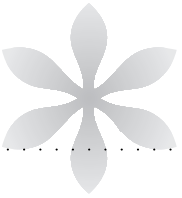

part one

stop stressing about stress

1

understanding stress and how it can work for you

Most of my stress is work related. This job has proved not to be full of "balance," as it was described to me before I accepted it, and instead is more out of balance and full of stress than any other job I've ever had in this industry. The volume of work is unmanageable with the resources allocated, so it's a hole we will never get out of, a shore we will never reach (which is inherently stressful if you are a person who cares about accomplishment and doing a good job). As it has been at every other company where I have worked, mine is a thankless job, but in many ways it feels worse here. We never have a sense that we can celebrate our accomplishments because there is never a lull in the work after you finish a difficult project. My hours "suck" . . . my work is primarily West Coast based, and as a result I come in a bit later and am often in the office three or more hours later than my coworkers, which leaves me little time to have much of a social life during the week. In addition, Fridays are usually my worst day of the week, with some crisis that needs immediate attention, so I can never make plans on a Friday night, leaving me with

only the weekends (sort of . . . in the first year and half here, I worked the weekends, too). I am single. I feel isolated and alone. I uprooted myself and moved across the country for this job, leaving my friends and family behind. I knew only a few people (from school) living in the area, but they are all married with kids and living in the suburbs, so I never see them. And, unlike my previous work environments, the company feels more assembly line in its structure and location . . . everyone does the work and goes home, with little interaction (I think being located in the suburbs exacerbates this). My floor is so noisy that we all work with our doors closed . . . so we sit alone in our dark, windowless offices, connecting only via phone or e-mail—sometimes the only times you see anyone in the flesh is in the bathroom.

—Joann, 32, business analyst

Stress for me is feeling like there is not enough time to take care of all my responsibilities and my personal well-being. Feeling rushed all the time. Feeling like there is always something left undone or done in haste. And feeling like I am always behind. In Asia, family and parents have a lot of influence on one's life. I feel a lot of stress is felt due to these family and social pressures. I think different races define and deal with stress differently. Here in the U.S.A., people are more aware of stress, whereas in India people barely use the term stress. *It is just accepted as a part of daily life, and very few people give it a second thought.*

—Rohiti, 28, certified public accountant

My second husband and I have been married for sixteen years, and we have one elderly Labrador retriever (she is thirteen and a half years old). We currently live in Atlanta. We moved here four years ago from NYC. My husband is originally from Wisconsin. I have other sisters in Texas and Tennessee. We moved to Atlanta since my largest client was located here and I was traveling all the time. My husband has moved for me twice. This last move has resulted in an extended period of unemployment for my husband, and although he is currently working, he is significantly underemployed. At a point where finances shouldn't be a problem in our lives, we are not where we want to be. This causes me a great deal of stress.

—Debbie, 60, lawyer

I'm an upper-level executive for a growing company in a rapidly changing market. I've worked hard to get where I am, and I continue to put in long hours and to make myself available at all times of the day, whenever the market demands snap decisions and quick action. I work for the kind of boss who thinks nothing of sending e-mails to his staff at eleven o'clock at night, and I regularly get to work in the morning to discover that many of my colleagues have already responded because they logged on from home while I was busy trying to put my children to bed. My workload makes me feel like I'm giving my family short shrift, but when I focus on being a good wife and mother, I feel like I'm ignoring my job. By the time I figured out that my husband was finding the love and attention he needed elsewhere, it was too late.

—Melissa, 39, logistics manager

I run a national nonprofit organization that I've successfully piloted through a period of enormous growth. I am the sole breadwinner in my household, supporting my stay-at-home partner and our adopted son. I also bear most of the responsibility for caring for my aging father, who not only has begun to show early signs of Alzheimer's disease but has also recently been diagnosed with colon cancer. I constantly feel the weight of the many people who depend on me, but I am somehow always there when I am needed. There is only one person for whom I never seem to find time: myself.

