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10 Tips for managing stress as a social media communicator

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ABSTRACT

This practical paper enumerates 10 tips for managing stress as a social media communicator. Professional communicators have very stressful lives, in fact some say that public relations and communications management ranks among the most stressful professions. This anecdotal and personal collection of tips comes from the experience of the authors as professional communicators, educators and advisors who have worked in the field with hundreds of students and practitioners.

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Working as a professional communicator in charge of your office's social media channels can be a very stressful job. You likely spend a lot of time reading other people's social media posts and comments every day, all day. It is also likely that you have your client's social media accounts linked to all of your devices, all the time. It's important to be mindful of your health and well-being so that you can be as effective as possible, enjoy your job and have a positive experience working in communications. This list of tips comes from us to you, practitioner to practitioner. While we are not clinical psychologists, we have had the chance to interact with hundreds of social media leads – these tips are a distillation of those countless conversations.

1. Maintain your sleep hygiene.

We are putting this first, because it is the key factor in managing your stress as a social media lead. Social leads wake up to a steady stream of stress and anxiety when they thumb through their messages and read through the feeds of the channels they are responsible for. It is important to turn off devices at least half an hour, perhaps ideally an hour, before going to bed and switch to relaxing magazine, fiction or non-fiction book in a paper format. This gives you a comforting tactile ritual before bed with lovely, soothing sounds like your finger scratching gently across the page as you turn it or the crinkle and whoosh of a magazine page as you turn it. Having no devices near your bed is a good idea. If you are worried about emerging alerts or crises, set a loud notification for your work account, but keep your phone in another room. Here are two good references for developing a system of sleep hygiene that works for you:

- Littlehales, Nick. (2016). *Sleep: Redefine Your Rest, for Success in Work, Sport and Life*. Oxford University Press.
- Walker, Matthew. (2018). *Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams*. Scribner.

2. Avoid “Headline Stress Disorder.”

Studies have shown that people who are exposed to large quantities of violence, disaster and negativity exhibit a strong negative stress response. As headlines are increasingly becoming more sensational, it's important to read past the headlines since the details are usually not as bad as the headline (Cohut, 2020). Before you start your day, review your weekly goals and your day plan to identify key topics you must pay attention to. Then try reading through a few trusted sources on the day's topics before scanning your feed. Make a habit of scheduling 30 minutes early every morning, after your run or while you enjoy your coffee, to peacefully and thoroughly read the day's key stories. This will not only give you a grounding in the stories of the days, it will also help you provide to your client an informed opinion on timely topics. This technique will help you avoid the feeling of feeling rising panic and anxiety as you thumb through endless sensational headlines as they roll through your feed, because you already know what the key stories are. Here's a good resource on how to cope with bad news:

- Cohut, Maria. (2020, January 16). Anxious about the news? Our top tips on how to cope. Medical News Today. Retrieved from <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/327516>

Take control of your digital life by managing your personal social media feeds. Take the time to curate them to make them uplifting instead of adding more stress. There is no shame in muting your triggers and ensuring a positive and reassuring experience when you check your own feeds. The accounts you follow for work-related reasons do not have to be the ones you follow on your personal accounts. Focus on your hobbies and the things that make you happy. This testimonial from a former social media lead is informative and useful:

- Rose, Beverly. (2018, September 28). Social Media Manager Burnout: The hidden reality behind their “glamorous” jobs & how companies can better support their well-being. ThriveGlobal.com. Retrieved from <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/mental-health-battles-facing-social-media-managers/>

3. Manage Commenting.

Professional communicators are some of the most conscientious and committed people in the workforce. We are trained to work for a brand, boss or cause that we believe in, so that we can deliver authentic strategic counsel. The downside to this is that we often take our client’s reputation very personally. The reality of working for a public-facing client is that there will be attacks. Some of those attacks will be ad hominem and perhaps even very nasty. Try not to personalize attacks on your client. Although you are loyal and committed, your work is not who you are as an individual. Try using the personalization features that most social channels offer such as filters on Instagram to remove offensive words during livestreams or profanity filters on Facebook. It is important to protect free speech, but no one needs to resort to insults, ad hominem attacks or hate speech to get their ideas across. There is always a better, cleaner and more respectful way to make a passionate argument. Don’t apologize for holding people to a civil discourse standard. Remember to include a link to this in your “About” section on your social page!

4. Empathy can be your friend.

It might be hard to accept at times, but people may be trolling or criticizing for a reason. While it may be difficult to not take online criticism personally, it's important to remember that you will rarely have the full picture. Embrace the opportunity to empathise with them—try to get a sense of who they are, how their personal history or their historical grievances might be driving their online behaviour toward your client. Also, understand that online criticism is often more severe than criticism delivered through other mediums. Some people feel protected by anonymity, while others feel that because they are behind a screen hundreds of kilometers away, they can be nasty without impunity. This is not an excuse for bad behaviour, but it may help you rationalise the reason for it and feel better while reading through it.

