

Stressed, Stretched, and Just Plain Overwhelmed

A Guide to Managing Your Stress and
Developing a Greater Sense of Work-Life Balance

By Kitty J. Boitnott, Ph.D., NBCT, RScP

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Kitty offers one-on-one coaching, career coaching and job search advice through [CareerHMO](#), and workshops on stress management for teachers and busy professionals. In addition to her coaching practice, Kitty is a professional speaker and workshop presenter.

For a FREE “Cheat Sheet” on the 7 strategies that you need to incorporate in your life to better manage your stress, go to this link: <https://kittyboitnott.leadpages.net/cheat-sheet-on-stress-management>. You just need to provide an email address in order to receive your FREE download.

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Dedication

To Bruce, with deep gratitude for all of your support, patience, and for being my “Number One Fan.” I also want to thank Midge for her careful review and editing of a very rough draft.

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Chapter 1

My Story of Job Burnout



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I don't know about you, but I have experienced job burnout on a profoundly personal level. Even though it has been a couple of years, I still remember the day I came to the realization like it was yesterday.

On the morning of April 12, 2012, I was preparing for a day at the office (as opposed to traveling somewhere). In the midst of putting on my makeup and drying my hair, I started to think about what the next few months would bring. I still had four months to go before completing my final term as President of the Virginia Education Association. I had endured a bruising battle with the General Assembly including the Governor and his staff, from January through the early part of March. The bitter back and forth communication between the Governor's office and myself and my staff had taken a personal toll. As I was preparing for my day that lovely spring morning, I became acutely aware of just how weary I was. I was tired, but it was more than just a normal tired. I was tired to the *bone*.

My mind jumped ahead to what would happen when my term came to an end later in the summer. I would have only two weeks vacation if I stuck to my plan. After finishing my work at the VEA, I was on track to return to my school division as a

middle school English teacher.

Part of the problem was that I hadn't taught middle school *or* English, since 1980. I had been an elementary school library media specialist for most of my 33 years as an educator. I couldn't imagine having the energy—or the stamina—to take on teaching middle school kids again.

All I could think about was how *tired* I was! How would I ever have the energy to do what I needed to do...and do it well? There would be planning to do; and I would have to navigate the learning curve of getting up to speed on the Standards of Learning (Virginia's version of the Common Core Curriculum). I would need to build new cooperative teaching relationships since I would surely have students assigned to me who had special needs and would need Individual Education Plans. There would be a new principal to adjust to and a large and more impersonal staff with whom to get acquainted. (One of the reasons I always liked working in an elementary school is that it is smaller and more like family.)

The more I thought about the prospect, the more exhausted I felt! Suddenly, I knew I didn't have it in me to go back to the classroom. I was aware, in a way that I had not been before, that I was running on “empty.” I had no energy left for teaching. I didn't have anything in reserve upon which to call to take on *anything* new. I was just going through the motions in order to get through the next few months.

In that moment, I decided I could not go back. I didn't know what I was going to do instead, but I knew I needed another alternative. Going back into a middle school classroom again at my age and level of exhaustion just wasn't an option. I wouldn't be any good for the kids. And it wouldn't be a good move for me either.

I recognized, suddenly, that what I was experiencing was a severe case of profound **job burnout**. I felt fatigued beyond words. I knew that I had to do whatever I needed to do to get through the rest of my term and *then* figure out what would be next for me. What I knew for sure in that moment was that I wouldn't be going back to teaching...ever.

If you have found yourself experiencing this level of fatigue or weariness because of the demands of a job or career, then you know what I mean. Job burnout is a very particular kind of fatigue. It goes beyond just being *tired*...the kind of tired that a nap might fix or that a long weekend can cure. Job burnout goes to the essence of who you are. It makes you weary, not just physically but psychologically, mentally, emotionally and even spiritually.

I also recognize now, with the benefit of time, space, and a little more perspective, that I was grieving, and I hadn't given myself the time or space to do that properly. In January of 2012, I put one of my two beloved dachshunds down. His kidneys were failing, and there was nothing to be done to help him other than put him out of his misery. He was 15 years old. He had stopped eating right after Christmas and he was listless. I saw how sick he was. I knew that putting him down was the right thing to do, but I had never had to make that decision before. I dreaded making the decision and then feeling remorse. As it turned out, his passing was peaceful, and when it was over, I knew I had done the right thing. I also knew that time was running out for my other "baby." I had another dachshund, a year older than Murphy who was liable to need the same act of love at any time. She was partially crippled, blind, and in bad shape, but still going.

Eleven days after putting Murphy down, Bayleigh—the little 13-pound wire-haired love of my life--followed him to doggie Heaven of her own accord. To add insult to injury, she did so while I was out of town for a business trip. She spared me having to go through the last traumatic moments with her; but on the other hand, I felt guilty about not being with her in her greatest moment of need. I can admit—*now*—that I was in shock for days after she died.

I had had these two precious dachshunds with me for 15 and 16 years. They were my family, and they both left me in the span of eleven days during the most difficult General Assembly session of my life. I couldn't take time off to grieve. I was just starting the G.A. session when I had to put Murphy down. So, I had to put on a

happy face and go about my job while setting aside time to grieve for the only family I had at the time other than my human family with whom I don't live. My dogs had moved with me four times in the span of seven years. They had seen me through my marriage *and* my divorce. They had been the family I came home to everyday when I wasn't on the road. I had spent thousands of dollars on their medical care and their daycare needs while I was away on business. They were my collective anchor...and they were suddenly gone.

I wasn't thinking about Murphy or Bayleigh, however, when I first became aware of the sense of fatigue that I felt on that beautiful April morning. I was, instead, dreading the future prospect of returning to teaching when I knew how much energy and stamina 13 and 14-year-olds would require of me as a middle school teacher. I knew I wasn't up to it. It gave me no pleasure to come to that conclusion, but it was real, and I needed to deal with it.

On that day, once I arrived at the office, I called my financial advisor and asked for a meeting. "I want to know if I can afford to retire," I said to him. "I need you to tell me if that is possible." And then that is what I did.

I Want You to Learn from My Mistakes

I now know that I could have saved myself some time, and I might have avoided the need to take six months as a recluse to recover from my job, if I had practiced the seven habits that I am going to share with you here in this book. Quite simply, they are habits you have already heard about multiple times. Your doctor may have talked to you about the need for you to exercise or to eat well. It wasn't until I started working on a coaching certification in stress management, however, that the real value of these habits, and how they are intertwined with stress and *managing* stress, that I experienced my own "ah-ha" moment. I would like to help you avoid working yourself into the ground out of ignorance, so I am going to offer the seven habits here.

I will be offering more detail throughout the book, but for now, here is the down and dirty list of **seven daily habits** you should incorporate into your life if you want to

avoid the pain and heartache of job burnout:

1. **Stay hydrated.**
2. **Eat for good nutrition.**
3. **Get sufficient *uninterrupted* sleep.**
4. **Get adequate and appropriate exercise.**
5. **Don't forget to *breathe!***
6. **Develop a daily practice of mindful meditation or prayer**
7. **Don't forget to have FUN!**

If it feels stressful to you to think about incorporating all of these habits into your life, don't worry. I don't recommend that you try to incorporate all of them at once. Try adding one practice at a time until each one becomes a *habit*, and then add another until you have incorporated most, if not all, of these practices in your lifestyle. Before I get into the specifics of the habits, however, let me share a little more of my story. You may find some areas where you can relate.

Chapter 2

I Also Know Other Kinds of Stress

Unfortunately, job related stress and feeling that deep and profound sense of job burnout isn't the only stress with which I have had personal experience. In the early 2000's I indulged myself by taking up a whirlwind romantic relationship that ended badly. Of course, at the beginning, I just thought it was an exciting adventure. I was unhappy with my work situation at the time, and my now ex-husband offered me an escape route.

I don't need to bore you with the gory details of the next five years. The abridged version of what happened was that in 2001, I sold my house, quit my job, and moved three hours from friends and family in order to live with a man whom I considered to be the smartest man I had ever met (and he still is). He was not only smart, he was charming and witty and he seemed to "get me," which was something that I had yearned to experience my entire life.

I had just ended a long distance relationship when I met my soon-to-be husband, and I was feeling "free," and unencumbered emotionally for the first time in years. Our meeting felt "destined." I was 47 years old, and looking back now, I realize that I actually feared being an "old maid" more than I feared being a divorcée. As a result of my dread of hitting 50 and still being single, I was more easily manipulated than I might have been in another stage of my life. As it happened, my ex-husband is also a master manipulator. I didn't see that at the time...that realization came later.

During the summer of 2001, I took what I considered to be a mighty leap of faith instead of a venture into foolhardy folly, and I moved in with my new love. It was only a matter of weeks before I began to suspect that I had made a mistake, but I had burned many bridges as I left my hometown. I felt that I needed to make the best of the situation which is exactly what I did for the next five years...until I could no longer hide the truth from myself or anyone else.

My ex-husband was diagnosed with having a bipolar disorder the first year that we were married. He experienced manic-depressive episodes. When he felt good (manic), he spent money that we didn't have. When he was in a dark mood (depressed), he would go into rages for no apparent reason...or at least for no reason that made any sense to me.

