

# Emotional Climate in the Information Technology Organization: Crisis or Crossroads?

by Margaret G. Massey and Deborah W. Stedman

*The overwhelming impact of massive change on human beings in the field of information technology is tremendous. This change, coupled with the loss of revenue and personnel resources that many of our college and university IT shops are experiencing, creates fertile ground for emotional and physical "dis-ease" for our co-workers and ourselves. This article suggests that this potentially harmful environment can actually present a golden opportunity to positively change our cognitive behavior and increase effectiveness in the IT workplace.*

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**S**tress is malignant in the American workplace. As reported in *HR Focus*, "Stress in the workplace is costing American businesses staggering amounts of money. It is estimated that companies lose about \$68 billion every year from lost productivity and spend up to 10 percent of their profits on stress-related disability claims. Health care professionals claim that as many as 90 percent of the patients they encounter suffer from stress-related symptoms."<sup>1</sup> These figures should astound the health-conscious employees of the 1990s. Moreover, they should serve grave notice to those of us working in dynamic, demanding information technology organizations where rampant change and increasing expectations have long been the norm.

## Stress in the workplace

Job-related stress can be traced to the beginning phases of the Industrial Revolution, when farm hands and independent craftsmen were gathered from their fields and villages to fill production lines and newly-formed chains of command. The goals of industry then were not too unlike those of today: manufacturing, information exchange, customer service, capitalization of new opportunities, etc. For society, this revolution was an economic boon: a never-ending climb to a higher standard of living. Yet in trade for new opportunities there was a down side for society to bear. By necessity, workers were crowded into urban environments, employee liberties were compromised, and there was an ever-growing need for greater produc-



**Debbie Stedman** ([sadkw@mdcc.edu](mailto:sadkw@mdcc.edu)) has been an information technology professional for twenty-three years, fifteen of those years at Miami-Dade Community College. Currently she is the Manager of User Services, whose charge it is to train all faculty, staff, and administrators in the use of administrative and student mainframe systems. She holds a masters degree in the field of counseling psychology and is a practicing psychotherapist. She is also an adjunct professor at Miami-Dade, teaching Human Relations.



**Margaret Massey** ([samgm@mdcc.edu](mailto:samgm@mdcc.edu)) has worked as an information technology professional for more than twenty-five years, with twenty of those years in management positions. She is currently the Director of Computer Applications Programming at Miami-Dade Community College. She received a BS from Auburn University and a master's in business from Florida International University, and is currently working on a doctorate. She teaches Management Information Systems at the graduate level and corporate finance at the undergraduate level.

<sup>1</sup> Virginia M. Gibson, "Stress in the Workplace: A Hidden Cost Factor," *HR Focus* (January 1993): 15.

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tion. These changes extracted increasing costs at the expense of human endeavor, worker esteem, and job satisfaction. Moreover, it is unclear whether one's job security actually improved or declined over the days of farming, village smithing, and shop keeping. Many, in fact, have proposed that society lost much of its inherent goodness in the never-ending hustle and bustle of the profit engine.

Fortunately, industry in the United States no longer includes the norm of child labor, twelve-hour work days, and six-day work weeks. Instead, innumerable labor laws define fairness and good judgment. But even with such regulations firmly knitted into the fabric of today's organizations, little has been done to relieve or even improve the existence and rigors of mental and physical stress in the workplace.

The problem of undue office stress is a complex, multi-faceted topic and perhaps unique to each office environment. Symptoms are sometimes difficult to define; solutions are, more often than not, difficult to implement without disrupting the productive nature of the office itself. Moreover, many issues reside beyond the realm of the workplace and cannot be addressed directly. Miami-Dade Community College, for example, has five campuses, four of which exist within the urban environs of metropolitan Miami. Employees are routinely subjected to the rigors of congestion, traffic, crime, etc., that affect citizens in all large cities. Added to this routine and expected confusion is the frustration of major random events. For some cities lately it has been fires, earthquakes, floods, and snow storms. For Miami, it was Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Suddenly South Florida lay in rubble from the south side of Miami to Homestead. Lives were lost, public utilities were gone, and thousands of homes and businesses lay in waste. But to make matters worse, the storm's misery continues even today for some entangled in zoning and building legalities, unfulfilled insurance claims, elevated construction costs, and faulty or fraudulent contractors.