5. Workout to avoid burnout.

Professional communicators tend to be news and current affairs junkies. We also tend to be people who love our devices: smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers: bring on the latest and the coolest apps! When you put a news junkie in a job that gives them a great device and a reason to surf news, current affairs and social media all day long, it can be exciting at first and then quickly turn into a recipe for burnout. Tough as it may be, make sure to give yourself times during the day away from your devices. Take walks several times throughout the day, even if it is only for 20 minutes at lunch around a park near your shop, or waking up an hour earlier for an enlivening morning jog, swim or walk. Japanese studies (Miyazaki, 2018) have shown that “forest bathing” has major restorative effects (Li, 2018). Also, most smartphone manufacturers now offer apps to help you manage your screen time. These can be very useful tools in managing your time online and avoiding burnout. Here are three good references on forest bathing and exercise:

- Li, Qing. (2018). ‘Forest Bathing’ Is Great for Your Health. Here’s How to Do It”. Time. Retrieved from: <https://time.com/5259602/japanese-forest-bathing/>
- Miyazaki, Yoshifumi. (2018). *Shinrin Yoku: The Japanese Art of Forest Bathing*. Timber Press.
- Ratey, John. (2013). *Spark: The revolutionary science of exercise and the brain*. Little Brown.

6. Relax, be mindful and meditate.

It is important to take the time to develop the connection between your mind and body. While it is very important to get some exercise everyday, it is equally important to do a mental health workout as well. Combining a daily regimen of physical exercise with a daily mindfulness practice can help you understand the connection between your mind and body. Communicators tend to be people who live in our minds. It can be very helpful to develop a practice that reminds us that our “mindbody” operates as a whole. Do good things for yourself by being mindful and meditating. Try a mindbody physical practice such as Somatics and Feldenkrais, which involve gentle breathing and movement exercises that help you become more present and at ease in your body. A visit to a good osteopath can work wonders for your well-being. Make time for meditation, concentration and relaxation exercises throughout the day. Another tool you can use is compassionate searches or restricted modes, such as those offered by Pinterest, SnapChat or Instagram. Here is a good reference on mind-body practices:

- Levey, Joel, Levey, Michelle, Wheatley, Margaret. (2003). *The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration, and Meditation: Ancient Skills for Modern Minds*. Wisdom Publications.

7. Create a response protocol by documenting common scenarios.

Routinizing your work is one of the best ways of lessening the repetitive stress of dealing with negativity on the social channels you monitor. Take time to document common scenarios that occur in your daily practice as a professional communicator. Light journaling can be one of the most effective ways of doing this. Carry a handy notebook that you love and use your favourite pens to take a few notes after a key event during your day: a stressful meeting, a challenging interaction on social channels, or an emotionally taxing strategy in the midst of a crisis. Take a moment to review your notes at the end of the day and again at the end of the week. Use these insights to document common scenarios by writing them up in short paragraphs, then develop a response protocol for each scenario so that you won’t have to relive the stress of the scenario each time it comes up.

8. Rely on your community – your professional society chapter.

While professional communicators tend to be both creative and competitive people, too much competition can lead to feelings of stress, insecurity, isolation and inadequacy. These feelings very likely do not reflect the reality of the quality of your practice. Remember that a successful post or clever strategy implemented by a colleague in another office is probably the result of a lot of personal and work experience on their part, rather than innate genius. Remind yourself that your personal and work experiences are rich and have provided you with many social media wins. Communicators work best when we share resources and work together in a supportive, empathic and compassionate environment. In the broader community, there is the Canadian Public Relations Society and the International Association of Business Communicators and their various regional chapters. Don't hesitate to bring your questions and challenges to your professional community. So, share, don't compare—we're in this together!

9. Calendarize your life.

Life can be very busy and frantic for busy professional communicators who manage multiple social media channels. There is always a new comment to answer, policy or campaign for which to create content, and a boss who is pushing you to set key performance indicators (KPIs) while scrambling to keep your channels fresh and up-to-date. It's easy to see how burnout could be a common factor in environments like this. Take control of your life by making your calendar your friend. Transfer the cognitive load and anxiety of your busy and often unpredictable schedule by calendarizing your day very thoroughly. Remember that if you move an appointment or an upcoming task to your calendar, you can remove it from your brain. This gives you more cognitive resources to be more creative. Calendarizing also provides you with the structure that leads to a greater feeling of calm and serenity. It also gives you more control and perspective on your day, making you feel better saying no to a meeting or unrealistic task. Getting Things Done (Allan, 2020) is an excellent resource for this sort of personal life management:

- Allan, Dave. (2020). What is GTD - Getting Things Done. Retrieved from <https://gettingsdone.com/what-is-gtd/>

10. Inform your manager and colleagues about your work and set reasonable analytics.

Professional communications and social media management can be a mystery for people who do not have professional training. Make sure to tell your boss and colleagues about how much you are working and the nature of your work. Social media is pretty much a full-time job, but many offices assign it as an addition to workload. This does not recognize the fact that your social media channels are your office's shop window – they are what the public sees and interacts with. Communicate with your manager and request that you be included in key policy or issues meetings or email chains while they are happening. People often do not know what a social media lead does and have clichéd ideas about it being all glamorous photo ops and beautiful videos. Make sure that you advocate for yourself – make your successes known and point out to colleagues how their successes are helped by your work in social media and communications. In a modern workplace, people's perceptions of success and utility are shaped by analytics and data. Take the time to think about the value of what you are doing in your day-to-day activities. Ask yourself: How is my work contributing to my office's mission? How can I put a number on the value I am creating? You, your boss and your colleagues will all feel better if your work is defined in understandable ways.

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