I adopted the behavior of one who lives with an emotionally fragile person. I suspect that it is the same behavior one adopts when living with an alcoholic or a drug addict. I walked on eggshells most of the time. I never knew what might set him off. I began to worry about our financial situation because he was spending money we didn't have. (Ironically, he was a financial advisor and advised other people on how to manage *their* money.)

A number of things happened that led me to the ultimate decision that I had to leave the marriage. I didn't leave right away, however. I had to plan. I had to get ready. I opened a separate checking account and began setting money aside for when I would leave. I started looking for apartments. There was a five-month span between the time I decided that I had to leave and the time I actually left. By the time I finally moved out, I had worked up a good case of bronchitis. In fact, the doctor told me that I had developed viral-induced asthma. I sounded like a foghorn each time I was seized by a coughing spell that left me breathless and dizzy.

What I know now is that stress depresses your immune system. It is not an accident that following a stressful event in your life, a week or so later you start experiencing the symptoms of a cold or a sinus infection. Now, when I look back over the five years that I was married, I can't count the number of doctor visits I made with a multitude of complaints that varied from back pain to colds and sinus infections. At one point, I prayed that the doctor would just see that I was an emotional wreck and that she would prescribe something for my nerves. She never did, and I didn't have the nerve to ask.

I left the marriage over the Christmas holidays of 2005. I pushed through the

move in spite of having a terrible cough that continued to plague me long after I had finished my last round of antibiotics. Friends helped with the move, and my sister helped me settle into a little two-bedroom apartment not far from my work.

We got everything moved, unpacked and settled over the course of two days. When the ball dropped for the new year of 2006, I was settled and ready for a new start except that I was unable to move! I called in sick from work two days in a row because I was simply unable to do anything other than sleep and wake up to go to the bathroom. The stress of doing what I had to do to get moved and navigate through the initial days of my separation had caught up with me. I finally collapsed out of sheer exhaustion.

Since then, I have not had a single sinus infection. I go to the doctor, now only to check on a condition that has nothing to do with stress. My life isn't perfect, nor is it totally stress free. Things still happen occasionally that knock me off kilter temporarily; but I have never had the kind of stress that my marriage caused. Even the job burnout that I described earlier didn't compare with the stress that my failed marriage caused.

I am able to put things in perspective now, but at the time I felt completely overwhelmed and unable to cope with my husband's behavior or my life in general. I often felt as if I were drowning. I remember distinctly the moment when I decided that I would have to leave the marriage. Ultimately, it came down to a choice between leaving and saving myself or staying and "going down" with my ex-husband. I chose myself...and I have never regretted making that decision. If you don't come away from reading this book with any other message, it is that you need to love and take care of yourself *first*. I tell my clients and workshop participants that there is a reason flight attendants tell you to put your own oxygen mask on before attempting to help others. If you pass out, you are not only no help to other people, you become yet another passenger who needs help. **Take care of yourself first. Take care of your own needs first.** There is no glory in martyring yourself for the sake of someone else.

Chapter 3

I Know My Story is Not Unique

I know that I am not unique in that I have survived a bad marriage and I have experienced job burnout. In fact, I believe that for most of us, feeling stressed has become an everyday part of our lives that we take too much for granted. Being “stressed out” has become the “new normal” for too many of us. According to Richard Carlson, “Stress is nothing more than a socially acceptable form of mental illness.” I don’t know that I agree with the “nothing more” part of his statement, but it is a fact that more and more people seem to be succumbing to the ill effects of stress gone unchecked.

Danae Pace has said that, “Stress is like trash of modern life—we all generate it but if you don’t dispose of it properly, it will pile up and overtake your life.” I believe there is a lot of truth in that statement. I also agree with the Belgian philosopher, Pascal Chabot, who has called burnout, “civilization’s disease.” In her book, *Thrive*, Arianna Huffington points out that, “Burnout, stress, and depression have become worldwide epidemics.”

The fact is that most of us feel overwhelmed with life--whether because of personal or professional circumstances--at least some of the time. There are occasions, depending on what is going on in your life, when you may feel that you are walking around with the weight of the world on your shoulders. The effects of stress on the human mind, body, and spirit are well documented, and research is continually revealing new and sometimes surprising—even contradictory—information about the nature of stress and its effect on the overall quality of all of our lives.

Stress Isn't Always from Negative Events in Your Life

It is probably fair to say that when you hear the word, “stress,” or if I were to ask you to talk about the stress in your own life, you would think of it and speak of it in mostly negative terms. Most of us think of stress as a “bad” thing—something we need to reduce, minimize, or eliminate.

Much of the stress we experience isn't just the result of negative events, however. Even though, more often than not, we associate stress with negative feelings, stress can be the result of happy events! So, while many American adults report that workplace stress is a major source of stress in their lives, work isn't always the culprit. If you are planning a wedding or just brought home a newborn...or if you are about to move into your dream home after years of planning and saving...you are also experiencing stress. It is the result of some of the happier and more positive aspects of life, but it is still *stress*.

The point is that stress alone doesn't have to be a “bad thing.” In fact, a relatively new body of research indicates that stress by itself isn't as problematic as our *beliefs* about stress; but I will offer more information about that later. For right now, consider the following facts about stress offered by a report from the American Institute of Stress: (1) over 40% of all adults in America suffer adverse health effects due to stress; and (2) over 75% of all visits made to our family doctors are for stress-related complaints.

When I was in training as a stress management coach and I ran across those two statistics, I was stunned. Imagine the health care implications of those two key points. If we could better manage or reduce our stress as a collective group, we could make major inroads on health care costs, not to mention the overall quality and enjoyment of life.

As gloomy as all the statistical data may sound, there are things that you can do *right now, starting today* to minimize, reduce, and manage stress in your life on a day-to-day basis. That is what this book is bringing to you: seven (7) simple (although perhaps not necessarily *easy*) daily practices that you can start incorporating into your

lifestyle right away—or over a relatively short period of time—that will help you become more resilient in the face of your day-to-day stress.

Now, let me be clear: incorporating these seven (7) daily practices into your life will not *eliminate* the stressors you may be experiencing. If your boss is a jerk, he is going to continue to be a jerk even if you are staying hydrated and you just had a great night's sleep. These practices won't make your boss any less difficult; but they *will* increase your physical, psychological, mental, and spiritual stamina and resilience so that you will be in a more powerful position to deal with the challenges that your workplace offers.

If you become intentional about incorporating these practices into your lifestyle, you will not only feel stronger, you will be more alert and ready to meet whatever your day holds. You will also be healthier and less prone to feeling chronically exhausted and frequently succumbing to illness. All of these practices, when taken together as part of your overall lifestyle, will enhance your health overall. You will begin to feel better about yourself. You will feel more physically fit. Ultimately, you will be physically *and* psychologically stronger and more resilient. In short, you will be better able to handle whatever comes your way.

Chapter 4

What Stress Is and Why It Needs to Be Managed



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Let's talk specifically about what stress is and how and why it needs to be managed. As I have stated before, stress is a fact of modern life. If you *think* you are feeling stressed about something, you probably are. You cannot “see” stress, but you can recognize the symptoms in others and in yourself. Dark circles under the eyes may be an indication of a lack of sleep. A sign that someone may have been crying would be bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes. Sudden weight loss may be the result of a loss of appetite during a stressful event. Likewise, weight gain in a relatively short period may be the result of eating to comfort oneself during a stressful event. Stress can cause you to feel and act in a manner that indicates increased moodiness, irritability, or erratic behavior. It may also result in increased risky behaviors such as drinking too much alcohol or using drugs to mask emotional pain.

Stress is something you *feel*. In general, it is a feeling that something is “off”—either a little bit off or way off, depending upon the situation. Stress can mean many things to many people, but in general, it is the result of feeling like things are happening too fast for you to keep up comfortably. Perhaps a major life event has taken you by surprise, and you are not able to cope with the resulting changes as effortlessly as you

might like. Some examples of major life events would include the death of a loved one, financial difficulties, the loss of a job, worry about a child, or trouble in one of your primary relationships. Stress can also be caused by positive life events like weddings, a new baby, adopting a new pet, moving into your dream house, or planning the vacation of a lifetime.

In short, stress is caused by change of *any* kind. It can be a positive change, or it can be negative change. As far as your body's physiological and psychological response to the change, however, it doesn't matter whether the stress is the result of a happy wedding or a tragic death...it causes a change in your day-to-day routine. It shakes you out of your comfort zone and requires that you adopt new habits or new ways reacting to a specific situation.

Generally speaking, there are three types of stress that we deal with on a regular basis. The first is often referred to as "acute stress" which is the result of *any* change. Anything that you aren't accustomed to doing or feeling can create a sense of feeling off balance or feeling stressed.

The problem lies in the fact that human beings like routine. We are creatures of habit. We like things to feel predictable. It is ludicrous, I know, but we like to think we are "in control" of our lives! That sense of control is an illusion, but in general, it is that illusion that helps most of us get through our days. If we were always hyper-conscious of the fact that we live in a world where we have absolutely no control over anything, we might really freak out. Instead, we adopt an attitude that we are in control of our routines and our lives, and we feel stressed when those routines or our lives are disrupted by something change in our circumstances.

"Acute stress" is the stress you feel when you start a new job, take out your first mortgage, or receive an unexpected bill from the IRS. These types of events create stress for you, but you adjust to it fairly quickly. As you adjust, the change becomes part of your day-to-day routine. The stress response to the immediate change calms down. You make the necessary adjustments and get on with your life.

