

STEP 1

Be Aware of Your Own Stress Addiction

The first step in our process of change is to understand ourselves, to accept the fact that yes, we have a problem. But never fear, there's definitely something we can do about it.

My research with thousands of women has taught me that the biggest universal problem women have today is our attitude toward stress, the daily dynamic tension of our lives. In fact, I've learned that living with stress for women these days has become more than a habit: it's an addiction.

That's right. Addiction. Just as with drugs or alcohol. Stress has become so ubiquitous (a fancy word for common, widespread, pervasive) that we're used to it, we expect it, we're actually uncomfortable if we don't have it.

Sisters (and some brothers), listen up. We've reached the point where we've got a "jones" for stress. It has taken over our lives like the extra thirty pounds or unwanted guest at the dining room table who refuses to leave.

Addicted to stress.

How did this happen, and what can we do about it?

Taking a Hard Look at Ourselves

Women today carry massive responsibilities of family, household, and career. It often feels to us as if we're being blown about in so many different directions that we're battered into exhaustion.

Ironically, we call this progress. We need to ask ourselves two questions:

Are we satisfied?

Are we happier?

Well, certainly men are happier. Two studies from Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania indicate that a

happiness shift has occurred over the years. In the 1970s, women used to be *slightly happier* than men; now men have exchanged places with women. The reason for this change is that men have cut back on unpleasant activities and now relax more, spending quality time with the family. Research shows that meanwhile, women have been taking on more complex tasks than they did four decades ago. They have replaced housework with paid work, but that doesn't mean that the work at home has disappeared. Women's to-do lists have grown; the number of waking hours to get everything done has not.

When tasks don't get crossed off the list, women experience stress resulting in sleepless nights and days filled with feelings of negativity and inadequacy. The studies emphasize that because women now have opportunities for accomplishment on many new levels, they tend to believe that if they don't "do it all"—the home, the marriage, the job—they don't measure up!

The Impact of Too Much Stress

Bottom line: if you are unhappy with yourself, then all your relationships, including your most intimate, will be filled with unhappiness. And further research from Sigal Barsade of the University of Pennsylvania explains that bad moods are contagious. Your family will absorb and mimic your behavior, thereby perpetuating a negative loop.

Although the medical community has established that a little stress is actually good for you—waking up your creativity, fueling your vitality, and keeping your immune system vigilant—the qualifying and key word here is *little*. When you find yourself rushing from activity to activity, doing chore after chore, with no personal time for yourself, the problem isn't the external world that's landing on your doorstep; rather, it's your own need to constantly open that door and welcome stress into your life!

Why We Love Stress

Most likely you are addicted to stress because of the adrenaline rush—the “look what I can do” syndrome. You’re so productive! You do it all, get it all—mother, wife, worker, with boundless energy 24/7.

However, having plenty of physical energy should not be confused with vital, focused energy. The critical question you must ask is, How do you distinguish a stress addict from a healthy high-energy person? And here’s the answer: the physical energy of a stress addict is always moving forward, living in the future, accomplishing the next task on the addict’s to-do list, or worrying about what will happen later, rather than experiencing reality in the present. In contrast, a high-energy person intensifies her present to experience it fully.

What It’s Like to Be an Addict

You might think that the term *addict* is a harsh word for simply being busy. But it is the right word. You may say that the conventional perception of an addict is of someone so focused on her bad habits that she is a very selfish person, whereas so much of a woman’s time is dedicated to being unselfish, to taking care of her family. But let’s look at the fundamentals of addiction, and we’ll see why *addict* is the right term.

Common to all unacknowledged addicts is the illusion that they have some sort of power and can control their behavior. However, when we take a closer look, we can readily see that this is a totally false perception; addicts are in fact without self-awareness and have little or no control over their compulsive activities. For example, a gambler thinks she can control her luck, an alcoholic her drinking, and a pot addict her smoking. However, an unaware addict cannot tap into her personal power. To numb the pain, the feelings of worthlessness both

overt and subtle, a stress addict hides herself in the great escape of distraction.

The fix of busyness leading to apparent accomplishment gives the stress addict a kind of high that sends pleasure signals to the brain. But, as is true of all addictions, the high is transitory. The addict needs another high and then another, the ever-expanding to-do list, to sustain that false euphoria.

Admit it. Oh, how you love the surge of adrenaline energy as you rush to perform your activities and duties! You feel important.



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Do They Have Adult Cliffs Notes?

