How do YOU see the world?

Moving Beyond Bias
The mission of AIS is to improve the health of the community and the world by setting the standard of excellence of stress management in education, research, clinical care and the workplace. Diverse and inclusive, The American Institute of Stress educates medical practitioners, scientists, health care professionals and the public; conducts research; and provides information, training and techniques to prevent human illness related to stress.

AIS provides a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters intellectual discovery, creates and transmits innovative knowledge, improves human health, and provides leadership to the world on stress related topics.
Contentment is a quarterly newsletter published in March, June, September and December with news and advertising designed with the general public in mind. It appeals to all those interested in the myriad and complex interrelationships between stress and health because technical jargon is avoided and it is easy to understand. Contentment is archived online at stress.org. Information in this publication is carefully compiled to ensure accuracy.

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AIS Daily Life Stress Board

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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The team cooperation between eight senior leaders began to fall apart almost immediately. They were given a specific outcome to achieve under the pressure of time, which required this newly formed group of high potential leaders to work through challenges by using the many talents of the team.

Teamwork deteriorated within the first 3 minutes of this experiential exercise, showcasing such sights as small whispers originating from subgroups splintering off by separating themselves according to gender and country of origin, an imposing male standing at the foot of the table pounding his fists as he screamed orders to his peers, all while a slight figured female stood leaning forward over the table repeating with increasing volume, “You must listen to me,” over and over. Just as the all out argument reached an ear splitting crescendo, two members of the dissolving team disconnected with familiar derision, sighed and reached for their phones.
Not the result they had imagined, especially from such an experienced senior team of multinational leaders.

What organically surfaced within the experienced group is a challenge that all of us face at one time or another, typically without any awareness of the obstacles right in front of us. If we are able to be truly present in the moment, and on high-alert to subtle cues showing up in our surroundings we might pick them up; but in today’s hyper-speed work environments we run way too fast to notice the seemingly small speed bumps that slow down progress and trip us up from time to time.

Recent developments in integrative neuroscience have demonstrated that the vast majority of information being processed by the brain at any given time is non-conscious, being filtered quietly beneath the surface of what we pay attention to. While we may not notice this interaction as it happens, the messages are sent and received nonetheless. According to Phil Dixon, CEO and Founder of the Academy for Brain-Based Leadership (www.academy-bbl.com), the brain processes approximately 11 million bits of information each second, with 10,999,960 of those items landing on the non-conscious part of our system and only about 40 catching our attention.

As an example, Dixon recommends bringing attention to your big, right toe. Try it now. Notice how it feels in your shoe, or in the air. Notice how it feels in your shoe, or in the air. Notice the temperature. Wiggle it. What are you aware of about that particular toe right now as you direct your attention in that direction? And where was all of that information being sent when you weren’t paying attention to it?

The information was always there, but it was vapidly passing through the brain unnoticed in order to free your mind to give energy and attention to what was necessary. But what if that information was indeed important to your survival? Even unnoticed or unrecognized, any data related to our safety is coded with greater intensity in the brain, altering our perception of our experience in the moment.

In practical terms this means that the frustrated facial expressions of your boss as she walks by your door may trigger a stress response; a short, to-the-point phone call that seems out of character from a loved one may signal a relationship in danger; an underlying negative tone read in a text or email (intended or not) may flag a nagging situation at work that will take up more time than you have to give in your current situation. Although seemingly minor when taken one small challenge at a time, when non-conscious triggers continue to nudge the nervous system in the direction of threat protection, our interactions can be skewed into a negative state of mind, ultimately hindering our ability to perform at our best and even wearing away at our health and happiness.

The Brain 1-2-4 Model

A pioneer in the field of Integrative Neuroscience, Dr. Evian Gordon developed his 1-2-4 model of the brain to help simplify the very complex process of brain organization. Gordon describes the core motivation as “minimize danger – maximize reward”, which serves as the key organizing...
principal of the brain. It drives emotion, thinking, feeling and self-regulation along a continuum of time and association for brain and body activity. The very first signals received by the brain are nonconscious emotional cues that occur within 1/5th of a second (<200 ms.). Emotion is reflected in action tendencies that are triggered automatically by basic signals of potential danger or reward. According to Dr. Gordon, these cues can be perceived at such low level signals that there is barely a trace of sensation to accompany them so they often go unnoticed by the busy professional at work or parent at home.

At longer time scales (greater than 200 ms.), thinking and feeling emerge with feedback from the brain and body, which bring about conscious awareness. With more time and combined with neurochemical modulators such as dopamine, serotonin and noradrenaline, self-generated processing begins to emerge. By providing feedback to this response system, and bringing greater awareness to both nonconscious and conscious cues in our environment and within our own brain-body system, we can self-regulate actions and even shift perceptions into a more productive state. Ultimately, this is what brain training is all about; adaptations reflected in brain “plasticity” that allow new processes to become routinized as new habits over time.