“Episodic stress” is the accumulated effect of lots of acute stress—or lots of unexpected changes—all at once or over a relatively short period of time with little break in between. Examples of episodic stress might include having the transmission on your car to go out and finding out that fixing it will cost hundreds of dollars that you don’t have. While driving your friend’s car to work, you get a speeding ticket because you were distracted over the transmission on *your* car and the added financial distress. When you get to work, you find out that you are being laid off because of downsizing that has nothing to do with your performance...but man, you have bills to pay and you need that job!

Sometimes it seems that we go through periods in our lives when major things just happen in a relatively short period. We have had no time to recover our sense of equilibrium or normalcy before getting hit with something else. And don’t forget, episodic stress might be the result of a series of *positive* events. Maybe you fell in love at first sight with the person of your dreams. After a whirlwind courtship, you have an amazing wedding with all of your relatives in attendance. You honeymoon in an exotic place and move into your dream house all within the span of a few short months. It’s exciting—and many people would be thrilled to experience those kinds of happy changes in their lives—but it is also *stressful* because it requires you to make lots of adjustments in your sense of “normal” in a short period.

“Chronic stress” is different from acute stress and episodic stress because it is long term in nature. It doesn’t have so much to do with “change” as it has to do with living in a stressful environment or dealing with stressful events all the time...constantly...and without reprieve. For example, a person who is living with chronic pain experiences chronic stress. Living in a dysfunctional environment where someone is abusive can create chronic stress. Living with an alcoholic or a drug addict and dealing with their erratic and unpredictable behavior can result in chronic stress. Soldiers in combat experience chronic stress which can result in p.

Whether you are experiencing acute stress, episodic stress, or chronic stress, learning

to cope with the changes created by the stresses you face make living with it easier and more manageable. There are definitely strategies that you can adopt and practices that you can incorporate into your life. You first need to know what they are, and then you need to set the intention for adopting them as part of your daily lifestyle.

Chapter 5

Assess Your Stress Now

Take some time right now to consider your particular level of stress. Are you experiencing the more or less “normal” stresses of everyday living, or are you experiencing more acute, chronic, or episodic stress? Take the “stress test” I have developed to determine your own stress level (the link is provided below). If you answer more than ten (10) questions with a “yes,” it may be time for you to take a look at how you need to adjust your life in order to lower your stress level, or at least start to pay more attention to what is happening in your life. To access a free “stress test” that I use in my workshops, go to this link: <https://timeout4teacher.coachesconsole.com>. You will need to provide your name and email address so you can download the assessment. It’s **FREE** and it can be telling. If you are glossing over or simply not paying attention to the stress that you are carrying around, you may be unaware of the risk you are taking with your health.

Some sample questions from the questionnaire include:

- > Have you been diagnosed with high blood pressure?
- > Are you frequently fatigued?
- > Do you find yourself clenching your jaw or unconsciously grinding your teeth, even at night?

These are just a few examples of the kinds of questions that the free assessment asks. As I indicated above, if you answer ten (10) or more questions with a “yes” it is time for you to consider slowing down, taking stock, and taking better care of yourself...starting now.

Chapter 6

Is Work the Source of Most of Your Stress?



Photo by Shutterstock

Some facts related to workplace stress: A report related to attitudes in the American workplace indicate that...

- 40% of workers reported their job was very or extremely stressful
- 25% view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives
- 26% report that they feel “often or very often burned out or stressed by their work”
- Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems
- 80% of workers feel stress on the job with nearly half saying that they need help learning how to manage stress and 42% saying their co-workers need such help
- 14% of respondents have felt like striking a coworker in the past year, but didn’t
- 25% have felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress
- 10% are concerned about a coworker that they fear could become violent
- 9% are aware of an assault or violent act in their workplace
- 18% reported having experienced some sort of threat or verbal intimidation in the past year
- Those surveyed indicated that the main causes of their stress at work were

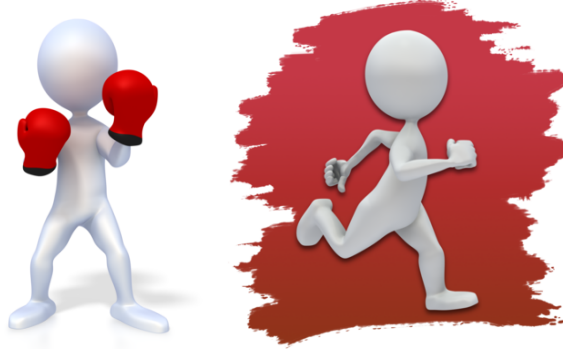
related to workload (46%); people issues (28%); juggling work and personal lives (20%); lack of job security (6%)

- 62% routinely find that they end the day with work-related neck pain
- 44% reported eye strain
- 38% complained of hurting hands
- 34% reported difficulty sleeping because of their stress from work
- 12% have called in sick because of job stress
- Over half said they often spend 12-hour days on work-related duties and an equal number frequently skip lunch because of the stress of job demands.

Chapter 7

Effects of Stress on the Body

We Are Hardwired for Survival



Photos by PresenterMedia.com

Whether your stress comes from work, home, or a combination of the two, you need to know that while stress plays a key role in your ability to function well in times of need, it can be harmful to your health...literally. But first, let me offer some good news about stress.

The reason you respond the way you do to stressful situations is that your body is hardwired for survival. From the beginning of time, humans have managed to survive and thrive because they know how to protect themselves in times of danger.

The “fight or flight” response that is the human response to physical danger is automatic. You don’t have to think about what to do...certain changes occur naturally in your body when you feel stressed, even if it doesn’t involve running away from a lion or a tiger, or defending yourself against a grizzly bear. The same physical response in your brain and body occurs when you are having a really bad day at the office or you are in the middle of a fight with your spouse.

The body's response goes something like this: when you feel threatened either physically or emotionally, your brain responds and starts producing chemicals that raise your vital statistics like blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration. Your muscles automatically tense. Your senses suddenly sharpen. You are ready for the attack and you are able to fend off your attacker. You are actually stronger, more alert, and able to do what is required in the moment. For a while after the actual attack is over, however, your heart continues to race, you have trouble catching your breath, and you may feel a sudden sense of being deflated as the extra rush of adrenaline that pumped into your bloodstream moments before drains out of your system.

So what is the good news? Your ability to act with heightened senses and performance can, in fact, be used to help you perform better in stressful situations. Even professional actors and public speakers admit to a feeling of “nerves” before going on stage and some even talk about debilitating stage fright. Once on stage, however, they perform beautifully, often with the assistance of the adrenaline rush that came with the nervousness.

All of these physical and psychological changes can be very good for you if your attacker is real; but what if you are just worried about something that is brewing at work, or you are afraid because your neighbor's home was broken into last week? Perhaps you are fretting with fear that the burglar is going to return to the neighborhood. What if you are afraid as the result of something you saw on the news that has nothing to do with your town, but you internalize the bad news and start to worry anyway? Your brain doesn't know the difference between the real threat and an imaginary worry...and so it responds pretty much the same way that it would if the danger were real and imminent...and there comes the rub. When you feel stressed even when you are not in any sort of immediate danger, your body continues to respond as though you are. You may have digestive problems, irritable bowel syndrome, a racing heart, or chronic high blood pressure.

Long term, the effects of prolonged stress responses may lead to depression,

fluctuations in weight, frequent minor illnesses that distract you from work, increased headaches, a loss of sex drive, chronic fatigue, backaches, muscle fatigue, etc. When your brain feels overloaded from stress, you may start to forget things, you lose things, you can't concentrate, you lose focus, willpower, and you may start to indulge in habits that are just going to add to your stress like over eating, drinking or smoking. These self-defeating habits can lead to a host of health issues that just add to your stress level, and the cycle continues.

Now, don't forget that I have said that not all stress is necessarily bad. In fact, harnessed and used wisely and in reasonable doses, stress can improve your performance in a variety of venues whether it be sports, the arts, or just taking a high stakes test. Recently, I watched a TED Talk given by health psychologist Kelly McGonigal. In this talk, Dr. McGonigal offered information on a new study related to stress. The study tracked 30,000 adults in the United States for eight years. The questions that the study participants were asked were, "How much stress have you experienced in the past year?" They were also asked, "Do you believe that stress is harmful for your health?" The researchers then followed up using public death records to track who died.

The bad news was that the people who reported experiencing a lot of stress in the previous year had a 43% greater risk of dying. But—and here is the important caveat and the surprising finding—that was only true for the people who *believed that stress was harmful to their health*. People who experienced a lot of stress but did not view it as harmful were no more likely to die prematurely. In fact, the study indicated that they had the lowest risk of dying, including the people who had reported relatively little stress.

So, is it possible that stress itself isn't as bad for us as what we *believe* about stress? Well, if you believe as I do that our thoughts do in fact drive our lives in very powerful ways, this isn't a surprising finding. Yet, it does say something about the way we should be talking and thinking about stress. What if you were to adopt the attitude

that stress—even the stress from events that we view as more negative like divorce or a forced job change—was a positive thing—or at least not a catastrophic event? What if we were to consider that feeling stressed can, in fact, enhance our performance, driving us toward positive changes in our lives? Might that change the way we think about and respond to stress?

Dr. McGonigal has taken from the study that we need to adopt a new way of thinking about stress. Instead of helping you *rid* yourself of stress, perhaps we just need to get a new idea about stress and its impact that can be positive instead of negative. So, we need a new belief!