Sara had found no time to read the book she had suggested for her book club members. She was agitated about tonight's opening remarks, beating herself up about it. Should she fake it or admit that she didn't read the book and let someone else run the meeting? Perhaps she should not attend the meeting and say she is sick? Sara tried to read the four hundred pages, but couldn't concentrate or get into the book. She felt as if she were back at school and unprepared for a test.

I asked Sara why she had joined a book club in the first place if she is not a reader and is busy with her work and the children. She quickly explained, "For the social benefits. I like to get together with the girls once a month and talk." I suggested that she attend the session and throw out an opening question based on the book jacket, allowing others to run with it. She could join in with examples from life experience, movies, or other books. Fun should not be stressful. Evaluate your clubs and activities. Are you overbooked?

You feel powerful. After all, you are a very busy person. During your high, you are always venturing outward, escaping; therefore, you don't have to go inward, to return to your own doorstep—the components, problems, conflicts, and deficits of your real personality, or at least what you think it is.

So you can't be still or alone. Deep down, you fear your own quiet company the most.

Are Addicts Bad People?

No. Emphatically not. Addicts are not bad people. Addictive behavior is basically a survival mechanism to deal with what is perceived as an unhappy reality.

Addicts are good people. You could argue that highly successful people are just working hard in our normal workaholic workplace culture. I've learned, however, that in the case of stress addiction, all this busyness usually stems from the addict's constant need to prove herself. Are you suppressing feelings of unattractiveness, unworthiness, and inadequacy that are nevertheless seeping out through the seams of your body and soul?

A Self-Test for Addiction Awareness

How can you tell that you are a stress addict and not merely a busy person who is responsible and reliable? Answer the following questions:

1. Do you tune out during conversations? (For example: Do you scan the top of your friend's head while you barely listen to the conversation, thinking about other things?)
☐ Yes ☐ No
2. Do you feel rushed wherever you are because you feel that you ought to be completing the next task somewhere else?
☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Are you irritable with others?
☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Do you rate yourself according to the opinions of those with whom you interact? Do you seek a “Wow” as a response for what you do? ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. Are you unable to ask for help? ☐ Yes ☐ No
6. Do you perceive being on the *receiving end* as a sign of weakness? ☐ Yes ☐ No
7. When you exercise, do you do it for longer than sixty minutes, five days a week? ☐ Yes ☐ No
8. Are you always talking on your cell phone—even when taking a walk? ☐ Yes ☐ No
9. Do you constantly check your appearance in the mirror? ☐ Yes ☐ No
10. Do you feel uncomfortable, worried, nervous in your mind or body when you don’t have something you must absolutely do right now? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered yes to

3 questions: You are out of balance.

5 questions: You are losing your sense of self.

10 questions: You have hit the crash-and-burn zone.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to help you pause and notice.

Profile of a Female Stress Addict

As a woman, you experience stress with greater intensity than a man does, as you process words and body language more quickly using both sides of the brain (which predisposes you to multi-tasking) and have a deeper limbic system, the seat of emotions (which connects you more sensitively to all your relationships). Consequently, you are more prone to depression and often

respond with emotional outbursts, which can be particularly awkward at the workplace.

When this emotional intensity is regularly activated by the various kinds of stress you experience, you become even more vulnerable to sadness and irritability. Stress becomes generalized as you experience a free-floating uneasiness and lose the capacity for calmer, more positive solutions. As a stress addict, you adhere to the same pattern of the “over-doer” at home, at work, and in all your relationships. Guess what? There is no such thing as a separation of work and home—though you’ll see well-intentioned efforts in pop culture to label the work-life balance—because you are the same person on Sunday night as on Monday morning. The balance or imbalance rests with you. As a stress junkie, you bring a common perception to all the major categories of your life:

Without you, nothing works.

Stress challenges our equilibrium, unsettling us, and our response to it ranges from mild to intense. Sometimes stress is



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Back to School

Mary is breathing shallowly, speaking quickly, and acting defensive about her son’s first semester at college. “We’re finishing the first term. We can’t believe how difficult those two humanities classes are. My son is a business major. Why does he need Writing the Essay and Western Civilization classes? I’m having trouble keeping up with all that reading and writing.”

Clearly the umbilical cord has not been cut. All this vicarious pressure must be stressing out Mary’s son, Jeremy, as well. Mary needs to concentrate on her own work and find some creative hobbies.

recognizably nerve racking; at other times it is more subtle and vague, even hidden. Can you recognize it in your own life? Let's take a closer look at how stress can manifest itself in the three compartments of your life.