—Gina, 45, executive director of a nonprofit organization

I don't have a paying job. I am the mother of three school-age children, one of whom suffers from a seizure disorder. My husband, a home contractor, has been on disability since being injured on a job site. The time I spend arguing and negotiating with insurance companies, lawyers, doctors, and the insane bureaucracies of Workers' Compensation and Social Security is almost like a full-time job. There are thousands of details for me to keep straight, and the slightest mistake can mean the loss of some income. The precarious health of my one child requires constant monitoring, and a day doesn't go by when I don't worry about which of my other children will start acting out in a desperate plea for emotional attention.

—Marie, 29, stay-at-home mother

Each of these women has a unique story to tell, but the one word that comes up in all of their stories is *stress*. Discussing stress has become so common in our culture. Many books have been written about it, and "experts" appear every day on television selling their stress-reduction secrets. We say we're stressed as often and as easily as we say we're tired or we're hungry. With so much overuse, the word itself has lost its meaning and power. It's time for us to take a fresh look at this phenomenon we call stress and to get a clear picture of what stress really is. And maybe if we can truly understand stress—its symptoms, its triggers, its effects, and, yes, even its benefits—we can start to put it in perspective. Ultimately, I intend to show you how to accept stress as an unavoidable part of life, to make it work in your favor, and thus help you free yourself from the worries and complaints and poor health that stress causes.

What Is Stress?

How many times have you complained about stress in your life? What do you mean by the word? Is it the people in your life who drive you crazy—your tyrannical boss, your misbehaving children, your aging parents, your demanding spouse, your gossipy coworkers, or your noisy neighbors? Is it the situations and chaos that you can't seem to get a hold of—maxed-out credit cards, unrelenting housework, long commutes to and from work, or conflicting demands on your time? Or have you gotten to the point where you expect these to be constant factors in your life, and the only things that you label stressful are unexpected disasters: an exploding water heater, the sudden collapse of your employer, a debilitating illness, or some other bolt from the blue? Perhaps the external factors themselves are not stressful, but instead stress is a response that erupts inside you as you interact with your chaotic world: the insomnia, the high blood pressure, the headaches, the irritability, the weight gain—in short, any or all of the things that will eventually land you in my emergency room. Is stress the trigger or the response? The cause or the effect?

In my view, it is neither, and it is both. Stress is the pressure that life exerts on us, and it is also the way this pressure makes us feel. Stress

refers to situations and experiences that cause you to feel anxious, frustrated, and angry because you're pushed beyond your ability to successfully cope. You feel out of balance. It is essentially a state of arousal, involving both the body and the mind. Stress is a process that incorporates both cause and effect, and it has emotional, psychological, behavioral, biological, and physical aspects. No two people are alike. Our unique physical and personality traits and the individual circumstances of our lives ensure that our stressors and the ways that we experience them will be ours and ours alone. No off-the-shelf stress-reduction scheme can possibly work for every woman. The packaged wisdom of pop-psych gurus can be very seductive, and the appeal of exotic relaxation techniques is undeniable, but too often these approaches provide only short-term relief. They ease our symptoms without ever resolving the fundamental internal conflicts at the root of the problem.

My approach for discovering optimal stress rests on developing an understanding of what stress is and what it is not and, most important, of the stress-health connection. Because no two people experience stress in exactly the same way, it won't surprise you that doctors and scientists can't agree on a single clear definition of stress. Yet even though there is no scientific consensus on the subject, you and I can still have a shared understanding about what I mean when I use the term *stress*.

We all know stress when we experience it. Whether it's due to the challenges of a fast-paced, competitive business environment, uncertainty and change, team dynamics, client expectations, family and interpersonal relationships, caretaking responsibilities, or expectations that we have of ourselves, stress is inevitable—but one of my core beliefs is that despite being inevitable, stress doesn't "just happen."

