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Understanding Stress Addiction

Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it gets you nowhere.

—Erma Bombeck

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Are You a Stress Addict?

If you're reading this book, chances are (1) you recognize you're a stress addict; (2) you have a concerned friend, family member, or colleague who thinks you're a stress addict; or (3) you are in denial.

Because the experience of stress is different for each individual, it's hard to know for sure whether you have an unhealthy dependence on stress. The following few questions may help you figure it out:

- Do you thrive on tight deadlines?
- Do you often leave things until the last minute?
- Do you have a difficult time doing nothing?
- Does it take you a few days off to feel like you're on vacation?
- Do you spend much of your vacation time thinking about work?
- Do you constantly worry about what you might be missing?
- Do you feel stressed when you're disconnected from your cell phone or computer?
- Do you find it difficult to turn your brain off at night to sleep?
- Do you feel as though there is never enough time to get things done?
- Do you ever feel as though the work you put in for the day is not enough?
- Do you lack time to see your friends or participate in hobbies you used to enjoy?
- Do you feel as though you're constantly running from one thing to the next?
- Do you find yourself finishing, or wanting to finish, other people's statements?
- Do you wish I'd stop asking questions so that you can get on with the book?

Chances are, you answered "yes" to many of these questions. But who cares? We all have stress, and it's not going anywhere—so

we might as well accept it, right? I once had a client tell me, "I love my stress and I don't want to manage it." She spoke aloud the truth that so many of us are living, whether we accept it or not: We thrive on stress. It makes us feel driven to succeed, boosts our energy, and gives meaning to our life. Our conversations often seem to involve a competition of who's more stressed. "How are you?" "Stressed." "Me too." Then the parties go on to explain why they're so stressed, with the person who's worse off winning in our backward way of thinking. This twisted social story tells us that the busier we are, the more stressed we are, the more important we are. Take *Seinfeld*'s George Costanza, who made it a point to look annoyed so that his boss would assume he was doing something important.

The problem is not that you can't handle your stress. You're likely doing a fabulous job getting the things done that need to get done, meeting deadlines, and even attending a social event once in a while (especially if it's work related). But what is your experience of your life? Are you taking time to appreciate what you're working so hard to accomplish, or are you merely speeding through to tackle the next item on your to-do list?

Perhaps more important, are you aware of the long-term impact that this stress-filled life has on you? Probably not. Or maybe, like most addicts, you know the consequences of your behavior but are so hooked on it that coming down from stress feels uncomfortable. With such a busy schedule, it's easier to stay amped up than deal with the detox of letting go. Remember the advertisement "This is your brain on drugs"? It made a lasting impression. Unfortunately, it's not just drugs that can cause your brain to feel scrambled. Unmanaged stress might be just as dangerous.

Stress (and drugs) have been shown to have the following side effects: increased heart rate and blood pressure, increased blood sugar, breakdown of muscle tissue, decreased digestive functioning, ulcers, blood clotting, migraines, skin problems, premature aging, loss of brain cells, social isolation and loneliness, anxiety, panic attacks, depression, substance abuse, relationship problems, lack of focus, multitasking, and disengagement. A

20-year study by the University of London completed in the early 1990s found that unmanaged reactions to stress were a more dangerous risk factor for cancer and heart disease than either cigarette smoking or high-cholesterol foods.[1] Stress may even be as addictive as drugs. In addition to the hormones adrenaline and noradrenaline, stress releases the "feel good" chemical dopamine, which encourages repeat behaviors by activating the reward center in our brains. This may be at the heart of many addictive behaviors and substance abuse issues.

Although it may seem a bit extreme to consider stress an addictive substance, just about anything can become addictive depending on the individual who is responding. Addiction expert Stanton Peele has suggested that any habit can become excessive, compulsive, or life endangering. According to Peele, "Addiction . . . is not a label to be applied to specific things but to an involvement a person creates in time or space."[2] It's all about the relationship that we build with our habits of behavior.

