

Next Chapter Notes

A Newsletter for those in
pre-retirement or retirement

Empathy Overload

Our effectiveness depends on the ability to show accurate empathy, even when it is not appreciated. Interpreting and responding to emotional cues all day takes great mental effort. But dealing with difficult tones, frustration, and the feeling states of others like hesitation, urgency, anger, and even rage can create “empathy overload.” If you’ve experienced empathy overload, don’t confuse it with burnout but be aware that it is still an energy-depletion state. Although temporary, typical symptoms of empathy overload include lingering fatigue, a short fuse with others, or dreading the phone ringing. Quick and sure rejuvenation tips: Don’t wait for symptoms to appear. Plan brief recovery breaks—even a couple of minutes will build resilience. Experiment with and learn what works for you. Techniques like meditation, being sure to stay hydrated, and a quick walk after tough calls to reset your focus. When things get tough, it’s okay to seek support.



Congratulations, You’re Retiring, But . . .

Retirement feels like the dream: total freedom and enough financial security to do whatever you want each day: No more meetings, budgets sessions, performance appraisals, long hours, deadlines. But heads up—for many people, that freedom can eventually bring a surprisingly negative side. The human brain loves structure, connections, purpose, and identity. Your job likely provided these things, but the need won’t vanish. If you ignore this reality, you may discover that days blur together and you lose direction. The excitement of “doing anything” is replaced by subtle restlessness. Boredom may follow. This is the dark side of retirement. Some may feel they are not being “successful” in retirement and guilty for not feeling happier. Prevent this drift by building new structures with goals, creative projects, volunteering, teaching, continuous adult learning, and establishing new connections along with leisure. It’s about knowing how you will fill your days to thrive in your Next Chapter.



The Power of “Exercise Snacks”

If you have only a few minutes to spare at different times during the day, capture the moments to improve well-being with “exercise snacks.” Exercise snacks are brief bursts of physical activity that last only a few minutes at most. They boost energy, support cardiovascular health, and counter the effects of prolonged sitting. You may not be able to exercise as regularly as you would like, but you can sneak in short, practicable movements at opportune moments during the day that will deliver meaningful health benefits. There are dozens of one-to-five-minute exercise snacks. Get a list by googling: “Exercise Snacks Poster.” Print and post near you.



Don’t Suffer from Inadequate Sleep Syndrome

Finishing work assignments into the wee hours, socializing, or enjoying bedtime procrastination places you at risk for “Insufficient (or Inadequate) Sleep Syndrome.” It’s a condition caused by lifestyle choices that disrupt sleep, creating daytime sleepiness, fatigue, and poor concentration. During the week, you may get only five to six hours of sleep instead of seven to eight, then catch up on weekends, but that’s the problem: Your body can adapt to this pattern in unhealthy ways and incur long-term health risks. Beyond lower productivity and accident risk at work, serious conditions like dementia become more likely. If you’re over 40, especially, form brain-protective habits. One is getting seven to nine hours of sleep consistently. Learn more at: nih.gov [at search “sleep, dementia”]



Managing “Background Stress”



F feeling tense when nothing’s wrong? It might be “background stress.” Background stress is all the stuff that can wear you down but flies under the radar. You aren’t fully aware of it, but it’s taking a subtle toll on your mental health anyway. Common background stressors include noisy traffic outside, a dripping faucet, or a noisy washing machine. Others include pollution, poor working conditions, pings on digital communication devices that needle you for attention, and forgetting to wear sunglasses on a sunny drive. Background stress can wear away at your mental well-being as these grinding irritants make you more irritable, add to your sense of anxiety, and activate your stress response system. The result is feeling more tired, having less resilience, being less tolerant of others, having sleep disturbances, and feeling a vague sense of unease that’s hard to shake off. To intervene, take a day to notice what background stressors you’ve “gotten used to.” With this awareness, choose interventions: Digitally declutter by turning off devices, tuning out noise with the help of noise-cancelling headphones, taking two-to-five-minute micro-breaks and deep breathing to interrupt the buildup of background stress, or better optimizing your environment to make it more calming and support-

Learn more: time.com/6201005/ambient-stress-pandemic-mental-health/

Problem Gambling Awareness Month

Illogical Thinking and Unseen Symptoms



All addictions are destructive, but gambling has unique features that make it especially harmful. Gambling entraps the reward centers of the brain like alcohol/drug addiction, but it is accompanied by severe cognitive distortions, which are completely illogical ways of thinking—for example, “I’ve lost so much, a huge win must be coming soon.” This and many other cognitive distortions trap compulsive gamblers or gambling addicts in states of denial that last longer than most addictions. Shame, anxiety, panic, depression, and feelings of hopelessness also contribute to a far higher risk of suicide than the general population. Apps and online betting platforms allow individuals to gamble privately and secretly, making the behavior largely invisible and leaving few observable warning signs—unlike substance use. Compulsive gamblers have common experiences like failed promises and attempts at quitting, restlessness when trying to quit, constant gambling to cover losses, preoccupation with gambling and past wins, or planning the next bet. If any of these symptoms match your experience, seek professional assistance. They’ll assist you in finding your way to becoming a recovering compulsive gambler, and with a commitment to change, your probability of success will have excellent odds.

Communicating with Those with Developmental Disabilities

March is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. In daily life, your words and actions can promote empathy and inclusion for others with developmental disabilities. Demonstrate understanding by listening patiently, speaking at an appropriate pace, and using respectful, person-first language that acknowledges individual needs. Don’t turn to a friend, supervisor, or another colleague to speak for someone with a developmental disability unless they have clearly requested or given permission for that support. Affirm them by saying “I believe in you” or “Would you like to join us?” The bottom line: Think “full participation” as a rule. Being authentic is key. You’ll be a powerful change agent and help create a culture of belonging that benefits everyone.



Etiquette rules resource:

worksupport.com/documents/Quick%20Facts%201%20IDD1.pdf

Stress Tips from the Field: Spot Your Growing Burnout



Ignoring stress because you feel in control of your life is a decision you should make with awareness. The path to burnout is a slow boil. It often builds quietly. Manageable at first, physical fatigue, emotional detachment, or reduced effectiveness soon appear, making it clear that the warning signs were easy to overlook. If you are under especially difficult stress, it doesn’t mean you are going to burn out, but it does mean your stress deserves attention before it compounds. Burnout is not a buzzword. It’s a recognized phenomenon. Learn about stress management and building resilience. It’s not required that you recognize the specific ways you are burned out before you explore support, guidance, or practical tools. This can help you maintain balance and prevent small pressures from escalating into sustained stress, which increases the risk of burnout.

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