A little historical background may be useful here. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Dr. Walter B. Cannon was a medical student at Harvard when he first posed questions about the stress phenomenon that eventually led to his lifelong research pursuits in physiology. In 1900, he received his medical degree and later became the chairman of the department of physiology at Harvard Medical School. It was at Harvard where he developed the concept of *homeostasis*, which is the notion that there are ideal steady-state conditions, such as temperature and body chemistry, that the body tends to maintain. Cannon coined

the term *fight or flight* in 1915 to describe an animal's response to a threat. This discovery was published in 1915 in *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage: An Account of Recent Researches into the Function of Emotional Excitement.* His research revealed valuable information about the role of adrenaline in the body and it provided new insight into the workings of the nervous system. But it was Dr. Hans Selye, an Austrian scientist working at the University of Montreal in Canada, who is most widely regarded as the father of stress research.

Selye's writings on stress date back to the 1930s, and he is credited with authoring more than seventeen hundred papers and thirty-nine books on the subject. He studied the neuroendocrine effects of the fight or flight response, and as the undisputed expert on stress, he observed that common symptoms were present in many diseases. In a landmark study published in 1950, he applied engineering principles to his observations about humans. In engineering, *stress* refers to the pressures exerted on a system: too many appliances in a single electrical outlet, too much snow on the roof, too much speed for a car's tires on a slick road. Selye had trained as a neuroendocrinologist (a physician specializing in hormones and other chemicals in the brain and the nervous system), and he proposed that these pressures are a normal part of human life, just as they are in any physical system. He believed that humans have a well-designed natural mechanism to respond and adapt to stress. What's important to understand is that this mechanism is designed to protect us and preserve homeostasis for short-term challenges. His understanding and description of stress form the foundation for most of today's work in the field. Selye was the first researcher to describe the link between stress and disease. He suggested that long-term exposure to demands and challenges, such as the ones that many of us face daily, can cause increasing levels of adaptation to stress and eventually result in physical exhaustion and perhaps even death.

Seyle described stress as a "disease of adaptation" or, more formally, "general adaptation syndrome," and he theorized that poor stress adaptation is the basis of many disease states. He explained this as the syndrome of "just being sick." When he exposed rats to various types of stress and then dissected them, he discovered that three physical changes are always present: (1) enlargement of the adrenal cortex (the site where adrenaline is produced); (2) atrophy of the thymus,

the spleen, the lymph nodes, and all other lymphatic structures (which are fundamental components of the immune system); and (3) deep bleeding ulcers in the stomach and the duodenum. Selye described three strategies in the general adaptation syndrome: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion.

The alarm reaction is characterized by surprise and anxiety and is considered to be a general call to arms (the fight-or-flight response). The adrenal glands secrete hormones, including epinephrine, norepinephrine, and hydrocortisone. This phase occurs quickly and accounts for a phenomenon such as a young and petite mother lifting a car to free her trapped child. Resistance represents the second phase of stress, when the body continues to adapt to and fight the stressor. The fight or flight response has ceased at this point. The adrenal glands are pushed to the edge of capacity, and possibly beyond, in this stage. An individual can respond to and meet the demands of the stress as long as this stage continues. If the adaptive stress is resolved, a rapid return to the resting state can be achieved. The third phase, exhaustion, occurs when an individual can no longer meet the demands placed on him or her due to the prolonged stress. According to Seyle, it is in the third phase where illness can occur.

As I discuss in chapter 2, Selye's observations from more than fifty years ago were correct. The Centers for Disease Control states that approximately 70 percent of medical disorders are related to stress. More simply, stress (and the emotional or physical reaction to it) can make people sick or make people with disease even sicker. Selye further divided stress into positive or negative conditions. He called good stress (for example, getting a job promotion) *eustress.* He called negative stress (such as anxiety produced by an abusive working situation) *distress.*

Our world has changed radically in only a few generations. Walter B. Cannon and Hans Seyle might not even recognize the harshness of some modern environments. You don't have to live in a war zone or a bitter arctic climate, and you don't have to suffer food shortages or work long days shoveling coal, to be affected by your surroundings. We hail so many modern technological advances as greatly improving our quality of life, but in reality, these very advances can represent new sources of stress. Cell phones, e-mail, text messaging, and other forms

of instant communication have accelerated life and work to an often unmanageable pace. You may be blessed with a full life and professional success and might be fortunate enough to live in a modern society filled with technological wizardry, but you need to understand that all of this can result in a frenetic existence, with pressures and stressors never imagined even thirty years ago.