At Home

- You do not delegate chores or allow others to contribute—it's your way or no way.
- You hover over your children as a helicopter mom.
- You are much too cheerful with your spouse and children, who may actually be annoyed by your cheerfulness.
- You are impatient, easily angered.
- You feel anxious and pressured about the clubs for which you have volunteered, such as the PTA, the American Association of University Women, or the neighborhood book club.
- Sex is one more thing on the to-do list (maybe).
- You experience sugar lust or a craving for fatty comfort foods.
- You don't sleep well.

At Work

- You bring work home with you and take your BlackBerry on vacation.
- You brag to the boss about how little sleep you got the previous night.
- You are not really a team player; you hoard your work or are secretive with colleagues who might steal your thunder.



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Mind-Reading Gone Awry

Carol and Lainie, who work for a software company, were assigned a prominent market research project to evaluate the competition for the company's new software product. During the first week of the project, Carol kept seeing Lainie working on other assignments, and she was seething. Finally she lashed out at Lainie for not pulling her weight. Fortunately, Lainie calmly explained that she was tying up loose ends, clearing her desk, so that she could devote her complete attention to their project. Carol's mind-reading almost sabotaged the team spirit. I explained to Carol that work is all about integrating one's personal rhythm with others'. She needs to be aware of her personal triggers and stay on the alert to being tempted to cross the line into negative mind-reading.

- Colleagues annoy you. They talk and laugh too loudly while you are working.
- You focus on the one colleague who doesn't greet you or doesn't like you, even though most of your coworkers are sociable and friendly.
- You worry about your family (your aging mother, your children's SATs) during work.
- You eat lunch at your desk and need a donut and coffee during the afternoon slump.
- You feel unappreciated; you want to quit but won't; you have a love-hate relationship with your job.

In Relationships

- You expect your spouse and friends to read your mind, to know what you mean even when it's evident that they can't figure out where you're coming from or what you want.
- You get caught up in repetitive, purposeless arguing.
- You have trouble receiving a gift: "Oh, you shouldn't have . . ."
- You are hungry for compliments. You want to be thought of as attractive, but don't think you really are. You are competitive with your girlfriends.
- You are sensitive to criticism.
- You view all your relationships in terms of accomplishments.

The Value of Awareness

Changing your life profile for the better requires that you gain an honest awareness that something is amiss, sapping your positive energy. The first step involves observing your behavior. You need a little distance to see the whole picture, the way you observe a friend and then give that friend some good advice. Only this time, you will show some compassion for yourself, befriend yourself, and take your own advice!

The secret to any success is having the determination to succeed, then taking small, patient steps, evaluating and tweaking them along the way without any pressure. Step 1 of this program is all about becoming aware, in a nonjudgmental way, leading you to determine *what* is wrong, not *who* is wrong. You are simply noticing.

The motivation to improve will become part of your mind-set when you start to truly see. When you complete this program, you will compare how you used to experience a glitch, a remark, or a schedule change and how you experience it now—with an easy smile. So, gently lift the curtain and take a peek at the full-blown symptoms of stress addiction. Could this possibly be you?

Symptoms of a Stress Addict

Here are more symptoms to watch out for. The ones listed earlier addressed behavior; these are on a more internal level:

The loose mind. The most telltale sign of a stress addict is a *loose mind*. You do all your chores and social activities with a kind of porous consciousness, unfocused on the here and now. You lose your mental boundaries, unable to exclude extraneous thoughts. You are the consummate multitasker. Even on your child's school trip for which you volunteered, or on a visit with your mother, or at a ball game with your husband, you are speaking on your cell phone most of the time, communicating with the workplace, home, friends, the plumber, the physical therapist. You are kidding yourself believing that you are really spending quality time with your loved ones. Although it might seem paradoxical, you would accomplish more through *single-minded tasking*—tightening your mind—but you do not believe this. Instead, your loose mind causes you to waste energy, feel tired, and grow irritable.

The dramatic vocabulary. Think about the words you use daily. "I'm crazy busy." Words define your reality and have a way of actualizing a prophecy. When your friend bemoans her hectic day, you brag about yours: "Oh, you think *you're* busy, listen to this . . ." If life were calmer and filled with free time, you probably would not know what to do with yourself. You might not want to sit still and be with yourself because there are pockets of



Tips for Curing Stress Addiction

Experiencing Technological Karma

Most of us know The Feeling of not receiving our e-mail for a few hours because our e-mail provider's server is down. You are cut off from a fast-paced world, and there is nothing you can do about it. After the initial frenzy during which you actually think you have some semblance of control over the situation, you settle into an "It's out of my hands" mind-set. Then you start feeling more relaxed, disconnected from the stress of 24/7 technology for a while. You have more time—found time—for yourself.

