



# Getting a Handle on Workplace Stress

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An analysis of the impact of work-related stress and tips on how to control it

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# **Introduction**

# **STRESS: A GLOBAL EPIDEMIC**

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# STRESS: A GLOBAL EPIDEMIC

For employees throughout the world, job-related stress is a real issue

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For most employees in the United States, job-related stress is a real issue. In fact, three out of every four American workers describe their work as stressful.<sup>i</sup> The problem exists internationally as well; according to the United Nations' International Labor Organization, occupational stress is a "global epidemic."<sup>ii</sup>

This stress epidemic has emotional, physical, and economic consequences. The American Institute of Stress lists 50 common emotional and physical disorders that have been linked to stress. These include: depression, anxiety, heart attacks, stroke, hypertension, immune system disturbances that increase susceptibility to infections, a host of viral-linked disorders, as well as autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis.<sup>ii</sup>

While the emotional and physical effects of this epidemic are often emphasized, the economic consequences of stress also are alarming. Workplace stress costs U.S. employers an estimated \$200 billion per year<sup>1</sup> in absenteeism, lower productivity, staff turnover, workers' compensation, medical insurance and other stress-related expenses. Considering this, stress management may be business' most significant challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>iii</sup>

Though job-related stress levels are rising across the board, those of leaders can often exceed that of the average employee. Responsibilities, organizational demands, employee concerns and challenges, and the need to maintain a productive focus can generate high levels of anxiety, worry, and strain for the one in charge.

The purpose of this report is to define what stress is (as well as what it isn't), describe its causes and impact, and set forth a range of strategies that can help proactively reduce stress as well lessen its effects.

<sup>1</sup> Some suggest the number to be lower, between \$120-190 billion, while others place the number at closer to \$300 billion!



*“The number of stressors has multiplied exponentially: traffic, money, success, work/life balance, the economy, the environment, parenting, family conflict, relationships, disease. As the nature of human life has become far more complicated, our ancient stress response hasn't been able to keep up.” ~ Andrew J. Bernstein*



# **Chapter 1**

## **WHAT IS STRESS?**

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# STRESS DEFINED

## How our bodies respond to demands for change

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The term “stress”, as it is currently used, was coined by Hungarian-Canadian endocrinologist Hans Selye in 1936. Selye defined it as “the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change.”<sup>iv</sup>

Psychologist Richard Lazarus later defined stress as “a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.”<sup>v</sup> This means that stress is how our body responds to perceived demands and threats that we have little or no control over, or what we feel when we think we’ve lost control of events.

The terms “chronic stress” refers to the response to emotional pressure suffered for a prolonged period of time.

The following anecdote illustrates the difference between normal and chronic stress levels.


*A lecturer, when explaining stress management to an audience, raised a glass of water. He asked, “How heavy is this glass of water?” Answers called out ranged from 5 lbs. to 10 lbs.*

*The lecturer replied, “The absolute weight doesn’t matter. It depends on how long you try to hold it. If I hold it for a minute, that’s not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I’ll have an ache in my right arm. If I hold it for a day, you’ll have to call an ambulance. In each case, it’s the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes.”*

*He continued, “That’s the way it is with stress management. If we carry our burdens all the time, sooner or later, as the burden becomes increasingly heavy, we won’t be able to carry on.”*

Normal stress would be the equivalent of holding a glass of water for a brief duration. Chronic stress is akin to being asked to hold the same glass indefinitely, without respite.

It is important to emphasize that the job itself is less the “problem” for many people as is the person-environment fit. Some individuals thrive in pressure situations, such as having to perform and juggle several high-focus duties at the same time. Their stress would come through having to perform non-imaginative, non-demanding, “assembly-line type” work enjoyed by those who shun responsibility and simply want to perform a task that is well within their capabilities.<sup>vi</sup>



*“Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one.” ~ Hans Selyae*





# **Chapter 2**

## **IS STRESS ALWAYS PROBLEMATIC?**

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# WHEN STRESS ISN'T ALWAYS BAD

## The positive side of stress and challenge

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There is some confusion about stress and its impact that demands clarification.