Professionals, of course, are expected to leave personal problems behind as they enter the workplace. But we all know from experience that personal problems complicate the work-related stresses of meeting deadlines, making rational decisions, and putting in long hours on behalf of the organization. At some point personal and office-related stress can get out of hand, resulting in undue physical and mental stress with reduced productivity in the workplace. At this point the affected person may become a concern to others and be referred to as a "problem employee."

The only reasonable solution, of course, is to

manage human resources as carefully as any other resource of the organization, maintain a healthy mental environment in which the employees work, and avoid unnecessary disturbances that confound rather than promote the satisfaction and willingness of an employee to perform at his or her utmost capacity.

At Miami-Dade we have begun a process in the computer information technology offices that is directed toward human resource and stress management. Our objectives are to define job-related stress in the workplace, investigate conditions that aggregate office-related stress, and evaluate means to alleviate some of the pressures related to job stress.

Initially, we were inspired by Carole Barone's presentation at CAUSE93, "New Interpretations of Old Rules ...," which emphasized change and reaction to change in the information technology organization. More recently, the presentation by Jan Baltzer at CAUSE94, "... The Use of Humor as a Management Tool," reminded us in an enlightened way that we are not alone at our institutions as we look for better ways to deal with the demands of our working lives.

Indeed, an increasing number of highly regarded information technology professionals are focusing on the managerial and personnel factors important to a healthy information technology organization. We can argue that human beings are equal to their needs, that a problem can be resolved if it can be perceived, that progress is what is left after the seemingly impossible has been retired, and that the crisis today in human affairs is represented not by the absence of human capacity, but by the failure to recognize that the capacity exists.

Our research for this paper included searches of available library materials, a survey conducted through the Internet on the CUMREC electronic discussion list (CUMREC-L), and documentation of our own work experiences. It is our objective to encourage continued research. We believe that by working with other information technology professionals we can investigate and promote strategies that can be implemented by many institutions to cope with this demanding situation.

### **Climate in recent years**

Over the past few years our information technology offices at Miami-Dade have faced many challenges that impose stress upon employees. We believe these trends might parallel similar conditions in IT offices in other colleges and universities, especially one particular circumstance.

A consulting firm was commissioned to ex-

amine several administrative units to make suggestions for improving efficiency. Computer Services was one of the organizational units examined. Although a seemingly benign study, the level of employee stress in the IT offices increased noticeably. College-sponsored reviews by consulting firms are commonplace and valuable. But in this case the study proved stressful because the employees were concerned about the precision of the report, or worse, a threat to job security. While no negative employee action was actually threatened, the study still increased an apparent level of stress among the staff. One must understand, of course, that many of these employees have learned by example to fear phrases like "increased efficiency," "downsizing," and "outsourcing"—these being popular euphemisms for layoffs. Similar terms were tossed around at Eastern, Pan American, and National Air Lines in Miami before those Goliaths of the airline industry became extinct.

Stress is inherent in technology. Client expectations are shaped and heightened by the fast-paced changes occurring in computer and communication-based technologies. Furthermore, the aggressive marketing of software manufacturers and their representatives continually promote system upgrades, modifications, and replacements. Client departments are, of course, the principal targets of such marketing schemes. Often they are presented with claims that leave the information technology organization in an unenviable position: that is, having to react to seemingly popular recommendations that may not be in the best interest of the organization. Often, the pressing desire to always be on the cutting edge of technology places an undue burden on the availability of resources to implement and manage the new technology if purchased.

Dwindling resources, hiring freezes, administrative policies, and new state mandates often dictate much of the agenda for the information technology professional. A feeling of "loss of control" is voiced both by managers and their subordinates. Sometimes, information management specialists joke that the most important skill of their trade is organizational politics.

