The Wellness Councils of America Presents...

# A WELCOA Expert Interview

# Under Pressure

## A Workforce On The Brink

## Luke Seaward, PhD
### Executive Director,
### Inspiration Unlimited

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### Brian Luke Seaward, PhD
*Executive Director, Inspiration Unlimited*

Brian Luke Seaward, PhD is a faculty member of the University of Northern Colorado and the Executive Director of Inspiration Unlimited. Inspiration Unlimited is a consulting company in the field of health promotion and wellness, providing current information on the aspects of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness for both personal and professional training and development. Dr. Seaward conducts various educational opportunities for professionals in all aspects of society; from the corporate and hospital settings to the Olympic arena. While the topic of stress management is by far the most requested, several other aspects of wellness are also in high demand. He is the author of several books including *Stand Like Mountain, Flow Like Water*, and *Stressed Is Desserts Spelled Backward*. He can be reached at www.brianlukeseaward.net

## Q1: Luke, what exactly is stress?

**SEAWARD:** There's no one definition, but there's a consensus among professionals in the field that stress is a perceived threat—real or imagined—to one's mind, body, spirit, or emotion.

## Q2: Is stress really harmful if left unchecked?

**SEAWARD:** Absolutely! Stress kills. There's a boatload of evidence revealing that about 80 to 85 percent of all disease and illness is not only stress related, but that there is a stress-related causal factor in this—meaning simply that stress causes illness and disease. Of course that relates to healthcare issues at the worksite.

When speaking of the negative health effects of stress, it's interesting to note that the stress response (fight or flight) revolves primarily around physical threats and dangers. But today, we're seeing very few physical threats—terrorism notwithstanding. So our physical response to stress is very antiquated because about 99 percent of our stressors today are mental, emotional, and spiritual, yet our bodies respond as if they're all physical.

## Q3: If stress has so many profound impacts on disease and human health, why is it not listed with physical inactivity, tobacco, and poor nutrition as a leading health risk?

**SEAWARD:** I think it's such a huge factor that we tend to overlook it. It's nebulous in the sense that it stares us in the face, but we can't see it because it's so huge. But the signs and symptoms are everywhere, from decreased productivity due to absenteeism, to increased health problems ranging from cancer, to heart disease, to hemorrhoids. You name it—the symptoms are evident everywhere.

## Q4: It seems like some people—especially in the business environment—really seem to thrive on stress. What's that all about?

**SEAWARD:** Well, there's good stress and bad stress. Good stress is that which is motivating, invigorating, and challenging.

Lots of people use this type of stress to get things accomplished. Take Lance Armstrong, for example. The Tour de France is incredibly stressful, yet Lance Armstrong rose to the occasion to become the hero of the Tour de France five years in a row. He met the challenge. He's an example (though extreme) of someone who used stress as a motivating factor to accomplish a goal, and this is quite admirable.

But there's only one Lance Armstrong. The vast majority of people make their living at the worksite, and what we're seeing today is that stress at the worksite is synonymous with change. Change is everywhere at work, whether it's stock reports, mergers, acquisitions, downsizing—the list is endless. This type of change at the worksite makes people feel very vulnerable and, at the same time, feel as though they have no of sense of empowerment. To revisit the Lance Armstrong example, these individuals can't just "peddle faster," and change brings about an incredible amount of negative stress.

So the real challenge today is to help people learn to adapt to change. With that adaptation comes a sense of empowerment. If people feel more empowered, they're likely to experience less negative stress. They feel like they have control—they're not just passive victims in a careless world.

## Q5: How do people begin to manage change and feel empowered during times of stress and change?

**SEAWARD:** Setting boundaries really helps. One of the big changes I see today is people setting more boundaries between work and home, and freedom and responsibility. In general, there's a real lack of boundaries in our world today.