First, “stress” is not the same as “challenge,” even as the two terms are often used interchangeably. Stress, as noted above, is typically used to describe a strain or misfit between a person’s abilities and what they are being asked to achieve. Challenge, by contrast, fits neatly within our range of ability and capacity for achievement. A good challenge energizes us psychologically and physically, and motivates us to learn new skills and master our jobs. We feel relaxed and satisfied when a challenge is met. Accordingly, challenge is an important ingredient for healthy and productive work.<sup>vii</sup> In fact, non-challenging or under stimulating work can be a serious stressor for some people.

Stated differently, whether something is viewed as a challenge or a threat (stress) depends on situational demands and resources. If available resources are believed to be sufficient, a person sees the demand as a challenge. When demands exceed resources, however, the stressor can be viewed as a threat.<sup>viii</sup>

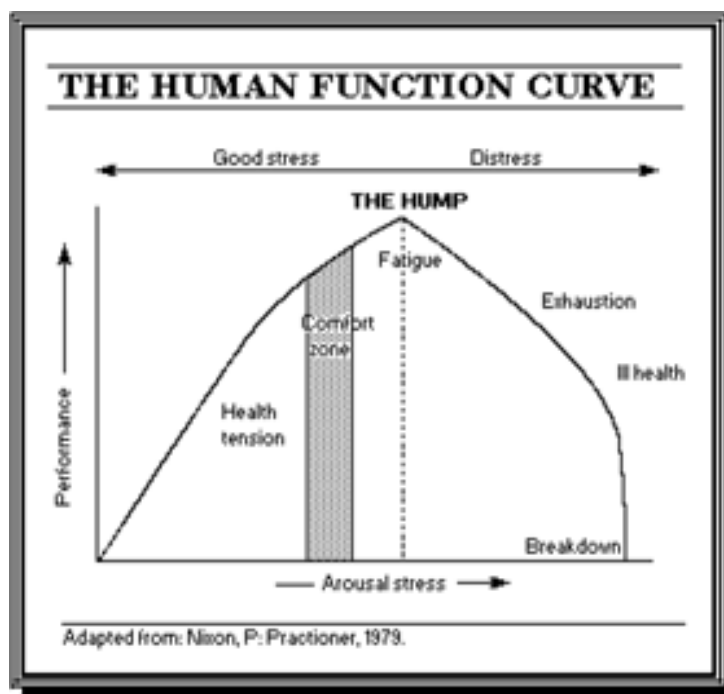
Second, stress isn’t always the evil that it’s made out to be. In addition to defining the term “stress” (above), Dr. Lazarus suggested that there is a difference between “eustress”, which is a term he used for positive stress, and “distress”, which refers to negative stress.

Unlike regular stress (or distress), eustress is perceived to be within our coping abilities and contributes to our growth. Examples of positive work-related stressors include starting a new job, receiving a promotion or raise at work, and taking educational classes or learning a new skill.<sup>ix</sup>

In addition, researchers have found that a little bit of stress, or even larger quantities of stress for short, more “acute” periods, can help a person stay focused, be more energetic, and develop the ability to meet new challenges in the workplace.<sup>2</sup> It’s what keeps us on our toes during a presentation or alert to prevent accidents or costly mistakes.<sup>x</sup>

When properly managed, stress can produce positive results. Moderate stress levels, such as occasional pressure to meet a deadline or to fulfill a challenging obligation, help people increase their immunity, become more resilient, and, perhaps most significantly, become more motivated to succeed at a given task.

When stress levels become chronic, however, it can be overwhelming and negatively affect our health and emotional wellbeing. Stated differently, the amount of stress and performance has the inverted-U-shaped relationship (see the chart below), so that stress is enhancing to a certain point, after which it becomes debilitating.<sup>xi</sup>



<sup>2</sup> In a 2013 study, scientists at UC San Francisco analyzed this effect on a cellular level in humans. The results indicated that while chronic stress is damaging, small bouts of acute stress keep our brains resilient and can condition us to persevere under pressure. (Source: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23490070>)



# **Chapter 3**

# **THE MANY CAUSES OF STRESS**

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# COMMON WORKPLACE STRESSORS

“Poor fit” is but one cause of job-related stress

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While chronic stress can be traced to many causes, such as personal finances and familial discord, it has become a particular problem at the workplace. In 2012, 65 percent of Americans cited work as a top source of stress, according to the American Psychological Association’s (APA) annual Stress in America Survey. A 2013 survey by APA’s Center for Organizational Excellence also found that job-related stress is a serious issue, with more than one-third of working Americans reporting chronic work stress.<sup>xii</sup>

Making matters worse is the fact that work-related stress doesn’t simply vanish when workers head home for the day. When stress persists, it can take a toll on one’s health and well-being. Heightened levels of job stress have been shown to be associated with increased rates of heart attack, hypertension, and other disorders.