Such pressures, combined with heavy workloads, short deadlines, and external stresses, can lead to serious emotional and physical problems. At Miami-Dade we determined that it is in the best interest of the employees and the college to provide a balanced workplace that promotes a healthy emotional and physical environment. Thus we began to address stress in our IT workplace, beginning with an informal survey conducted via the Internet.

### Findings of our survey

In November 1994, we conducted a survey through CUMREC-L to discover how other information technology professionals feel about stress in their places of work. When asked if respondents believed that their job is more stressful now than it was five years ago, 86 percent of respondents answered "yes." When asked to what they attributed this added stress, 46 percent cited "understaffing" as the predominant cause, and 42 percent said "additional responsibilities." (See survey findings in Table 1.)

These findings are congruent with those of growing ranks of stress management experts, who find that job stress is related to a feeling of high responsibility and little control.<sup>2</sup> Certainly it is common to find the "high responsibility and loss of control" scenario in today's IT organizations.

Often it is the most conscientious workers who are inclined to develop job stress.<sup>3</sup> There seems to be an awareness in the IT community that the very nature of the work in our profession demands a high degree of meticulousness and attracts the types of individuals who are already prone to stress.

Many information technology professionals have lived with stress so long that they overlook the symptoms as simply normal or typical for their age. Moreover, they are fearful of being labeled a "complainer" and do not address the problem of stress until they are on the brink of emotional or physical illness. Menon suggests that physical illness is treated while most of the time the cause is ignored: "Psychiatrists, not doctors, are in fact becoming the main healers of the 90s ... more than 80 percent of my patients suffer from stress-related symptoms, and what they need is counseling more than medicines."<sup>4</sup> This is certainly true for information technology professionals who daily face stress associated with evolving technologies, system malfunctions, backlogs, pressures to reduce costs, loss of control over their work, and lack of planning.

### Symptoms of stress

As IT professionals, we have a responsibility to learn to identify the signals our body and mind are sending that alert us to the fact that we are reacting to stressors.

Stress can be thought of as acting on three different levels: the physiological level, the psychological level, and the social level. All of these interact and influence how our mind and body will react to certain circumstances. The physiologic reactions arise when some stressor affects us. Whether this stressor is external (such as if we were being chased by someone with a gun), or

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Vobejda, "When Your Job Makes You Sick," *Washington Post*, 10 March 1992, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 23 September 1991. NewsBank file EMP 65:G14.

<sup>4</sup> Ramesh Menon, "The Silent Scourge," *India Today*, 30 April 1992, pp. 68-72.

Table 1: Survey findings

Survey Questions	Results
1. Do you feel that your job is more stressful now than it was five years ago?	86% ...of respondents stated that they felt more stress
2. If "yes" to #1, to what do you attribute this added stress?*	46% ...stated that they were understaffed 42% ...stated they have had additional responsibilities 34% ...stated the increase in demands for the technology 30% ...stated budget cuts 15% ...stated they felt everyone wants things done immediately with no concern for their workload 11% ...stated they felt they had less time to get everything accomplished
3. Do you feel that stress has affected you?*	86% ...yes Emotionally 63% ...yes Physically 51% ...yes Sleeping patterns 30% ...yes Eating patterns 15% ...yes Depression 11% ...yes Feeling of helplessness 11% ...yes Continual feeling of sadness 7% ...yes Other 7% ...yes, feeling overloaded
4. Does your place of employment have a professional counselor for employees?	71% ...yes 14% ...no
5. Do you think it would be beneficial to have a professional counselor for employees?	36% ...yes 28% ...no 12% ...would rather see money going to correct the cause 20% ...indifferent
6. Other— Please include any comments that you wish to make regarding stress in your working environment.	Interruptions with new priorities (faxes) result in delays or reduction of output. Stress can be eliminated by having proper training dollars and funds to purchase the correct consultants and equipment. Stress can be relieved by giving individuals the authority/power to control situations that may arise, instead of management being the only authority. Management needs to be aware of stress and be sensitive to their employees' needs. Administrators only look at the bottom line, not the frenzy that is created when individuals are rushed to complete a project. People are working longer weeks and are feeling unappreciated by their employers.
*Results add up to more than 100%, due to multiple responses for each question.	