I experienced this compulsory hiatus for two weeks during an already hectic media tour. Irritated that my e-mail provider wasn't even taking my phone calls, imagining that the company was going out of business, I decided to adopt a wait-and-see attitude and just let it be. A couple of weeks later, normality returned, and guess what? I was surprised to learn that I hadn't missed much. The "universe" was trying to tell me something. Now I take voluntary breaks and no longer fear that I am missing out. I am actually finding more within.

disappointment and unfulfilled dreams you don't want to contemplate. For if you did, you would have to do something, make a move, risk failure and rejection. It is easier to distract yourself by speeding things up and at the same time making yourself indispensable to others. Or so you think.

The great performer. Stress addiction is driven by the constant need to prove your self-worth, to show that you are a valuable person. You reap the reward for being the consummate go-to person. In fact, your voracious appetite for compliments motivates you to hunt for them constantly to feed your ego. Because you have built your reputation around the title of the "doer," what will be left to distinguish you from other successful women?

Delegate work? No way—then you would not get to shine as superwoman. The problem is that *you can no longer separate who you are from what you do*. If you fail at a task, you feel like a failure as a person because your tasks define you. You are usually anxious, whether you are presenting in the board room or addressing the League of Women Voters. What will people say about your performance?

The guilty sinner. Stress addicts always feel guilty about having fun and relaxing. You might say, “I’m so happy, I can’t stand it!” There is an internal conflict between what you want to do and what you think you ought to do. And if you *are* enjoying yourself, you feel as if you are tempting fate; you think of the blissful heroine in a typical soap opera, heaped with adversity the moment she proclaims she has never been happier. It’s as though fear will protect you from a bad thing, and happiness predisposes you to disaster. In other words, being overwhelmed with work is your insurance policy against tragedy.

The sacrificial giver. Giving is your signature specialty and makes you feel good about yourself. When you receive a gift, though, you follow it up with, “Oh, you shouldn’t have.” Imagine how the bright, smiling face (of your daughter, husband, fellow worker) droops when you invalidate a gift.

Let’s be honest. You are the consummate people pleaser. Please preface your name with “Saint.” However, your eagerness to be the giver and to do for others depletes your energy reserve and positivism. Internally, you feel resentful and are running on very little gas. You are out of balance, about to tip over with all this giving! Also, you have actually made others second class, always coming to you for help.

The inattentive listener. Often you go through the motions of being present to others. But while you are speaking on the phone, you might be checking your e-mail, cleaning out a drawer, exercising on a treadmill, driving the car, and so on. You

don't think listening attentively is a good enough reason to cease all other activities. This is a self-imposed adult version of attention deficit disorder. You don't have a genetic or biochemical problem with how your brain works; rather, you *choose* not to focus your attention. Don't think, however, that the other person doesn't know or sense that you are not totally present. There is a subtle pause in your voice; you respond to a previous question a little too late, or you do not follow the conversation completely and are a little confused because you have missed some of the sequential details. Sometimes you are engaged in a face-to-face conversation, and this is trickier than over the phone, where you can believe that the other person can't see that you are multitasking; face-to-face, your eyes betray you. Whereas a natural and attentive conversationalist focuses on the speaker's eyes and literally bathes his face with listening cues, the stress addict looks elsewhere, eyes scanning for more action. Your subtle message to the speaker is, "You are not worth my total attention. I am extremely busy, an important person who carries the world on her shoulders and can only squeeze you into my day while I think about the next task on my list."

The great controller. You have grown more irritable because you are disappointed that people and situations do not act according to your requirements. You feel that other people must behave in sync with your expectations and within your time frame. Speeding through life makes patience a nonstarter virtue. For example, you have a doctor's appointment scheduled for your son. The doctor keeps you waiting forty-five minutes. You look at your watch every couple of minutes. You go up to the sign-in sheet and check where the list is going and if anyone has been called ahead of you. When your child's name is finally called, you wait with him in an examining room for another fifteen minutes. By this time you are crazy and forget half the questions you wanted to ask the doctor (unless they're on your to-do list, which

is now ten pages long). If only you could let go of your “must” requirement, you could utilize the time more efficiently, such as by nurturing your child.

The stern inner critic. Stress addicts are not only critical of other people but also highly critical of themselves. You wonder, Am I thin enough? Am I accomplishing enough? Do I have the lifestyle I expect and deserve? One of the telltale signs of stress addiction is that you compare yourself to the most attractive, happy, or successful person in the room, never focusing on your own unique attributes and accomplishments, never content with yourself. A negative coach lies at the root of your personality, whipping you on: *You are not good enough!* Past accomplishments do not satisfy your inner critic—they are over and done with. It’s as though your good qualities don’t register with you.

