

Stress or Frustration?



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Many people feel stressed, or so they say. Very often though, what they feel is not stressed but frustrated. The response to those frustrations might resemble stress physiologically and psychologically, but the emotion they experience is frustration. Frustration is defined as follows by for example the Cambridge Dictionary:

“The feeling of being annoyed or less confident because you cannot achieve what you want; the fact that something prevents plans or efforts from being successful; disappointment or discouragement, or a discouraging situation.”

Within this context and definition one could then easily see how people could feel stressed when, in fact, they are actually frustrated. Frustrated with not being able to do what they need to get done in the way it should be done and as soon as it should be done. Naturally this could lead to a stress response, but it is useful to consider the reason for any response, including a stress response, in order to deal with the cause rather than with the consequences.

Often these frustrations come in the form of constraints at work. Some of the most common constraints people mention during resilience workshops and individual coaching and mentoring sessions relate to communication, equipment, tools and supplies. In management and leadership roles equipment and supplies could take on the shape of budgets as well as actual equipment, tools and supplies. So perhaps it is better to use ‘resources’ as the collective term. People most often voice their frustration about no communication, unclear communication, miscommunication, inappropriate communication, interruptions, the means of communication, the amount of communication (too much or too little), etc. With regards to resources people mostly voice frustration with not having the resources they need or having the incorrect or insufficient resources to do what they are expected to do.

Organizationally these are all fairly obvious and consistent sources of frustration, however, there is another level of frustration which applies more universally in life. People generally feel frustrated because they are unfulfilled. As a consequence they attempt to find fulfillment through engaging in activities that will only give them satisfaction, happiness and joy, but never fulfillment. The challenge with seeking fulfillment through activities leading to

satisfaction, happiness and joy is that they are all temporary and usually do not withstand many of the more serious challenges we may experience during our lifetime.

By way of illustration, one could argue that we feel satisfaction in our body; happiness in our mind and joy in our soul. Fulfillment, on the other hand, we don't feel *in* any of those, but *when* what we do with our body, mind and soul aligns with our purpose. Fulfillment we only experience when we align with our purpose. Many of us have engaged with goal setting activities, but have never aligned those goals with our purpose. That creates a false sense of accomplishment, and while things are going well, this may lead to satisfaction, happiness and joy, but never reach a deeper level of fulfillment. We might also experience frustration when those goals are not met, and not actually because of the unmet goals, but because they don't give us that sense of fulfillment. In other words, don't be so preoccupied with your personal goals that you forget to fulfill your purpose.

When we seek to live intentionally within our purpose, we tend to set goals that have meaning. We are more tolerant of the challenges along the way and tend to feel more engaged with whatever it is that we need to do, to reach those goals, even the frustrating parts. When we set meaningful goals aligned with our purpose it helps us to achieve something of significance. Achieving something of significance helps us to have a sense of progress. Experiencing progress helps us to feel a sense of accomplishment which helps us to remain engaged in the bigger goals regardless of the challenges. We become more tolerant and therefore also more resistant to frustration and feelings of psychological and physiological stress.

Purpose sits at the core of who we are and why we do what we do. Misalignment with our purpose inevitably leads to feeling unfulfilled and therefore frustrated. Finding our purpose is an intentional activity. Compare it to finding a treasure... not looking for it means it will never be discovered. Unlike a treasure, nobody else can find our purpose for us. It is not something we contract out. Intentionally seeking it may lead us to finding it, but we need to look in the right places and have a plan in place. Perhaps a treasure map of where we've been and where we are going; how all our experiences link together to reveal a pattern. What did you see, what did you hear, who did you meet, what did they say, what did you feel, when did you feel that, and so on.

Once we find our purpose, we next set out to understand how we align with it in every stage of our lives and in the different domains of our lives: in our families, organizations, communities, etc. Often purpose is revealed through what we do in our families, organizations and communities, those natural roles we fulfill. It all requires action and being intentional. When many people set out to 'find themselves', they mention that they do it because they want more happiness and joy. Those are not things we find, they are consequences of what we find on our journey. No one sets out to find unhappiness and no joy. It is an outcome, a consequence, of being on a journey other than the one leading to our purpose. Many people have managed to overcome some tremendous challenges in life by focussing on their purpose. They have managed to endure immense psychological and physical pressure. What we need to find is purpose.

Being intentional about seeking alignment with our purpose also gives us a sense of control over our lives and helps us to make priority-based decisions rather than tolerating activity driven task lists that may or may not lead to satisfaction, happiness and joy. It helps us to maintain perspective. Every human on this planet, past present or future has a purpose,

regardless of their opinion of whether they have a purpose or not. Purpose often reveals itself when we look beyond our own discomfort, inadequacies, pain, suffering, the stuff we do and the things we own. It is often revealed once we understand how who we are impacts on other people, more specifically how it impacts on them in a positive way regardless of where we find ourselves and what state we're in physically, mentally and spiritually. Finding your purpose doesn't mean that you will never feel frustrated. It means you are able to recalibrate and realign more effectively and efficiently to get back on track to leading a fulfilling life.