Around the time that Hans Selye was conducting his research, two other scientists were developing a model to document the effects of stress on the body. In 1967, psychiatrists T. H. Holmes and R. H. Rahe published their work and described a system to measure the relative stressfulness of various life events and circumstances. Their research was based on the principle that major stressors cause a break in the habits and patterns of our daily activities and in our social relationships (the higher the number on the scale, the greater is the need for readjustment and thus the greater effect on our daily lives). In Holmes and Rahe's study, 394 people (215 women and 179 men) were asked to rate a series of life events (which included marriage, divorce, the death of a spouse, retirement, and even vacations) on a scale of 1 to 100 as to the intensity and length of time necessary to readjust regardless of the desirability of the event. The scores were compiled and an average score was determined for each event that indicated the severity and amount of time needed to adjust to it. We can gauge the stressfulness of these life events by comparing the amount of time needed for, and the difficulty of, readjustment and adaptation after the event.

The results of the research are commonly referred to as the Rahe and Holmes Stress Scale (see below).

Rahe and Holmes Stress Scale

Life Event	*Life Event Unit*
Death of spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital separation from mate	65
Detention in jail, other institution	63
Death of a close family member	63
Major personal injury or illness	53

Marriage	50
Fired from work	47
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Major change in the health or behavior of a family member	44
Pregnancy	40
Sexual difficulties	39
Gaining a new family member (e.g., through birth, adoption, oldster moving, etc.)	39
Major business readjustment (e.g., merger, reorganization, bankruptcy)	39
Major change in financial status	38
Death of close friend	37
Change to different line of work	36
Major change in the number of arguments with spouse	35
Taking out a mortgage or loan for a major purchase	31
Foreclosure on a mortgage or loan	30
Major change in responsibilities at work	29
Son or daughter leaving home (e.g., marriage, attending college)	29
Trouble with in-laws	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Spouse beginning or ceasing to work outside the home	26
Beginning or ceasing formal schooling	26
Major change in living conditions	25
Revision of personal habits (dress, manners, associations, etc.)	24
Trouble with boss	23
Major change in working hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change to a new school	20
Major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation	19
Major change in church activities (a lot more or less than usual)	19
Major change in social activities (clubs, dancing, movies, visiting)	18
Taking out a mortgage or loan for a lesser purchase (e.g., for a car, TV, freezer, etc.)	17
Major change in sleeping habits	16
Major change in the number of family get-togethers	15

(*continued*)

Life Event	*Life Event Unit*
Major change in eating habits	15
Vacation	13
Christmas season	12
Minor violations of the law (e.g., traffic tickets, etc.)	11

Data from T. H. Holmes and R. H. Rahe, "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale," Journal of Psychosomatic Research *11 (1967): 213–218, esp. 216.*

Although their initial goal was to improve the ability to predict the onset of disease or illness, Holmes and Rahe devised what became an often used measurement of the affect of certain events on our lives. They began with the assumption that the more significant the life change, the greater the biological changes, causing the body to use more energy to readjust and thus increasing the likelihood of illness.

Remember that although smaller chronic stressors may rank lower on the list, as they increase in both number and duration, their cumulative effect can be devastating.

So far, we have looked at the meaning of stress through a historical perspective. What about a more current definition? We know that scientists do not agree on any single definition of stress, but here are some concepts I want to share as we build a definition for the purposes of this book.

- Stress is the pressure that life exerts on us and the way this pressure makes us feel.
- Stress is a state of arousal that involves the body and the mind.
- The reflex response to stress evolved from our need as humans to protect ourselves from real physical dangers—the "lions and tigers and bears" of early human history.
- In modern society, our stressors are more likely connected to common events, daily hassles, technology, time constraints, deadlines, and interpersonal communication.
- Stress involves cause and effect. Demands, challenges, or changes *cause* a series of events that require adjustment. Our thoughts, actions, and behaviors can be considered the *effects* of these triggers.