Look at technology for example. It's wonderful, but it can cause extreme stress. In the wrong hands or at the wrong time of day, technology can be very problematic. Technology is supposed to serve our best interests, but we're not supposed to be slaves to it. It's well documented that people are now addicted to things like cell phones and e-mail and laptops because they feel they always have to be connected. Talk about not having boundaries! Keeping pace with this 24/7 mentality of accessibility is like running at a sprint speed for an entire marathon, and no one can do that successfully. Simply stated, it causes burnout!

## Q6: How do people consciously set boundaries? What's involved in boundary setting from an individual perspective?

**SEAWARD:** People first need to acknowledge that it's important to have healthy boundaries. Once they do that, they need to realize that boundaries are rooted in values. What do we value that's important in life? Health? Education? Family? Privacy? Love? Freedom? Responsibility? These are all a part of the fabric of what makes up healthy boundaries.

We set boundaries with these values in mind. For example, someone may set a boundary that they're not going to check their work email from home because, from 5:30 until bedtime, it's important to pay attention to their family.

Right now in America we're seeing really poor boundaries in terms of finances, relationships, behaviors, etc. But if people can see that they need to set boundaries for their own good, then they can begin to create and implement them.

It's vital that these boundaries be put into play on a daily basis. If an individual creates boundaries, but doesn't abide by them, then they get walked on—by their boss, by their friends, by everyone. When that happens, people begin to feel violated and victimized which leads to more fear, more anger, and more stress. It leads to an unbroken cycle of stress, and it's a dysfunctional, never-ending cycle.

### David Hunnicutt, PhD

***President,***
***Wellness Councils of America***

David Hunnicutt, PhD, was named President of WELCOA in 1995. Under Dr. Hunnicutt's guidance, WELCOA routinely distributes millions of publications each year to its corporate membership of over 2,500 companies, and over 500 Well Workplaces. These publications are designed to increase quality of life, enhance employee productivity and improve personal health, and well-being.

Known for his pragmatic approach and strong background in organizational development and corporate leadership, Dr. Hunnicutt is widely recognized as a national wellness advocate. By dedicating his professional energies to advancing the cause of corporate wellness, Dr. Hunnicutt consults with hundreds of organizations each year including Merrill Lynch, Caterpillar, and the United Nations to help them link health promotion objectives to business outcomes.

"WILLPOWER IS WHAT I CALL ONE OF THE "MUSCLES OF THE SOUL." IT'S ONE OF OUR INNER RESOURCES THAT WE USE TO OVERCOME OUR PROBLEMS, JUST LIKE A SENSE OF HUMOR, PATIENCE, TOLERANCE, OR COURAGE. WILLPOWER IS IN THAT SAME FAMILY OF MUSCLES, AND IT NEEDS TO BE EXERCISED REGULARLY."



**Q7:** Can the typical working American effectively manage their boundaries? Do they have the resources to figure this thing out?

**SEAWARD:** I think so, but it definitely takes willpower. Willpower is what I call one of the "muscles of the soul." It's one of our inner resources that we use to overcome our problems, just like a sense of humor, patience, tolerance, or courage. Willpower is in that same family of muscles, and it needs to be exercised regularly.

Let's take television watching for example. In America, we have a serious lack of willpower when it comes to watching TV. In fact, the average American now watches between 20 and 40 hours of television a week. As one of my students correctly observed, that's nearly a full-time job!

When most people sit down at night to watch television, I don't think they say, "I'm going to get my quota of seven hours of TV watching tonight." What they say is something like, "I'm going to watch *Friends*." But then the television ends up sucking them in, and they watch it for the entire evening. A strong sense of willpower could help in that situation. After *Friends* you could just shut off the TV. There are more valuable things to do with your life.

**Q8:** Are people more stressed today than they were 200 years ago? There were some serious stressors to deal with during the settling of this country. Is stress worse now?

**SEAWARD:** Every epoch in the history of humanity has had its own challenges— social challenges, wartime conquests, weather disasters, you name it. What's

unique about today is that we are at a very challenging moment in the history of humanity. At no other point in the history of humanity have we seen this convergence of problems on the world stage— technology, global warming, terrorism, etc.,—they're all working together to bring us to a boiling point.

