

A close-up photograph of a person's lower legs and feet. They are wearing orange patterned leggings and black athletic shoes with bright green accents. The person is in the process of tying their right shoe on a gravel path. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green grass and a light sky.

Stress Management

Dealing Effectively with Stress at Work and in Life

If you are determined to make some changes in your life, this practical overview will encourage you to identify the key stressors in your life, and to face what you are doing to make matters worse.

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Introduction

This chapter contains nearly everything you will ever need to know about managing stress. Knowing what to do about stress is not much of a problem, though. Doing something about it is the challenge. This longing to do something about stress creates the market for the books, articles, tapes, seminars—and book chapters—on stress. Everyone is looking for a magic bullet. Failing that, disconsolate seekers are hoping to discover some practical, sustainable strategies that will diminish the impact of stress in their lives. For that reason, this essay focuses on what you can do about stress.

Stress is not in short supply. We have become so accustomed to it that we often fail to recognize when we are distressed. And we regularly do things that make stress worse. Moreover, we frequently seek relief from the stress in our lives by indulging in destructive numbing behaviors, embracing the illusion of a reprieve that only weakens our resolve to initiate significant change.

This chapter presents an opportunity to reflect briefly on how stress impacts your life at home and work, and to decide whether you really want to do something about it. If you are determined to make some changes in your life, this practical overview will encourage you to identify the key stressors in your life, and to face what you are doing to make matters worse. This paper will encourage you to come up with healthier antidotes to stress. You can choose from several proven strategies for managing stress more effectively. And you can achieve all of this in the next 30 minutes. Implementing your newly acquired insight may take a bit longer, but you can make the decision to be more relaxed, more contented and less miserable right now.

Recognize your distress

It is easy to overlook the evidence that stress is exerting a destructive influence in our lives. The pressure to fit additional tasks into already crowded schedules discourages quiet reflection and demands that unscheduled moments be used to attend to nagging tasks. Hounded by crusading marketers, we now pursue recreation with the same intensity that we perform our jobs. Driven by our lust for material things, we acquire mindlessly, then lose interest and exhibit the symbols of our fruitless search for meaning in the next yard sale. Discontentment, like a polluted fog, settles over the lives of contemporary maze dwellers and obscures the view of nearby peaks that might be scaled if weary plodders could only see the opportunities that are there. The first reactions to stress are psychological. Watch for increased irritability and emotional overreactions to the minor aggravations of everyday life. When you realize that you are preoccupied and having trouble concentrating,

stress may be the culprit. You may notice that you are having trouble sleeping or that you are anxious or depressed. Take the signs and symptoms of stress seriously. When you are stressed, your heart rate increases, and you experience increased respiration and perspiration. You may develop a tremor and a variety of gastrointestinal aggravations. As you would expect, such powerful physiological influences—if they persist for an extended period of time—can cause or worsen a variety of serious illnesses. Watch for increased irritability and emotional overreactions to the minor aggravations

Intervene early in the stress cascade

Because chronic stress seriously erodes physical and emotional health, it is essential to recognize its destructive potential and to react quickly to limit the danger. Because experiencing some stress is unavoidable, we take it for granted. We anticipate stress the way we anticipate rain or snow. It is part

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of our environment. But how many of us prepare for stress the way we prepare for inclement weather? The knowledge that stress happens does not incline us to prepare for it, to minimize its impact on our daily functioning or to avoid its discomforts the way we might dress in layers or fly around turbulent air. As a result, by the time we realize that stress is a significant risk it has damaged our emotional lives in much the same way as exposure to the sun scars unprotected skin. Reserve a few minutes of your usual preparation for work to assess your stress level and to anticipate the stressful blows you will likely absorb during the day. If you are already stressed, identify the contributing factors. If you ignore stress it will diffuse so widely in your psyche that you will never be able to recall the primary irritant. It is never too early in the day to practice relaxation. Choose one of the stress antidote activities in your mental drug cabinet and take your medicine. If you suspect that a difficult day awaits, dress for distress by wearing precautions instead of feelings on your sleeve.

Identify the top five stressors in your life

Forget the forest. Focus on a few big trees. It is true that everything and everybody contributes to the stress in your life and that death is the only complete stress-reliever (we hope), but the background noise is not your principal concern. We are all inclined to focus on what is right in front of us and to overlook those things that matter most. The driver that cuts in front of you on the way to work is of little significance in your life—unless you are already pretty tightly wound. That coworker who has been dumping on you and taking credit for your work for the past decade is the real issue. Deal effectively with your coworker, and rude drivers will shrink to the significance of bird droppings on the windshield of your life.