- Triggers or causes can be external (the boss, the job, the bad news) or internal (your thoughts and unresolved conflicts).
- Triggers may produce different emotional, behavioral, and psychological responses in each of us.
- Being exposed to a stressor is not the same as being vulnerable to it.
- The stress process involves the mind and the body.
- Stress is in the eye of the beholder.

I have come to think of stress as a process showing the relationship between a cause/trigger and a subsequent effect/response.

The stress process incorporates aspects of biology, psychology, coping, and behavior and has three main elements:

1. A stimulus or a stressor that serves as the trigger.
2. A reflex perception, which is unique to each of us and includes coping skills, personality traits, genetics, and so on.
3. A response, of which there are four types: biological, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. The accumulation of responses determines our general experience of stress. In broad terms, that experience can reflect either healthy adaptation and adjustment or nonadaptive unhealthy responses and conditions.

Understanding how this process works forms the very heart of your ability to adjust or control various factors in your life and to learn when and how to seek creative solutions to challenges. Think of the stress process as your personal automatic "emergency response system." Your unique appraisal of a situation, a demand, or a challenge determines the type and intensity of the response that is triggered. Four levels, or types, of responses can occur, and each generates one part of the total stress experience: biological, behavioral, psychological, and emotional.

At this point, I hope you can see that the only reasonable approach to finding relief from stress is to look inside yourself and assess how the stress process works for you. You can identify the many aspects of your daily life that relate to your personal passions and goals. Once you've determined the areas of balance and imbalance, you can set up

an action plan to bring everything into alignment. This is how you regain control and how you become proactive, thus dictating the shape and direction of your life, instead of remaining passive and waiting nervously for the next calamity.

My goal is to give you tools to help you identify symptoms of stress in your own life, so that you can recognize the triggers, sort through your stressors, and distinguish those that serve your goals from the ones that get in your way. I can't promise to eliminate stress from your life. It may surprise you, but I wouldn't even *want* to eliminate all stress. As you will learn, not all stress is inherently bad. I hope to show you how to minimize the damaging stress in your life and turn the rest to your advantage. In this way, you will find your BestStress Zone.

Stress Isn't Always the Enemy

The human body has evolved in remarkable ways. Our physiological response to stress and danger, whether from a confrontation with a prehistoric beast or a dinosaur-brained boss, has been an essential weapon in our long fight to survive in a hostile environment. In today's world, the stress process might be triggered by something as common as having to give a speech, or it might result from an unexpected and cataclysmic event, such as a hurricane or a terrorist attack. In either case, the body responds in consistent ways. First, the brain activates the autonomic nervous system, which controls involuntary processes—in this case, stimulating the output of key hormones that in turn regulate other functions. Our heart rate and blood pressure increase, boosting our energy, strength, and reflexes. Even our immune system is put on heightened alert. With its defenses up, so to speak, the body is ready to meet a challenge.

Everyone is familiar with the feelings of heightened alertness and intensity that occur during this stress response. For many of us, our most vivid and important memories are of such moments—not necessarily times of danger but simply of our increased engagement and awareness, which were made necessary by the events around us. We often hear people say that they "felt so alive" in these unusual circumstances. We might lump all of these experiences together as

"stress," but that would be a misleading term. Sometimes it's more accurate to say that our lives are very full, complex, or overly busy, but these demanding situations don't always represent danger. Instead, the experiences are inevitable, and we're extraordinarily lucky that we're equipped to handle them. So stress, or the stress response or stress process, is at times beneficial and even vital to our continued health.

What happens, though, when the stress response is stimulated all the time? As much as the body needs to be able to enter a higher gear when necessary, it isn't designed to operate at that level on a constant basis. Imagine if you ran your car in the highest gear all the time; the engine would wear out in a hurry and would be in constant danger of breaking down entirely. The same is true for your body. The cumulative effect of being in a perpetual state of arousal—a state of chronic stress—can have an extremely damaging effect on your health. Just as an overtaxed stress system means too much of a good thing, however, you can also have too little stress. If your system doesn't respond quickly enough, strongly enough, or often enough to stress, your body won't be able to defend itself when it needs to.