Numerous studies indicate that job stress has escalated progressively over the past few decades<sup>xiii</sup> and is said to be reaching epidemic levels.

Workplace stress can be caused by many triggers. A primary one is the aforementioned “poor fit” between job requirements and the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.

According to a 2006 survey conducted by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), respondents identified the following other primary causes for their stress:

- Deadlines (55 percent)
- Interpersonal relationships (53 percent)
- Staff management (50 percent)
- Dealing with issues/problems that arise (49 percent)

# 10

## COMMONLY IDENTIFIED SOURCES OF WORK-INDUCED STRESS

1

### DEADLINES

Meeting firm timetables for project completion

2

### INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Dealing with others who don't quite think and act like you would prefer

3

### STAFF MANAGEMENT

Managing others' work and needs

4

### DEALING WITH ISSUES/PROBLEMS THAT ARISE

Finding the right solution to unanticipated challenges

5

### EXCESSIVE WORKLOADS

Finding ways to get everything done

6

### LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH OR ADVANCEMENT

Feeling like you've hit up against a glass ceiling

7

### UNENGAGING WORK

Work is boring and uninspiring

8

### UNCLEAR PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

Not sure what is really expected of you

9

### LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Feeling alone, with no one to turn to

10

### LACK OF CONTROL OVER JOB-RELATED DECISIONS

Suffering from a lack of choice and ability to make meaningful decisions

Other commonly identified sources of work-induced stress include:

- Excessive workloads
- Limited opportunities for growth or advancement
- Unengaging work
- Conflicting demands or unclear performance expectations
- Lack of social support
- Lack of adequate control over job-related decisions

This last source of work-related stress deserves particular attention. According to coaching expert Sir John Whitmore, stress develops from long periods of suppression, which is what happens when people lack choice in the workplace. Similarly, a survey referenced in a leading book on coaching revealed that the leading cause of burnout was “little personal control allowed” in doing one’s job.<sup>xiv</sup>

In his seminal work on job-related strain, researcher Robert Karasek pointed out that mental stress at work results not only from on-the-job demands, but is also a function of the employee’s decision-making latitude or control in the workplace. Workers whose jobs rated high in demands yet low in employee control (as measured by latitude over their decision making) reported significantly more exhaustion after work, trouble awakening in the morning, depression, nervousness, anxiety, and insomnia or disturbed sleep than other workers. Conversely, when workers facing high demands enjoyed more control, their stress was lower. Karasek argued that workers with a greater sense of control in their work roles may experience lower stress than individuals who do not have (or do not feel in) control at work.<sup>xv</sup>

There are other forms of stressors, many of which have nothing to do with a person’s actual job description or responsibilities. These stressors, while not new to the workplace, have become much more commonplace in recent decades. They include: economic upheavals, downsizing, layoffs, mergers, acquisitions, and bankruptcies. Taken in the aggregate, they have impacted hundreds of thousands of workers (if not more), who, assuming that they survive such changes, often feel they have to work longer and harder just to maintain their current economic status.



**Chapter 4**  
**HOW WORK-  
RELATED STRESS  
IMPACTS  
EMPLOYEES**



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# SYMPTOMS OF STRESS FOR WORKERS