This really is an opportunity for human beings to come together and rise to the occasion to address these problems. We need to reach our highest human potential, here and now. We have the resources within each and every one of us to solve the problems at hand, but what makes it difficult is that we're living in an age of fear. Fear is broadcast in the media, and if anyone saw the movie *Bowling for Columbine*, they know exactly what I'm talking about. Fear sells. What I often tell people is don't buy into it. Be strong. Our challenges can be addressed, if we stay centered and take the time to do so.

## Q9: What can corporate leaders do to start raising awareness around the issue of stress management at the work-site?

**SEAWARD:** Leaders today need to lead by example because they are role models. They've got to demonstrate strong, healthy boundaries themselves. They've got to demonstrate the qualities of leadership that are lacking today (just look at Tyco and Enron as examples of what *not* to do). They need to revisit the whole idea of service— service in terms of providing motivation and inspiration for the people who work for them, as well as the customers and clients they serve.

That's not to say that leaders need to create a stress-free environment. You don't
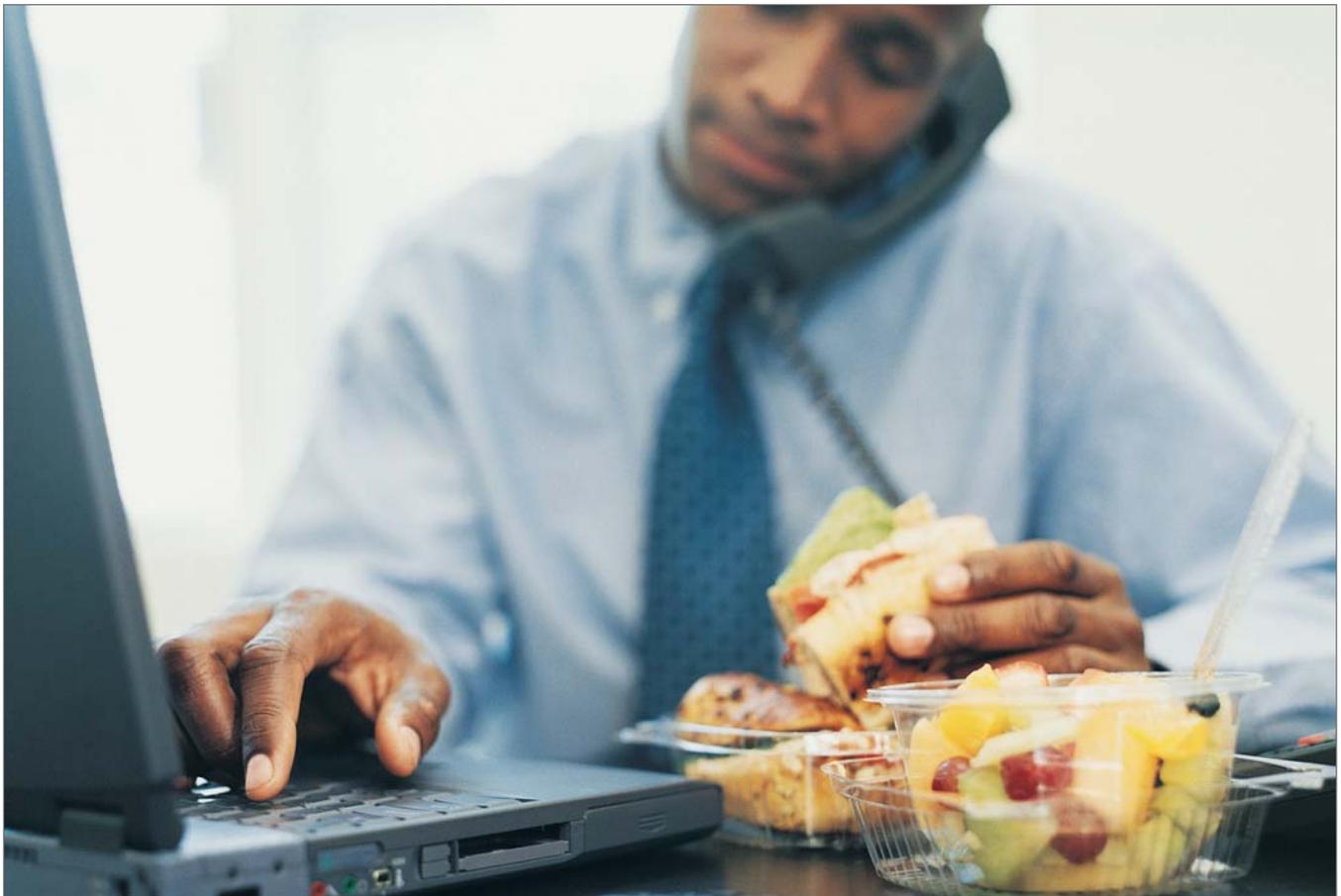
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want to have a stress-free environment because it's not very productive. People need to have some level of inspirational, healthy stress that's kept in balance. If a leader can model what that looks like, it's a good first step. It's likely that sense of balance will eventually be emulated throughout the company.

