressful and a little scary, I have learned to expect and “make friends with” those symptoms, and it helps me to react to them less.”

“I used to ignore stress and try to power through it. Then I started burning out. I found that I just couldn’t muster the motivation anymore at a certain point. Since then, I’ve been careful to give myself breaks and keep myself from overworking. So in a sense, I’ve learned to embrace stress by learning my limits and honoring them. But I don’t fear stress, and that makes a difference for me.”
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