Are you willing to invest a few minutes to improve the quality of your life? Sit down, turn your legal pad to the landscape orientation and divide the page into five columns. List the five top stressors in your life in the first column. These will usually be people. Next, make a short list of the things these folk do to annoy you in the second column. In the third column, write down how you feel when they act that way. In the fourth column, detail how your feelings compel you to behave. Finally, describe a more appropriate response in the fifth column. Keep this paper with you. Force yourself to behave as suggested in

the fifth column no matter how you feel. Do you think this little exercise is too simple to be effective? Think again. Invest some time and energy in using this tool and the stress in your life will diminish considerably. If spending a lot of money will help you feel better about doing this, see your local psychotherapist and pay several thousand dollars to achieve the same results.

Figure out how you are making matters worse

In the developed parts of the western world, it is not what others do to us but what we do to ourselves that causes us the most distress. We fail to assert ourselves because we are fearful that others will be displeased. We remain reluctant to confront the petty tyrants that disrupt our work environments, settling instead for a pitiful peace at any price. We ruminate endlessly about what happened and what we should have done or said long after the insignificant interpersonal moment has passed. We worry and fret about those bad things that might happen instead of investing our emotional energies to make good things happen. We gossip, criticize, conspire and pout while nourishing resentments, becoming enraged over minor frustrations and blaming others when things don't turn out well. Who wouldn't feel stressed?

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If you remain convinced that all or even most of the stress in your life is the fault of others, stop reading this chapter and resign yourself to a lifetime of chronic frustration. If you are ready to admit that you are part of the problem and you are ready to take responsibility for your actions, there is hope. Identify the top three or four attitudes that contribute to your distress. These are probably not the only flaws you have, but you will not live long enough to fix them all.

Since you will not see your own foibles clearly, you will want to ask a forthright friend for help. The two of you may choose to pick from a list. Are you habitually critical and negative? Are you chronically angry and resentful? Do you blame others for every problem that turns up? Do you ruminate pointlessly? Do you become emotionally aroused at the slightest provocation? Do you let others take advantage of you when you should assert yourself more forcefully? Do you procrastinate to the point that it causes significant distress? Do you promise more than you can reasonably

deliver? You get the point. When you have clearly identified those ways you stress yourself, you are ready to begin making some changes that will make a difference in how you feel.

Avoid unhealthy coping strategies

Anything that is quick, easy and temporarily relieves stress is bound to be popular. Unfortunately, most antidotes to stress that are quick and easy are also unhealthy. Excessive alcohol use remains a perennial favorite. It is much easier to request and to prescribe one of the popular sedative medications than to ask the hard questions and to face up to the discouraging answers. Some of the chemicals initially chosen to silence the incessant hammering of stress eventually create stressful poundings of their Stress Management own. The current epidemic of obesity suggests that fast food has become the preferred coping strategy for the harried and the poorly motivated. Video games, mindless music, insipid TV programming and a thousand other distractions invite passive consumers to succumb to hypnotic spells during which time flies and opportunities to make a difference are lost forever. It is not that such pleasures have no place in the life well-lived, but that the threat of intemperate use is such a danger. The instruments of escapism are the anesthetizing parasites of our stress-filled lives. We embrace them to dull our pain, and they thrive on the rot of our decaying wills.

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Take an unstinting look at the ways you cope with the stress in your life. Identify one or two unhealthy strategies that you would like to modify or replace with more appropriate behavioral patterns. Set realistic goals. Lasting change requires such a sustained investment of energy and determination that unrealistic goals will only result in failure and discouragement. You are not likely to be successful in just stopping bad habits. Vile habits are best replaced with better ones. And be patient with yourself. Only the best and brightest will spend the rest of their lives trying to cope more effectively with stress. The rest will tread water until they finally sink under the weight of the stressful baggage they cannot bring themselves to let go.

Keep a list of healthy stress relievers close at hand

Our lives have a way of rushing us from task to task, right past the most important things. Personal stress

management is one such issue. Everyone agrees that life is stressful and that there are better and worse ways to cope with it, but most of us would have to think hard to come up with a dozen practical strategies we use regularly to manage the stress in our lives. Since stress often blinds us to the obvious, unless we are familiar with healthy coping options, we are likely to overlook even those simple interventions that might make all the difference.

Sit down at your computer and begin a document entitled, "Some Effective Stress Management Strategies." List all of the practical approaches that you believe might be helpful in your work environment. Be realistic. Hitting your boss in the head with a hammer repeatedly is not reasonable—attractive perhaps—but not reasonable. Keep adding to and revising this document until it is a reasonably comprehensive list of practical options from which you intend to choose when you feel stressed. Hang it on the wall right in front of your face and refer to it the next time you feel the tension rise. You may think this exercise is silly. Nothing is silly if it works. Choosing to remain stressed when better options are within reach is silly.