When we lose sight of our natural pulse—or worse, intentionally disrupt it to accomplish something—we trigger an adaptive response that becomes addictive. At its core, addiction is a dependence on some external or internal stimulus that causes either a feeling of pleasure or the avoidance of pain. Early-stage stress addiction usually attracts us to sources of stress to get something positive—a neurochemical satisfaction such as dopamine release, an intrinsic (internal) reward such as feeling needed, or an extrinsic (external) benefit such as money, power, or success.

As our addiction progresses, however, it becomes less about what we might get and more about avoiding loss, which brings with it an even stronger tie to our basic survival mechanisms. Instead of intentionally turning to stress-providing stimulation for positive reinforcements, we require them to avoid the pain of its absence. We shift from triggering positive dopamine to avoiding negative cortisol, from seeking importance to avoiding insignificance, and from accomplishing success to merely

remaining employed. This fear-based shift moves us from what appeared to be healthy striving to merely surviving.

We can reverse this process by neurochemically rebalancing our brain, nourishing our mind and body with love and support, and establishing training behaviors or habits that strengthen our ability to resist stress's addictive nature. As we've already discovered, stress is not the problem. Depending on or accepting stress without recovery despite hazardous consequences, such as fatigue, dissatisfaction in life, loss of joy, and anxiety, is what destroys our health, energy, and engagement.

Stress is neither good nor bad; it just is. Therefore, it is not the existence of stress that causes an addictive dependence; rather, it's our individual response to the stress in our lives over time. Each person has unique experiences with stress throughout the life span; certain situations cause severe disability, while others enhance learning and facilitate growth.

A life without stress would be stressful. It would push us out of our comfort zone in the opposite direction, with a lack of stimulation for growth. Research shows that one of the highest spikes in human mortality occurs within six months of retirement. It is quite dangerous to go from being always "on" to a screeching halt. The human system is not designed to function in a state of all or nothing, yet because of our hectic environment and constant connection, people tend to be pulled back to the extremes. To operate most effectively, we need to find the balance between stress and recovery that enables us to experience challenge and growth without constantly breaking down.

As discussed in Chapter 3, peak performance in sports, business, and other competitive endeavors occurs at the pinnacle of stress, where there's just enough meaningful, focused stimulation to energize our efforts without going over the top and burning out. The challenge that most people have in finding this balance at the peak is getting pulled into increasingly stressful situations without allowing the necessary rest or recovery time. As a result, the system starts to depend on false sources of energy to

push through the symptoms of fatigue until we experience an energy crisis. When that happens, even the harshest stress hormones can't get us up in the morning or through a simple task.

Understanding Stress

Attempting to come up with a universal definition of stress is a lot like trying to define love; it can mean so many different things to different people, and its true experience lies in the eyes of the beholder. The simplest and most helpful definition of stress that I've discovered comes from Hans Selye, a pioneering stress researcher who is often accredited with discovering, or at least first conceptualizing, our modern notion of stress. In 1936, Selye coined the word *stress* as being "the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change"[3] after noticing that laboratory animals who were subjected to acute physical stimuli (such as deafening noise, blaring light, or extreme temperatures) exhibited similar pathological changes, including stomach ulcers, shrinkage of lymphoid tissue, and enlargement of the adrenal glands. He later showed that persistent, chronic stress could cause these animals to develop diseases similar to those seen in humans, such as heart attacks, stroke, kidney disease, and rheumatoid arthritis.

Although the word *stress* quickly became associated with negative threats and responses, Selye also recognized that any definition should also include good stress, or what he called *eustress*. This differentiation between positive eustress and negative distress helped to categorize the initial stimulus. However, it still didn't provide a true separation in how individual responses might differ. Many people have negative stressors that cause growth and a positive outcome, while others experience significant benefit that includes positive stress—and still find themselves suffering negative consequences. As you look back on your life, you can most likely see how the periods when you experienced the most growth were also some of the most challenging. At the same

time, you probably know people who despite seeming to "have it all" complain about the minor details of their existence, such as choosing cabinet colors for a new home, or even create drama when it's not there.

Perhaps this conundrum is what caused the idea of stress to revert to a one-size-fits-all concept—describing not just the stimulus but also the experience and the outcome. As one physician explains in a 1951 issue of the *British Medical Journal*, "Stress in addition to being itself, was also the cause of itself, and the result of itself."[4] Stress continues to be difficult to define because it is ultimately grounded in the perception of the individual having the experience. Circumstances such as prior life experiences, sense of control, and current level of resilience can all play a role in determining whether people simply drag themselves along through chronic, overwhelming stress or use the opportunity as a stimulus for personal growth.

