

Natural Law No. 1

Responsibility

Stress is the twin sister of madness

— Chinese proverb

This first chapter is all about understanding the stress cycle and how stress can affect us in the workplace, because once we understand a few simple rules, then it is possible to have a completely different, less stressful experience at work. In order to really understand that WE control our stress levels, we need to understand what stress actually is and the impact it has on our mind and body. Whilst there is still no universally agreed definition of 'stress,' I think it is safe to say that most people have experienced varying levels of stress in their daily lives.

Now, just to be clear, I'm not talking about the type of stress that is 'buzzy'; that positive state of mind that makes us feel invincible. The technical word for that is *eustress* although I tend to call that welcome place excitement. No, the stress that I'm talking about here is the opposite kind; the overwhelming stress that changes our personality and outlook on life. I know only too well how I can be transported from being a rational, caring and compassionate human to quite the reverse, when I'm feeling stressed out. There is something about stress that can bring out the worst in us – and while we may try and suppress this change of character, there are times that we say and do things that we may later regret. For that reason alone, it is time to address the root causes of stress and learn how to alleviate them so that we do not become a victim of our own anxieties.

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“When I’m stressed, the world becomes a different place. I stop thinking of people as people, but more like obstacles to be overcome. It feels like I’m solely responsible and I can’t trust anyone to do anything right. My behaviour becomes much sharper and more snappy and while I can get away with this at work, I’m also more verbally attacking at home too. Unfortunately, my wonderful husband may even end up getting a torrent of abuse after making an innocent comment.”

— Jessica, *Financial Analyst*

When I look back at my time working in Public Relations, there is one incident that stands out for me. Strangely nothing really dramatic happened and compared to other experiences that people endure throughout the world, my ‘moment’ would not have scored highly on a global stress scale. I wasn’t made redundant, fired or forced to jump out of a burning office. I have no doubt that other people would have breezed through the circumstances without ruffling a feather. Indeed, I’m sure on another day I could have breezed through it without ruffling a feather myself, but the truth of the matter is that on that particular rainy November morning in 2001 I was lost in London, late for an appointment and very stressed in the back of a black taxi cab. My morning of difficulties culminated with me desperately (and I use that word advisedly) trying to find the CNBC studio so that I could brief my client. My client, an impatient man, had just called demanding to know where I was as he was due to go live on air on the ‘Power Lunch’ programme. My manager, an equally impatient and complex woman had also called demanding that I get to the studio immediately. Believe me, I wanted nothing more than to get the studio, but I just couldn’t find the address, this being before the delights of Bluetooth. I was shaking and unable to think clearly as I tried to make sense of my A to Z map, hoping that if I stared long enough at the pages, the address would somehow materialise (it didn’t). The driver – who I believe was also stressed – hurled abuse at me for not knowing where I was going and helped my stress level peak when he stopped the cab and ordered me to get out. I swore at him, he swore back and then drove off.

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Now, if someone had told me (however kindly) at that moment that I was in control of my stress levels, I may very well be writing this from HMS Holloway prison, as right then it didn't feel like I was in control of anything. I could easily have vented my fury on any passer-by. It felt that everything – my client, my manager, the cab driver, the weather – was conspiring against me. Eventually, I found the studio and ever the professional, I duly put on my PR face and briefed my client before his appearance. I then raced dutifully back to the office to deal with the next item on my extensive 'To-Do' list. And whilst I was able to hold it together in the office (with the occasional silent snivel in the bathroom), when I got home, even with a large glass of Pinot Grigio, I continued to feel tense and anxious about what the next day would bring. Rarely in that job did I sleep well.

At this point in my early adult life, I didn't understand the human stress response, so while I may have often said silently or more often out loud, "God I'm stressed!" – I had very little understanding of what it actually meant when I uttered those words. And this so often seems to be the case with clients that I work with in the business world. In fact, for many people, they no longer recognise that they are experiencing stress symptoms as it is such a normal state of being for them, especially if other people around them are also displaying similar behaviour. Indeed, I used to think that anyone who was calm and laid back was either lazy or just didn't have enough work to do!

"About six months into my first job, I went out for a meal with a university friend. After half an hour or so he said, 'You seem really different, I've never seen you so stressed - try and relax'.

I remember feeling quite shocked by this – I didn't think I was stressed. It was only six months later when I spent a week working at a client's office that I realised how highly wired I was. I was so used to the being around forceful and stressed-out colleagues that I didn't realise there was another way to be."