*“When we are stressed in some moment to the extent that our mind identifies a threat to our being, our body goes through an automatic alarm reaction.”*

<sup>5</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1991), p. 254.

internal (such as the *thought* that we have a fatal disease—whether the disease is real or imagined), will cause the same physiological reactions. When we are stressed in some moment to the extent that our mind identifies a threat to our being, our body goes through an automatic alarm reaction. This reaction has been referred to as the “fight or flight” reaction as described by Kabat-Zinn: “If our social status is threatened or

our ego, or our strongly held beliefs, or our desire to control things or to have them be a certain way (‘my’ way for instance), then the sympathetic nervous system lets loose. We can be catapulted into a state of hyperarousal and fight or flight whether we like it or not.”<sup>5</sup>

The fight or flight reaction releases stress hormones into the body. The most familiar of these hormones is adrenaline. The adrenaline

release leads to heightened sense perceptions so that we can take in as much information about our surroundings and internal processes as possible. The pupils of our eyes dilate to let in more light, the hair on our body stands erect so that we are more sensitive to vibrations. The output of the heart jumps by a factor of four or five, which causes our heart to pump more blood, which raises our blood pressure, so that more blood and energy can be delivered to our extremities, in case we are called upon to fight or run. The body's digestive system shuts down, so that the blood can be redirected to our arms and legs.

If the automatic alarm reaction is not terminated by the act of either fighting or fleeing, the body stays in this hyper-aroused state. If one's body is subjected to this hyper-arousal often, with no outlet, in essence the stress is being internalized. We carry around the arousal inside in the form of the stress hormones and agitated thoughts and feelings. "There is mounting evidence that chronic stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system can lead to long-term physiological dysregulation, resulting in problems such as increased blood pressure, cardiac arrhythmias, digestive problems, chronic headaches, backaches, and sleep disorders, as well as to psychological distress in the form of chronic anxiety."<sup>6</sup>

Being faced with the chronic stressors inherent in our work, followed by a stress reaction which we internalize, or get "control" of by denying the stress or "pushing it down" out of our consciousness, becomes our normal way of functioning. This cycle becomes so familiar that we view it as normal. Our body reactions, such as changes in our eating or sleeping patterns, chronic muscle tension, "butterflies" in the stomach, heart palpitations, impulses to lash out in anger or get in arguments or fights, overuse of stimulants or depressants such as alcohol and tranquilizers, are explained away.

William Roiter, a psychologist with American PsychManagement, which directs employee assistance programs for more than sixty corporations, states, "If a worker is predisposed to drink, stress can trigger alcoholism. If you are predisposed to anger, you will start yelling, if you are predisposed to pushing your feelings down, stress can trigger depression."<sup>7</sup>

### **You are what you think**

Even though over the years our profession has evolved into a more structured discipline, with the concepts of shareable code, object-oriented design, system development methodologies, and CASE tools being the standard, many of the people attracted to the profession are, in a

sense, artisans. IT professionals experience a delight in the creation of a good system design, or an exquisitely written and executed program.

The ability to solve complex puzzles is another skill that many in our profession proudly possess. The intrinsic rewards—such as pride in one's accomplishment, realized by a person when he or she has achieved a goal—and the opportunity to experience this reinforcement often is what attracts many of us to this profession. We have a heightened sense of ownership about our work, and relish the recognition that the mastery of a difficult technical skill or concept can bring.

This constant reinforcement can be addictive. The "trouble" comes if we take our identity from our job, or job performance, as opposed to being able to separate the work we do from our being—who we *are*. The problem with this identification is that if we feel that our job or job performance is threatened, it is as if our being is at risk. It's as if we believe that we *are* the job.

The general rule for what causes psychological stress is that how you see things and how you handle them make all the difference in terms of how much stress you will experience.

The way we think, our cognitive behavior, dictates the way we see ourselves and the world and our relationship to both. Our thoughts and core beliefs about ourselves influence our ability to make things happen and how we react to what is happening.