This new perspective on stress does not negate the need to adopt the seven (7) habits or lifestyle practices that this book offers. If anything, it boosts the argument for incorporating these practices into our daily routine so that we do, in fact, deal with stress more proactively and productively than we might have before.

Chapter 8

7 Simple (Not Necessarily *EASY*) Steps to Better Managing Stress

When I started to reinvent myself as I left my teaching career behind, I decided that I wanted to use my experience, expertise, credentials, and life experience in addition to my training as a Licensed Science of Mind Practitioner and become a Life Coach. Given my penchant for wanting appropriate training and credentials (I have two master's degrees, a Ph.D., and I am a National Board Certified Library Media Specialist) I sought out a life coach program that was affordable and credible. I used a program that my career coach at the time suggested. It was the program she had used when she got her own training.

As I was completing that program for Life Strategies Coaching, I noticed that the company was offering a discount on some other certifications. One of the programs happened to be for Stress Management Coaching. Given what I have shared with you about my own experience with stress and burnout, it seemed logical for me to check out getting an additional certification so that I could speak with additional authority about the importance of managing—and to the point possible—reducing one's stress.

I was astonished to find all of the information that was available about stress. In fact, if you go to Amazon and do a keyword search on the words, “stress management,” you will find over 42,000 offerings. On Kindle alone, there are over 5,000 offerings (and here comes another one).

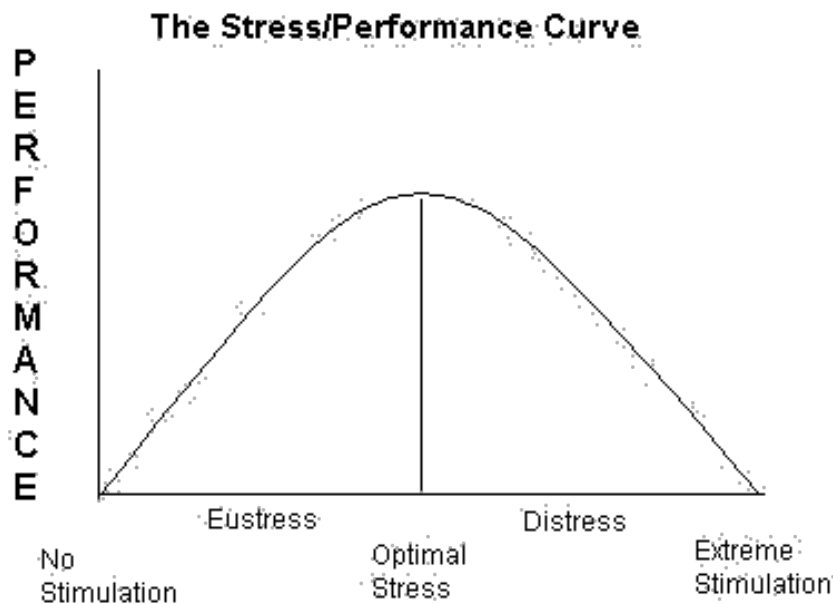
All of this points to the fact that a lot of people are experiencing stress in their lives and they are searching for relief. The problem lies in the fact that while people are aware of the fact that they are stressed out, the *advice* can be overwhelming. Every expert has his or her own particular “perfect cure.” You can hardly pick up a magazine without finding an article offering advice on how to banish stress from your life forever!

Here's the rub, however. There is no getting *rid* of stress in your life. As I tell

my clients and the people who attend my workshops, the only people who are not experiencing some sort of stress every day are the ones who are dead. They are buried somewhere or their ashes are resting on someone’s mantle.

It is a **fact** that as we live, we experience stress. Furthermore, if you really think about it, would you want it any other way? Would you give up the highs in order to avoid the lows and miss learning from this life experience? Would you rather never be intensely happy in order to avoid feeling intensely sad? How else do we measure our lives, after all? We strive and thrive because we feel the tension of wanting to be fabulously successful which means we sometimes experience spectacular defeat. We *like* the idea of “being all we can be,” don’t we? Stress, when managed properly, helps us to do our best work. Athletes who win Gold Medals or Super Bowls or Wimbledon Tournaments can talk about the stress they feel, but they wouldn’t trade in the awards they ultimately achieved, and neither would you.

The real trick is not to *avoid* stress...or even to eliminate it...the magic is in learning to **manage** it and **reduce** it to the extent that you can so that you still **perform at your peak level**. Look at this diagram below.



<http://www.med.nus.edu.sg/pcm/stress/q1-5.html>
<http://www.med.nus.edu.sg/pcm/stress/q1-5.html>

This diagram shows that when you are experiencing no stimulation at all, you are not experiencing any sort of stimulation. This would be really boring after a while, don't you think? Life would be flat and lackluster. As stimulation levels rise, your need to step up to meet the challenge—and the stress builds—and at the optimal level, you do very well. You are in the “zone.” This is where athletes want to be...at the top of the curve...where they perform at their best.

When you become *over* stimulated, however...when changes start to occur faster than you can keep up with them, or when you suffer a catastrophic event like the death of a loved one or the receipt of a dire prognosis, you go over into the area of **distress**. That feels uncomfortable, and it takes you out of your normal comfort zone into an area where you feel that you are unable to cope well.

That is where this book comes in to offer help. I offer seven (7) specific strategies, techniques or “tips” or lifestyle habits for how you can better manage your stress when you are in the middle of a stressful period in your life. I offer the caveat that the seven (7) strategies that I offer are simple although that does not mean they are necessarily *easy*. Furthermore, if you practice these strategies, techniques, or “tips” routinely as a part of your daily lifestyle, you will build your natural resilience. You will handle stress more easily and bounce back from crises and catastrophic events more readily.

I urge you to consider adopting these seven (7) strategies at your earliest opportunity. I also urge you to avoid the certain doom of trying to adopt them all at once. The surest way to fail is to attempt a large-scale overhaul of your entire routine all at the same time. Instead, commit to one or two changes at a time. If you are already incorporating *some* of these strategies in your lifestyle, don't stop. Just add one or two of these practices gradually over time until you have incorporated all of them into your

daily lifestyle.

Which change should you incorporate first? That is up to you. Choose the one that feels the most compelling or would be the easiest and quickest to incorporate into your life. For some of you, it should be increasing the amount of water you drink because you are mildly to severely dehydrated too much of the time. For others, it might be meditating or taking a vacation that you have been delaying for far too long. You will know which one you need to do first. The most important step is to do *something*. You owe it to yourself.

So, without any further ado, here are the seven (7) strategies that I recommend you undertake in order to help you manage and reduce your stress level and build the resilience that you need in order to meet the inevitable challenges that life will throw your way.

Chapter 9

Stay Hydrated



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Let's start with combatting the ill effects of stress by emphasizing the importance of staying properly hydrated. Too many of us walk around mildly dehydrated each day, and we don't even know it. By the time you feel thirsty, experts say that it is already too late because your body is lacking the water it needs so desperately in order to operate at its optimal level. Dehydration causes your body to operate at a level that is not only not ideal, it actually negatively impacts your brain function.

Your body needs water for survival. More than half of your body weight is made up of water. Every cell, tissue, and organ requires a certain amount of water in order to function as it was intended. Without water, your body cannot maintain its temperature, remove waste and toxins that accumulate daily, or lubricate your joints. In short, water is ***absolutely essential to good health.***

To be perfectly clear, I don't mean just any "fluid" when I speak of the importance of staying hydrated. Soda, for example, is no substitute for water. New studies are showing just how harmful soft drinks and other drinks high in sugar content—including fruit juices—can be to your health. It is a good idea to pay close

attention to the labels on all of the food and drinks that you take into your body. If an item is high in sugar or fructose, you might want to limit or even eliminate its consumption, especially if you have a tendency toward or have a family history or risk of diabetes.

Some experts say that you may substitute non-caloric green or black tea or even coffee in small amounts for the purpose of staying hydrated, but I would suggest that you drink those items in moderation and not as a substitute for drinking water. It cannot be overstated that your body needs *water*. Your cells and organs crave it! Likewise, your brain needs to be properly hydrated in order to function properly. That foggy feeling you sometimes experience in the middle of the afternoon may well be a signal that your brain is dehydrated. You may need a good dose of water rather than a caffeine boost.

You should drink water throughout the day because your body eliminates it through trips to the bathroom, perspiration, and even through your breathing. You also need to increase your water intake when the weather is hot, when you have been exercising, or if you are sick. When your body is overheated, you increase the danger of becoming dehydrated, and dehydration can lead to a whole host of health issues.

Most experts agree that a reasonable goal is for the average adult to drink 6 to 8 8-ounce glasses of water each day.

Some ways to stay hydrated through the day include the following:

- Keep a bottle of water with you during the day. (Carrying a reusable water bottle and filling it from the tap rather than buying bottled water is more economical and earth friendly.)
- If you don't like the taste of plain water, flavor it with a slice of fresh lemon or lime or add a low-calorie flavoring to it. You will get the benefits of the nutrients and the hydrating effects of the water.
- If you are going to be exercising, make sure to drink MORE water before, during, and after your workout.

