Stressing mental health

It was close to midnight and I was compiling my data on the long-term effects of stress hormones on the mouse brain. Like many scientists, I often found myself working late, so this day during the second year of my Ph.D. didn’t seem all that unusual—except that it was Christmas. For the first time, I wondered whether there was a connection between my everyday life and my research topic. Many of my friends and family members who don’t work in science were already worried that my long and unpredictable hours could have health implications. Upon reflection, I realized that this was the second year in a row that I had worked on Christmas Day, so maybe they had a point. But I felt fine, so why should I worry? I had work to do.

As the stress of completing a Ph.D. mounted, though, I began to recognize that, just as chronic stress modified the brains and behavior of my mice, my peers were experiencing something similar. We tended to refer to these changes—which included feeling downtrodden and anxious, withdrawing from social activities, and losing much of our enthusiasm for science—as the “third-year blues,” which made them seem expected and even normal. But, I realized that they weren’t—and that if I didn’t manage my workload, I wouldn’t be exempt from the effects of stress on the brain.

Stress is an ingrained and unavoidable aspect of scientific practice. In some unfortunate cases, lab culture can make it worse. In many others, however, it is simply the nature of research. Deadlines, tight funding, and the pressure to “publish or perish” all create chronic stress. There is no avoiding these issues. But, I decided that I could make a point of managing them and advocating the importance of protecting our health.

Personally, I realized that self-imposed deadlines and goals created much of the stress I was feeling, and that tempering my expectations was an easy way to reduce it. I’ve learned to manage my time with realistic short-, medium-, and long-term experimental deadlines, which keep me on track while minimizing pressure to do too much at once. I still work long hours, but I ensure that I make time to focus on myself too. This may mean finding time to get outside and grab a bite to eat during an otherwise busy day, or making sure I have a leisure activity to look forward to as the capstone to a busy week. The short-term result may be spending slightly less time in the lab, but the long-term gain is a reinvigorated and more productive scientist.

I’ve also made a point of talking to my mentors about the dangers of excessive stress and the knock-on effects on lab productivity. I’ve found that they are responsive and understanding, which has served as a useful reminder that most advisers (even those who may appear intimidating) take the welfare of their team seriously. Moreover, they are often open to working together to develop timelines and approaches that balance the needs for productivity and well-being.

Conversations with peers about these issues are equally important. I’ve known many junior scientists who prefer to conceal their concerns, living by the mantra, “Don’t let them see you sweat.” In these cases, you can lessen your colleagues’ feelings of isolation by simply asking, “How’re things going?” More than once, this approach has led to long conversations, and even tears, about matters that people felt they couldn’t discuss within their labs and didn’t know how to broach elsewhere. Others prefer not to talk, but giving them the opportunity is sometimes enough to make them feel less alone.

Now that I am a postdoc, I continue to work long hours while also acknowledging the effects of stress on my health. By integrating sustainability and well-being into my work life, I find myself enjoying science more than ever. I’ve been told that “inside, a part of you is a postdoc forever.” If that’s true I don’t mind, because I now practice science on my own terms, and I’m loving every minute of it.

Michael Notaras is a postdoc at the Feil Family Brain and Mind Research Institute at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
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