We can't control what's already happened to us and are oftentimes dealing with elements beyond our control. However, the critical factor in how we respond to stress is our personal resilience, which can change our response to stress across all levels—body, mind, and spirit.

The Stress Response

Let's first look at our ingrained stress response as we work to create a simple understanding of how stress affects the human operating system. According to stress researcher Robert Sapolsky,[5] all vertebrates respond to stressful situations by releasing hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol to mobilize energy throughout the body, particularly in those areas that allow us to fight our way out of or flee from danger, such as the large muscles in our lower body. Our evolved nature means that humans are the only species able to imagine a potential threat and respond as if it were actually happening in the moment. Regardless of whether the stress we

face is real or imagined, the impact on the body and brain is identical.

As a result, physiological changes ensue: an increase in heart rate, blood flow, and available blood sugar to provide fuel for energy production. This enhanced energy metabolism is beneficial in the short term; it leads to increases in strength, improvements in short-term memory, and enhanced immune functioning.

The problem is that we engage the same response even if we are not truly in danger. Over time, the responses that were meant to protect us start to have the opposite effect, causing internal wear and tear on both the body and the brain. This parallels our internal inflammatory response, which is designed to help us repair acute damage but over time begins to attack even healthy cells, causing more harm than good.

Acute (short-term) response	Chronic (long-term) response
Increase in adrenaline	Increase in cortisol
Increase in heart rate	Continued strain on heart and arteries
Increase in blood sugar	Excess sugar stored as fat
Enhanced immune functioning	Increased inflammation
Improved short-term memory	Poor decision making

In addition to the simple but powerful hormonal shifts that occur, stress that persists over time, accumulates to toxic levels, or if not given adequate time for recovery, can speed up the development of life-threatening diseases and disorders. Although stress has not yet been shown to cause any particular illnesses, it has been correlated with all of modern society's major diseases: heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and dementia. The exact connection between chronic stress and disease is still not clear, but many studies under way may soon provide a better picture.

One new area of research seems to pinpoint the impact of chronic stress on our genetic coding and a particular part of our

DNA molecule called the telomere. A simple way to think of a telomere is that it functions like the cap on the end of shoelace. Telomeres experience normal erosion during cell division, but this aging process may speed up as a result of chronic stress. As the protective coating begins to wear away, it allows the sensitive fabric underneath to become damaged and frayed. Elizabeth Blackburn and her colleagues at the University of California at San Francisco discovered that chronic stress and perception of life stress both affected three biological factors—the length of telomeres, the activity of telomerase, and levels of oxidative stress, all of which speed up the biological aging process. People undergoing the greatest perceived levels of stress were said to have a biological age that was 10 years greater than their chronological age.[6]

Exciting developments in biotechnology will soon enable us to measure both the internal damage we've experienced through unmanaged stress and the changes and improvements we're able to initiate using techniques such as those discussed in Parts 2 and 3 of this book. Until then, it's important that we pay close attention to our symptoms of imbalance, noticing when there are warning signs being sent by our body and brain, such as fatigue, irritability, anxiety, depression, changes in appetite, and illness. If we stay constantly amped up on stress hormones without taking a break from time to time, we may be able to avoid the temporary disruption of warning signs and symptoms but find ourselves running out of steam with a debilitating personal energy crisis.

Overload, Overwhelm, Over It All

Stress is both additive and accumulative, meaning that the number of stressors, the intensity of each, and the frequency and length of time each persists all combine to create the total effect on your system. This is similar to how food affects your digestive system's glucose response. You may have heard of the glycemic index; this is a score that's given to each food to determine how

quickly the nutrients break down into usable blood sugar in the body. It was once thought of as a guideline for food selection. However, the glycemic index score alone leaves much to be determined; the way that food is prepared and other foods you eat in combination ultimately impact how you react to the food. What is more important to evaluate is the total glycemic load. This requires calculating many factors that are usually too time consuming to use readily in real-life situations and are often unknown, particularly if you're not the one preparing the foods.

