

## My Kind of Hero

"I just need some tips on stress management", he told me, "I'm not at the top of my game and I need to be". He was an executive at a large, local firm with a wife and three kids, all under the age of ten. His hours were, typically, 8am to 7pm, but they varied according to quarterly deadlines and travel. He travelled a lot, sometimes overseas. Besides working, he was a coach for his son's soccer team and involved in Indian Princesses with his daughter. When I asked him when he slept, he laughed. "I don't get much of that", he said. I asked him about time with his wife. "I don't get much of that either but she's just as busy as I am", he responded. They both felt it was important that each child have at least two to three activities outside of school as well as time with friends.

As we talked further, I learned that he had a boss who was quite demanding and would often criticize him for not achieving more. He had trouble with authority figures anyway as he was raised in a family where his father was dominant, controlling and abusive, especially when he drank. I asked him about this and he admitted that it was hard but he had "moved on" and it didn't matter anymore. He "tolerated his boss" but admitted that it was getting harder to keep from saying something he might regret later. His company was known for firing people who didn't "tow the corporate line" and his boss was in line to be the next CEO. I asked him about anger and how he expressed it. "I'm too tired to be angry", he admitted, "but I do need a break".

I was surprised to see him. I don't usually see men like this in my office. They're too busy. They really are. I see their wives. Their wives tell me that they're worried about husbands who are killing themselves with work. Their wives tell me how lonely they are. Their wives tell me that their children don't have a father because they're never home. Their wives tell me they're thinking about divorce. When I ask them about couples' counseling, they tell me that "he doesn't believe in counseling" or "he doesn't have time". Sometimes we do couples counseling anyway because all they talk about is their relationship.

I am not blaming husbands here, by the way. It's the way we are now in this country, it seems. The husband or wife is upwardly mobile to meet a standard of living and corporations are about the bottom line and families are peripheral. Corporations don't care if what they demand of their employees breaks up families. They care about how much money is coming in no matter how it comes. They have stockholders and competitors and numerous reasons to work this way. It's an accepted practice.

But we each have a choice. We have a choice in deciding how we want to be husbands and wives and parents and families. We have a choice about where our priorities lie. We have a choice about how to spend our time. It's limited. There is never enough time to do it all. We don't get to have it all. But we do get what we aim for. If it's money, we usually get some. If it's success, we usually get that too. But how much is enough and how much sacrifice is worth it?

The third annual Work Stress Survey, conducted by Harris Interactive, showed that more than 80% of employed Americans are stressed out by at least one aspect of their work, poor compensation and an unreasonable workload tied as the No. 1 stressors. Occupational stress increases the risk of heart attack, according to a recent University College London review of studies. This may not be too surprising. However, findings from the 2014 Stress in America survey conducted again by Harris (on behalf of the American Psychological Association), reveal that unhealthy behaviors associated with stress may begin manifesting early in people's lives. Teens reported stress levels that exceeded adults' average reported stress levels. According to the study, they "felt overwhelmed, depressed or sad, fatigued and exhibited other behaviors" associated with stress. The study also found that teens are more likely than adults to underestimate the impact of stress on their physical and mental health.

Where do teens learn about stressful lifestyles? But, back to my client. We worked on his stress and he was able to take some time to develop a healthier lifestyle. A physical workup revealed that he had the beginnings of major heart disease; he decided to take this as a wake up call for change. One of the changes he made was to change jobs. He decided that he wanted to spend more time with his wife and kids.

Where are you with this issue? We all have to make choices. Do you prefer to be a family man (or woman) or a corporate star? Maybe the truth is that you can't be both. By the way, April is National Stress Awareness month.

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