## The impacts are far-ranging

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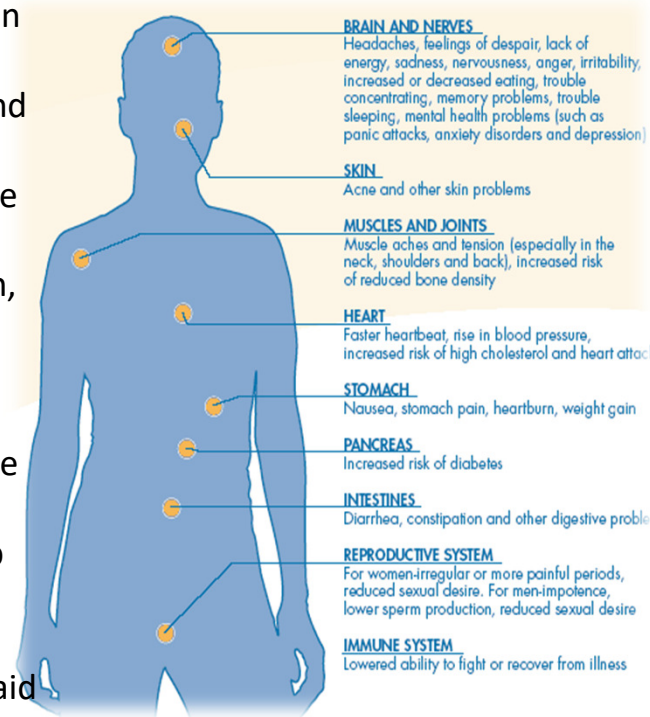
Over time, stress caused by any of the above causes or other triggers can begin to negatively impact an employee's social, emotional, and physical health both at work and at home. According to the ADA survey cited above, when on the job, employees say stress and anxiety most often impacts their...

- workplace performance (56 percent)
- relationship with coworkers and peers (51 percent)
- quality of work (50 percent)
- relationships with superiors (43 percent)

Moreover, in excess of three-fourths of those who said that stress interferes with their work acknowledged that it carries over to their personal life. Men (83 percent) experienced this more so than women (72 percent).

In the short term, a stressful work environment can contribute to problems such as headache, stomachache, sleep disturbances, short temper and difficulty concentrating. Chronic, long-term stress can result in anxiety, insomnia, high blood pressure and a weakened immune system. It can also contribute to health conditions such as depression, obesity and heart disease. The chart to the left illustrates these impacts and many others.<sup>xvi</sup>

Compounding the problem is that, according to the APA study, only 37 percent of Americans surveyed said they were doing an excellent or very good job managing stress. And if they looked to their workplaces for support, they were often disappointed. Just 36 percent of those surveyed said that their workplaces provide sufficient resources to help them manage that stress.





# **Chapter 5**

## **HOW WORK- RELATED STRESS IMPACTS LEADERS**

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# SYMPTOMS OF STRESS FOR LEADERS

## Stress levels keep growing for leaders

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Although stress impacts people at all levels of the organizational chart, it plays a particularly significant role in the lives of leaders. A Center for Creative Leadership white paper shared the following alarming findings:

- 88 percent of leaders report that work is a primary source of stress in their lives and that having a leadership role increases the level of stress.
- More than two-thirds of surveyed leaders believe their stress level is higher today than it was five years ago.

Leaders in the study cited a lack of resources and limited time as the most stressful leadership demands. They also said that their stress is caused largely by trying to do more with less, and to do it faster.<sup>xvii</sup>

There are other reasons as to why leaders have a particularly hard go at containing their stress levels.

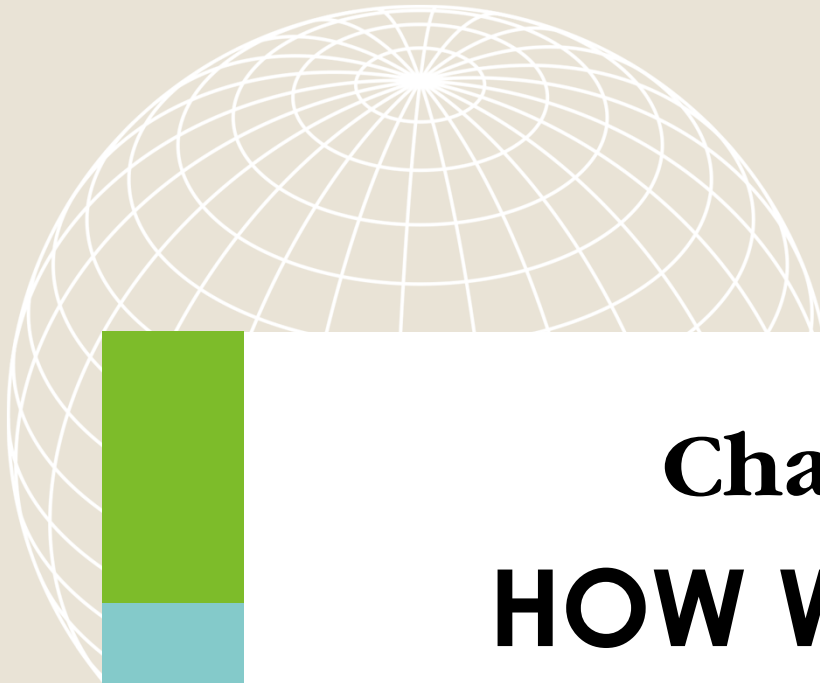
First, their task list never ends. The buck stops with them so they must look around and see everything that needs to be done. If it's not anyone else's job or is simply not being attended to correctly, then it automatically becomes the leader's job.