Draft a blueprint for your life

There are a lot of people in the world who will tell you how to live your life. They feel entitled to tell you what to think, what to believe, what to wear and what to eat. They know what values you should adopt, what causes you should support and how you should spend your free time. Most of these persuaders want your money. Some want your money and your time. Some—those who feel powerless to do anything else—just want to tell other people what to do. Their methods run the gamut from subtle manipulation to oppressive domination. Those who seek your compliance want you to feel stressed; that is when you are most vulnerable to their stratagems. Whatever their reasons and methods, they want to run your life. They will run your life if you let them.

The best defense against others' persuasive wiles and the anxiety that accompanies passive acquiescence is having a plan and being engaged in executing it. Those who have identified their values, developed goals based on those values and figured out how to measure their progress are not nearly so influenced by selfish

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persuaders. As a direct consequence, they are less distressed by others' attempts to control them.

Here is another small project that will take some time and effort but, if carried through, will decrease the stress in your life. Create another document labeled, "My priorities." In the first column, list your top ten values in order of priority. In the second column, list three specific behavioral objectives that support each of your values. Finally, specify one or two performance measures for each behavioral objective. You now have a clear plan for your life. Proceed to conduct your life accordingly. When someone suggests that you do this or that, look to see whether it is consistent with your plan. If it is not, this commitment is a mistake. Look the tempter in the eye, inform him that his proposal is not consistent with your priorities and dismiss him and the stress he hopes to bring into your life. Do you find it difficult to assert yourself in this way? Read on.

Assert yourself

Those who do not assert themselves appropriately sentence themselves to a lifetime of smoldering resentment occasionally interrupted by explosive outbursts that leave them feeling guilty, inferior and worthless. Those who are hesitant to stand up to others are fearful that their petitioners will think less of them if they don't go along. These silent sufferers want to be loved and they want to keep the peace. They are willing to pay almost any price in their hopeless pursuits of those goals. This is a central paradox of everyday life. The only way to get others to love and respect you is to stand up to them.

Once you recognize that you need to become more assertive, do something about it. Enroll in an assertiveness training course. Read a few of the thousands of self-help books on the topic. If you exercise best with a personal trainer, work with a professional counselor to increase your strength and to improve your skills. Start small and celebrate your successes. Keep a list of assertiveness opportunities, what you did and what you might have done better. If you cannot bring yourself to just say "no," master a few phrases that will prevent your continuing to accept assignments that you never meant to agree to. "Let me think about it and get back to you." "Let me check. I believe I already have another commitment." (Your commitment may be to do anything else.) "I am already so committed that I could not give this project the attention it deserves." Contrary to your fears, assertiveness need not be nasty. While it is true that some boors confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness and end up causing more aggravation for everyone, appropriate

assertiveness is gracious, gentle and respectful.

Practice emotional detachment

Emotional overreaction, usually in the form of anger, is the most common cause of stress in the work environment. It is the workplace equivalent of road rage. Coworkers, with chips firmly fixed on their shoulders and already convinced that others are out to get them, become enraged at the slightest perceived insult. Accidentally leave their name off an email message, and they are seriously affronted. Suggest that the team needs to pull together and stop the bickering, and they feel singled out. Sensitive in the extreme, these people stay poised for the next indignity that they are certain is on the way. You are already probably thinking of four or five names. Here's the rub. We all tend to overreact emotionally in the workplace. And we tend to see this more clearly in others than in ourselves.

Anything you say when you are hot can and will be used against you.

You will continue to suffer this self-victimization until you realize that you are the problem. Suppose you already realize this presents an opportunity for you. Significant progress in diminishing this destructive tendency will require some emotional reprogramming. Seeing a psychotherapist would be an excellent investment. There are some practical things you can do to make headway too. Recognize when you are emotionally aroused and take full responsibility for your reaction. Stop blaming others for how you feel. It is true that they may have behaved badly, but your reaction to their behavior is up to you, not them. Keep your mouth shut until you are able to stand down. Anything you say when you are hot can and will be used against you. Coach yourself before you face situations that you anticipate will be an emotional challenge. Instinctive reactions to others are difficult to modify, but you can discipline yourself to react differently over time. You will need to be persistent and patient with yourself. Openly admitting that you have a tendency to become emotionally aroused and then coaching others with the same problem is an excellent way to reinforce the admonitions you are giving to yourself.

