

Understanding your personality type can help you to deal with stress

Health and wellbeing part 2: how to manage stress

In this article...

- › The theory of personality type
- › Using this theory to identify coping strategies during times of stress and pressure
- › Methods of coping

people can be physically and mentally draining for others. If you are a clinical leader or manager, you need to be mindful about how different members of your team recharge their batteries. Line managers and clinical leaders also need to be able to explore – both at an individual and team level – the working style, possible causes of stress and how team members can work together effectively and support each other. This is crucial as a study by the OPP revealed; respondents cited relationships with colleagues both as a potential cause of stress and a potential aid to managing stress (OPP, 2006).

Head versus heart

Another way our minds work differently according to the theory of psychological type is in how we make decisions. We either have a preference for thinking (structuring decisions through objective balance, emphasising logic, reason, truth and fairness) or feeling (structuring decisions by focusing on personal values, people and needs). This does not mean those with a thinking preference do not feel and vice versa; we manage to mix both, but are more comfortable using our preferred style. Understanding this will help us realise why relationships with colleagues can be a potential cause of stress.

There is a higher prevalence of “feeling” individuals in nursing (Briggs Myers et al, 1998). It is important for such people to have harmony in the workplace; they tend to feel stressed at work more than those with a preference for thinking, who are more likely to cite their causes of stress as an insufficiently challenging workload or a lack of autonomy (OPP, 2006). We can take measures to develop our non-preferred type (Box 1).

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The first article in this two-part series discussed research on health and wellbeing in healthcare and signposted resources on coping strategies to prevent stress. This second article discusses strategies to help health professionals look after themselves by being aware of their personality. It also aims to encourage them to look at what they can influence and control so they can be more proactive and effective.

Mother and daughter team Katherine Cook Briggs and Isobel Briggs Myers developed a tool to identify personality types (Briggs Myers, 2000). The Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator is used by individuals and organisations to get the best from people. In my experience as a facilitator of individual, team and service development, using the MBTI can lead to more productive meetings; improve tolerance, understanding, communication and problem-solving; manage conflict; and boost team performance.

How we recharge our batteries

MBTI is not about putting people in “boxes”, but recognising there are differences in the way we are. One example of this is that we do not recharge our batteries in the same way. Preferring to focus attention on the outer world of people and activity and energise by taking action and interacting with people is known as “extraversion”; focussing internally in one’s own world of ideas, experiences and energies, by reflecting on thoughts, memories and feelings, is called “introversion”. Those with a preference for extraversion deal with their problems by talking them through with others, then taking action, while those with a preference for introversion tend to use reflection and may appear private and self-contained. There is no right or a wrong – just a preference.

When thinking about how to recharge their batteries, those who prefer extraversion need to interact with people and engage in activities, while those who favour introversion prefer to spend time alone thinking things through. Problems occur when individuals feel stressed and are too busy to see their friends and chat or spend time alone; by not using their coping strategies they inadvertently escalate their own stress.

It is important to realise that what can feel energising and motivating for some

5 key points

1 Different psychological types see change in different ways, which can lead to misunderstandings

2 The Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator is used by individuals and organisations to get the best from people

3 Using the MBTI improves

communication, tolerance, understanding and problem-solving; manages conflict; and boosts team performance

4 Those with a preference for extraversion deal with problems by talking through them with others then taking action

5 Those with a preference for introversion tend to use reflection to deal with problems

Coping with change

Different personality types see change in different ways; this can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Barger and Kirby (2004) found there are those who:

- » Experience change as fun and good, and so want to change things;
- » May like the idea of change but want to think about it;
- » Are in between and change things that are not working, as long as it is practical.

We need to ask ourselves the following questions when dealing with change in order to avoid sitting in our comfort zone:

- » Is this change for the sake of change?
- » Did I throw the baby out with the bath water?
- » Did I throw out the bath water or hold on to that as well as the baby?