Dr. Martin Seligman and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have been studying health differences between people who can be identified as being basically optimistic or basically pessimistic in their thinking about why things happen to them. These two groups of people have very different ways of explaining the causes of what Dr. Seligman calls the "bad" events that happen to them in their lives. ("Bad" events include natural disasters, such as floods, hurricanes, or earthquakes; and personal defeats or setbacks, such as loss of a job or rejection by someone you care about.)<sup>8</sup>

Some people tend to be pessimistic in the ways they explain to themselves the causes of a bad event. This pattern involves blaming themselves for the bad things that happen to them, thinking that the effects of whatever happened will last a long time and that the bad event will affect many different aspects of their lives. These people carry their thoughts to catastrophic conclusions, such as, "This is my fault; this is going to last forever; it's going to affect everything I do." This mode of thinking is sometimes called catastrophizing. An example of this might be: "I always knew I would fail and this proves it; I can

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>7</sup> Vobejda, pp. 12-15.

<sup>8</sup> Kabat-Zinn, pp. 199-200.

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never do anything right; now I am doomed.”

An optimist experiencing the same event would see it quite differently. People who are optimists tend not to blame themselves for bad events or, if they do, they see them more as a momentary event which will become resolved. Optimists see events as being of specific duration and not a lifetime; they do not blow “bad” events out of proportion. An example of this style might be: “Well, I really blew it that time, but I’ll figure out something, make some adjustments, and next time I will be successful.”

Dr. Seligman’s overall conclusion from these and other studies is that it is not the world per se that puts us at increased risk of illness so much as how we see and think about what is happening to us.<sup>9</sup>

Robert Kahn, professor emeritus of psychology and public health at the University of Michigan, says it is impossible to predict how occupational stress will affect an individual because the psychological effects of the workplace can be minimized or heightened by the personality characteristics of the individual.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Crisis or crossroads?**

At Miami-Dade Community College, among the ranks of the management team in the Computer Applications Programming department, it was clear that the stress that all of us were experiencing was taking a dramatic toll on our productivity and physical and emotional health. As we looked for coping strategies to ease our stress and that of our co-workers, we were urged by mental health professionals (both on staff and through the written word) that it was necessary to reframe our perception, to look at the problem from a different angle. As human beings, we have choice at every moment as to how we mentally and emotionally perceive and react to every event in our life, even though we may not have control over the actual event. We can choose to view our stressors from a “learned helplessness” perspective and react as we have described earlier, or we can see this turmoil as an opportunity to acquire and practice new living skills, which have the potential to literally change our lives.

By changing our self talk (cognitive behavior)—that constant chatter in our heads which offers unrelenting judgment, criticism, and comment—we can literally change our perception of the world and our life.

Albert Ellis, in his rational emotive theory, describes that it is not the action or event that causes a consequence, but rather the individuals’ beliefs about themselves in relation to the event that causes the consequences.<sup>11</sup> If one were to lose a job, the long-term consequences of that job

loss would not be determined by the mere job loss. Rather, the long-term consequences would be determined by the individual’s belief about himself or herself and what the loss meant. Beliefs such as, “I knew it all along, I am not worthy and they found me out,” will have powerful long-term effects on how the individual will recover from the action. A different individual facing the same action but whose core beliefs are healthier and more positive will experience very different consequences from the same action.

Armed with this knowledge, our stressful environment can be used as a practice field, if you will, to learn to change our core beliefs and our cognitive behavior. At Miami-Dade, some of the techniques that we are beginning to use to make these mental and emotional changes are counseling, meditation, and creative visualization.

#### **Counseling**

In our CUMREC-L survey, when asked “Does your place of employment have a professional counselor,” 71 percent of the respondents said that it did. The follow-up for those who answered “yes” might be to ask how many have taken advantage of this service. Even in the “enlightened” ’90s, there is still some perception that availing oneself of counseling services may be a sign of weakness, or illness. Our socialization has molded us to believe that, unlike our physical health, we can handle our emotional health alone, and asking for help somehow labels or taints us.

When we are used to looking at problems and solutions through our own filter, we miss alternatives that may not be part of our experience. Very often, it takes someone on the outside to be able to see the whole picture through an objective lens. There is a wonderful sculpture of a man in a cage that illustrates this point. The man is struggling to pry the bars apart so that he can escape, while directly behind him, the door to the cage is wide open. Counseling can be thought of as helping us look at problems and life events from a different angle, which we may not otherwise be able to see.

