



Well@Work Podcast Episode 13: Circle of Influence

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMSHA. On this episode of the podcast, Dr. Jessica Eslinger discusses how to take control of your stress by doing the circle of influence exercise. And now, Dr. Jessica Eslinger.

Hello, my name is Dr. Jessica Eslinger and I'm a clinician and researcher at the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. In this podcast, I'm going to talk about how to take control of your stress using the circle of influence exercise. There are times during our work lives when we feel that we have limited control over what's occurring, the number of patients or clients assigned to us, how people interact with us, or how management addresses problems. During this COVID-19 pandemic, we may feel some of these stressors more acutely as we face new challenges in how we take care of our families, do our jobs, and stay connected with others.

I'm going to tell you about an exercise that can help increase your feelings of personal control by helping you think more clearly about the choices in your life. This exercise is called the circle of influence and is based on the work of Stephen Covey. This exercise can be done individually, or in a group by a supervisor, with a supervisee, or amongst colleagues. To do this exercise, you'll need a paper, a pen, and sticky notes.

Here's how it works. First, fold a blank sheet of paper in half and draw two pictures on one side of the paper. Draw a picture of what makes a good day and on the other side of the picture draw what makes a bad day. Don't use words, just draw pictures the best you can. Next, think about the feelings and stressors these pictures represent for you. If you're in a group or with a colleague or supervisor, talk through these pictures. Describe what they are and what they represent to you. Doing this will bring up ideas and themes that you'll use during the rest of the exercise. Next, on a new sheet of paper draw a big circle, as big as the paper allows. This is your circle of concern. Inside the circle are the things that bother you about your job. Next, draw a smaller circle inside the larger circle. This is your circle of control. Inside this circle are the things that you feel you have control over. Many of us feel that we have limited control over things that occur at work. This can feel very uncomfortable and can elicit strong feelings of anxiety. It's hard to feel that we don't have control over things, so let's draw another circle between the circle of concern and the circle of control. We'll call this the circle of influence. Now, from your good day, identify three actions you could take that would make the most positive impact for you at work. Write each of these on a separate sticky note and place each in the circle where you feel the issue lies. Now, identify three actions identified from your bad day that if they occurred would make the most long-term positive difference for you. Again, write each of these on a separate sticky note and place each in the circle where you feel the issue lies. Now, stand back and look at what you've placed in each circle. Ask yourself while you may not have control over some of these things, do you have any influence over them? Try to move each of the items to the circle of influence.

If you're doing this in supervision or in a group setting, it's a powerful exercise to discuss influence versus control of each item as a group. You may find that you can influence things about your job that you hadn't realized. And you may even find that you have more control over certain things than you thought. Continue to discuss and move your items until you feel that their place where they need to



be. The goal of this exercise is to help individuals gain a feeling of agency over issues that may have previously felt beyond their control. It can give us permission to acknowledge that if we don't have control over an issue, that sometimes it's helpful for us to just be able to acknowledge this and park it. Being able to shift perspective and identify one's own influence over issues helps build resiliency and promotes feelings of hopefulness and competency. I find it helpful to repeat this exercise at regular intervals. It helps me identify things that are bothering me and supports me in considering how I have influence over things that may feel well beyond my control in the moment. I hope you've enjoyed this podcast, for other podcasts in the series please visit our Well@Work website and remember to stay well at work.

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