Decrease pointless rumination

Some of us are plagued by the tendency to dwell on things. We go over what happened repeatedly in our minds, punishing ourselves for what we did or did not do, stirring a festering resentment, creating enormous emotional distress and

becoming progressively more entangled in the ligatures of our impotent rage and tormenting fantasies of retribution. For many of us, this continues until we tire of beating ourselves up. This is not thoughtful problem solving. This is fruitless. This is counterproductive. This is destructive. This needs to stop.

You may be surprised to learn that the following suggestions are supported by solid scientific evidence. Place a rubber band around your wrist. When you find yourself engaged in pointless rumination, pluck the rubber band sharply. The temporary sting will interrupt your mental spasm, snap you back to reality and provide you with a brief opportunity to resume more productive mental activity. As a bonus, your colleagues' incredulous questions about why you are popping yourself with a rubber band will make for some interesting conversations.

Stop expecting others to read your mind

If others really cared about us, they would know what we need and want and they would do it without our having to ask, right? That expectation has triggered a good deal of frustration for most of us. Even those who love us are not particularly skilled at reading our minds. There is no reason to expect that our colleagues at work will be any better at it. Yet many of us careen through our daily lives, frustrated that others don't realize how we feel, see things the way we do, share our priorities or handle matters the way we would. The unspoken expectation that others should read our minds and respond accordingly is the psychological equivalent of handing a musician a blank score and expecting her to play the comforting melody we long to hear. It is an exercise in mutual frustration.

Make sure that everyone knows where you stand. Communicate your expectations clearly and then obtain feedback to ensure that the intended message was accurately received. When something bothers you, confront others promptly, directly and privately instead of pouting and withdrawing. When you leave others wondering what you are thinking or feeling, it makes them uncomfortable. Your most conscientious colleagues will fret that they have done something wrong, and this will distract them from the important work that needs to be done. It is even more important to be open and specific with your approval and recognition. Stop taking things for granted. Clarify. Clarify. Clarify.

Avoid negative people

Negative people are like flies. Fail to shoo them away and they will spoil everything. These folk attack, complain, undermine, and criticize with a vengeance. Incredibly, they believe they are making an important contribution. While they do sometimes provide comic relief or prick ballooned egos, they more often cause distress and leave suspicion and discouragement as their enduring legacies. If you permit these malignant personalities to metastasize in your life, they will distract you, fatigue you and eventually destroy you.

You will not be able to excise the negative people from your life entirely, but you can limit their negative impact on your life. Dealing effectively with negative people is neither simple nor easy since they are often among the best and the brightest in their fields. The fact that they work so hard gives them the right, in their view, to bedevil others. Then too, they often make points that need to be heard. The manner in which they express themselves is often so annoying that you may be inclined to dismiss them as just another workplace aggravation. While this may turn out to be the best approach, avoid choosing this option too quickly.

Calm yourself. Do not take their bait. Negative people may have a legitimate point, but they are inclined to spin the facts to conform to their distorted world view. Obtain the facts independently and listen to the other side before you react. All of us, including our negative colleagues, have assets and liabilities. Remind yourself to consider the agitators' net asset value to the organization. When their overall value becomes negative, make a compelling case and provide them with another career opportunity. So long as their overall contribution is positive, marginalize them to protect impressionable colleagues from contamination. It is sometimes possible to turn these people around, but when you decide this is not a likely outcome, invest your energy in individuals more likely to pay dividends for you and the organization.

Work on your attitude

Attitude is not everything; it is just the most important thing. A poor attitude is disabling, a good attitude enabling. The leader's attitude always comes through loud and clear. Attitude—a deep-seated conviction that is independent of current circumstances—cannot be faked. When one's attitude is poor, getting through the day is a struggle and there is no chance of leading others effectively. Moody leaders kick the wit out of everyone in their way. With a positive attitude, problems become opportunities, insurmountable barriers become exciting challenges and a bleak outlook

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is just the morning haze that will burn away in time. In spite of all we know about the power of our attitudes, we still pay too little attention to them or view them as psychological humors over which we have little control.

If you decide to manage your attitude instead of allowing your attitude to manage you, the following approaches will help. Perform an attitude check every day before you go out the door. If it is poor, hide until you have adjusted it. Keep some tools handy. Take a hot shower. Say a prayer. Dance for two minutes. Call someone who will make you laugh. Make the decision to deal with the aggravation that is weighing you down. Turn on some of your favorite music and crank up the volume. If time permits, exercise vigorously until you are soaked with sweat. There are a thousand other ways to adjust your attitude in the short term. You need only be attentive and committed. If you struggle with a negative attitude most of the time, find some other line of work.