- If you start to feel hungry, drink water first, before snacking. Often the sensation of hunger is triggered by thirst.
- Drink throughout the day at regular intervals. If you have trouble with waking up in the middle of the night, however, in need of a trip to the bathroom, you might want to stop your water intake a couple of hours before bedtime.

Chapter 10

Eat for Good Nutrition



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Just as our bodies need an adequate amount of water every day to stay healthy, our bodies also need food that is full of vitamins, nutrients, and minerals. Thrown into the mix is the fact that we also need to pay close attention to the proper types and portions of foods that we ingest for good health. The messages that we receive and the millions of dollars that we spend on diets and diet supplements every year point to the fact that we have lots of knowledge but little real understanding of how to use what we know for our overall health and wellbeing. Furthermore, the confusion is exacerbated by the fact that everyday, it seems, some new health expert is announcing the latest and greatest diet breakthrough.

Our body is made up of trillions of cells, and each and every one needs to be not only properly hydrated each day, but each cell also needs certain nutrients in order to function properly. Generally speaking, you can't go wrong if you eat a diet rich in *whole* foods (i.e., no highly processed foods which are, frankly, far too abundant in our current society) that are rich in vitamins and minerals that our bodies need. Concentrate on *appropriate* (and I cannot emphasize that word "appropriate" enough) amounts of

protein, healthy fats, carbohydrates (in moderation), and fiber. If you have issues with gluten sensitivity, and many people seem to, consider cutting gluten out of your diet completely for a while to see if you feel better. Consider whether you are taking in more calories in a day than you need to in order to maintain a healthy weight for your age bracket. Eating a diet that is healthy and that will provide your body with the nutritional balance you need is something of a complicated proposition, but the stakes couldn't be higher. Not heeding what your body needs nutrition-wise can lead to heart disease, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, and a whole host of other ailments. The costs to you are monetary as illness requires medical attention and psychological as you lose the sense of health and vitality that is so critical for a life filled with energy and enthusiasm.

Most of us know on at least a theoretical level that a diet rich in vitamins, minerals, and nutrients is good for us, but when we feel particularly stressed over some personal or work event, we tend to want to turn to food for comfort rather than good nutrition. Burying our anxiety in a dish of ice cream, after all, seems more satisfying in the moment than snacking on broccoli or cauliflower. We gravitate toward certain foods in times of stress because they do, in fact, make us feel better, at least temporarily. A snack high in sugar or carbohydrates will create a boost of dopamine levels and you will feel good at least for a short time. But the feeling doesn't last, which is why you may find yourself in the trap of eating to feel better temporarily instead of eating for good health.

I am not a nutritionist, so if you need a professional in that realm, I highly recommend that you either do the homework you need to do for yourself and your family or you seek the guidance of a certified and professionally trained nutritionist. Most importantly, tune in to your body if you haven't done so already and make sure you are feeding it the types of foods that it craves for optimal performance. If you tune in to the messages that your body is already sending you, you will know exactly how to fine-tune your diet.

Chapter 11

Get Sufficient Uninterrupted Sleep



Photo by PresenterMedia.com

Sleep is another critical component of optimal health. In the long run, it really won't matter very much how healthy you are in other ways if you are constantly sleep deprived! Unfortunately, many people are, in fact, *chronically* sleep deprived either because of poor planning around their bedtime routine or because of specific physical/physiological reasons.

Experts generally agree that the average adult needs between 6 ½-8 hours of sleep per night. Because this is an *average*, obviously, some adults can cope quite well with a little less while some adults need a bit more. Just as important as the *amount* of sleep one gets each night, however, is the *quality* of the sleep that one manages to garner. Quality vs. quantity is not something you may have thought much about with regard to how much and what type of sleep you are getting each night, but trust me, it merits your serious consideration.

First, consider whether or not you are getting *sufficient* sleep to get through your days feeling generally alert, awake, and able to tackle the variety of

responsibilities that you have both at work and at home. If you are feeling rested most days, perhaps you can skip this chapter. If, however, you are routinely in need of a caffeine “pick-me-up” in the middle of most afternoons in order to finish out the workday, or if you suffer from sleeplessness one or more nights per month, keep reading.

Don’t feel that you are alone if sleeplessness is a problem that you face periodically. According to a 2000 study, 43% of the American adults surveyed indicated that for at least a few days every month, they feel so sleepy during the day that it interferes with their ability to conduct their daily activities; and one out of five, or 20%, reported feeling this level of daytime sleepiness at least a few days or more per week. Over 51% of American workers reported that sleepiness had interfered with the amount of work they were able to complete in a day, and not surprisingly, over two-thirds of shift workers reported experiencing problems sleeping. Another nearly 25% reported having difficulty getting up for work two or more mornings per week, and a third of those surveyed admitted that they would take a nap at work if they were allowed.

Now all of these statistics are troubling enough, but feeling sleepy at work for most office workers isn’t a life threatening condition. What if you work with heavy machinery or in risky conditions, however, that require you to be alert and on your toes all day? There is also the troubling statistic indicating that over 30% of American drivers have admitted that they have fallen asleep at the wheel at least once. According to the National Sleep Foundation, 100,000 traffic accidents and 1,500 traffic-related fatalities are the result of a driver falling asleep behind the wheel. Clearly, not getting enough sleep can create health issues for individuals in more ways than one!

Other side effects of sleep deprivation include but are not limited to these conditions:

- Increased irritability;
- Feelings of anxiety and even depression;
- A decreased ability to concentrate and understand information (one reason your

children need adequate sleep in order to perform well in school);

- A suppressed immune system;
- And undesirable weight-gain since sleeplessness and/or sleep interruption can interfere with the production of hormones your body needs in order to regulate a healthy weight

Are you convinced yet that sleep is an issue that merits serious attention?

You may be wondering at this point what you can do to improve the odds of your getting a more restful and energizing sleep. Thankfully, there are many possible steps for you to consider depending on your specific circumstances. For example, check your habits around bedtime. Do you need to establish a set time for yourself when you make yourself go to bed in order to signal to your brain that it is time to get some rest? Or, are you too tired to drag yourself off to bed so you continue to sit in front of the TV until you have fallen asleep and then wake up in the middle of the night with the TV airing a late night (early morning) infomercial? If you fall into the latter category, you may need to change your evening routine. If you are staying up late to watch TV or surf the Internet, try turning off all of your electronic devices for a few nights and see if that helps you get to sleep sooner.

Some studies have suggested that reading your iPad, Kindle, or tablet at night may be a bad idea, especially right before bedtime. The backlight and its electronic source can trick your brain into believing that it is still daytime and it (your brain) will resist the idea of going to sleep even though your body may be tired. Trying reading a good old-fashioned book or an informational magazine article that will not stimulate you but will allow you to unwind and relax so that you can fall asleep more easily.

Other practical things you can try to improve your quantity AND quality of sleep include the following:

- Take a warm bath or relaxing shower prior to bedtime
- Avoid strenuous exercise right before going to bed
- Drink herbal tea or a warm glass of milk prior to going to bed

- If you have a television in the bedroom, turn it off before trying to go to sleep, and consider removing it to another room. Your bedroom should be a sanctuary where you go to relax and rest.
- If you have a desk with your computer or piles of work in your bedroom, use the same advice regarding moving it out. Your bedroom should be separate and apart from anything related to your work.
- Strive to go to bed at a certain time every night and get up at the same time every morning.
- Avoid eating a heavy meal late in the evening—move your dinner hour up if you need to.
- Avoid anything with caffeine after noon every day and avoid drinking alcohol late in the evening. Caffeine and alcohol both tend to stimulate the brain and can cause you to either have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep.
- If you have trouble with staying asleep after you have finally gone to sleep, especially pay attention to your caffeine intake and the amount of alcohol you are drinking the evenings.
- If you are a pre- or perimenopausal woman, consider talking to your doctor about your sleep issues. Hormone fluctuations can have a significant effect on your ability to sleep and stay asleep each night.

Sleep is an absolute necessity and too many of us are struggling through our days feeling groggy, grumpy, and out of sorts because we haven't been getting the sleep we need in order to function properly. Going without adequate sleep or having sleep interruption issues go untended can create hormone imbalances that lead to listlessness, weight gain, and even depression. Don't ignore this very important aspect of your daily life. There is a reason you get sleepy—it means you need to sleep! Make time for it just like you would make time for other life enhancing experiences. You will be glad you di

Chapter 12

Get Adequate & Appropriate Exercise



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Regardless of your age, the status of your health at the moment, or anything else that may be going on in your life, you need to pay attention to getting adequate and appropriate exercise incorporated into your daily routine. You should strive to get a minimum of 30 minutes of exercise into your daily regimen at least five days a week. The type and form of exercise can vary based on your age and physical conditioning.

Even those who don't incorporate exercise into their daily practice generally accept the merits of exercise. We all know that exercise is good for us. There is little debate about that. It is a proven fact that exercise builds muscle, increases lung capacity, improves cardiovascular function, and triggers the release of chemicals that counteract the effects of stress.

Even though it is generally acknowledged and accepted that exercise is an excellent way to reduce stress, it is often the first thing we tend to eliminate when we get "busy" or feel stressed. It is all too easy to think that we can "postpone" exercise until "later." Unless we schedule it into our days, however, it is easy for "later" to never arrive.

Not enough of us are making exercise a priority in our lives. According to the
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Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Americans are no more fit today than we were in 1990. Perhaps even more significantly, it is generally accepted that lack of exercise, improper diet, and smoking are all contributing factors toward both heart disease and cancer.