BOX 1. DEVELOPING YOUR NON-PREFERRED TYPE

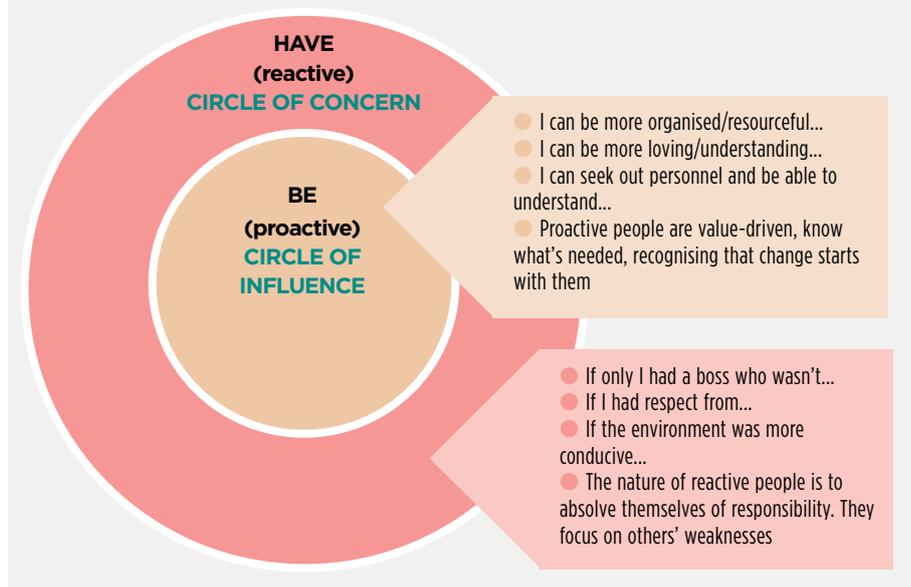
Feeling types can benefit from the natural inclination of thinking types to:

- Analyse consequences and implications
- Hold consistently to a policy
- Stand firm for important principles
- Create rational systems
- Be fair

Thinking types can benefit from the natural inclination of feeling types to:

- Forecast how others will react and feel
- Make necessary individual exceptions
- Stand firm for human-centred values
- Organise people and tasks harmoniously
- Appreciate the thinking type along with everyone else

FIG 1. CIRCLE OF CONCERN AND CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE



» If it isn't broken, is there another way of doing it?

Circles of concern and influence

When we feel stressed or react to continuous change, we can fear having no control. We may be reactive by nature and see ourselves as victims of circumstance. Covey (1989) described this as being in our "circle of concern". Reactive people tend to focus on this circle, which saps their energy and time, and results in blaming and defensiveness. The things about which we are concerned and can do something are considered to be in our circle of influence; this circle is about proactivity. Knowing in which circle we spend our energies requires self-awareness, which is vital for us to develop and change.

We each have a range of concerns, some of which we have no control over. Reactive people focus their efforts on issues in the circle of concern and on circumstances over which they have no control. Proactive people focus on issues in their circle of influence. This approach affects the things we have no control over – our circle of concern – by enabling us to accept them, while focusing our efforts on the things we can change. Reactive people neglect issues that are under their control because their focus is elsewhere; as such their circle of influence shrinks. Positive change will not occur for someone who is working in their circle of concern.

What you can do

The Royal College of Nursing's (2009) clinical leadership programme offers a facilitator's tool based on Covey's model. It

suggests making a list of all your concerns; draw two circles, one inside the other on a piece of paper (Fig 1). Start to put items from the list of concerns in either the circle of concern or circle of influence. To determine whether your concerns lie in the circle of concern or influence, think about the language you use and distinguishing between the "have" (reactive) and the "be" (proactive). The circle of concern should be full of "haves" and the circle of influence of "bes". Anything we have direct or indirect control over is something over which we can have influence. If we have no control, this needs to go into the circle of concern.

By focusing on the things in the circle of influence we will become proactive and effective. We can explore the steps we must take to behave proactively, then draw up an action plan. If we remain in the circle of concern, worrying over the things we cannot change, this negative energy will reduce the circle of influence. The more time we spend in our circle of influence, the more likely it is to expand. **NT**

References

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