Hooked on pain. Exercise addiction mirrors stress addiction. If you want to see a stress addict in action and understand what she is experiencing, go to an all-night gym. Exercise addicts carry the expression “no pain, no gain” to the max. If they don’t hurt physically or feel exhausted—annihilated, so to speak—they keep on exercising. I have heard comments like these in the gym: “That was an amazing class. I could barely breathe. I call it death by step!” “What a great training session—he killed me!” Instead of engaging in a health-promoting exercise program (no more than sixty minutes of exercise), the exercise addict erodes the joints, damages internal organs, and triggers depression with *combat* fatigue. Exercise addicts are highly critical of their bodies and never feel thin or attractive enough. They pound their bodies into submission to achieve a semblance of control. However, their workout rules their life as they organize their day around the exercise session.

Numb from the waist down. For the stress addict, sex becomes another performance-driven obligation. The media implies that you need to be capable of being aroused at a moment’s

notice as well as choreographing an amazing athletic love workout. And don't forget to be multiorgasmic in the process. However, if you're a stress addict, making love makes you yawn. Stress has depleted your vitality. You would rather sleep. At the heart of the matter, you are avoiding intimacy with yourself! You don't eagerly slide into pleasure because you don't view sex as an accomplishment, and besides, there is no one there to validate your performance, except for your spouse, who doesn't count. It is also difficult to perform well in the bedroom when your self-image is not at an all-time high. Your stern inner critic is always nagging, and your body might be changing because of childbirth and the natural aging process.

Understanding Why

Now that you are taking a closer look at your life, you might be wondering how you got suckered into this kind of maddening, heart-deadening lifestyle. If you are to manage your stressors, you need to understand the general root causes. Here are some possible reasons that might resonate for you.

Toxic Feedback from the Past

Did your parents compliment you only when you achieved academically or athletically? Were you a bit sensitive to criticism because of bad experiences at school with teachers who graded you rigorously and classmates who hurt your feelings by making fun of you, adding insult to the injury of high parental demands?

If the answer to either of these questions is yes, make every effort to escape getting stuck in the past. Just become cognizant of your current adrenaline-charged lifestyle. You are no longer a child needing validation, a "Good girl!" Nor do you have to follow tribal beliefs that don't make any sense to you—even if they come from your parents or your community.



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Cleaning Out Your Closet

Realize that it is easier to be incredibly busy than to deal with layers of grief accumulated during the course of a lifetime. Dealing with emotional issues from the past is like cleaning out a messy closet—who wants to clean out a closet? You would rather be hectic with other chores where your performance can be validated and applauded. However, cleaning out a closet is a private matter and involves letting go of what no longer serves you, so that you can see more clearly what you need and really use. And chances are that if one closet is filled with clutter, there are many others, along with drawers, and there might even be a basement or attic! However, when you clean out just one closet, the rest is much easier to do, as you are motivated by the initial successful results. Similarly, tackle any one of the layers of mental clutter, and you get at the source, because they all share the same theme—that's why you don't have to keep digging into past resentments ad infinitum. Keep your thoughts relevant to what you are doing today instead of confused with the past, to ease up on yourself, in a small and simple way, so that the process feels more like cleaning out your pocketbook instead of a whole closet.

Whenever I clean out my pocketbook, I feel a great emotional release. I might not even understand what kind of junk I have cleared out of my head while I was deciding what to throw away or keep, but I feel better. The point is that I come away from the task having created more room to see what remains inside, the special things I have forgotten about amid all the clutter, and so will you.

Don't overwhelm yourself in frenetic activity, even for a noble cause. How can you ease up on yourself today—in a small and simple way? What is really stopping you from doing less and letting go? In the case of curing stress addiction, less is more. Gandhi said, "There is more to life than increasing its speed."

The Sandwich Generation Is Growing Stale

Being sandwiched between aging parents and developing children can disguise a stress addict as an altruist, for after all, caregiving is a noble endeavor. “What would you have me do? Abandon these helpless individuals?”

For example, Nili, one of my clients, is the consummate caregiver. She is taking care of two teenage boys along with her first-grade daughter and helping her widowed mother recover in Nili’s home from a hysterectomy that had unforeseen complications. Because it is *her* mother, she tiptoes around her husband, Jack, who isn’t crazy about her mother living with them even for a few weeks.