Second, leaders suffer from what is called "Social Support stress." This means that they do not have peers within the company to speak with and share their concerns and problems. Lack of social support is widely known to produce higher stress—which makes it an occupational hazard of leadership.

“Paradoxically, what makes good leaders great are the trials and tribulations of failure... Leaders who have endured adversity are most likely to be the ones with the resilience and resolve to succeed.” ~ David Dotlich



*“To be a champion, you have to learn to handle stress and pressure. But if you've prepared mentally and physically, you don't have to worry.” ~ Harvey Mackay*



# Chapter 6

## HOW WORKERS “MANAGE” STRESS

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# COMMON COPING TACTICS

## Ways that workers “get by”

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Individuals who experience excessive stress often deal with it in unhealthy ways such as overeating, excessive caffeine consumption, eating unhealthy foods, smoking cigarettes, or abusing substances such as drugs and alcohol. Here is a partial breakdown from the above-cited ADAA study.

- Consuming more caffeine (31 percent of people surveyed)
- Smoking (27 percent)
- Exercising more frequently (25 percent)
- Taking over-the-counter or prescription medication (23 percent)
- Consuming more alcoholic beverages (20 percent)

Women and men typically manage their job stress differently:

- Women are significantly more likely than men to eat more (46 percent vs. 27 percent) and talk to family and friends (44 percent vs. 21 percent).
- Men are significantly more likely than women to have sex more frequently (19 percent vs. 10 percent) and use illicit drugs (12 percent vs. 2 percent).<sup>xviii</sup>





**Chapter 7**  
**TIPS TO**  
**CONSTRUCTIVELY**  
**MANAGE STRESS**  
**FOR EMPLOYEES**  
**AND LEADERS**

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# STRESS REDUCING STRATEGIES

## Proactive and reactive tips for employees and bonus stress-reducing techniques for leaders

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With the exceptions of increased exercise and talking through stress, the strategies listed above (Chapter 6) are far from ideal and in most cases only serve to exacerbate the problem. Instead, consider these healthy, constructive strategies – both proactive and reactive – to reduce stress and live a happier, healthier life.

Proactive Strategies	Reactive Strategies
Develop healthy daily routines	Label your emotion
Get (and keep) it together	Keep track of your stressors
Take breaks	Tidy up your workspace
Get clear on your values	Let others know
Prioritize	Find the silver lining
Establish clear boundaries	Make a joke of it
Resist perfectionism	Think positively



## Proactive Strategies

- Develop healthy daily routines. Daily routines that include some or all of the following can have a significant impact on our mood, mental state and physical wellbeing.
  - Exercise. Perhaps the best way to minimize the negative health outcomes of work-related stress is through a regular exercise program. Exercise dissipates some of the hormone buildup that comes with stress, allowing us to relax and get refocused.<sup>3</sup>
  - Yoga. Studies have shown that yoga may help reduce stress and anxiety. It could also improve one's mood and overall sense of well-being.<sup>xviii</sup>
  - Mindfulness. Mindfulness (a state in which you actively observe present experiences and thoughts such as breathing, the weather, etc. without judging them<sup>4</sup>) helps reduce stress in a number of ways, including making us more aware of our thoughts, allowing us to step back from them and assess them more objectively (as opposed to emotionally). Start by taking a few minutes each day to focus on a simple activity like breathing, walking or enjoying a meal. The skill of being able to focus purposefully on a single activity without distraction will get stronger with practice and you'll find that you can apply it to many different aspects of your life.

