

# Building Stress Resilient Emotional Intelligence: Practical Tips for Improvement

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*In the case study described below, our client was facing a high level of stress, and we were able to help him create an action plan to reduce stress and build resilience. This example occurred prior to COVID-19. Leaders like George, already under stress prior to the pandemic, are facing unprecedented levels of stress now.*

*Coaching and training for stress resilience and decision making under stress are essential, now more than ever.*

A VP of HR reached out to us recently to explore options for working with George, the Director of Manufacturing. George was known as a strong collaborator, able to build effective teams to meet aggressive production schedules while keeping a positive attitude. In the weeks leading up to the call, however, George had not been acting like himself. He was experiencing a higher-than-normal level of stress, and it seemed to be impacting his ability to remain team-focused and optimistic. He was quick to become irritated, and his temper was damaging some of his interpersonal relationships at work. The head of HR asked if we had any ideas about what might be happening and how to help.

Dr. Dick Thompson states in his book *The Stress Effect: Why Smart Leaders Make Dumb Decisions—And What to do About It*, “In working with leaders over the years, I have observed their fluctuations in stress and the corresponding changes in Emotional Intelligence (EI). Some leaders have higher stress management capacity than others, perhaps due to innateness, training, experience or some other factor.” Even leaders with strong resilience will sometimes experience a drop in their EI functioning when the stress level gets too high. The impact of higher stress on George was apparent in his behavior.

To understand this relationship between EI and stress, it’s important to review what stress really is. Hans Selye, a pioneer in the study of stress as we know it today, defines

stress as the body’s non-specific reaction to any demand made upon it. That is, the body produces predictable physiological and behavioral responses when any external or internal stimulus acts on it. The demand (stressor) can be either positive or negative; the body doesn’t know the difference. The reaction, i.e., the body’s response, is the same. For example, stressful situations such as winning a million dollars, getting a divorce or being awarded a promotion all produce the same core physiological symptoms.

## The Situation

When we spoke with George to explore his situation more closely, we discovered several stressors impacting him. He had been asked to lead a special project team to explore options for expanding the manufacturing facility into an adjacent warehouse that was becoming available. Outside of work, he had just begun coaching his son’s little league team, and his family had recently grown in size with the addition of twin girls. To say his life was busy was an understatement.

Based on our conversation regarding the many stressors George was facing in his daily life, we determined that he would benefit greatly by learning techniques to increase what we call Stress Resilient Emotional Intelligence™ (SREI). With the goal of building George’s SREI, we coached him using a variety of customized strategies geared toward helping him handle his stress in a more successful manner.

## The Solution

The starting point to increase SREI is to focus on awareness: if leaders want to improve in any area, they must be aware of their constantly-changing emotional state and the influences impacting them, the situation in which they find themselves, etc. Improving the ability to monitor emotional functioning is the first step. We administered the [EQ-i 2.0®](#), the most

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scientifically-validated assessment of Emotional Intelligence available, and the **ARSENAL Assessment™**, an assessment that measures best practices for building stress resilience. We provided feedback to George on both assessments and coached him on using techniques to improve self-awareness.

The second step is not as easy. Once a leader becomes aware of an area that can be an emotional hotspot, he must then employ various techniques to withstand the stressor or to reduce its impact. Leaders must try different performance aids in a variety of situations to find which techniques work best for them. Under stress, one leader may want to find a quiet area with no noise in which to regroup and collect his thoughts; another leader may find that soothing music works better. The key here is to try many different strategies, weed out the ones that don’t work and ultimately build up a toolkit of several go-to responses that do work.

Through the feedback, George discovered that the biggest opportunities for improvement in his life were getting more sleep and improving his physical fitness. In his case, working on one actually helped the other. When he coached the little league team, he decided to run laps with the kids instead of watching them from the sidelines. He arrived to the fields early and stayed late

and used his time effectively to add extra mileage on his running plan. Once he began to increase his exercise, he discovered that he was tired earlier in the evening, which forced him to get more sleep.

By making small changes, George didn’t add much additional time to his hectic schedule; he simply made adjustments to use his time more efficiently. It paid off in his feeling more fit and rested, which in turn caused his cheerful disposition and positive attitude to return. By continuing to focus on his awareness, George was able to identify right away when his stress level started to rise, and he could use stress-management tools to get back into balance quickly. Within a few weeks, his team members noticed that his upbeat demeanor and collaborative work style had returned.

## The Takeaway

Even though Emotional Intelligence can be susceptible to stress, it doesn’t have to be the end of the story. By getting feedback on proven assessments and trying different strategies based on results, each person can identify how best to meet stress reduction goals. Being aware of stress is the first step. The second is knowing which techniques to use and when to employ them. The outcome will be an overall higher tolerance to stress and an increase in Stress Resilient Emotional Intelligence.

### About the Author

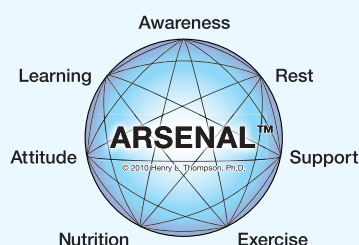
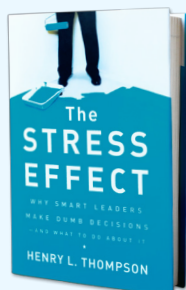
Debra Cannarella is the Director of Operations at High Performing Systems, Inc. (HPS), a consulting company that provides assessments, consulting and training solutions to help organizations excel. HPS conducts assessments of leadership potential and provides individual, leader and executive coaching to clients.

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