

Stress Hardy Transition

BY JEROME SHORE

These are stressful times. Business is bad and people are living with the fear of losing their jobs, or even worse, not finding a new one.

This article is in two parts. The first part addresses how stress that comes from fear puts blinkers on people and offers twelve ideas for dealing with it. The second part offers advice and tips about marketing yourself if you are in transition now or feel you may be soon.

When humans face stressful circumstances their automatic reaction is to become conservative and use solutions that worked in the past. This is one instinct that worked in prehistoric times when “do or die” was a regular occurrence. There wasn’t time to be creative while fleeing a tiger or some such. Our ancestors who survived were the ones who did what worked and that what worked trait has been passed down through the generations.

Twenty-first century humans instinctively still tend to get conservative when afraid. Think of it as blinkers. We tend to only see the limited range of what we think worked in the past and lose our creativity. But it’s a new world now and we have much more time to be creative when we’re up against it. You’re not likely to be chased by a tiger these days.

If you’re in job transition, or think you are about to be and feel afraid, you really need to see well beyond what your blinkers allow. Following are a dozen ideas to build mental energy to help shatter those blinkers.

1. Develop a clear and specific goal. Think about what success would look like for you. Use that vision to continually refocus yourself. Write your vision down. Review it regularly. Update it when you learn something new. Refocusing will produce energy to help you think more creatively.

2. Mindfulness builds mental energy. Pay attention to what you are doing. Don’t multitask. Do one thing well at a time.

3. Build your self-esteem. Create a victory list that includes the things you’ve accomplished in your life. Carry it around with you on a 3 x 5 card. Look at it to build your optimism and mental energy.

4. Challenge negative beliefs that you are helpless. Specify each of your negative beliefs. Examine each for its truthfulness, exaggeration, overgeneralization, and distortion. You will develop some new positive truths about yourself.

5. Fight back against fear by enrolling other people in your situation. One way is to simply talk to someone about how you are feeling. The support you will receive as you share your pain will cause you to feel less afraid. Less fear will lead to more mental energy. You may also get some good ideas from a friend.

6. Another way to fight back is to create or join a support and strategy group. This has the added benefit of more sources of creative ideas to deal with your transition.

7. Learn to turn barriers into stepping stones. Rather than focusing on the difficulty of reaching your vision, focus instead on the steps to get there one at a time. A good way to do this is to plan “looking backwards from success.” That is, once you decide what success looks like determine the key steps that got you there and then work on those.

8. Don’t let worst case scenarios get you down. Examine the worst case scenario and compare its likelihood with best case scenario. You’ll see that the best case scenario can be more likely especially as you make plans to overcome problems. Seeking support and taking action is always part of a good plan.

9. Confidence comes from learning, experience, success, risking, trial, and error. Confidence builds mental energy.

10. Confidence also comes from a bias toward being confident. Using the imagery of Velcro and Teflon can help you build confidence—you want good thoughts to stick and negative thoughts to fall away.

11. You can gain mental energy by habitually taking direct action in one of three ways: (1) by scheduling to do a task or make a decision at a certain future time; (2) by dividing big projects into small pieces; or (3) with a “do it now” mentality for small tasks and decisions.

12. Learn to let go of feelings, attitudes, beliefs, fears, and policies that are in your way and use the energy created to help you take creative action. For example, when you simply decide to let go of something like a long-standing fear, there are so many possibilities for action to take that you have not considered before.

Now, if you are in transition or think you will be here are some ideas. This will sound a lot like normal business development activities, which you probably have had some exposure to already.

1. Make a variety of lists that can be the foundation of your personal strategic plan: potential employers, contacts you want to network with, other kinds of careers you might want to explore (teaching, starting a business, consulting, in-house assignments, and so on), learning that will benefit you (courses, CLE, degrees, and so on), your strengths and weaknesses that are worth taking action on, and your passions. As a coach I find that making lists is a way to think through problems and opportunities and always something

my clients can do more of. It's a kind of thinking that produces excellent rewards. Lists are fertile ground for creating an action orientation, which is so necessary when in transition. Having nothing to do is a depressing thought. Making lists and following through on their contents is a great antidote.

Warren Bongard of ZSA Legal Recruitment (wbongard@zsa.ca) suggests that people in transition ought to be very aware of their passions as they relate to career choice. "Nothing makes for a better fit than being in the right job for your skills, education and passion," he says.

2. Successful transition is a fulltime marketing job. And it takes a lot of mental energy—more so when nobody is chasing you. My suggestion is that you divide your day into sections devoted to certain types of activities that will focus your efforts.

Use the first hour of every day for contacting people to start and cultivate relationships.

This should be done with a list made at the end of the previous day. If you can have success first thing it will be energy boosting for everything else you do that day. Just making a good number of calls, even if you only leave a bunch of messages, can be energy boosting.

Other things to focus on in specific day parts: plan tomorrow at the end of each day, have a regular time to exercise, try to have a networking lunch every day maybe followed by a coffee meeting. Planning that kind of contact as a policy will focus your efforts on the right things.

3. In addition to networking spend time building your brand name—essentially raising your level of trustworthiness. To build your brand name you can publish articles; take advantage of speaking opportunities; and use social marketing like blogging, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter to get your name and expertise out.

You can also continue to learn as a way of brand building. In fact, if you are still employed you may get your employer to back your continuing education. Warren Bongard notes that many enlightened firms are funding learning and even coaching for lawyers who may have to be transitioned out. This makes the transition process for the firm and the lawyer that much easier.

4. Grow your interviewing skills. Prepare knowing that people who hire will respond well to candidates who have taken the time to learn about their firm. Learn your script so you can spend your interview time acting the necessary role, not creating answers to questions on the fly. Show enthusiasm during and after the interview. People hire others who seem to like them.

5. Make sure you've done a good self-assessment. In my coaching practice I often work with people who don't like what they are doing and could be doing something they would prefer to do, and make a good living doing it. Bongard notes that many people he sees "crave an alternative to law, like an entrepreneurial business or consulting that are good fits with their personality and their legal education." I find that these people just don't realize they can get what they want—they just have to market themselves to make it successful.

So if you're embroiled in the stress of transition or facing it square on, now is the time to learn how to cope with your stress and make yourself successful by marketing yourself effectively.