Nili typifies the stressed-out performance addict. She martyrs herself for everyone else because deep down she doesn’t believe



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Your Paycheck and Housework Stress

Did you know that in married working couples, the more money a woman earns, the less housework she will do? So says sociologist Sanjiv Gupta of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. That finding is based on a study of women who work full-time. The critical element, Gupta explains, is how much money the woman makes, not how much she makes compared to her spouse. If she earns \$40,000 or more, she’s going to spend less time doing housework than a woman who earns less. In other words, shedding or delegating chores is directly tied to a woman’s subjective quantifiable sense of her own self-worth and is not linked to her position relative to her husband. Is how much money you make your mirror—the ultimate definition of your self-worth, giving you permission to relax and fulfill yourself? Consider this: no one can pay you what you are really worth.

that she has accomplished enough and earned the right to be happy. She can't cut the umbilical cord that nourishes all the members of her family. She is also the household generator; everyone's plugged in to her energy socket. There is no need to investigate Nili's childhood or look into her tribal beliefs to find a conditioned pattern of selflessness and perfectionism. The world is not conspiring against her; the obstacles are internally driven! Romance is no longer enticing to a depleted woman. How can she possibly feel sexy? Jack is getting tired of her saying no to him.

The Biology of Stress 101

Admitting the truth is an important step in the recovery of any addiction. However, what truly seals the deal is realizing what stress does to you, how it inflames your body, mind, and spirit. Is it worth it to be sick and tired, or out of focus?

When you respond to a family member or coworker with anger due to stress, you may feel hyperalert because of the adrenaline rush (the hormones adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol rushing throughout your body); however, in reality you are using the most primitive, reptilian part of your brain, the fight-or-flight inner core. You will probably say things you later regret, send that e-mail you wish you had never written, or beat yourself up with "I should have said . . ." What you should be using instead is the most highly evolved part of your neurological system, the cerebellum and neocortex at the top front of the brain. To do so means consciously observing that you are stressed and taking a break to relax.

Ultimately, stress robs you of an optimistic resiliency that allows you to adapt to various obstacles; instead, you're hitting your head against a wall in frustration.

If you only knew what stress does to your body, you would stop stress in its tracks!



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Hitting a Wall Hurts

Michelle called me up in tears. After hearing her story, I sent her directly to the emergency room and then met with her the next day. Raising two preschoolers as a single mom and feeling conflicted about her new promotion in the marketing department (more pay, but more responsibilities), Michelle felt inundated. Getting both the children and herself out the door during the morning rush was tense, especially when the kids were fooling around. She would scream and insult them, then feel guilty for losing it with a three-year-old and a five-year-old. This particular morning, while screaming at her children, she walked smack into her metal front door and broke her nose badly!

Michelle realized that being upset caused her to be unaware of her surroundings. We came up with some concrete morning strategies to ease the tension, such as preparing the children's clothes and lunches the night before and waking up fifteen minutes earlier. After her surgery, there was compulsory rest from work; during the healing time, Michelle decided that all this agitation wasn't worth it. She could see the pattern and stop it.

Stress and Body Chemistry

Here's what happens when you experience stress. Powerful hormones are released throughout the body, elevating blood pressure and putting the senses on high alert. Glucose is driven up to the brain and into the muscles. Your evolutionary preprogrammed response is fight or flight. However, in modern times whom do you fight—where is that proverbial saber-toothed tiger? Of course, it's your spouse, family members, friends, and colleagues. How do you interact with others when you feel stressed?

Do you put on boxing gloves, arguing tit for tat, or do you flee from the room and slam the door shut—the home version of the fight-or-flight response?

Do you know that you live with powerful stressors night and day? Consequently, powerful stress hormones are continuously flowing throughout your body, inflaming organs, metabolic processes, and emotions, and making nerve endings raw. That's why stress needs to be systematically released, because it is toxic to health and happiness. If you are going green, concerned with shedding processed foods in your diet or chemicals in your home environment, then you need to be equally conscious about shedding toxic emotions like anger and resentment. Stress causes you to fall into negative perception, subtly at first, without your awareness. Only now you will know the reason.

Four Modern-Day Stressors

The four stressors that bombard our bodies daily and simultaneously are environmental, physical, internal, and national.

1. Environmental stress consists of air, land, and water pollution; radiation; food additives; pesticides; cleansers; and chemicals.
2. Physical stress includes bacteria and viruses in our bodies, allergies, aches, aging, and injury.
3. Internal stress is self-induced stress: unrealistic expectations, grief, living in ambiguity, feeling helpless or hopeless, and experiencing relationship woes.
4. Our national vulnerability to terrorism induces fear and anxiety.