Clearly, you can have too much stress in your life, and you can have too little. Trying to eliminate stress from your life completely is like going on a radical diet. It may seem logical to banish potentially unhealthy substances like carbohydrates, fats, or salt, but your body actually needs each of these nutrients, to some degree. Likewise, your body requires occasional periods of heightened stimulation or arousal to stay in peak performing condition.

What's true for your body is true for your mind as well. You tell yourself that you need more peace and quiet, more serenity, yet you can't stop yourself from pushing forward. You complain about the pressure of your job, but you like being in the middle of the action. You can't stand the long hours at the office and being away from your family, but then you think that buying a bigger house might be nice. You don't really have time for the church sisterhood group, but you swore to yourself that community service would be a part of your family's values. You think that if you have to sit through one more Little League game you'll go insane, but you always wanted a big family, and you still catch yourself looking enviously at mothers pushing newborns in strollers down the street.

You want what you want, and generally there's nothing wrong with that. It's okay to have professional ambitions, to want to build a safe home life for your children, to want to be a big wheel in your community, or even simply to get fit and lose twenty pounds. It makes no sense to feel guilty about the choices you make in life or to resent the effort you must expend to realize your dreams. If you feel torn between your commitments to your family, your job, your parents, and your community, take a step back and reflect. Remembering that your life is the result of your choices makes it easier to embrace all of the challenges that those choices entail. It also reminds you that you are free to reconsider. Naturally, life is full of random events, and wisdom comes from expecting the unexpected. No amount of planning can ensure that you avoid such calamities, but you can put yourself in a position to minimize the damage by having support systems and contingency plans in place and by knowing how to quickly bring your emotional and psychological selves back into alignment. The problem arises when all of the busy activity of your daily life directs you away from the things you really hold dear or prevents you from focusing on the things that give your life meaning and satisfaction. Again, it's this lack of alignment, this imbalance, that triggers stress.

It's Time to Get Beyond Stress

I hope to give you a new way to think about the stress process in your life, so that you can restore balance and control. We will be exploring concepts that are in the domain of mind-body medicine. One of the central tenets of mind-body medicine is the recognition that the mind plays a key role in health and that the historical medical concept of Cartesian dualism—that is, separation of mind and body—is false. Please keep one additional incentive in mind: learning how to think about stress in a new way puts you on the path to more successful aging. Optimal stress and the BestStress Zone approach is unique because it incorporates a better understanding of the stress-health connection. The evidence is clear that the biological by-products of constant stress accumulate in the body and, over time, reduce your mental and

physical capacities. Although currently there is no single way to measure this deterioration, certain medical tests help us assemble a picture of the overall physical effects of stress on the body.

I want to give you practical tools to help you assess your stressors and their symptoms and to determine which stress is good and which is bad. I'll take you through the physical and medical signs and dangers of stress and will show you how to recognize the symptoms—which differ for every individual—and how to minimize their effects. We'll go through the exercise of determining your three Ps—purpose, passions, and priorities. You will learn which of your daily challenges are worth the effort and the stress, because they bring you closer to your goals, and which are merely obstacles and distractions. This process of self-evaluation and self-discovery will enable you to envision and establish a life that works for you, in which you've minimized dangerous stress and embraced productive challenges. You'll then be living in your BestStress Zone. I'll give you strategies for maintaining, nurturing, and defending that zone, and I'll show you how to prepare for those inevitable moments when life deals you a bad hand and even the most careful planning falls apart.

The best thing about this approach is that there are no right and wrong answers. There is no one-size-fits-all system. You don't need to change anything about yourself or your attitudes that you don't want to change. Each person's BestStress Zone will be unique. My aim is to help you clarify your own values and goals, reorder your commitments, and refocus your energies so you can live the life that you want to live.