In the same way, it probably doesn't make sense to attempt to calculate your actual stress load at any moment. Yet it is still an important factor to keep in mind when considering how you are dealing with the stresses of life. Stress builds from the inside out, meaning that the irritants and stimulation we experience at a cellular level affect our systemwide resilience. Rather than freaking out about all the minor details going on around you that you can't influence, it's more important to focus on what is under your control: how you manage the critical elements of recovery (energy management) and perception (information management).

If we are not mindful of our stress and recovery balance we can easily find ourselves fighting off fatigue, drawn to even greater amounts of stress in order to feel energized. At the same time, the way we perceive our current stress load often leads to the feeling of being overwhelmed. As a result, we can experience adrenal dysfunction, exhaustion, or burnout. There are some warning signs. If you feel worn down—like you've experienced a dramatic shift in your energy level—or if you have an unusually difficult time recovering from illness or injury, you might find it helpful to meet with a medical practitioner who specializes in adrenal dysfunction.

My personal journey with fatigue felt like I had stepped onto a roller coaster I didn't want to ride, although the outcome for me was positive and led to my desire to write this book. Ultimately I determined that the label used to describe this syndrome, or classification of symptoms, was not necessary in creating my

process of healing. In case it's helpful for you, I'd like to share a bit of my experience.

Less than a year ago, I went from running one half marathon per month to barely being able to tolerate a half minute of jogging on the treadmill. I knew I was burning the candle at both ends with my travel and workload, but I had always been able to get myself going when I needed to workout. I felt like my exercise routine was critical in keeping my energy levels adequate (not ideal) and my anxiety levels under control. Despite regularly traveling cross-country and dealing with ever-changing time zones, I pushed myself to get to the gym—even if it meant getting up in the morning at what would have been nonsensical hours at home.

A chance meeting with an integrative medicine doctor opened my eyes to what might have caused my sudden fatigue (although I realize when looking back on it that it didn't come on so suddenly). He pointed out that it might be the symptom of an underlying condition that caused a significant weakening of my adrenal glands or a systemic concern that kept the adrenal process from effectively doing its job. I found myself weeping during a follow-up conversation, when he explained the causes and common symptoms of adrenal dysfunction. I told him that I was terrified that what I had been experiencing was just a mental battle with depression and anxiety or, even worse, that it was the way I was destined to spend my life. I'd grown up hearing that my symptoms were "all in my head," so I assumed someone was going to tell me to get over myself and get on with life. Fortunately, this doctor knew that a core condition was likely causing my symptoms, was convinced that I was quite far along the spectrum of exhaustion, and ordered a few simple tests to see what was going on. Most important, he believed that there was a solution to my problem and that the treatment was something I would be able to facilitate on my own with a little help.

I received the results of my lab work not long after, and sure enough, the doctor identified what appeared to be late stages of burnout. He thoroughly explained to me what happens as a result

of early trauma and continued chronic stress on the physiology of the body, in particular the small but powerful glands of the adrenal system. I felt a sense of hope as I decided to follow the treatment protocol for the first few days. Then I started to doubt myself, turning back to the old stories in my head about natural remedies versus medical diagnostics.

So as any good researcher would do, I decided to check in with my regular doctor to make sure there were no underlying conditions causing my severe fatigue. He informed me that the only truly accurate way to determine whether an adrenal disorder existed (notice the shift from dysfunction to disorder) was for me to undergo a blood test that would stimulate my glands to see whether they responded.

The next day, my physician called me on the phone to deliver the "good" results. He stated that there was no indication of any problem with my adrenal glands, and went on to suggest that I focus on the positive—that I was "functional." This was followed by a recommendation to see my shrink.

I'm not saying that my decision to seek medical care was unwarranted or a waste of time. It is always wise to look for underlying medical problems when the body isn't responding the way we know it should. That said, as I'm sure you can imagine, I was not willing to settle for a life of being "functional." I strive to be able to run on a treadmill for more than 30 seconds; I know it can be part of a healthy life. Although I don't need to go back to running a half marathon a month (probably not the best choice when traveling every week and feeling exhausted), the ability to be consistently physically active and feeling energized enough to do my job well are important to me. I'm guessing, because you're still reading this book, that it's important to you as well.