Stress is enmeshed in our lives, leading to fatigue, insomnia, overeating or loss of appetite, poor concentration, excessive worry, allergies, frequent colds, and aches and pains. A generalized negativity infiltrates the spirit, making you feel sad and disempowered and causing your creativity to decline.



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Stress Is the Tipping Point for Disease

Scientists at the University of Saskatchewan's Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization have uncovered that signs of stress in proteins and other compounds found in the blood can help predict susceptibility to disease. It's well known that exposure to viruses or bacteria causes disease in some individuals but not in others. This study helps clarify how the stress level of an individual affects the infection process and the severity of disease. During seasonal outbreaks of viruses and bacteria, like the flu, make sure to include daily stress management as a part of your health regimen. When you wash your hands, wash away your negative mind-set.

Identify Your Personal Physical Stress Response

Note how your body reacts to stress to understand how to create your individual relaxation response. Your choice for relaxation might involve physical or social activity, using humor, visualizing, meditating, or creating your own synergistic combination based on your unique needs. Throughout this book you will learn specific relaxation response cues, even the various foods to eat, to release your specific type of stress.

1. You may feel a variety of emotions: anxious, angry, tense, resentful, irritable, fatigued, or depressed. Each of us has a personal emotional "stress profile." What is yours? When you identify your stress profile, you can direct specific strategies to promote relaxation.
2. It's useful to pay attention to the body parts that commonly become afflicted when you are feeling stress: head, jaw, neck, shoulders, stomach, back, joints, and skin.
3. You may either get the munchies or lose your appetite.



Tips for Curing Stress Addiction

The Biophysical Response

Listen to what your body is trying to tell you—metaphorically.

Here are some physical cues that can help you decode your stressful mind-set. When your neck hurts, are you unyielding in an argument? If you have a headache, are you overanalyzing? Do your shoulders hurt because you are shouldering too much responsibility? Does your back hurt because you feel unsupported? If your skin itches, what are you itching to do? Do you have acne because you are erupting in anger? Does your stomach hurt because your ego has been undermined? Do you get diarrhea because you need to get the crap out of your life? Do you have a urinary tract infection because someone is pissing you off?

Your body serves as a metaphor for what is happening in your mind. Think about where it hurts and how that might relate to the root cause of your problem. Your inflammatory physiological discomforts in turn provoke inflammatory language, setting you on fire with anger or causing burnout. You get caught in an inflammatory loop. However, the opposite is also true. You possess the power to put out the fire. You can change your negative perception to forgive, release, or laugh, moving on to a yet more positive perception. Challenge your anger with a rational explanation. Realize that stress is causing you to lose perspective. Listen to what your body is trying to tell you. The next time you are losing it and don't know why, let that painful weakest link in your body provide the clue to letting go of the disturbing mind-set.

4. You may experience sleep disturbances, either in falling asleep or staying asleep.
5. Your breathing can become shallow and more rapid.
6. Some people experience dizziness.
7. Whereas some people feel hyperalert, others cannot concentrate and are easily distracted.

Your body is trying to tell you something. Take note, because sometimes you have to leave your overly analytical, locked-in-worry mind to get into your senses to experience pleasure.

Two Kinds of Stress: Acute and Chronic

Stress management involves quickly recognizing stress responses, both covert and overt, to stop them before they do damage. First, be aware that there are two types of stress, acute and chronic. Not all stress is bad, and that's a great relief, because who can live a stress-free life? Acute stress heightens the senses, enabling you to live in the moment.

Acute stress can help you take action when you receive bad news or a bad diagnosis. For example, if you accept a diagnosis with total passivity and inertia, you might not go for a necessary second opinion or attend a support group. When you become an active partner in your own health, you channel normal anxiety into positive energy.

In contrast, chronic stress is damaging. The latest research from Harvard, for example, shows that caregivers face a 20 percent higher risk of mortality than the rest of the population because of the daily stressors they face.

The Type D Personality

According to the American Medical Association, a new personality type has been identified as one more prone to inflammation, particularly heart disease and stroke, than the Type A (which



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The Glass Half Filled

Try this exercise to let go of overload and the resentment that accompanies it. Hold a glass half-filled with water. It feels comfortable in your hand. Keep holding it. Your hand is starting to ache. Hold it for half an hour, an hour. The glass gets unbelievably heavy, and your hand hurts terribly. Now put the glass down. What a relief! Pick it up again and hold it for a few minutes. Put it down.

