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## Pay and Benefits Watch

### Stress Test

By Elizabeth Newell | [enewell@govexec.com](mailto:enewell@govexec.com) | June 17, 2010

When the Senior Executives Association surveyed high-ranking career feds on their interest in joining the Senior Executive Service, they identified work-life balance as one of their primary reasons for not pursuing the top tier of federal service.

If any of those respondents attended the SEA conference breakout session "Finding Resilience: Avoiding Executive Burnout and Staying at the Top of Your Game" on Wednesday it likely confirmed their concerns. Conference participants nodded vigorously as a former senior agency official, a psychologist and a corporate health expert described the physical and emotional tolls persistent stress can take on professionals.

Jessy Mack, manager of corporate health at the Virginia Hospital Center in Arlington, Va., said that mental stress, such as the kind caused by work, affects the body almost exactly the same way as a physical threat -- for instance, confronting a bear. Faced with stress, a person's muscles will tense up, heart rate and blood pressure will increase while digestive and reproductive systems slow, and breathing accelerates, she said. According to Mack, the constant strain of these abnormal body functions can take a major toll.

"Our bodies can't handle normal functions if we're constantly in fight or flight mode," she said.

So what can federal employees, particularly senior executives, do to manage stress when long hours and heavy workloads come with the job? Greg Rothwell, former director of acquisitions at the Homeland Security Department and currently a president of Evermay Consulting, provided some common-sense advice to federal employees: take time to recognize your public service, exercise, spend time with your family, and visualize your exit strategy from the high-pressure position.

Psychotherapist Jacob Melamed said while workload and other professional stresses certainly contribute to burnout, it always depends on the approach a person takes to individual circumstances.

Part of this, Melamed said, is acknowledging that unpredictability is the only guarantee. Workers can prevent roadblocks by take a balanced view of their surroundings; instead of getting frustrated by obstacles and challenges, they can accept them as a fact of life and play to their own strengths, he said.

Attendees of Wednesday's session said leaders are the key components in whether or not they experience burnout. Regardless of policy, leaders show by example whether an office truly is committed to work-life balance. If a senior manager sends e-mails at 11 p.m., subordinates are bound to get the impression they are expected to respond immediately. If a senior manager takes walks at lunch or leaves at 5 p.m. to attend her child's soccer game, subordinates likely will feel free to do the same.

Several managers said during the session that, while they feel compelled to work long and strange hours and tether themselves to their BlackBerrys, they make it clear they support a clear line between their employees' personal and professional lives and don't expect subordinates to suffer alongside them unless absolutely necessary.

One of the most cited work-life balance programs, telework, often is assumed to universally reduce stress. But William Bransford, general counsel of SEA, says proper teleworking requires thoughtful, thorough implementation by managers.

"As leaders, as executives out there implementing the telework program, [they] need to do so carefully, slowly and clearly so that employees know their expectations," Bransford said. "You're expected when you implement program not to have a loss in productivity, for your programs to continue, all those things."

### **Not So Fast**

Maryland Democratic Sen. Ben Cardin is trying hard to push up the effective date of a health care reform provision that will allow the children of federal employees to be kids a little longer. But so far the effort isn't gaining much momentum.

Cardin in May [introduced a bill](#) that would allow the law letting government workers' children remain in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program until age 26 to take effect this year rather than in 2011.

The Maryland senator last week attempted to breathe new life into the provision by attaching it as an amendment to jobs legislation. But that effort [failed](#). So for the time being, feds eager to put children age 22 to 26 on their health plans should keep January 2011 on their calendars.



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