Beyond Bias

So how do we reset and shift the brain into more desired patterns when we’re caught in a barrage of biases? Many practitioners have begun to explore models of brain change including the SCARF™ model developed by David Rock and the Neuroleadership Institute and the SAFETY™ model developed by Phil Dixon and the Academy of Brain-Based Leadership. No matter what model you use, the key capacities for optimal brain development include recognition of the brains desire for safety as a primary goal. Recognition of non-conscious cues
that can be conveyed in our work places and other relationships are important in order to raise awareness to underlying sensitivities that can alter perspective.

Examples might include background noise, too much technology competing for attention, multitasking, facial cues and body language, lack of natural lighting and access to fresh air, and limitations of social support. Perhaps the most important factor when it comes to how the brain perceives potential stress in our surroundings is our “locus of control”, or how much control we think we have over a situation. Executives in senior positions with greater responsibilities will have a better time tolerating their stress than lower level employees who believe that someone else is always telling them what to do with out having any say. A simple way managers can minimize the impact of stress on their co-workers is to enable group discussions and brainstorming sessions where everyone feels heard, while communicating in a positive way that while change isn’t always possible, expressing your concerns is.

In addition to minimizing potential threats in the environment, building up opportunities for rewards can also help us reduce the negative impact of chronic stress in our lives. Exercises that nudge the brain in a more positive direction include writing down things you feel grateful for and why, writing a positive, encouraging email to a co-worker to start the day, taking 3-5 minute recharge breaks every hour, and creating a nourishing environment with healthy snacks, opportunity to move regularly, access to the outdoors, and even aromatherapy or soft lighting. Setting aside a “recharge room” in the home or office can also provide a safe place for the brain to rest and reflect, to reset and shift into a more optimal state of mind.

Resilience Breaks-up
Unconscious Bias

The senior team spent over an hour charting the lessons learned, debriefing the hot topics surfaced about unconscious bias they all experienced during a 20-minute exercise. The experiential exercise had nothing to do with what they were doing in their ambitious project, yet it illustrated in an undeniable way how they showed up in that moment as a team. More importantly, it provided an opportunity for them to understand their own behaviors of unconscious bias and make to conscious choices about who they needed to be as a team to win. That’s when the work really began.

They became a better team by recognizing, calling out and making the real-time resilient choices to put the brakes on bias and make better decisions. They went on to accomplish great success as a team.

How will you surface the unconscious biases on your team that bottleneck your best ideas and processes?

What kinds of unconscious biases are likely in your organization given the brain’s deep desire for safety above all else?

How will you go beyond awareness to give your teams a memorable experience to build on for sustainable change?
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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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The goal here is to use the power of brain plasticity (adaptability) to create new neural connections that gently nudge us in the direction of our most important goals. Considering the well-documented consequences of unmanaged chronic stress, we would all benefit in making strategic relaxation and recovery rituals part of our daily routines. The more often you pair a sensory experience with an intentional positive feeling or brain state the more hard wired the cue-response relationship becomes and the quicker you can shift to your desired state of mind. The key is to realize that you need to proactively practice these strategies so that when you wake up in the middle of the night, or are facing pressure situation, you can instantly turn to them and the neural associations will already be strong enough to quickly and gently trigger the relaxation response.

Cues can be internal (deep breathing, positive thinking) or external (music, aromatherapy, massage). While internal shifts can be powerful and ultimately our best indicator of when we are in a state of unbalance, most people are so busy and stressed that they have adapted their perception to recognize the stressed state as the norm. Without focused awareness it can be difficult, perhaps near impossible, to self regulate using internal messages alone. Fortunately there are many targeted approaches we can incorporate into our lives to help guide us as we work to broaden and build our own awareness.

**Evidence-based stress reduction cues:**

**Music** – According to recent research, music with a strong beat stimulates the brain and ultimately causes brainwaves to resonate in time with the rhythm. Slow beats encourage the slow brainwaves that are associated with hypnotic or meditative states. Faster beats may encourage more alert and concentrated thinking.