I share my story to let you know that if you're feeling less than optimal, it is up to you to seek the type of care that you need. I don't think recovery from fatigue requires a host of supplements and alternative treatments for most people, but it probably does for some. The information that I provide about recharging your

energy will certainly get you on the right path to healing your tired body, mind, and spirit. But if you need additional information, I encourage you to seek a practitioner who is wise to the integrative medicine approach (who does not ignore traditional medicine but rather integrates long-practiced traditions of both the past and the present). In the meantime, let's look at why something we know can be bad for us is so difficult to resist.

What Is Stress Addiction?

The addictive nature of stress affects us at multiple levels of our operating systems—biological, psychological, and social. Any form of addiction derives its strength from the biopsychosocial dependence that's accumulated over time.

Biologically, we have an ingrained response designed to protect us from threats in our environment. Often called the fight-flight-freeze response, these brain-based chemicals are triggered by our perception of stress—whether it's positive or negative and acute (short term) or chronic (long lasting). Depending on the way we interpret the situation, the chemical response in our brain can be quite different, resulting in a unique systemwide stress response. Take, for example, the idea of a challenge versus a threat. Two people in the same scenario may assess their abilities and determine that they either have what they need to get through the experience unharmed or fear they won't rise to the challenge. For example, when people feel supported by others, they estimate the slope of a hill to be less steep than when they stare at the climb alone. The same situation with a different perspective leads to a different experience.

This means that our psychological response, which consists of both our mental and our emotional evaluations, has the power to dictate the physiological response. In this case, how we think drastically changes how we feel.

As part of our assessment of stress, the brain also takes into account our social norms, expectations, and perceived level

of support—what we might call our *collective story*. The world today has clear societal messages that can sway our interpretation of circumstances. We are constantly being bombarded, primarily by our 24-hour news media, with the notions that the world is a dangerous place and there is not enough good to go around.

In addition, our constant connection to technology gives our brain a boost of feel-good chemicals each time we anticipate a new message, be it a blessing or a threat. According to a study by Nokia, the average mobile phone user checks his device every 6.5 minutes during the day, or 150 times while he's awake.[7] It's no wonder people have begun to experience what's been called phantom vibration syndrome, where they feel a vibration on the skin near their pocket and go to pull out their phone only to discover it was a false alarm. This can happen when the phone is in a different room, or while the person is watching TV or even is in the shower.

Our brains are hardwired to crave new information. Each time we are exposed to novelty, we experience a release of dopamine, a chemical associated with the brain's reward center. This affinity for all things new may also be at the root of our multitasking addiction; we are always a bit curious about what else might be going on when we're trying to focus on a single task. With access to so much information, it's easy to find a distraction these days.

Whether stress should be considered addictive continues to be a hot topic—and a fun debate. Yet it's clear that certain factors keep us connected to stress as an energy provider—especially when we aren't managing our energy effectively through more lasting sources, such as healthy nutrition, physical activity, relaxation, adequate sleep, and strong social connections. If you look at the medical model of addiction, it seems clear that stress can be used as a drug of choice just like any other mood-altering substance or behavior. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*,[8] for something to be classified as an addiction, it should meet the following requirements. As you read

through them, ask yourself whether any sound familiar when it comes to stress or stimulation in your life.

1. The impact of the substance is decreased with repeated use, requiring greater amounts to sustain the desired effect (tolerance). (In other words, you need more stress to get the same "high.")
2. Withdrawal symptoms (such as irritability, headaches, fatigue, depression, anxiety, or other physical or psychological changes) experienced when substance is not in use, or the substance is taken in order to avoid symptoms of withdrawal.
3. Continued use over a longer period of time or in greater amounts than originally intended. (You experience high levels of stress to meet a deadline, tell yourself you'll take time off once the task is completed, but find yourself quickly slipping back into stress mode for the next thing.)
4. Desire to stop or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control substance use. (You know you should take breaks, but can't seem to make them a priority.)
5. Significant time spent obtaining substance or recovering from its use.
6. Decreased participation in important social, recreational, or work-related activities due to substance use. (You skip out on meeting up with friends or taking much-needed decompression time to stay connected to work and amped up on stress.)
7. Continued use despite physical or psychological consequences either caused or made worse by the substance. (You see the consequences of unrelenting stress in your life, but continue to attempt to push past the pain or discomfort.)