Moderate exercise engaged in on a regular basis may be the single most effective way to get stress under control as well as to improve your general health and sense of overall well-being. Exercise can go a long way toward releasing the hormones that are produced when you are experiencing a stressful situation at home or at work. The exercise need not be strenuous in order to be beneficial, either. A brisk walk for 30 minutes will accomplish the task.

Other benefits of regular exercise include the following:

- Muscle strength
- Increased flexibility
- Increased heart and lung efficiency
- Decreased risk of developing heart disease
- Decreased risk of developing lung disease
- Improved circulation
- Reduced cholesterol levels
- Strengthened immune system
- Loss of excess body fat
- Decreased risk of diabetes
- Improved quality of sleep
- Increased mental acuity
- Improved self-image
- Decreased effects of stress
- Improved ability to manage stress

Once you have accepted that exercise is important, if you haven't been exercising regularly, the next step is to find an exercise that will appeal to you and that

you will continue to enjoy after the first day or so. Some suggestions for alternatives that you might enjoy include:

- Walking
- Swimming
- Step Aerobics
- Yoga
- Racquetball
- Pilates
- Dance
- Your choice of team sports (weekend football games, tennis, racquetball, playground basketball games, beach volleyball, etc.)
- And many more

In addition to getting some sort of aerobic exercise on a regular basis, lifting weights is also very beneficial for adults, especially as you age. Weight lifting builds bone mass and can reverse osteoporosis. It increases muscle tone and helps your body to burn more calories because the more muscle you have, the more calories you burn during the aerobic portion of your workout.

I could easily keep rhapsodizing about the benefits of daily exercise, but I think you get the point. Exercise is not only an important stress reducer; it is absolutely necessary for long-term health and an increased sense of well-being.

Chapter 13

Don't Forget to *BREATHE!*



Photo by PresenterMedia.com

It may seem odd—unnecessary even—to mention the importance of breathing in a book on stress management. For most of us, breathing is one of those things we never think about, and we rarely consider in the grand scheme of overall health and wellbeing. Having said that, it is important to recognize that even though most people are unconscious of their breathing and they take it for granted, some health experts consider breathing to be the most important of all the bodily functions. We can go far longer without water and food and still live, for example, than we could ever go without breathing. A lack of oxygen to the brain for just a few minutes can cause severe brain damage and even death.

Long story short, breathing brings oxygen to every cell in the body. Cells require oxygen to transform nutrients into energy. Oxygen is essential in the digestive process, and the body uses oxygen to oxidize or burn off metabolic waste products and other toxins in the body leading to their elimination from the body through the lungs.

An important and relatively simple de-stressing technique to remember is to take some deep, slow breaths, whenever you feel yourself feeling tense or stressed. In fact, when you remember to do it, breathing is actually one of the easiest—and certainly the

least expensive—relaxation techniques there is.

Most of us fail to breathe, properly, however, even though we are breathing all the time. The vast majority of us are in the habit of shallow breathing. This means that the breaths we take don't get down into the lower part of our lungs the way deep breathing does. Try taking several slow, deep breaths right now just for practice. Breathe in slowly through your nose. Hold. Gently let the breath out through your mouth. Do this several times in a row. Feel your stomach and abdomen rising and falling.

You may have to take some time to practice this in order for it to become part of your regular routine. Post a note near your computer or on your desk where you will see it. Remind yourself to “just breathe.” Re-teach yourself to breath properly and feel the difference almost immediately. The tension will flow out of your shoulders. You will feel more relaxed and alert.

When you are feeling especially tense, try the following exercise:

- 1) Slowly breathe in through your nose. Count slowly to five, filling your torso from the bottom up, with air. Keeping your chest and shoulders still, feel your body expanding from the abdomen first and then the lower back.
- 2) Breathe out through your mouth slowly keeping your lips together except for an opening just large enough to let the air out in a measured way. Make a low whispering sound to a slow count from one to ten. Again, keep your shoulders and chest still. Feel your body deflating from the abdomen first and then the lower back.
- 3) Repeat several times until you feel more grounded, less stressed, and calmer.

A Caution about Smoking as it Relates to Breathing and Stress

While I am talking about the importance of breathing for good health, I feel that I should offer a caution about smoking, especially as it relates to smoking as stress relief. Even though smoking in general has gone down nationwide between 1964 and

2014 (BeSmokeFree.gov) it is a fact that still, one in five American adults and teens still smoke. For many teens, smoking is a temptation because it is “cool” or it is a form of open rebellion.

Regardless of the reason, statistics point to the fact that each day 3200 people under the age of 18 try their first cigarette. Out of that 3200 people, approximately 2100 become daily smokers. In spite of everything we now know about the harmful effects of smoking, people often disregard the statistics, and for those who have already become addicted, quitting is something they know they *should* do, but it feels daunting because they are, well....*addicted*.

I can speak to this issue because I am a former smoker. I started smoking in college because my friends smoked. By the time I started, the warning labels were already on all of the cigarette packages, but when you are 20, you think you are invincible. What did I care then about “long term health risks?”

First, I convinced myself that I wouldn’t get hooked. Then I convinced myself that even though I had developed a smoking habit, I could “quit anytime I wanted,” except that when I did finally decide to quit, it wasn’t that simple. I finally quit in 1987. I have been a non-smoker almost twice as long as I was ever a smoker. In spite of that fact, when I was in my mid-50’s I was diagnosed with viral-induced asthma which, it turns out, was aggravated by the fact that I had been a smoker in my youth--and sometimes a heavy smoker at that--for fifteen years.

I bring this up because there will come the day when the habits of *your* youth will come to roost. If you have engaged in healthy habits, that’s a good thing. If you haven’t, it can come back to bite you in the most unexpected and sometimes unpleasant ways. I cannot be clearer. If you smoke, quit. If you haven’t ever started, good for you! Don’t start. If you have someone in your life who smokes, let them read this chapter. Smoking isn’t good for you. It isn’t good for the people around you. It is a habit best never started, but once started, as hard as it is to quit, you should quit. Seek out help with quitting if you need to. Your lungs crave fresh air filled with oxygen, not air filled with smoke laden

carcinogens.

Chapter 14

Develop a Daily Practice of Mindful Meditation or Prayer--or Both



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We have talked about the importance of getting enough water, eating well, getting adequate sleep, exercising and breathing. Now, I would like to speak to the importance of incorporating into your day the practice of prayer or mindful meditation--or both.

Now, what this section is NOT about is religion. I am not proposing that you need to adopt a religious practice if you don't already have one or that you need to do anything other than bear in mind that if you are feeling stressed, you might benefit from some sort of "time out" each day. This could include a 10-minute meditation practice, a visualization session, a period of listening to calming music and turning off the electronic devices—and your thoughts—for just a few minutes every day. You might take a few moments to pray if you feel more comfortable with that...pray for world peace...pray for peace of mind...but use the time it takes to formulate a prayer to slow your mind down. Studies suggest that people who meditate or who take time to bring their attention into the moment as in prayer tend to have lower blood pressure, slower breathing, and a slower heart rate. Also, their brain waves show that while still alert, they are able to relax more deeply.

Oprah Winfrey and Deepak Chopra along with Russell Simmons, Arianna Huffington and other celebrities have started to promote the benefits of meditation in recent years. If you search “meditation” online, you will find that there are literally dozens of ways to meditate. Find one that suits your style. The whole idea behind the benefit of meditation or prayer is to focus on the present moment rather than to have your mind racing with thoughts of what happened yesterday or last week or 20 years ago. Our lives can be consumed by regret over things that happened so long ago that chances are you are the only one who recalls it. Chances are even better that you only remember *parts* of what really happened. If you have siblings, talk with them about some incident you all experienced when you were kids. You may be amazed to learn that their recollections vary wildly from your own. If someone has hurt you in the past and you are having trouble getting past it or letting it go, seek help from a counselor or a minister. You don’t need to continue to suffer over something that is now in your past.

On the flip side, if you aren’t consumed with regret over or hurt from the past, it is possible that you may be consumed with fear or anxiety about the future...something over which you generally have little control. I am not suggesting that you shouldn’t prepare for the future by getting a good education or saving for a rainy day, but if you are so worried about the future that you forget to enjoy the present moment, what’s the point? Life is made up of moments that cannot be retrieved except through memories; but if we are so consumed with the past or the future that we forget to focus on the present...well, you get the idea.

Many people—myself included—have trouble developing the discipline necessary to create a meditation practice that is meaningful. If you have seen the movie, *Eat, Pray, Love*, or if you read the book, you might remember the scene in which the main character attempts to quiet her mind, while the whole time, her mind is racing with commentary about the deficiency of her efforts. That is how we are. We are running a commentary all of the time. It is that commentary that we need to switch to the “off mode,” if only for a few moments each day; but it takes practice and discipline. Don’t

be too hard on yourself if you have trouble. Each of us has to start somewhere. Give yourself a break. You probably didn't grow up learning how to meditate and you need not set up expectations that you are unlikely to satisfy right away. Give yourself time to practice...take five minutes to set aside the commentary, the regrets, the fear...just five minutes to sit and be still and to quiet your mind. After you have mastered the ability to do five minutes, increase it by a minute a day. Be gentle with yourself. Some days will be easier than others. Don't make creating a meditation practice something that adds to your stress! That would definitely be self-defeating.

