

My Reality, My Response

Periodically, I share themes and trends from my discussions with clients. I am typically doing 6-8 coaching calls a day with clients from a wide variety of organizations, industries, and geographies. I also am continuing to deliver training via various virtual platforms and some of the trends are discovered and reinforced through these training events. Here is what I'm seeing and hearing.

We all know that 2020 is a year we will never forget. As people tell me how they're feeling, the big headline is "exhausted, overwhelmed, stressed and fatigued." I'm sure many of us can relate to these feelings. As I dig a little deeper, the exhaustion falls into these categories:

1. **Physical Fatigue** - People aren't sleeping well, aren't exercising, aren't eating healthy, and are balancing more work and home demands.
2. **Mental Fatigue** - People are trying to make big decisions with some certainty, which is a real challenge in our uncertain world. Launching or continuing projects, kids in person at school or virtually from home, how to do the upcoming holidays, and the list goes on and on. Our brains are tired!
3. **Emotional Fatigue** - We miss the hugs and the conversations that generate or reinforce connections and relationships. We don't like having to wave at parents or grandparents from the car because we can't get in to see them and be with them. This is also true if we've had loved ones in the hospital with a COVID diagnosis. We can't even visit and be in the room with them. It leaves a big hole in our hearts.
4. **Compassion Fatigue** - This is a fairly recent trend. It comes from my health care workers, my teachers and education administrators, and those in the non-profit world who are serving those with dire needs. We give so much of ourselves and it's not enough. The patients die anyway and I try to be there for them because their families can't be. I try hard to protect my students and we have to close the school down anyway. Food insecurity, housing evictions, job loss... And the list goes on and on.
5. **Psychological Fatigue** - I see this almost as a culmination of all of the above. I'm physically, mentally, emotionally, and compassionately spent! My entire body is depleted and there is no real end in sight. And now the holidays are coming, we're wrapping up the one of the most challenging years ever, and we're trying to plan for the New Year with so many unknowns. Overwhelmed!!!

I don't mean to be a pessimist. And, these are the things I hear. The examples I've given mostly reflect the pandemic, add in the diversity and inclusion efforts and a stressful election (regardless of your political leanings), and it is indeed overwhelming. And, it is our reality.

So what are the patterns of how people are responding to these feelings of fatigue, overwhelm, and exhaustion? Here are the response themes:

1. **Micro-managing** - Someone is struggling to know how to do their own job, so they are looking over the shoulders of their staff and even colleagues. They may feel a greater sense of satisfaction in believing they are adding value. They are checking, checking, checking!

2. **Anger** - This is akin to the fight response when under stress. These are people who are being escorted off of planes, out of grocery stores, and who are lashing out at others. We also know that domestic abuse goes up during stressful times and that is holding true in our current scenario.
3. **Procrastination** - These are the “We’ll know more in two weeks” people. It’s as if they are frozen and perhaps fearful of making the wrong decision so they make no or few decisions.
4. **Depression** - We have all experienced these moments. I may feel hopeless and I can feel helpless. It’s real and can put someone in a downward spiral.
5. **Missing in Action** - This is akin to the flight response when under stress. This person has chosen to withdraw. They aren’t answering emails or returning calls. I teach that withholding is the ultimate form of control and this person is perhaps seeking to regain some control in a seemingly out of control world.
6. **Distraction** – I want to work on anything but my work because it is just too much. Maybe I play video games, watch movies, or make up a reason to do almost anything except work.

Admittedly, we have all felt the response patterns noted here, maybe all of them in a day or short period of time. Ignoring or denying them is not a healthy answer. If we hide our heads in the sand and pretend they don’t exist, we are not helping our teams nor are we being effective leaders at a time when our teams need us most. I was talking with a therapist recently about what she is seeing in her practice. We found many similar patterns. One of the things she shared that was most helpful was concerning recent findings that just by naming something – a feeling, a syndrome, a pattern – that we move it from the amygdala (the part of the brain that allows us to feel certain emotions and to perceive them in other people) to the frontal cortex (the part of the brain that controls important cognitive skills such as emotional expression, problem solving, language, and judgment). When our emotions are all over the place, we have what is often called an ‘amygdala hijacking.’ When, by naming these feelings, we move them from the amygdala to the frontal cortex, we give ourselves some emotional relief and we can better solve problems and make healthy and effective decisions. Now let’s be clear, I’m no neuroscientist and I don’t claim to be one. This is my practical explanation for how I understand this works and it makes a lot of sense to me. I offer it to you as a way of thinking about your own feelings and the feelings of those around you.

Naming our feelings is only the first step and, yet, we can’t get to the subsequent steps until we achieve this first step. What are you doing to manage yourself as well as support others through these challenging times? It’s worth giving this some thought and exploring it so that we are managing ‘it’ rather than letting ‘it’ continue to exhaust and overwhelm us.

Postscript:

After developing this document, a client and colleague sent me this article link. It is a complement to my anecdotal experience. I encourage you to give it a read.

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/work-business-as-usual-covid19-leadership/>