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Getting Beyond the Budget-Cut Blues

As Florida university budgets shrink, concerns grow. Worry, stress and speculation about the future are perfectly normal during such times of uncertainty and change. Yet there are coping strategies that can help you weather budget pressures and related stress successfully, says author and consultant David Lee.

Lee has worked in the area of change management and resilience for more than 25 years, helping people increase their capacity to deal with stress and change.

There are healthy and unhealthy responses to news about impending cutbacks in the workplace, says Lee. “What’s particularly unhealthy is obsessing about things we can’t control or influence.”

Lee draws from the field of cognitive psychology to describe two common—and unproductive—responses: Fortune Telling and Catastrophizing.

“When faced with a change or difficult situation, anticipating what might happen and how to deal with it is obviously useful,” says Lee. “What isn’t useful, though, is to engage in Fortune Telling. This is where we act as if our *guess* about

what will happen is actually a *reality*, and then upset ourselves over it—even though it hasn’t happened and we don’t actually know if it will happen.”

“A simple example of Fortune Telling is when you think about a difficult conversation you need to have

situation or future event,” Lee continues. “Some people add to their own misery quotient by imagining doomsday scenarios that are closer to a Stephen King horror movie than they are to reality.”

A healthier response is to look at what is within



and you anticipate the person giving you a hard time. Instead of thinking, ‘they’ll probably be difficult to deal with,’ and planning how best to talk with them, Fortune Telling is thinking ‘I just *know* they’re going to be horrible to deal with,’ and then getting angry at them over the response you have imagined.”

“Fortune Telling is so counterproductive because it’s usually combined with Catastrophizing, in which we exaggerate the potential negative consequences of a

your circle of control or influence, Lee advises. “You might ask yourself, ‘how can I make the best of these budget cuts, or make them as workable as possible?’ instead of focusing on how horrible it is that they’ve happened—something that you can’t control. At the very least, you can still control your own responses to a situation.”

Lee points to the work of author Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D., in the realm of positive psychology.

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During times of change and uncertainty in the workplace, focus on what is within your sphere of influence rather than on things you cannot control.



Healthy Responses to Budget Cuts, Stress

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“Seligman describes the Three Ps of making ourselves miserable,” explains Lee. “First, it’s taking the attitude that the change is **permanent**. Someone with this attitude may complain ‘we’ll never have a decent budget ever again.’ Next is the **pervasive** aspect: Someone applies what they experienced in one context to all situations, saying ‘The whole university is falling apart. Then there is the view that everything is **personal**. This type of person thinks ‘it’s about me—it’s my fault that this is happening.’ All

three of these can become barriers to moving past a difficult situation. They’re also a recipe for depression.”

Looking back on previous difficult times can give you new insights on how to deal with new challenges. “When faced with difficult circumstances, reflect on the storms you have already weathered,” says Lee. “Remind yourself that you were able to handle them and because of that, you can probably handle this. Also, ask ‘what were the gifts and opportunities that came out of that situation, and what

gifts and opportunities might come out of the current one?’ That will help you start moving out of fear mode and into curiosity mode, which is far more energizing. Thinking about those possibilities not only makes you feel better, it’s a real, practical working strategy to deal with stressful change.”

Resources:

-“Stop Stress to Be At Your Best” on CD by David Lee
-www.HumanNatureAtWork.com
-www.authentic happiness.com
-www.stress.about.com
-www.stressinstitute.com
-“Coping with Faculty Stress,” by Walter H Gmelch, Sage Publications, 1993

Some people add to their own misery quotient during times of stress by imagining scenarios that are closer to a Stephen King horror movie than they are to reality.



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Q & A With Author David Lee

Q: Is it a good idea to spend more time at work in times of change and uncertainty?

A: It depends on your reasons for putting in extra hours. Don’t mistake action for accomplishment. If you are staying late in the frantic hope that you will feel more in control, that’s not a good idea. If you are using that time to develop some practical strategies, that’s

OK, as long as you are maintaining some balance in your life.

Q: What are some practical steps professionals can take to alleviate stress and develop greater resilience to long periods of unsettled working conditions?

A: Exercise, talking with trusted friends, journaling and networking are all valuable. The number one factor in

stress resilience is having quality personal relationships. With a good friend you can be open and vulnerable. This is not the time to be the strong, silent type.

Q: Is there a silver lining?

A: Yes. Uncertain times provide great opportunities for transformation—both at the individual and organizational level.

Stress Management is a Learned Behavior

Being able to control stress is a learned behavior, and stress can be effectively managed by taking small steps toward changing unhealthy behaviors. The American Psychological Association offers these tips.

Understand how you experience stress. Everyone experiences stress differently.

How do you know when you are stressed? How are your thoughts or behaviors different from times when you do not feel stressed?

Recognize how you deal with stress. Determine if you are using unhealthy behaviors to cope. Do you make unhealthy choices when you feel rushed and overwhelmed?

Reach out for support. Supportive friends and family can improve your ability to manage stress. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress, you may want to talk to a psychologist, who can help you better manage stress and change unhealthy behaviors.

Find more tips at www.apahelpcenter.org.