

Ethikos Volume 34, Number 2. February 01, 2020 Ethics, cognitive dissonance, and mindfulness

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As members of the compliance profession, our role is unique. As leaders of the compliance and ethics field, what happens when our personal ethics are challenged? Do we speak up? Are we able to speak up without fear of losing our jobs? Do we walk away? Do we stay quiet and do as we are told and allow a quiet internal conflict to fester until it takes its toll on our health and we become too stressed or ill to go to work?

Types of stress

In the workplace, broadly speaking, there are two main categories of stress. The first is the stress of being overworked: under pressure, on a tight budget, with low morale; people are leaving, which means more work for those still working there.

The other type of stress is when one's personal ethics conflict with the interests of their employer or their profession, such as the compliance officer who has been told to turn a blind eye to corrupt dealings or risk losing their livelihood. This creates an inner conflict that only the individual can understand. Add into that mix difficult situations within an individual's personal life and the additional pressure that puts on them.

Will Joel Friedman^[1] divides stress into four categories.

1. Physical stress.
2. Psychological stress, which can happen when one is overworked.
3. Psychosocial stress, which is the byproduct of the former, where one feels that they have no social support or have a lack of resources due to loss of employment.
4. Psychospiritual stress, such as a crisis of values, meaning, and purpose; joyless striving (instead of productive, satisfying, meaningful, and fulfilling work); and a misalignment with one's core spiritual beliefs.

Ethics and cognitive dissonance

The psychologist Festinger (1957) coined the term "cognitive consistency" to describe the inner drive we have that holds all our attitudes and behaviors in harmony and avoids disharmony (or cognitive dissonance). When there is an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors (dissonance), something must change to eliminate the dissonance.^[2]

That dissonance, once internalized, leads to stress. If left unattended, it manifests as a disease within the body. Initially, this can begin as inflammation that develops into any number of diseases, such as ulcers; headaches or migraines; and, at the worst end of the scale, serious heart conditions or cancer, the so-called "professionals

disease” in the medical profession. The root cause of all major degenerative diseases is increasingly considered by researchers to be inflammation.^[3] The cause of inflammation can be when the body is put into a state of stress (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The relationship between stress/inflammation and cognitive dissonance

The relationship between stress/inflammation and cognitive dissonance



In addition to the physical toll that cognitive dissonance and its associated stress takes on the body, an individual’s self-worth, social interactions, and personal relationships start to diminish. Perhaps they decrease slowly over a period of time so that they are barely noticeable until something happens and others realize that they no longer recognize the colleague they sit next to. Work output may decline, and quality can diminish.

When one’s personal ethics conflict with their professional ethics, how do you proceed? After all, the job needs to be done, there are bills to pay, family is reliant on the individual’s income, and the employer is reliant on the output. Should personal ethics be put aside and the employer’s instructions followed, or should a case be argued?

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