

Actuarial Stress

WHenever I talk to actuaries these days, the topic of increased workloads inevitably comes up. Everyone seems busier than ever, and I don't think this is because everybody had a huge amount of free time before. It may have resulted from the change in the economy or an increased emphasis on profitability or cost control by companies and consulting firms. But whatever the cause, the result is evident—an increase in actuarial stress.

Actuaries are certainly not unique in feeling this pressure. In today's fast-paced world, most professionals involved in business experience it. The more money we make, the less time we seem to have to spend it. We're no closer to the world of perpetual leisure than we are to the paperless office.

Of course, the most effective way to deal with stress is to avoid it in the first place, but most of us are not willing or able to manage stress that way. Besides, a little bit of stress or managed stress is good for us. It gets the adrenaline pumping and the ideas flowing. Some people even seek it out (those A-type personalities). But for most of us, once we identify the problem, we just have to learn to better manage it.

If the stress comes from your job, it's often best to distance yourself from it, at least for a while. But that isn't always as easy as it sounds. Problems tend to linger in the mind for a long time. I remember that the Jobs Rated Almanac ranked the actuarial profession as low-stress, because an actuary can always find another job. But I don't think we can count on this technique for the long or even the intermediate term.

There are a wide variety of ways to deal with stress, and there are plenty of books and seminars available on this subject. But there isn't a single right answer. Different personality types and individuals respond differently to both stress and stress management techniques. The most effective way of managing your stress depends on what works for you. Although some might dream of a month on a beach in Tahiti, many of us would find that almost as stressful as work itself. And of course, work isn't the only place stress can originate.

The one thing you shouldn't do with stress is to

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ignore it. I'm certainly no psychologist, so the following shouldn't be considered medical advice. Rather, it represents several approaches I've found to deal successfully with my own actuarial stress.

One of the most successful approaches is to involve yourself in some kind of regular physical activity. For example, gardening or a hobby can be great stress relievers. Participation in sports can be great, if you can do it. For me, running works like a charm, and can have wonderful side benefits too. Some of my best ideas have come from my free associations while running.

Other sports can be just as rewarding. For some, a solitary activity will do the trick, while others benefit from exercising in more social activities, such as tennis or golf. They find the group environment both motivating and relaxing. Be aware, however, that recreational competition, with yourself or with others, can be just as stressful as work.

For others, simple relaxation is the best. Reading a book can be great—but try not to make it a non-fiction actuarial book, although there is certainly a place for continuing education activities. Lying out on a beach or listening to a symphony or hip-hop group (depending on your generation) can be equally effective.

Pick whatever stress management program works for you, but don't ignore actuarial stress. And don't just think that you'll start your program next week or next month; do it soon and don't let it go the way of many New Year's resolutions. Stress management might provide some fun and be healthy too. 1