## Q10:

**Environment can play a big role in whether people stay healthy or get sick. I wonder if we've set up "toxic" jobs— jobs that cause stress and illness. What are your thoughts on that?**

**SEAWARD:** I definitely agree with that. And it's not only the frenzied atmosphere of productivity to meet quotas for stockholders looking to get their next dividend payment. It's also things like electromagnetic pollution from computers, and other physically harmful substances that workers deal with on a regular basis.

But that's just the health side of things. A toxic environment leads to deteriorating corporate loyalty, too, both on the part of the employee and the company.

For example, think back to the days when our fathers were working. Company loyalty was very strong. People worked for companies for 20, 30, even 40 years and retired with a gold watch. Now corporate loyalty is a myth. In the end, people are more likely to get a kick in the butt than they are to get a gold watch. That's if they stayed with the job for more than a few years to begin with.

## Q11:

**We've talked about the CEO's role in all of this. What can practitioners do to help employees deal more effectively with stress?**

**SEAWARD:** We need to not only reduce the symptoms of stress but also the causes of stress. As a culture, we are great at offering symptomatic relief, but as you know, if you don't get rid of the causes, the symptoms soon reappear.

So I think we need to focus on the causes of stress and the perceptions that lead to it, rather than simply throwing out stress balls at lunch 'n' learns. This idea goes back to corporate values; it goes back to corporate integrity; it goes back to corporate loyalty. Employees need to feel that they are invested in the company at a deeper, more spiritual level if we are going to start addressing the causes of workplace stress.

There are some companies—not enough in my opinion—but there are some companies that have changed the old paradigm and said, "We can no longer attempt to satisfy shareholders' financial expectations by any means necessary." These companies are making a radical departure and saying, "If we put employee needs, boundaries, and loyalty first, the expectations of shareholders will be met many times over." That's an encouraging trend.

The Internet has played a big role in promoting this new paradigm. There is a wealth of information available on the Web about building healthy corporate cultures and healthy boundaries at the worksite. It all comes down to embracing what I call a "new ethic for a higher consciousness" at the worksite—having a healthy balance in terms of stress in the working environment.

# Q12: Luke, let's talk about anger for a moment. Anger is a chief emotion at the worksite, isn't it?

**SEAWARD:** Yes it is, and the reason goes back to employees feeling like the company is disloyal to them, or that they are being victimized and/or violated in some way—like they're doing the work but not getting the benefit or recognition for it. We have a lot of unresolved anger issues in this country, and unresolved anger—every time—comes down to unmet expectations. Employers need to work with employees to set expectations and boundaries if we're going to affect anger issues at the worksite in any meaningful way.

# Q13: In your books, Stressed is Desserts Spelled Backwards and Stand Like Mountain, Flow Like Water, you've done a great job at putting stress into terms that people can actually use and understand. Can you tell us about the kinds of things you do in your own life to stay balanced?