The glass represents your overloaded life and the inevitable resentment it brings. Who can carry even the smallest resentment for long without feeling overwhelmed by the pain, without having it take over one's whole consciousness?

Put the glass down and feel relieved. You can always pick it up again if you want to for a few moments. Do yourself a favor, though, and put it down.

pales in comparison): the Type D personality, distressed and distant. The Type D has trouble tolerating her own imperfections and perceives asking for help as a personal shortcoming; both attitudes are barriers to intimacy.

For a Type D, change can be overwhelming because the unknown invites fearful visions. Consider this: you can walk a plank on the ground with confidence, remaining on the plank without slipping off to the ground. Now elevate that same plank ten feet, and you are frightened that you will lose your balance and fall. It is not your body that fails you, but your *mind*, which conjures up failure. The Type D personality is terribly afraid of living her life: What will people say? What if she should fail?

Use It or Lose It!

Even when you feel distressed about having lost all control—because of the aging process, for example—you can exert the mind, your powerful control center. Observe how some older people look young and act young even when chronologically advanced in age. Some people who get cancer feel alienated from humanity; others come to their senses. Make up your mind to live with enthusiasm, experiencing one focused action after another. Obviously, no one is going to live forever, but you can really be happy while you are alive. Choose not to listen to your self-doubts by redirecting your thoughts toward what you love doing, toward relaxation. You are not stuck, because you *can release your physical and mental overload*. Choose to put the half-full glass down and create your own calm center.

Whereas our prehistoric ancestors experienced tangible physical threats that triggered life-and-death stress responses, we usually face emotional threats, such as being ignored at a party, feeling embarrassed when making a speech, or getting criticized at work. Your thoughts control your body. That's why the placebo effect works. Before you even learn how to beat stress and lift your mood, start by minimizing small daily stressors, such as by releasing some of your duties and asking for help. You might not be able to tackle the huge chronic stressors just yet. However, by reducing your stress overload with small, manageable changes, you will reap giant gains immediately.

Keep in mind: the stress response during prehistoric times was adaptive behavior for survival. However, now that survival is easier, stress comes at a great expense to your health and happiness because there is no tangible outlet. The point is that you have to make a concerted effort using both mind and body to release stress. Awareness is a necessary first step in cultivating a relaxation response. In the following chapters you will learn concrete



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The Four Rooms Exercise

In the **physical room**, you eat healthy meals and snacks; eat a rainbow array of fruits and vegetables; drink plenty of water; take a power hour to do your own thing; exercise daily, whether by walking, lifting weights, or dancing around the house; get enough sleep; and organize your day around good health. In the **emotional room**, you establish boundaries, express your true feelings naturally, ask for what you need, delegate chores, and come to your senses instead of numbing them. In the **intellectual room**, you learn from reading, watching movies, and listening to others. Some chance encounter might transform your life for the better. Three words from the woman ringing up your order at the supermarket can be your breakthrough moment. In the **spiritual room**, you activate your compassion; don't just talk about it. This might mean volunteering once a week at your community center, letting someone with a couple of items precede you at the supermarket, holding the door open for an elderly person, or giving a sad stranger a warm smile.

When you address your physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual stressors by walking into the four rooms of your home, your immune system becomes vigilant; thinking clears and energy soars. If a problem should arise, you will deal with it. Instead of falling into a negative worry loop, you can take the necessary steps to solve your problem, asking for help when you need it and evaluating your success along the way, flexible enough to try plan B or plan C. If you observe yourself slipping while under pressure, take note of your physical stress-response cues and interpret them to reestablish balance quickly. Your body will let you know if you are successful; this is your own form of biofeedback.

coping tools that will build confidence in your ability to cope with the stress of modern day living as you experience greater well-being. You are building up a resistance to feeling bad, the same way you might get your immunizations and booster shots.

Step 2, Reclaim Your Identity, will help you achieve *homeostasis*, which in terms of stress management means balanced physical and emotional well-being, in order to treat yourself as an individual whom you hold in high esteem. Liberating yourself from stress addiction means identifying your true self and the inner message that can propel you forward to a happier life. It's time to reveal who you really are and identify your real purpose in life.



Are you ready to reveal your hidden dreams, take stock of your unique gifts, and reclaim your identity? An original like you does not need to settle for living a contracted life without meaning! Your personality quest in Step 2 will lead you on a journey to embrace yourself and reclaim your joy and natural self-expression. It's high time you answered these questions: Where do I fit and with whom? And do I even need to fit?