All of these activities create moments of pause that help us arrive at concrete, productive solutions, rather than internalizing negative thoughts and feelings.

<sup>3</sup> Research conducted by the Mayo Clinic shows that when we feel stress, hormones including adrenaline and cortisol are released. Once the stressful event is over, our hormone levels return to normal. When we experience chronic stress, however, our response system stays active, which means our hormones remain at unhealthy levels for extended periods of time. This type of chronic stress impacts every system of the body, including the respiratory, cardiovascular, and endocrine systems. Learn more at <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20046037>

<sup>4</sup> For more about mindfulness, visit <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/>.

## Proactive Strategies, cont'd

- Healthy eating. Consume more fruits and vegetables while reducing added sugars, fat, and sodium. Omega-3 fatty acids (found in fatty fish, walnuts, seaweed and flaxseed) are known to give your mood a boost.
  - Breaks. Take scheduled breaks throughout the day. Go out for lunch, visit a coworker, take a short walk, or read a newspaper, something to get your mind off of work for a little while.
  - Gratitude. Consider thoughts of gratitude for all of the good that's happening in your life, despite the stress that you are presently experiencing.
  - Hobbies and activities. Make time for hobbies and favorite activities, such as reading a book, going to concerts, or playing games with your family.
  - Sleep. Get enough sleep. To do so, limit your caffeine intake late in the day as well as stimulating activities, such as computer and television use, at night.
- Get (and keep) it together. Few things add stress than not having your own life in order. Be on time (better yet, a few minutes early) to work and meetings. Keep yourself looking kempt and your things in order.
  - Take breaks. Make sure you take stress breaks. Get up from your desk and walk around, or get outside for some fresh air. Do some deep breathing, shoulder shrugs, or just close your eyes for one minute. Taking a mental or physical break is an important strategy for dealing with day-to-day stress.
  - Get clear on your values. Identify your core values and use them to guide your choices and behaviors. The more you do the more balance you will feel, even when time and other resources are in short supply.

## Proactive Strategies, cont'd

- **Prioritize.** Put your work in priority order and then work on the high priority items first. Avoid spending a disproportionate amount of time and energy on tasks that are less important. It may be helpful to have a simple rating system where you assess the priority level of each work item. Base this system on some standard criteria that is important to your position.
- **Establish clear boundaries.** Boundaries are critical to maintain a “safe space” from your work responsibilities and to help you unwind. Strategies may include not bringing work home with you, avoiding checking email when out of the office, and not answering the phone during dinner. Let everyone in the office know that you are unavailable at certain times and that you will respond when you’re back “on”. Make sure to use all of your vacation days so that you can recharge more deeply from time to time.
- **Resist perfectionism.** We take pride in our work and want for it to be perfect. When you set unrealistic goals for yourself, however, you add undue stress to the process. Shoot for excellence, not perfection.

*“There are six components of wellness: proper weight and diet, proper exercise, breaking the smoking habit, control of alcohol, stress management and periodic exams.” ~ Kenneth H. Cooper*

## Reactive Strategies

- Label your emotion. The act of labeling emotions reduces activity in the emotional brain and increases activity in the areas of the brain that are responsible for our focus and awareness. Such actions, as simple as they are, can help you draft a clearer plan on how to handle the stress that you're feeling. Methods for labeling emotions include<sup>xx</sup>:
  - Think about it. Have a quick, silent conversation with yourself along the lines of: "What emotion am I feeling right now? Frustration. I'm feeling complete and total frustration."
  - Write about it. Writing is a very effective way to boost your performance in pressure-filled situations.<sup>xxi</sup>
  - Verbalize it. Label your emotional state out loud, such as: "I feel really embarrassed about what she said to me."
- Keep track of your stressors. Use a stress diary chart for a week or two to identify which situations create the most stress and how you respond to them. Using a diary will help you to identify your causes of stress in more detail, the levels of pressure at which you operate most effectively, and how you may be able to improve the way you manage stress. Record your thoughts, feelings and information about the environment, including the people and circumstances involved, the physical setting and how you reacted. Recording this information can help you find patterns among your stressors and your reactions to them.
- Tidy up your workspace. A little organization can offer a psychological boost. Clean up your desk, file loose papers or rearrange furniture. Whatever it takes to clear your head and make you feel more positive about your environment.
- Let your stress-generating coworker(s) know. If someone is causing you much stress, talk to them and tell them how you are feeling. Speak while things are relatively calm and controllable rather than after your stress and frustration spills over.

