

before moving forward. Once you can realize that you are spiraling out of control, you can stop spinning before making a poor decision.

One method I've found helpful for recognizing stress is to think of it as approaching a stoplight while driving a car. When you come to a green light, you simply stay on the gas and keep moving forward. In our jobs as athletic directors, when things are going fine and we are crossing things off our to-do list, we're in a green light mode—our heart rate is slow and steady, our muscles are relaxed, and we feel good.

When you're behind the wheel and come to a yellow light, you either slow down or speed up depending on the situation, but you have to think before you act. On the job, when you have yellow lights such as a late official or bus that doesn't show up, you have to slow down and recognize the situation is out of the norm. During yellow lights, our heart rate may pick up speed, our muscles are a little tense, or we may feel some anxiety or irritability creeping in.

If you panic at the sight of a yellow light and react out of emotion, you let stress take

over. In a car, you might slam the brakes too hard or end up running a red light. As an athletic director, you might get mad, make a rash decision, or simply elevate stress levels unnecessarily.

Red light behind the wheel? You better stop. A red light situation in your job is also a signal to stop so you can de-stress before you do anything else. Signs of being in red-light mode include sweating, a racing heart, a clenched jaw, or a general feeling of being out of control.

I actually place signal light stickers on my phone and computer that serve as reminders for me to check my internal traffic lights. I always want to be acutely aware of whether I'm in green, yellow, or red light mode. And when I am in yellow or red, I will not answer the phone or respond to e-mails—it usually ends up being counter-productive.

So how exactly do you deal with the stress of being in a red-light situation? I encourage people to develop routines they can use to let things go. For example, when

I feel myself getting into yellow or red lights, I will leave my office for a quick 30- to 60-second walk down the hall or outside the building to escape. When I get back, I decide if something needs to be done immediately

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about the stressful situation. If it requires a quick phone call, I make it. But if a situation can wait until I have more time to think about it, I add it to my to-do list as something to tackle later in the day.

LEADERSHIP

My strategy for handling the stress from the incident was to hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. Before we announced the decision, I thought about the negative repercussions. I visualized how I would react to any newspaper articles, e-mails, and phone calls. I visualized myself staying in the green-light zone and maintaining my self-control, even when angry parents, community members, and students confronted me.

I used the signal light stickers on my phone and computer to remind myself not to respond to any e-mails or answer the phone if I was in a yellow or red light. And after I finished a conversation or e-mail about the situation, I used my baby wipes to wash away my stress before moving on to another task.

For me, the true measure of how you are performing is the mirror test: Are you pleased with what you see when you look in the mirror? I have a mirror in my office and I constantly ask kids to look at themselves in the glass and tell me what they see. Do they see someone who is telling the truth and living a life of no regrets, or someone who is holding back? I used the mirror

test on myself a lot last winter after the ice hockey decision. Ultimately, I found it was an opportunity for me to walk the walk and set an example for my coaches and peers as to how to react in a hostile situation.

I also learned that, as an athletic administrator, with every tough decision you make, some people will support you and some people will disagree with you. If you are going to be an effective administrator you cannot take criticism of your decisions personally. You must have a strong grasp of your mission as an athletic director and be able to use that mission when making decisions.

When people are upset with your decision, always remember that they are angered at the decision, not at you personally. They may not know that, but as long as you do, you will experience a lot less stress.

THE WORK-LIFE TRANSITION

Another big source of stress can be blending your work and personal life. If you find that your job is affecting your relationships at home or vice-versa, you need to develop a routine to separate your life as an athletic director from your life outside of work.

For me, showering is an effective way to transition to where I need to be mentally. When I shower before school in the morning, I consciously make the commitment to leave all my personal life stress in the shower. I simply wash those thoughts down the drain. I also start thinking about what I need to do for that day at work and how to stay positive with the tasks ahead.

When I get home at the end of the day, I get into the shower as quickly as possible and wash away all the stress and negativity from work. Sometimes I am in there for two minutes, other times for 20 minutes.

This process works well for me, but each individual must find his or her own routine for compartmentalizing the different roles they play. Changing clothes, exercising, altering your physical space, or listening to music in the car on the way home are all effective techniques.

Stress is unavoidable in our jobs. If ignored, it can eat away at you. But if you face it head on, you can enjoy and find more success at your job. And, down the road, you will definitely find more green lights ahead. ■