Naturally, in an office setting, deep, long-term, family-of-origin therapy work (exploring how we learned to think and feel the way we do) is not the most appropriate. However, one of the ways that we are using counseling in our organization is to help each other recognize what we are really feeling. As we stated earlier, most of us are so used to feeling a certain way, even though it may not be healthy, that we assume that it is normal, and we deny, suppress, or displace our feelings. It is very common, for example, to feel

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Vobejda, pp. 12-15.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 3d ed. (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1986), p. 213.

angry and act out those feelings, when in reality if we peel back the layers of our feelings, we are really experiencing fear or pain. So learning to "listen" to our psyche is one of the prime goals.

Another prime goal is to make sure that we are not "catastrophizing." As Mark Twain stated, "I have suffered many catastrophes in my life ... most of them never happened." In stressful times, we tend to take an incident and make huge, imaginary leaps to catastrophic conclusions. "That meeting did not go well today, the VP didn't look at me ... I'd better start looking for another job." Counseling can teach us to live more fully in the present and lessen our past recriminations and future catastrophizing.

Finally, just being able to express feelings and problems is cathartic for many. Having a congruent, empathic person available to listen, who exhibits what Carl Rogers (the father of Person Centered Therapy) calls "unconditional positive regard," can deflate the potentially harmful build-up of emotions.<sup>12</sup>

### **Meditation**

As we discussed earlier in this article, our feelings and perceptions of the circumstances in our lives can have a profound effect on the outcome of how we experience and handle our life events. If we are filled with negative self-talk, for example, our experiences will be self-fulfilling, and thus negative.

Our minds seem to be constantly filled with the "shoulds," "oughts," and "woulds" of our daily existence. They are filled, too, with all of our plans about how to get what we want, while planning to ward off the things that we don't want. We can feel overwhelmed by all of the important things that just have to get done. Much of the time, we are desperately trying to do them all but not enjoying the "doing." Wayne Dyer, in his book, *You'll See It When You Believe It*, says, "We are not human doings, we are human beings,"<sup>13</sup> while Jon Kabat-Zinn says, "Meditation is really non-doing. It is the only human endeavor I know of that does not involve trying to get somewhere else but, rather, emphasizes being where you are already."<sup>14</sup>

The practice of meditation is designed to help us quiet the mind. It is a very enlightening experience because it allows us to "watch" the incessant and relentless activity of our own mind and how much we are driven by it. With practice, we are able to quiet our thoughts and go to the center of our being, where we can find an inner balance that helps us face the turmoil of life.

The practice of meditation is nothing more than setting aside a special time and place for "non-doing." It is best to sit with eyes closed in a

comfortable erect posture, in a place that is quiet and devoid of interruptions. All concentration should be directed to your slow and steady breathing. When you notice thoughts present, you gently let the thought leave your mind and re-direct your attention to your calm, steady breathing.

Thoughts of past and future, thoughts of "what if," "I should," and "I ought" are gently released. It is the thoughts about what we should have done, and what is ahead, that keep us spinning through life. It is the momentum of all of this doing that takes over. Meditation helps us to focus on the present, and live in the moment.

At first you will notice how much activity your mind is engaged in, an insight that may be surprising. With practice, you will begin to feel small spaces of calmness, when there appear to be no thoughts taking place; it is at these quiet moments that we experience peace. In essence, meditation is designed to help you change your mental behavior, while getting in touch with the calm center of your being.

### **Creative visualization**

William James said, "The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives."<sup>15</sup> Our focus, the object of our mental energy, is a powerful phenomenon. Most of us can relate to the experience of wanting to purchase a new car. When we decide which make and model we wish to buy, almost as if by magic, it seems that the road becomes filled with that very car, when only the day before it seemed there were hardly any on the street. This curiosity can be explained by thinking of our mind as a computer. When we feed in the data of the type of car we are interested in, our mind sets up, in essence, a list of specifications. Then when we encounter a car that matches our specifications, a signal is sent to our brain which alerts us that we are encountering a "match." It's not that there are more cars of our selected type on the road, it's just that we have programmed our minds to be alert for that model and to signal us when we come upon it.