Nature versus Nurture

During my research process, I also became aware of a hypersensitization that some people experience with regard to stress.

Essentially, a trauma or series of traumas overstimulates the human stress response for a certain period, making it less effective at managing future episodes. Studies have evaluated individuals who have experienced childhood trauma such as physical or sexual abuse and found that the greater the early stress, the more damaging the exposure to stress later in life.[9] This may be part of the reason some people seem prone to worry, whereas others roll with the punches. There is a genetic component to our patterns of thought and behavior, and many people who exhibit type-A personalities were born that way. However, we know that even genetic predispositions aren't a guaranteed fate. We're increasingly seeing that while genes "load the gun," it's lifestyle that "pulls the trigger."

You can compare this to people who seem genetically wired to develop type 2 diabetes. Although they may be more sensitive to insulin swings and imbalances, their lifestyle choices mostly determine whether they end up becoming insulin resistant and developing the disorder. In the same way, repeatedly experiencing situations that we perceive to be stressful may "wear out" the body's ability to cope. Over time, we may either become overly sensitive or lack sensitivity in that department. With continued exposure, the body's natural biological mechanisms weaken or even begin to fight themselves.

However, we can reduce or even remove painful symptoms by bringing the body back into balance through a process of resting, repairing, and rebuilding—and by undergoing what I refer to as the "recharge process."

I can clearly identify scenarios in my life that led to my hypersensitization to stress. I've been aware of these for decades yet still struggled to rebalance my system to be less out of sync. I'm sure you've been through similar situations. We can recognize where the problem started, but mere knowledge of the cause does not provide us with a solution. The key to recovery is to first acknowledge and understand the underlying cause of the sensitivity and then work smarter (not harder) to repair the damage and build resilience to stress moving forward.

From One Addict to Another

I know all of this not just through research but because it is my story too. After pushing for years, using excess stress and survival-based emotions to help me cope with feeling I was in over my head, my brain and body finally stopped me in my tracks. I feel fortunate that it wasn't a more severe message, and I remind myself every day that I have been warned. But it was enough to show me that the way I was working wasn't working.

I was diagnosed at an early age with an anxiety disorder and therefore knew stress would always be part of my life. I was also clear on what I wouldn't be able to tolerate, including stressful situations such as flying and public speaking. When my former boss first hired me for the Human Performance Institute in Orlando, Florida, I remember him beaming with excitement when he told me that with time and experience I'd have the opportunity to travel and become a keynote speaker. I quickly informed him that I was interested in the job but only if I could stay at home and train the groups that came to our facility to limit my time on the road. I was thrilled that my lack of excitement about the "adventure" of being a road warrior didn't cost me the job.

Two years later, after being pestered by a client, I agreed to travel a short distance to give a keynote presentation. What happened next changed my life. My head was spinning with stress during the weeks leading up to the meeting, but about halfway through the session, the audience roared with laughter at something that I said (a good thing, in this case)—and I was hooked. I couldn't believe the attendees enjoyed my talk, and the lineup after the meeting was filled with individuals eager to swap stories and share their gratitude with me.

The ability to connect with people on this deeper level about things that I knew would have a positive impact on their lives was amazing. I quickly recognized that I was being given an opportunity to do work I was truly passionate about, and I couldn't slam

the door shut without at least giving it my best try. So I proceeded to work diligently with my client to put together a customized program that ended up giving me opportunities to travel and speak around the globe.

The following year I traveled more than 300,000 miles, visiting places as distant as Hong Kong, Australia, and Greece. I'll never forget the feeling I had stepping off a transcontinental plane; fetching transportation, unsure of currencies or communications; and pinching myself that I was taking this on. Each destination was a new obstacle, each presentation terrified me night after sleepless night, but I kept going—that is, until I couldn't.