**SEAWARD:** I get up every morning and walk my dog, which is my combination of exercise and pet therapy. When I get back home I meditate for half an hour. For me,

meditation is just a means to calm the mind. It's not any kind of religious thing, although it conjures up those images for some people. The best analogy I've heard for meditation is that it's like deleting unwanted e-mails from your computer. And that's exactly what you're doing—you're cleansing your mind.

I also swim or run every day. I love exercise. I also pay very close attention to the foods I eat, because we live in a country right now that has the largest variety of foods anywhere, and yet the worst quality of food in terms of containing synthetic substances like herbicides, fungicides, pesticides, and fertilizers. We've got some real problems in our food supply today, so I eat organic foods only, which is something I'd advocate for everybody.

Humor is also important to me. I like to think I have a sense of humor, and I use it as a coping technique. Whether it's reading funny e-mails and jokes, or sending a few to my friends, I think humor is important.

I also have to tell you that I'm a big fan of prayer. I think prayer is a wonderful coping technique. I believe that not acknowledging the spiritual dimension in life contributes to overall dysfunction in the world. So my spiritual practice in stress management is very important to me and prayer is part of that. All of these habits are part of the healthy boundaries I've set up for myself.

## Q14: If you could give one piece of advice to the typical working American, what would you tell them?

**SEAWARD:** Get rid of your television. TV is human kryptonite. It's a tool to deliver the message of a lifestyle that most people either can't afford, or shouldn't have. TV is terribly addictive. If you are in denial about that, then I challenge you to turn off the television for a month and see if you can live without it. If you can't, then I rest my case.

Don't get me wrong—there are some wonderful things on TV. I'm a big fan of PBS. But in terms of what I would suggest for a healthy lifestyle, I think it's important

to honor the integration, balance, and harmony of the mind, body, spirit, and emotions. In the application of that, it's essential that we take more time to explore our inner selves. If we can come to terms with the issues and problems we have, we'll be better equipped to deal more effectively with stress. We can then maintain a better balance with our loved ones, friends, and community, because we're all connected as one big family.

# Q15: How do you think things will play out in the next 10 to 20 years? Are you optimistic about the future health of the American workforce?

**SEAWARD:** I'm an optimist by nature, and I will say this: it takes a lot more work to be an optimist these days than it did 20 years ago!

Having said that, I'm disheartened by the news I hear about obesity in this country. I'm disheartened by the recent news from the American Cancer Society that soon, one out of every two people will come down with cancer. I'm definitely disheartened with the problem of workplace violence—even one incident of workplace violence is one too many.

But I have to tell you, I see great hope. I could be delusional; I'll be the first to admit that. But I'm a big fan of the work of Joseph Campbell, who was interviewed by Bill Moyers a number of years of ago on PBS during his series called *The Power of Myth*. Joseph Campbell did a lot of work on what he calls "The Hero's Journey." "The Hero's Journey" can be summed up by acknowledging that we're all going to encounter problems in life, but we have the resources to deal with those problems if we put our minds to it. We have a number of stories to help guide us on our own journey—whether it's something as ancient as Ulysses, or something as contemporary as Lance Armstrong.

I may be an eternal optimist, but don't think I'm simply looking at life through rose-colored glasses. I really feel that when people encounter problems, they can rise to the occasion and make their lives, and the world, much better.
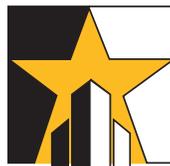
## ABOUT THE WELLNESS COUNCILS OF AMERICA

The Wellness Councils of America is one of North America's most trusted voices on the topic of worksite wellness. With over a decade of experience, WELCOA is widely recognized and highly regarded for its innovative approach to worksite wellness. Indeed, through their internationally recognized "Well Workplace" awards initiative, WELCOA has helped hundreds of companies transform their corporate cultures and improve the health and well-being of their most valuable asset—their employees.

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