**Aromatherapy** - Many areas of patient care have been addressed, including some of the more tenacious problems, which have often proved resistant to traditional nursing care. One such problem is sleep disturbance, especially in the older patient. In order to try to improve the care available, the staff of the NDU had to adopt some alternatives to the traditional way of thinking. The use of aromatherapy significantly improved the sleep patterns of patients and at the same time, reduced the amount of night sedation required. Following a study of the effectiveness of aromatherapy, it is now being successfully used in the Coronary Care Unit for patients with problems of stress, with encouraging results. [http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S135361179680062X](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S135361179680062X)

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**Journaling** - University of Texas at Austin psychologist and researcher James Pennebaker contends that regular journaling strengthens immune cells, called T-lymphocytes. Other research indicates that journaling decreases the symptoms of asthma and rheumatoid arthritis. Pennebaker believes that writing about stressful events helps you come to terms with them, thus reducing the impact of these stressors on your physical health. [http://www.apa.org/monitor/jun02/writing.aspx](http://www.apa.org/monitor/jun02/writing.aspx)

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**Tired and Wired?** When you wake up in the middle of the night with your mind racing make sure you don’t do anything that will stimulate more stress, including turning on a bright light or powering up technology (that includes television, smart phone, ipad, etc). Don’t try to convince yourself that checking email will help decrease the work load you have to deal with in the morning because the stimulating effect of technology will prohibit sleep and make you much less effective tomorrow.

Instead, utilize one of your external cues (which you should be practicing during the day) to help support the shift back into a restful state. Dump any lingering or obsessive thoughts onto a piece of paper (not your phone or computer!) and assure yourself that they will be there in the morning when you are rested and ready to tackle the day.
The brain is very sensitive to anything that may be perceived as a threat in our environment. When we become aware of stress that others carry around us, it sends a very clear signal that we too should be worried. This triggers what’s called an “amygdala hijack” where the more primitive part of our brain responds in a more knee-jerk reactive way (based on the limbic system, fight or flight mechanisms) rather than a mindful, responsive, reflective way.

When we experience stress, whether real or imagined, it requires a greater amount of energy to be used in order to fuel potential fight or flight situations. This means we can become more fatigued as the day goes on, easily carrying our irritability or distracted thinking into the home where it can negatively impact our interpersonal relationships with those we care about.

People who cause second-hand stress are usually unaware of the impact they’re having on others. Most people don’t realize how sensitive the brain is at picking up things like non-verbal cues, changes in vocal tone or inflection, noise, physical tension, or choice of language. If someone is aware that they might be causing second-hand stress, the best thing they could do is take a few deep breaths before communicating or interacting with others. Second-hand stress can also be caused via email, so saving messages as drafts first and spending a few extra moments re-reading for not just type but also tone can be helpful, saving precious time and energy in the long run.

The best way to limit the effects of second-hand stress is to become protective of your energy, building appropriate boundaries and establishing healthy habits that allow for personal recovery such as 5-minute breaks every hour, getting up to stretch or walk around for a few minutes, deep breathing exercises, mini-meditations, and adding more humor into your day. Being able to see minor annoyances in the scope of the bigger picture can help mediate the intensity of the stress, decreasing its effects. Practice seeing what’s positive around you by writing down a few things you’re grateful for each morning so that the negatives don’t have as much power to stress you out.
Quick tips for decreasing second-hand stress:

- Schedule consistent 50-minute work hours and make sure to force yourself to consistently take a break for 5 to 10 minutes each hour.

- When a colleague asks to talk for a minute (and you know it’s going to take longer) set expectations from the beginning by letting them know how much time you have. By communicating with the right attitude (“I’d love to chat but I only have 2 minutes right now” or “I’d like to discuss this but it’s a bad time, let’s pick a time where I can give you my full attention”) people won’t feel shunned and you can still keep your focus where you need it in the moment. If you do decide to chat, set a timer to go off in the allotted time frame so you aren’t constantly worried about the clock. This helps you be more fully engaged in the moment, and will keep the conversation more on point.

- Schedule “appointments” in your calendar away from the office to recharge your energy (go to a coffee shop, walk in the park, go to a bookstore and browse, get a massage). These recharge appointments should be just as important as any other client or team meetings you have during the day.

- Turn off distractions as much as possible. Limit email time to certain blocks during the day and take mailbox offline when returning emails so you’re not fighting a losing battle (respond to 1 message, receive 5 more). Face away from your computer screen whenever possible. Close your door. Wear silencing headphones to block out background noise. Have a sign you put on your door or cubicle wall when you’re in “focus mode” asking people to come back in 30 minutes.

Stress can be a positive source of motivation if we have the resilience to manage it effectively. When stress becomes hazardous is when we’re running low on resources such as time and energy, and the brain becomes overly sensitive to the negatives around us. By far, the best way to fight off second-hand stress is to build in consistent self-care practices that allow time for recovery and relaxation. Simple things like moving more often, eating regularly, and taking consistent breaks can recharge our system so we’re better able to handle the stress that is a naturally occurring element in a healthy life.