

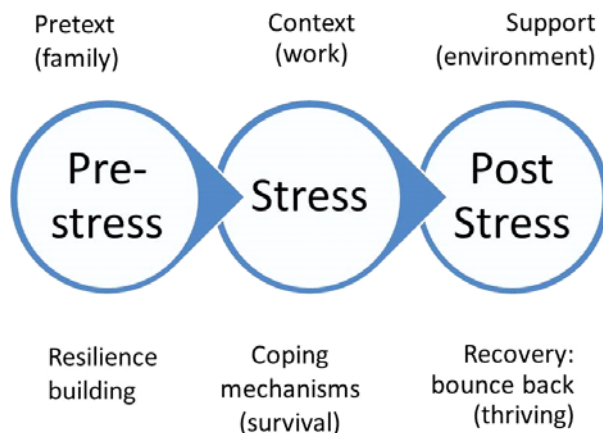
The Science of Work-life Balance Coaching

By Robert I. Holmes, Th.D

Work-life balance is important for our clients to achieve because the “life” part of the equation is the support environment for the “work” part. To get better performance at work, our clients need to enhance the environment they are coming from in order to cope with the stress they will face at work. Getting this right reduces stress leave, sick leave, turnover and the costs associated with a person leaving work.

There are different kinds of stress – some are good, some are neutral and some are bad for us if experienced in the long term. When focusing in on work-life balance we also need to keep in mind that stress might be coming from home, work or after work.

Research shows that work is a leading cause of stress for adults. (Consider that 65 percent of respondents to the American Psychological Association’s 2012 “Stress in America” survey cited work as a significant source of stress in their daily lives.) As coaches, however, we know that our clients’ performance and resilience in the workplace are strongly influenced by the goings-on in their non-work lives. It may be helpful to visualize your client’s day as divided into three segments: pre-text, context and recovery. Each of these segments has an impact on the other two.



Pre-text

The pre-text—what happens before the workday begins, including the morning routine and daily commute—plays a major role in determining your client’s work performance. I have found that the single most important element in a client’s pre-text is their home life – especially their family situation. According to the Holmes & Rahe stressor scale (Holmes TH, Rahe RH (1967). "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale". *J Psychosom Res* **11**: pp 213–18) family elements account for eight of the top ten items, including (being married coming in at seventh).

Techniques a client might use to boost resilience to stress include:

- **Building role distinction.** When at home, your client should make an effort to focus on his identity as a partner, spouse and/or parent instead of bringing work home.
- **Being fully present at work.** Taking personal calls during the workday can decrease resilience to stress
- **Maintaining good physical health.** Support your clients in planning to eat more healthfully and exercise for at least 30 minutes daily.

Context

Consider how stressful the workplace itself is. Each job is different: Consider that in 2013, CareerCast.com’s annual survey of the least- and most-stressful jobs identified university professor and jeweler as two of the lowest-stress professions. On the other end of the spectrum were careers in military service, firefighting and law enforcement.

Techniques for improving coping mechanisms include:

- **Developing boundaries.** Your client needs to know when to say yes and when to say no.
- **Recognizing the signs of stress.** Coach clients to recognize warning signs of stress, such as increased heart rate, distraction and sweating when stationary. Taking regular breaks or making time for a longer walk during the workday can help keep stress at bay.
- **Learning mindfulness.** Separate self from activity and performance.

Recovery

Does your client have a close-knit work group that helps them through tough times? What about a strong support network away from the workplace? Do they volunteer in the community after-hours? Although volunteerism can boost positive emotions and decrease stress, this isn’t

always the case with more-stressful obligations, such as firefighting or involvement in local government.

Clients can enhance their ability to bounce back by:

- **Taking the long way home.** Getting some physical and chronological distance from the workplace before arriving home yields dividends in a person's home and professional life.
- **Seeking new experiences.** Encourage your client to try something new, meet someone new or eat something different.
- **Unplugging.** Setting a technology curfew will help your client "turn off" his work day and ensure more restful, intentional time spent away from the workplace.

You can readily integrate work-life balance into your coaching practice, to assist clients to review this vital and important issue. Indeed looking at stress alone, or relational issues in isolation would be much less effective without examining whole of life issues such as this.



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