Retreat and recharge

There is always more work to do than can be done. Successful leaders decide what is most important, readjust priorities continually based on changing circumstances, abandon obsolete tasks and take new task when indicated—all without losing sight of the ultimate goal and while remaining confident and good-humored. This demands a focus and energy that are impossible to sustain indefinitely. Over time, the continuously engaged leader fatigues, makes simple mistakes, becomes crabby, persists in tasks that no longer matter and misses significant opportunities. Colleagues take note. Credibility suffers. Team effectiveness slips. Creativity disappears and is replaced by mechanical activity that is neither productive nor satisfying.

If you attempt to remain fully engaged all the time, you will flame out

Take a careful look at your most productive work pattern. While there are as many different styles as there are leaders, you will probably conclude that you work best in short bursts of intense activity alternating with periods of routine maintenance work and brief times of quiet reflection. The demands of your job will not permit you to establish a rigid schedule, but if you

attempt to remain fully engaged all the time, you will flame out. Identify those daily activities that allow you to recharge your batteries such as an hour of vigorous exercise, immersion in great music or a prolonged soak in the tub. A sabbatical may be ideal, but these cannot be arranged often enough.

Cut yourself some slack

Most successful organizational leaders are driven. They make daily lists, set priorities and get things done. They identify short- and long-term goals and reach most of them. They enjoy the challenge of performing in the business pressure cooker. They grow thick skins and persevere when everyone else is ready to quit. Wily leaders decide when to fight to the death and when to concede gracefully. They come early and stay late, work at home and pay the price to become one of the experts everyone looks for in a crisis. Their commitment and intensity are the foundations of their success. They sustain this level of emotional intensity without feeling particularly stressed. They have found ways to decompress frequently and easily. And they know when to give themselves a break.

Learn the difference between reasonable and unreasonable guilt and then behave accordingly. Reasonable guilt should descend like a dark, shameful pall when you have transgressed some moral or ethical rule to which you subscribe. In response to such reasonable guilt, you should confess, repent and make restitution. But much of the guilt that afflicts us is unreasonable. We reproach ourselves because we did not think or behave perfectly, not because we really have done anything wrong. Irrational guilt is the way those with unrealistic expectations reward themselves. It chokes the soul and wears the best-intentioned. Irrational guilt is best ignored. Act as if you didn't feel guilty, and the burden of irrational guilt will abate over time.

Focus on healthy distractions

Even a privileged life occasions some unhappiness, but those inclined to worry milk additional misery out of ordinary aggravations by obsessively anticipating other things that might go wrong. They torture themselves and those around them with regretful recollections, despairing assessments and apprehensive expectations. The curse of this stressful pox is probably inherited, but there are effective coping strategies. Employing them successfully will make a difference in the intensity of the stress that plagues everyday life.

Try to avoid ever shifting your brain into neutral. Stay engaged. So long as you are focused on some healthy distraction or productive activity, your natural inclination to fret will remain

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in the background, exiled to the periphery of consciousness. Give it an opening, and this hateful jack-in-the-box will spring into mental view, chattering mockingly, banishing any sense of peace and replacing a calm reprieve with the awful foreboding that anticipates an approaching storm.

Purposeful activity is the best antidote. When that cannot be pursued, activities that produce intense sensory input are the next best options. Loud music, a hot bath and vigorous exercise will drown out the baleful din of painful rumination. Even television, videogames and crossword puzzles have a role. Reaching out to help someone less fortunate will take your mind off yourself. When all else fails, there are always drugs. Contrary to what you might think, medication is not always a bad option.

Conclusion

Life has always been stressful. The threat of wild animals and murderous tribesmen nearby must have been anxiety-

provoking. Living through the European wars or struggling on the American frontier could not have been very peaceful. Life in present day Afghanistan—now that is stressful. Our ancestors and many of our fellows in third world countries would be startled by our reactions to the minor aggravations in our lives. Perhaps that is the way we are made. If there is no immediate threat to life or limb, we overreact to some minor chafing just to feel “normal.”

Such sober reflections notwithstanding, many of us feel stressed and the stress in our lives, even when imagined, is killing us. It is taking the joy out of life, limiting our productivity and fueling our headlong pursuit of unhealthy distractions. In spite of all the discomfort the stress in our lives occasions, we mostly just endure it. We note it, we study it and we rue it, but we don't do much about it.

This chapter acknowledges that stress exists and that it exerts a powerful negative influence in our lives. However, it takes the view that stress is manageable, sometimes even preventable. In coping with stress, there are some things we can and must do if we are determined not to surrender to its pernicious assault on our wellbeing. Stop cowering in the face of stress. Take charge of yourself and do something to improve your life.

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