Creative visualization is a process in which we program our minds to "look" for objects or situations which will help us meet our goals. The theory is that just like the cars that were always on the road, whatever we need to reach our target is also available. We just need to train our mind to filter through all of the stimuli and pick out the parts that will help us reach our mark.

At the height of stressful situations, we can become caught up in the vortex of the negative whirl that surrounds difficult situations. When

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 107-109.

<sup>13</sup> Wayne Dyer, *You'll See It When You Believe It* (New York: W. Morrow, 1989), p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Kabat-Zinn, p. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Fanning, *Visualization for Change*, 2d ed. (Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 1994), p. 7.

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our focus is cast on the negativity or stressors that surround us, our mind will be programmed to pick out only the negative stimuli, and thus our negative focus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Creative visualization helps us refocus and reprogram our minds. It can be used to help us relax, prepare for an upcoming event, solve problems, heal, or achieve a goal. The basic exercise is very simple and for the purposes of this article, we will describe a relaxation exercise.

Essentially, it is necessary to find a few uninterrupted minutes in a quiet place. You will sit with your eyes closed, and picture a scene which is very peaceful for you. It is important that you create every detail of this tranquil place. Some people pick the ocean, or the mountains or the forest as the backdrop of their scenes. It is important to create this picture in as much detail as possible. The colors, textures, sounds, and smells of your surroundings and the feelings that you are experiencing, are important components of this visualization.

Once you have created your special, relaxing place, you will scan your body mentally so that you can detect where the physical tension is occurring. Is your neck stiff? Have you been clenching your teeth and putting tension in your jaw muscles? What other parts of your body are feeling tense?

When you have identified the areas of tension, see if you can visualize what that tension "looks like," "sounds like," "smells like," or "feels like." It is helpful to get an impression from each of your senses about the tension. This will help you create a detailed metaphor for the tension in your body. For an example, one might picture the tension as tightly twisted ropes. With your eyes closed, you would picture the ropes being squeezed tightly together, and then you would picture these ropes slowly and gently untwist. As you visualize the ropes unwinding, you will feel the tension leave your body, and feel yourself enjoying your peaceful surroundings. "Five minutes of visualization can cancel out hours, days, even weeks of negative thinking or acting. Three five-minute sessions a day can change a habit that took years to form and reinforce."<sup>16</sup>

## In conclusion

One of the questions we asked in our CUMREC-L survey was, "Do you think it would be beneficial to have a professional counselor or psychologist closely associated with the information technology department who is familiar with the kind of stress that information technologists encounter?" Several respondents suggested that they would rather "see money spent correcting some of the causes of stress," than to spend the money for a mental health counselor.

As human beings we have been conditioned to believe that external forces control our being, and in order to make changes in our lives, we must change our outside circumstances. As many of us know too well, there will always be people or forces that can disrupt our work, threaten our jobs and our role in the industry, or make what we say one day irrelevant the next, no matter how much power we may think we have accumulated. Additionally, there are usually limits to how much we can do to change things or resist certain changes within our institutions, even if we have a lot of power and influence.<sup>17</sup>

We do, however, have choice at every moment of how we perceive and react to external events and relationships. The power of thought is enormous. In this article we have touched on some ways in which we can change our thoughts. We suggest that this change in *our thinking* is the key to changing our life and our organizations for the better.

The tenets we have touched on in this text can not simply be implemented throughout our departments and colleges as we implement computer systems. They are not dependent on getting others to buy into the same way of thinking or performing; rather, these suggested practices must be absorbed and practiced individually. However, once you begin to think and feel differently, you will automatically affect everything and everyone around you. We believe that information technology organizations have much to gain as we turn our crisis into a crossroads for enormous leaps in personal and professional growth.

C/E

This article is based on a presentation made by the authors at CUMREC95.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 152-153.

<sup>17</sup> Kabat-Zinn, p. 203.