



## **Best Negotiating Practices®** **Dominate Stress during a Negotiation**

**T**wo casualties of stress are memory and creativity, fundamental requirements for success in negotiating. "Thinking outside the box" can save many negotiations, but creativity may jump out the window when stress enters in.

One exec describes a problem he was unprepared to handle while negotiating a lease extension on his office space: "I suddenly felt angry and became upset. I couldn't concentrate on anything the landlord was saying," he reports ruefully.

Another businessperson approached her former boss' widow about purchasing their art framing business, when "all of a sudden the stakes seemed overwhelming and I got clammy hands and a headache. I was breathing shallow, gulping in air, and I could scarcely remember anything that was on the table."

The good news is that a healthy level of stress creates motivation, by presenting a challenge that gets one's juices flowing. It is the unhealthy level or form of stress that lowers decision-making ability and wears one out. Failure to cope with stress can usher in a defeat at the bargaining table and, if chronic, can lead to physical disorders, like ulcers, or worse.

It's never advantageous to make decisions under extreme stress. The greater the

stress, the higher the chance one may choose a risky alternative. This is because the ability to handle complex tasks requiring focused attention dissolves into incompetence under stress. Long-range considerations may be sacrificed, due to impaired judgment.

When stress gets out of control, the tendency to make a premature deal increases. Ranna Parekh, a Boston psychiatrist and director with Watershed Associates Inc., says that in an extreme state of stress, one can experience "emotional flooding," which can lead to "cognitive distortions."

Silicon Valley's "Type-A" business climate carries with it a level of impatience. Negotiators may try to push through the stress, when taking a break and gathering one's thoughts would be far more effective.

Here are three techniques for lowering stress. To use any of them, leave the meeting room and find a quiet place where you can be undisturbed for few minutes, perhaps outdoors.

The first technique is a simple breathing exercise developed by Dr. Andrew Weil. Sit up straight, place your tongue on the ridge above your front teeth and just below your palate, breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Breathe deeply

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into your abdomen. Inhale to the count of four, hold your breath to the count of seven and exhale with a "whoosh" to the count of eight. Repeat three times. Concentrate on your breath and try to think of nothing else. The routine takes about two minutes, after which you will have altered your stress response.

The second technique is a traditional visualization. Sit quietly for several minutes and bring to mind a peaceful place. Concentrate on inputs from your senses. For example, if you conjure a beach scene, allow yourself to smell the ocean, hear the waves and feel the sun.

The third method is recommended by psychiatrist and author Richard Restak, who points out that the brain center involved in the stress response will relax once you activate a different portion of your brain. Obtain a bonsai plant, a miniature Japanese tree small enough to place on your desk. Sit quietly at your desk

and gaze intently at the bonsai. Then close your eyes and try to bring forth an accurate image of the plant. If you cannot do it, open your eyes and stare at the tree longer. Once you repeat this enough times to bring forth an accurate image with your eyes closed, you can stop.

None of these methods replaces a good night's sleep, nutritious breakfast, daily exercise or other sensible preparation for a stressful environment like negotiating. But since emotions and stress occur without warning, it is best to recognize the danger and use a tried-and-true method to deal with them on the spot.

The best negotiators are creative, patient and calm. When you master stress and dominate your emotions, others will enjoy working with you more. There's a significant payoff: People always extend the most consideration -- that is, give their best deals -- to people they like and trust. ■

Watershed Associates, Inc. provides experts in negotiations, who deliver keynotes, interactive workshops, meeting facilitation, executive retreats and coaching services to businesses and governments worldwide.

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