If nothing else works for you, try remembering the first lines from the "Serenity Prayer." It is a prayer that has been adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs, but it works for me in moments of stress. It starts with the words, "*God grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.*" Just remembering that there IS a difference between those things that I can change and those things that are outside my realm of control give me a peace that I find very comforting.

A Note about the Importance of Gratitude as Part of Your Practice

A growing body of research points to the importance of feeling grateful for your daily blessings, whatever they may be. “If the only prayer you say in your life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice,” according to Meister Eckhart, a German theologian, philosopher and mystic who lived somewhere between 1260 and 1328.

Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D., a world leading scientific expert on gratitude, is a Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Davis, and the founding editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. He contends, and I agree with him, that the practice of gratitude has a profound effect on practically every important aspect of our lives: our physical health, our psychological well-being, and our relationships with others.

Dr. Emmons and others promote the idea of keeping gratitude journals as a way of reminding ourselves of all of the many things for which we have to be grateful in our lives. One study in which Dr. Emmons participated, over one thousand people from ages eight to 80, kept a gratitude journal. In as little as three weeks, the benefits that were reported were as follows:

Physical:

- ✓ Stronger immune systems
- ✓ Less bothered by aches and pains
- ✓ Lower blood pressure
- ✓ Exercise more and take better care of their health
- ✓ Sleep longer and feel more refreshed upon waking

Psychological

- ✓ Higher levels of positive emotions
- ✓ More alert, alive, and awake
- ✓ More joy and pleasure
- ✓ More optimism and happiness

Social

- ✓ More helpful, generous, and compassionate
- ✓ More forgiving
- ✓ More outgoing
- ✓ Feel less lonely and isolated

Clearly, practicing gratitude offers benefits. If you search just a little, you can find thousands of book offerings on the topic of gratitude and the importance of being thankful. The research is clear and continues to come out each day. My best advice to you is practice gratitude every day. You will start to see benefits almost immediately.

If you are in a place right this moment when things seem so bad that you are thinking, “Yeah, right. I should be *thankful* that I lost my job”...or “I should be *thankful* I have been diagnosed with cancer. Fat chance.”

Whatever may be going on in your life, feeling grateful for what you *do* have as opposed to simply dwelling on what you *don't* have can help. If you don't believe me, try this one experiment for three days. For just three days, first thing in the morning, write down on a blank piece of paper the things for which you are grateful. Start with being able to get up. Some people can't do that much. So you have an opportunity to start fresh in a new day. Not feeling so grateful about that? Then how about your first cup of coffee? How about the rain pattering on your windowsill? How about the sunrise? How about whatever you have for breakfast? How about your car—beat up and dilapidated as it may be—that is going to take you to that job interview—or the

doctor—today? How about the air that you breathe or the water running from the faucet or the phone call from a friend who is checking on you to see how things are going? Get the idea?

No matter how bad things may be for you right now, chances are pretty good that other people have it just as bad or worse, so try putting things in perspective. As long as you have life, there is hope. No job? You have an opportunity to get an even *better* job. Just got a bad diagnosis? No diagnosis is ever final. There are miracle cures in the news all the time. You have to be willing to believe in miracles...and you have to be willing to do what your doctor or your healer or your intuition tells you to do in order to get yourself healed.

As I said earlier, the only people who don't experience stress in their lives are the ones who are already dead. As long as you are living, you have hope and as long as you have hope, you can make things better by just remembering the things for which you have to be grateful. Try the three-day experiment and see if you don't start to feel better. I am betting you will.

Chapter 15

Make it a Point to Have FUN!



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While staying well hydrated, eating well, getting enough sleep and exercise are all important practices that go a long way toward creating optimal health and reducing the stress you may feel right now, another factor not to forget is to HAVE FUN! That's right...relax a little! We all tend to take ourselves way too seriously, and we need to lighten up.

Now, I am not suggesting that there aren't plenty of things in life that need to be taken seriously. Your health is certainly one of the things I recommend paying serious attention to if you want to minimize your stress. I also recommend trying to maintain healthy relationships for a less stressful life. Nothing is more stressful than having a fight with your spouse or significant other, being on the outs with a sibling or child, or having a blow up with a colleague at work. All of these things can ruin what might be a perfectly fine day in every other way.

We can go a long way toward minimizing these stressors, however, by remembering that not everything is a matter of life and death. Even when we are faced with life and death situations such as a bad diagnosis or a gloomy prognosis, we can do a lot for ourselves by trying to see things in a brighter light. It is all about keeping

things in perspective.

I recommend that you take some time everyday to do something that just makes you happy. It doesn't have to be a lot. It doesn't have to be anything that would make anyone else happy...just you. For me, some days it is just stopping at the local Starbucks for my favorite coffee drink. It costs a few dollars, but compared to how it lights up my day, it's a bargain.

For some of us, hanging out with our grandchildren is the ticket. Listening to the laughter of a child, playing with our pets, talking to a friend on the phone...these are all things that you can do that won't cost anything but can bring a smile to your face and lift your spirits if you just given them a chance.

Don't forget to take a vacation every once in a while! Remember that old childhood saying about "all work and no play?" Vacations were designed for a reason. We need a break in our routine every so often. Getting away can help you gain new perspective on old, nagging issues. Perhaps a vacation will help you to appreciate your boss more—or vice versa. Don't sacrifice your mental, physical or spiritual health for the sake of your job. As important as it is, YOU are more important, and taking care of yourself should be your first priority.

Life is to be enjoyed. It is NOT meant to be a chore. It is not to be taken so seriously that you fail to enjoy yourself. Conventional wisdom points to the fact that when people are approaching the end of their days, the stuff that took up so much of their time, energy, and worry really mean very little to them. As it turns out what is important is the quality of our relationships with our loved ones, the time spent with those we care about and who care about us.

LIVE YOUR LIFE! You only get one shot at it. The people we most admire are the ones who lived full out, who lived courageously and joyously. You can do that. It is a choice! Have fun. You won't regret it

Chapter 16

What About Work-Life Balance?

I am sure you have heard a lot about the importance of creating work-life balance, but if you are like most people, hearing about it and actually experiencing it may be two completely different things! Let's face it. Between work, regardless of the type of work, and family responsibilities, depending upon where you happen to be in life in that regard, it is difficult to find anything that even remotely resembles "balance."

Yet, lifestyle experts will tell you that it is absolutely essential to your overall happiness and sense of well-being to experience some sort of down time and some sort of family life in addition to needing to feel that you are doing well and being successful at work. So, let's talk about what work-life balance really means.

Work-Life Balance is Different for Everyone

Work-life balance means different things to different people, and that is how it should be. No one should expect to live their lives according to the "rules" that pertain to other people, especially if you are in a different stage in your life from others.

What do I mean by a different stage in life? Well, if you are a 23-year-old single man who just is just starting out in your first job or career, your life is going to look very different from the way it might look in 10 years when you may be married, just bought your first house, and your wife is expecting your second child. Right?

The same goes for how your life and your "work-life balance" will look if you are a 30-year-old mother of three who works outside of the home and juggles child rearing, household responsibilities, and the need to balance not only your mothering responsibilities, but your relationship with your husband, your boss, and your colleagues as well. All of those factors would need to be considered when considering work-life balance.

What if you are a 55-year-old woman whose kids have moved on and are doing well, but your parents are now in need of your help? If you become a caregiver for

aging and ailing parents, that will bring about another type of stress. How do you balance your own needs against the needs of your parents?

Work-life balance is not a static condition; it is ever changing. Remember the seesaw on the playground on which you used to play when you were a kid? You couldn't play on it without someone else to provide the ballast you needed in order to go up and down. If one person was a lot heavier than you, you also experienced a rougher ride than if you and your playmate were evenly matched with regard to weight and strength. Imagine for a moment, how you would feel if someone much heavier than you got on the other side of the seesaw and lifted you high in the air and just sat there, leaving you dangling in the air? Now imagine the other extreme. Perhaps you are much heavier than your counterpart, and *you* stay on the ground while he hangs out high above the ground. Neither scenario sounds like much fun, right?

Your life, when it gets out of balance like that seesaw scenario, is the same. If one aspect of your life outweighs or overwhelms the other, not only do you feel the sense of being out of balance, but you also stop having any fun.

I believe that you were born to enjoy life. Living your life should not be a chore. You are the only person who can decide what work-life balance looks like for you, but you have to *decide* instead of being the victim of circumstances over which you are exerting no control. If your life is feeling out of balance, it is time to do something about it.

So What to Do?

The first step is to decide once and for all, and for yourself—not what someone else says or thinks—what feels right for you at whatever stage of life you may happen to be. Remember that you do not need to make this business of living *your* life a competition with anyone else. In spite of the various media messages to the contrary, you don't have to work to keep up with the mythical “Jones” and you aren't in an Olympics of how to create happiness in your own life. The sooner you get that message

through your head, the happier you will be.

Work-life balance is whatever feels right for you. If you are working more at your job because you have a particular deadline that must be met, that's fine. Make up for it by taking some time off when the project has been completed and handed off. Make sure you take the time between projects to rest and reconnect with loved ones. Do something fun and relaxing so that you can recharge your batteries before beginning another time-consuming work project.