With a compromised immune system and constant overwhelming stress I could virtually feel rushing through my veins, my system finally crashed. I had experienced panic attacks as a child, but usually they were fairly quick and mostly harmless. This time the panic seemed to accumulate over a period of days that turned into weeks, and I found myself in the hospital multiple times.

I couldn't shake the feeling of terror, that something had snapped and I would never be able to get on a plane or a stage again. My life as I knew it was over, and for the first time in several years on the road, I called in sick. As I slowly worked myself out of panic mode and into survival mode, I recognized that something had to change. I knew that I needed to take better care of myself to keep from breaking down this way in the future. My first step was to get a massage.

At the time, I simply assumed that massage was something you did when you went to a spa and felt like spending a fortune on being pampered. However, I quickly realized that it was also a way for me to show myself love and support while decreasing the dangerous cortisol hormones that flooded my system. Many years later, I still commit to getting a massage once a week as part of my maintenance plan. We all experience recovery and relaxation differently, so massage might not be the answer for everyone. But I find I'm paying for time to be taken care of—time for me to focus on relaxing my body and quieting my mind. It's not only

paid off in terms of health benefits; I have done most of my best work during massage sessions. I've found that the pathways in my brain begin to relax and make new connections, triggering creative thoughts and insight.

I can look back on each personal energy crisis in my life and see clearly how my energy management routine had failed. When I don't "put my oxygen mask on first," my sensitive brain and body let me know immediately. I used to call it a curse; I felt like my brain was somehow broken or I was a freak of nature. But now I consider it a blessing. Most people can push through the fatigue and the exhaustion and can even burn out before realizing something has to be done. They can slowly disengage from things enough to keep their sanity, even if they're regularly disappointed in their lack of energy or engagement. But the longer we push through the pain, the more we inflict internal wear and tear on our system. The sooner we are forced to take a hard look at our stress response, the sooner we can minimize the damage and start to rest, repair, and recharge our bodies and minds.

My name is Heidi, and I'm a stressaholic. Not only have I been put in situations that terrified me, I have put up with them because of the great reward I received for pushing through the pain. What's worse, I miss the stress when it subsides; I crave it so much that I've even re-created it without reason. During the majority of the last decade I spent on the road as a speaker and consultant, I've tried to build in relaxation practices, but I found them boring and quite honestly a "waste of time." Who can meditate when there is so much work to be done and so little time in which to do it? But my stress addiction has taught me that I tell myself stories to support my need for speed. We all do. We've all been fooled by the story that the busier we are and the more stressed we are, the more important we must be. I recall driving to an appointment, glancing down at my phone to check e-mail (something I never do anymore), and feeling depressed staring at an empty inbox because my sense of worth had become wrapped up in how much work I had to do.

The truth is that we can be busy without being stressed and we can have challenges without being worried or anxious. We can take control of our operating system and transform the lens through which we see life to one that is more optimistic and resilient. We can rewire the way our brain perceives stress and experience significant growth as a result—rather than enduring yet another energy crisis. But to do so, we need to design a more optimal way of operating that enables us to take on the stress of life in manageable amounts, with built-in periods of rest and recovery. By creating a more resilient system, we build up our tolerance to stress so that when the most difficult circumstances occur, we can experience our most profound growth as a result.

Many people assume that having more of whatever they need or want—whether it's time, money, power, or the like—will make them happy. But positive psychology research has shown the opposite can be true. Studies of lottery winners discovered that people feel happier up to a certain amount of winnings, most likely due to an increase in security. But along with the positive bolt of benefits comes more challenges: tax payments, greater lifestyle expenses, expectations, family members they didn't know existed, and so on. However, people who have experienced debilitating injuries, such as amputees, face tremendous loss but often rebound with a greater sense of purpose as they rebuild their system and reframe their life. It's not life's circumstances that make the biggest difference in our happiness and well-being; it's our perception of what's going on around us and our ability to cope with, and even learn to embrace, all that it has to offer.

Later in this book I discuss specific rules and mantras that I found helpful in my journey away from stress addiction—such as recognizing I am not my thoughts, realizing recovery is not optional, and finally understanding that taking care of myself is not selfish. I hope that these ideas will help you as you break free from the grasp of stress in your life and move from exhaustion to enlightenment.