

“Under Pressure”

Lately almost everyone I talk to tells me they are busier now than ever before.

The changes in the world economy are forcing everyone to find ways to be more productive and efficient. The improved communication technology is making almost everyone instantly and constantly accessible. The line between work and personal time is very blurred and usually we are also to blame. We are addicted to our mobile devices incessantly checking emails and messages never taking a break from the demands of work.

Pressure and stress are obvious outcomes and we all experience them at various degrees every day. Sometimes the pressure comes and goes very quickly. It may be triggered by small events like someone simply cutting us off in traffic. Other times stress is a more constant companion. Perhaps, your work is always fast-paced and the aggressive deadlines are constantly present. In either case, our natural style – our hard-wired behavioural style – plays a significant role in how we react and respond to it. Our style also has an important impact on what types of situations tend to trigger us to experience pressure and feeling of stress. In other words, what is a stressful situation for one style can be very easy for another style to handle.

For example, losing the ability to make independent decisions can cause stress for a decisive “D-style” while asking a more careful “S-style” to make a quick, independent decision can create a pressure situation. The situation can be the same; the reaction is very different depending on the person’s style.

Think about a recent situation when you were feeling stressed and overwhelmed. What were your reactions to what was taking place in your environment? The chances are extremely high you reverted to your natural behavioural style and began to exhibit those behaviours more.

If you are a competitive “D-style”, you became even more impatient and direct. If you happen to be an outgoing “I-style”, you started to talk more and seek more attention from others. In the case you are a steady “S-style”, you withdrew instead and began to rather stubbornly resist what was happening around you. Finally, if you are an analytical “C-style”, you started to question everything and analyse the reasons, causes and consequences of the situation.



Actually, reverting to our natural behavioural style makes a lot of sense. It is the behavioural “territory” or “turf” we master. We are at our strongest on that turf and feel the most comfortable and secure when we stand on that ground. There is nothing wrong with facing the challenging situations from our positions of strength. However, what usually also happens when we are under pressure is that we lose some of our ability to modify our behaviours. And, as the pressure increases, we also tend to begin to use and exhibit the negative aspects of our natural behavioural style.

For example, in practice if you are a D-style, instead of being assertive, you may become overly aggressive and blunt. However, in stressful situations it becomes even more serious and pronounced because our ability to modify behaviours is compromised. This in turn often escalates tensions with others and the situation gets even worse and more stressful. It is a downward spiral and we all get caught in it from time to time. In movies the heroes face incredibly dangerous situations with calm and ease. Bullets are flying everywhere and explosions light up the silver screen. Yet, the hero stays calm and collected and even cracks witty one-liners. He remains the same person throughout the movie. He does not overreact or “lose it”. Usually the most significant reaction the audience will see is when he takes care of the last worst villain. Even then, he is in control.

Being self-aware is fundamental in being in control of our reactions to our environment. When you “lose it”, you lose control of your behaviours. When you are aware of what types of situations and factors cause you stress, how you respond to stress, and how you can alleviate it, you are much better equipped to productively deal with stress and pressure. When you are aware of what is happening to you, you can be more focused on your behaviours, and therefore, better at maintaining your ability to modify them. The end result is that you handle the stressful situation well, stay on course to achieve your goals and do not cause damage to relationships with others.

In theory this is a very simple process. First, become aware of what types of situations tend to cause you stress so you can anticipate and be prepared for them. Second, be aware of your typical and natural reactions to stress so you can consciously control and modify your behaviour. Finally, learn what factors tend to alleviate your stress to help you cope and recover faster.

In reality, this is much harder to do. Modifying our behaviours takes effort and energy; it takes even more energy when we feel the pressure. However, once you become cognizant of what is transpiring under the demanding circumstances, it gets easier. You will realise your natural reaction is often making the situation worse and it makes a lot more sense to change how you react. In fact, it almost always is the only thing you can change. You will achieve a better outcome, you feel better and others around you will feel better. Everyone wins.

All this being said, I know sometimes we all want to throw a temper tantrum. Go ahead, throw one from time to time. But now you will know it is your decision to do so and you are the one who will pay the price. I predict you will do it less often.

Thanks to Markku Kaupinen for this article.