It is also important to remember that work alone will not bring you the long lasting sense of fulfillment that we all yearn for as we get older. I would be hard pressed to share a story of someone who, at the end of their life, would have regrets that they had not worked enough overtime or achieved or accomplished more in the realm of their job. Instead, I believe you will find people who are in their twilight years talking about their children, their grandchildren, and the relationships that meant the most to them in their lives. The regrets that we generally hear of are regrets about not having spent enough time with loved ones...not nurturing the relationships that make up the true mosaic of our lives. And you may hear disappointment about lost opportunities, but not so much about lost opportunities to put in more hours or get in more projects.

Work-life balance is a fairly new concept. I also find that it is not just a concept that impacts working wives and mothers. My younger male clients often share with me that when looking to make a career move, balancing the demands of a meaningful home life is important to them. It is important for men to feel connected to their families. Families provide an anchor for men as well as motivation. Work-life balance may be a fairly new concept, but it is one that deserves attention. You may need to do a little juggling, but it will be worth the effort in the long run.

If you can, leave your work at work so you can be fully present with your family when you are at home. If you must take work home with you, and sometimes I know you do, try to compartmentalize the time you spend on your work so that you don't come across as absent-minded or distracted when your kids are trying to tell you about

their day. I still remember the times when my dad was able to come home from work and eat lunch with the family. Those days are pretty much gone these days, but we had a strong family connection because family was a supreme value for my father. He preferred to spend time with us when he could. He did that his entire life, and I remember the times we spent together as a family with fond memories.

Sometimes You Just Need to Say “No”



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When striving to achieve work-life balance, it is extremely important that you learn to set priorities, and you must learn to say “no” on occasion. Stop over committing and stop making yourself miserable. YOU can determine what is important in your life. In fact, you are the *only* person who can determine what is important in your life.

Again, just as in the examples offered earlier, you may change your priorities over time depending on where you are in your life. If you are young, single, and don’t have much of a personal life yet, you can commit to working over time, going on trips that no one else wants to take, volunteer to take on extra projects in order to work up the corporate ladder, and earn the promotions that you seek. On the other hand, if you are married or in a committed relationship, or if you have children or aging parents who need your attention, you will need to learn to say “no” when asked to undertake something that would take time and energy away from your personal commitments.

Set Healthy Boundaries

Setting boundaries for yourself both at work and at home is important. Personal boundaries need to be set in order to avoid getting sucked into the drama of individuals who may want to take up too much of your time and energy. You know the type of

“friend” to whom I am referring. Nothing is ever going well with this pal. Life just sucks. There is always drama and the gossip never ends. These people drain you of your energy. Learn to steer clear of them. They may occasionally offer entertainment in small doses, but they become too much of a drain over time.

The same goes for work boundaries. Steer clear of the office gossip and the talk around the water cooler or in the lounge. Cultivate friends both personally and professionally who are positive in their outlook. And even with your best friends, cultivate a sense of boundaries so that they don’t feel that they can take advantage of your generally good nature.

Schedule Down Time

In addition to saying “no” on occasion and setting better boundaries for yourself, it may also be useful for you to actively schedule down time. Plan fun activities for the weekend. Schedule a long weekend away at the beach or in the mountains—in a fun setting that is totally different from your regular home environment. “Getting away” can have many healthy effects, and taking time to relax can help you rejuvenate yourself so that when you get back to work, you are energized and ready to tackle the next challenge.

Take regular vacations. Your work will still be there when you get back. In order to avoid feeling overwhelmed when you have left the office for a week or two, leave someone you trust in charge of your calendar, your non-critical email, and any other work that can just as easily be done by someone else. I know we all like to think we are indispensable, but if you drop dead of overwork and too much stress, who do you think will do the work? The uncomfortable truth is that *no one* is indispensable.

There are a number of benefits of taking regular vacations. One is that you will be able to shed some of the stress that builds up when you are working long hours, long days, and long weeks. You will also be more productive upon your return. You will come back both physically and psychologically renewed. There is a definite benefit to just getting away for a while.

Your family will benefit, too, from your taking time from work and spending time with them. I already shared that I have fond memories of my dad coming home from work for lunch every day. I also have fond memories of our annual vacations. We didn't have a lot of money, so we never went anywhere exotic. My dad had a fondness for the Smokey Mountains, and it seemed that no summer was complete for him without a trip to the mountains. He would drive us to vacation destinations in North Carolina and Tennessee. I don't think we ever skipped a summer. Even though our vacations were never extravagant, we enjoyed our time together and we had a lot of fun.

Researchers also contend that you need a vacation in order to reset your mind. Your productivity will actually go up after you have taken a break of a week or two. So do yourself and your loved ones a favor. Schedule time off and take a vacation. You deserve it.

Consider the Critical Difference Between Achievement and Fulfillment



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As you strive to create the delicate work-life balance that is so elusive for most of us, consider that there is a very critical difference between *achievement* and *fulfillment*. Achievement entails gathering awards, accolades, trophies, and recognition for things you have done in your life. You earn recognition for achievement through many different vehicles, and it is nice to be recognized for a job well done. I don't know of anyone who wouldn't want to be recognized for some major achievement that is related to hard work or major effort. It is important to remember, however, that

achievement is very different from *fulfillment*. Feelings of fulfillment are far more elusive and more difficult, in many cases, to attain.

There are numerous examples of people who admit to feeling empty even when it seems, that they “have it all.” They turn to drugs and alcohol in order to dull this painful sense of emptiness. They don’t know if people like them because of their success or because they really like *them*. A few examples would be Marilyn Monroe, Michael Jackson, Philip Seymore Hoffman, Robin Williams...these are just a few of the individuals who, when peering at their lives from the outside looking in, would seem to have had everything anyone could possibly want. Yet they were desperately unhappy for a variety of reasons and they cut their lives short as the result.

Consider, then, what *you* prefer...to have a feeling of achievement or to experience the sensation of feeling fulfilled in a meaningful way? When Arianna Huffington wrote her book, *Thrive*, she said she wanted to redefine success. She asserts, and I agree with her, that success that is not measured in terms of money alone. Constant activity for the sake of activity alone, and stressing out over everything, shortens your life and makes it less joyful and fulfilling. As a society, we may need to rethink what we consider to be “success.” But forgetting about the social issue, you have to decide for yourself what feels right.

Chapter 17

Conclusion

Stress is a fact of life, and it is important to remember that not all stress is necessarily bad. If we didn't experience periodic changes in our lives, we would get bored pretty quickly. As stated in an earlier section of this book, life is to be enjoyed! Sometimes we feel up, and sometimes we feel down...and that's okay. When stress is a problem, however, causing us to fail to take care of ourselves properly, then it is time to take action.

This book has offered seven (7) rather simple and relatively inexpensive things that you can choose to incorporate into your daily routine right now so that you can be more resilient and able to meet the challenges that will inevitably present themselves in your life. No one is exempt from suffering the loss of a loved one on occasion. It is one of the inalienable truths that we don't like to talk about or think about, but people die. At some point in your life, if you live long enough, you will face the death of someone you love.

Likewise, few of us escape the ups and downs of modern life. Many of us experience the heartbreak of a lost relationship at some point; we miss out on the promotion we had longed for and thought we deserved; we suffer financial setbacks caused by our own lack of planning or a Wall Street meltdown. These things happen and they are mostly outside the realm of our immediate control. The only thing over which we have any control at all is our own attitude about them and how we choose to handle them.

Handling these setbacks and challenges will be easier when you have

incorporated these seven (7) daily habits into your daily routine. Again, those practices

include:

- 1. Stay hydrated.**
- 2. Eat for good nutrition.**
- 3. Get sufficient *uninterrupted* sleep.**
- 4. Get adequate and appropriate exercise.**
- 5. Don't forget to *breathe!***
- 6. Develop a daily practice of mindful meditation or prayer**
- 7. Don't forget to have FUN!**

As stated earlier, incorporating these seven (7) practices into your daily life will not eliminate the stresses that go with living. They won't prevent your boss from giving you grief at work. It won't make everything suddenly rosy with your spouse if things have been rocky lately. And they won't put money in the bank if you are worried about your finances. What they *will* do is make finding ways to work around these challenges or deal with them head on easier because they will help you to clear your mind so that you can think more clearly and problem-solve more effectively.

You will feel better about yourself, and you will have a better attitude about life in general if you adopt these practices. You will know that while you don't have control over outside events that occur in your life you do have control over yourself. YOU choose to incorporate healthy habits into your life. You choose to eat for good nutrition instead of for comfort. You feel more rested and stronger because you are choosing to get the sleep and exercise you need for a healthy body and mind. And you are taking care of yourself spiritually as well as by concentrating on taking care of yourself by making time for the things that lift your spirits...playing with your pet, catching up with a friend, or buying yourself a bouquet of flowers just because you can. You also feel more connected with yourself and your Creator when you take time to meditate or pray each day, keeping yourself grounded and knowing that no matter what is happening around you, YOU are okay.

I hope you have found this book to be helpful. Stress is a given in our modern

day society, but suffering because you can't get a handle on what is going on in your life isn't. You can take control of many things, after all, and by incorporating these seven (7) habits into your lifestyle, you can start exerting more control over your stress.



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For a [FREE “Cheat Sheet”](#) on the 7 strategies that you need to incorporate in your life to better manage your stress, go to this link: <https://kittyboitnott.leadpages.net/cheat-sheet-on-stress-management>. You just need to provide an email address in order to receive your FREE download.