

**Wellbeing: Constructively Handling Criticism by nutrition and cognitive
behavioural therapist, Joanne Reid Rodrigues**

When people experience work-induced stress, the cause of their stress-response is usually not their workload or the job itself; but friction with other people. A manager who might be abrupt or unappreciative of the member of staff's efforts, or a fractious exchange with a colleague often triggers stress.

In the workplace, we're often brought into contact with people we might not necessarily choose to befriend. Working with different personalities can be challenging, but it gives us a tremendous opportunity to train ourselves in maintaining even-mindedness. In martial arts, the Zen teachers tell us: "There are no friends, no enemies; only teachers." We can learn something from every experience.

In my own thirty-five-year career, one of the best gifts I've ever given myself is receiving criticism without allowing myself to be crushed by it. Naturally, we all enjoy positive feedback and praise. But we're wise to be as neutral to praise as we are to criticism, for other people's opinions are subjective. And their opinions can change. We can't be all things to all people; and when we accept this, it's quite liberating. Anais Nin said: "We don't see things as they are; we see things as *we* are." This explains why two people can work in the same office or for the same company and experience the same environment very differently.

This principle also applies to our opinions of other people. We know we shouldn't judge, but sometimes we do; and our evaluations and experiences form our opinions. The negative aspect of judging another is that we might spectacularly underestimate or overestimate them. In misjudging we might miss an opportunity to show compassion when it's greatly needed, or find ourselves disappointed. The practical aspect of judging is discernment. Wise discernment is an essential quality in all great leaders.

In my experience, some of the common issues that trigger varying levels of stress in the workplace are: micromanagement, cliques forming, and being addressed curtly, resulting in people feeling disrespected. Chronic stress can have a profound negative impact on our physical health. The mind and body are intrinsically linked, and whatever's happening in the mind will be expressed in the body. Tension, digestive issues, disturbed sleep, eczema (particularly on the face, neck, and hands), reduced immunology, lower back pain, and neck, shoulder and jaw pain are just some of the common ways that the body demonstrates stress.

People who are insecure and needy of approval can often feel high levels of stress or deep hurt when they receive any type of criticism. In fact, I'd go one step further: to the approval addict, the absence of praise can actually feel like criticism. Thoughts such as *what have I done wrong? why don't they like me?* can form their inner dialogue. Their inner adversaries are the real issue.

When any form of criticism from a colleague or a manager feels like a crushing blow, it's always because we agree with the criticism, at some level. The famous quote by Eleanor Roosevelt is worth noting: "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." In other words, it's not the criticism that stings; it's our attachment to it. Here are some constructive ways to handle criticism:

- 1) Common responses to criticism include defensiveness, anger, and hurt. These emotions do not result from the criticism, but from our beliefs and perceptions about the criticism. Imagine you're looking at words on a computer screen, and then feel the distance between yourself and the screen. Allowing distance between yourself and the criticism can prevent stress reaching boiling point. Observing our response, we can practise remaining neutral, and focus on our breathing.
- 2) Ask yourself: is there any ring of truth in what's been said? Can I use any of this constructively to develop myself and advance my skills?
- 3) Balancing our thinking helps reduce the stress response. Tell yourself: *just because I've received criticism doesn't mean I'm bad at my job – it just means*

there's room for development. I can view this in a constructive way. I can demonstrate professionalism and maturity by acting on the advice given and by demonstrating that I'm willing to learn, review, and make a shift.

- 4) Reminding ourselves that no one is beyond criticism helps us keep perspective and balance.

Maintaining even-mindedness while under fire is a skill that can seriously enhance our health. Even-mindedness reduces the stress response. Those of us who are sensitive might understandably find it difficult. But with self-observation, it's a skill we can develop, over time. Give no one authority over your psyche. Handling criticism without losing your sense of self is a sign of growth; and to get there, we do need those challenging experiences in the arena of daily life and work.

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