## Reactive Strategies, cont'd

- Get support. Ask a diverse group, such as your peers, your boss, a family member and a trusted friend, to work with you to understand your goals for managing stress and to help you stay on track.
- Get a coach. Similarly, working with a coach can also empower you while providing you with a listening, non-judgmental ear to confide in and bounce thoughts off of. In the Center for Creative Leadership study cited above, nearly 80 percent of surveyed leaders state they would benefit from a coach to help them manage stress. Similarly, in the APA study previously referenced, 79 percent of respondents believed that they would benefit from a coach to help them manage stress.
- Find the silver lining – In almost every difficult situation there is a silver lining. This can include some partial benefits (lessons learned, things achieved, contacts made, etc.) as well as considering how many others may have it worse than you.
- Make a joke of it. Humor, when used properly, is a great way to relieve stress in the workplace. Share a joke or funny story when you or those around you start taking things too seriously.<sup>xxii</sup>
- Think positively. If you focus on the downside of every situation and interaction, you'll find yourself drained of energy and motivation. Try to think positively about your work, avoid negative-thinking co-workers, and pat yourself on the back about small accomplishments, even if no one else does.

## Strategies for leaders

For the most part, the strategies listed above will help leaders reduce and better manage their stress levels. Leaders, however, face unique challenges that require targeted interventions that apply to their specific circumstances.

In addition to the strategies listed above, leaders should consider the following tactics to manage their increased stress levels.

Record and review your leadership goals	Be selective in your work	Learn to delegate	Connect at your pace
Seek to control only the controllable	Let others support you	Remain positive	Get social support
Re-group on a task	Increase your determination	Consider your impact	Ask yourself: "Is this really worth it?"

- Record and review your leadership goals. Clarity of purpose and action is a solid defense against leadership stress.
- Be selective in your work. Don't engage in tasks and efforts that unproductive or produce limited benefits. Apply the "Pareto principle" (also known as "the 80/20 rule,") which states that for many events, roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. Identify the handful of actions that consistently produce the best and most fruitful outcomes and focus intently on getting those done.

## Strategies for leaders, cont'd

- Learn to delegate. Leaders often feel that since the buck stops with them, if something needs to be done, they ultimately will have to be the ones to do it. Before succumbing to such thinking, ask yourself whether you are really the best person for the task and if it is a proper use of your extremely valuable time. If the answer is “no,” find someone else to take it on. Be certain that you adhere to sound delegation principles such as task clarity, articulated expectations, checking for understanding, timelines, and support.
- Connect at your pace. Don't allow people to thrust their way into your work day. Let them know when you're available to meet and/or speak and schedule the conversation. This applies as well to telephone calls and e-mail. Learn to become comfortable not responding immediately so that you can get real work done without distraction.
- Seek to control only the controllable. We are limited in what we can control. Other things, such as others' behavior and performance, are out of our hands. Focus on the things you can control such as your efforts and the way you choose to react to problems.
- Let others support you. Be willing to let people into your situation. Just knowing that others care about you can be extremely uplifting and can keep you going during difficult moments. Having people who can step in during your absence will help alleviate the burden and make sure that things move forward as needed.
- Remain positive. Stress is part of leadership so don't let it poison your work mindset or, more importantly, your self-perception. Simply thinking positively will do a lot to ward off stress-producing negativity.

## Strategies for leaders, cont'd

- Get social support. We noted above that leaders often lack social support at work. To combat this, leaders should identify ways to connect with peers from other organizations. Examples of this include: attending an industry conference, a business leaders' lunch, or a professional service organization. Consider joining a peer board, a mastermind group, or a leadership development group that will provide trustworthy, confidential, and ongoing social support.
- Re-group on a task. When a task is stressful, look for ways to better organize and streamline what needs to be done. Take time to clearly define roles and clarify expectations. Gaining added focus and clarity can reduce stress before and/or during a task.
- Increase your determination – A lot of the stress that we feel starts in our head. Commit to working through challenges rather than allowing them to gain the upper hand. Keep a collection of inspirational quotes handy, such as: “The obstacle is the path” (Zen proverb) and “Great works are performed not by strength but by perseverance.” (Samuel Johnson)
- Consider your impact – As much as you are struggling with your burden, keep in mind that you are still needed by others. Your leadership, guidance, direction and support are critical elements in your organization and folks need you to be there for them.
- Ask yourself: “Is this really worth it?” Often, our stress is self-induced. As we aspire to “make it”, we sometimes forget that we’re adding unneeded stressors to our lives that simply don’t justify our longings.




## Strategies for leaders, cont'd

The following parable illustrates this idea well.

*A group of friends visited their old university professor. The conversation soon turned to complaints about the stress and tension in the former students' lives. The professor went into his kitchen and returned with a pitcher of coffee and a host of different glasses and mugs. Some were clearly nicer and more expensive than the others.*

*When all of them had a cup in hand, the professor said, "You'll notice that all of the 'better' cups were taken, leaving behind the ordinary ones. Every one of you wanted the best, and that is the source of your stress. What you really wanted was coffee, not the utensil. But you still went for the nicest one."*

*If life is coffee, then jobs, money, status etc. are the utensils. Remember to enjoy the coffee!*



*"You'll notice that all of the 'better' cups were taken, leaving behind the ordinary ones. Every one of you wanted the best, and that is the source of your stress. What you really wanted was coffee, not the utensil. But you still went for the nicest one."*



**Conclusion**  
**OUR REACTION**  
**MATTERS**

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# STRESS: OUR REACTION MATTERS

## Ways to keep our sanity in a stress-inducing world

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In summary, chronic stress is a growing, widespread problem, in the United States and throughout the world. It has a strong negative impact on workers' physical and emotional wellbeing as well as their productivity, to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars annually.

On the other hand, "healthy" stress (or challenge) can be a tool that motivates us to push ahead and achieve great things.

Numerous strategies exist – both proactive and reactive – to help workers of all types manage their stress levels to minimize its impact. Being mindful of these techniques and taking steps to implement them can go a long way in reducing the harmful impact of chronic stress in the workplace and in our personal lives. In particular, how we think about ourselves, our impact, and the challenges that we face may be our best defense against the pernicious effects of workplace stress, as illustrated in the following tale.

*A story is told of a young woman who told her mother about her difficulties. She was tired of fighting and struggling and did not know how she was going to make it through. It seemed as one problem was solved, a new one arose.*

*Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. The pots soon came to boil. In the first she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil, without saying a word.*

*After twenty minutes she turned off the burners. She scooped the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and placed it in a bowl. Turning to her daughter, she asked, "Tell me what you see." "Carrots, eggs, and coffee," came the reply.*

*Her mother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. The mother then asked the daughter to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled, as she tasted its rich aroma. The daughter then asked, "What are you trying to say, mother?"*

*Her mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity: boiling water. Each reacted differently.*

*The carrot started off hard and firm. After being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak.*

*The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its soft interior. After sitting in boiling water, however, its insides became hardened.*

*The coffee beans acted differently. As a result of the boiling process, they changed the water.*

*"Which are you?" she asked her daughter. "When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, which softens in the face of difficulty, an egg that hardens and becomes firmer, or a coffee bean that changes the situation completely?"*



## *About the Author*



Naphtali Hoff, PsyD, is President of Impactful Coaching & Consulting, LLC. Naphtali an accomplished executive coach, organizational consultant, and sought after trainer and lecturer. He is President of Impactful Coaching & Consulting ([ImpactfulCoaching.com](http://ImpactfulCoaching.com)) and author of “Becoming the New Boss” ([BecomingtheNewBoss.com](http://BecomingtheNewBoss.com)), a book for new leaders.

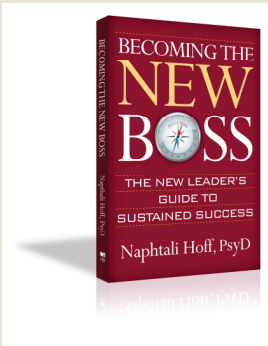
Naphtali completed his doctorate in human and organizational psychology, which analyzes successful individual or organizational change and development, and holds two master’s degrees in education and educational leadership, respectively.

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## Endnotes

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