— Caroline, *Public Relations Officer*

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In retrospect, I realise that if I'd had some understanding of how stress worked, my seven years in public relations would have been very different. Rather than feeling at the beck-and-call of others or a slave to my workload, I could have created more energy, vitality and most of all, more enjoyment in my job. This is a salutary lesson for us, as the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) October 2011 survey showed: stress has become the most common cause of long-term sickness absence for both manual and non-manual employees. It also states that up to 80% of ill health can be traced to stress.

While I still do experience stress and have moments of 'behavioural regret', I don't react to stressful situations in the same way that I used to, mainly because I now understand the stress cycle. So without further ado, let's look at what happens when we 'get stressed'.

The Four Phases of the Stress Cycle: Trigger - Reaction - Release - Rest

We will be taking a closer look at actual stress triggers later in the book, but right now we're looking at what happens once we are triggered and in the stress response itself, which is also called the fight or flight response. This very fast hormonal reaction is outside of our mental control (part of the parasympathetic nervous system) and is a characteristic that we have inherited from our ancient ancestors. So while each of us has different stress triggers, once we're triggered we all physically respond in exactly the same way. Whilst it can feel very uncomfortable to be in a highly reactive fight or flight situation, it's actually a blessing that we have this in-built mechanism within our physiology. In fact it is very unlikely that we'd be still here, inhabiting planet earth if it were not for these 'sensory alarm bells', as it is the fight or flight response that made sure our ancestors got off their backsides when faced with a prehistoric predator.

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To understand the stress response in action, let us imagine a prehistoric caveman outside of his cave, completely immersed in his work. Suddenly a sabre-toothed tiger comes into view: immediately and totally subconsciously, alarm bells trigger our caveman's focus from work to survival. Within seconds stress hormones including adrenaline, cortisol and DHEA flood his bloodstream, making his whole body pumped-up and surging with energy. His heart rate, blood rate and oxygen flow all dramatically increase while his digestive system and sex drive shut down. All physical activity is focused purely on survival and ensuring that our caveman is ready for action.

The caveman will physically respond either by facing his predator head on (fight) or running for the hills (flight). Once the danger has passed and if the caveman lived to tell the tale, he would then rest for a short amount of time to allow his hormone levels to return to normal before carrying on with the rest of his day, physically pretty much unaffected by his sabre-toothed tiger encounter. From these kinds of scenario, cave-dwellers evolved and learned how to protect themselves from such threats.

This centuries-old cycle is still the same today, the only trouble is that nowadays we don't follow the cycle through to its natural conclusion. As our work means that we are usually confined to an office, car or meeting room, it's easy for us to get stuck in the second stage - the hormonal reaction. Without having an outlet for physical release, all that pent-up stress-induced adrenaline swirls around our blood stream for up to six hours creating tightness, tension and a general feeling of being ill-at-ease. While I certainly don't encourage road rage or other acts of physical violence to get rid of the adrenaline, these urges are actually our body's natural response to stress. Therefore, it is imperative that we find new ways to release the adrenaline and allow our body to relax and regain its natural balance.

However, even if we do manage to reach stage three and create an outlet for physical release, many of us forego the last stage - rest. I'm not talking about taking a week-long break after doing a stressful fifteen-minute presentation to one's colleagues, I'm talking

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about ensuring that we create some 'time-out' in our day whether it is ten minutes to recharge our batteries by a walk in the park or a soothing massage after work. Too often we jump from one stress trigger to another without taking time to breathe properly let alone stop and rest – and then we wonder why at the end of the day we feel either wired or completely wiped out.

Rest is such a critical part of the stress cycle as it enables our body to rebalance its endocrine system - the system responsible for sending out all stress-related hormones such as adrenaline, cortisol and DHEA. If our adrenal glands are not given time to recuperate after a stressful situation, they will become out of balance. Too much adrenaline leaves us in a restless state, unable to relax or switch-off our racing minds and we can also experience physical symptoms such as excessive sweating – especially at night – and disrupted digestive and sleep patterns. Ultimately this can lead to adrenal burn-out which is a state of total exhaustion, the remedy for which bed rest for extended periods of time. It makes sense then to rest, relax and recuperate before such a regimen is forced upon us.

“Like most people, I had a really busy and demanding life. Although the nature of my job was full-on and the pace was relentless, I didn't have the time to stop even though I started to notice that my energy and concentration levels were noticeably dwindling. Mornings became especially hard as I was unable to get any proper, good quality sleep. Normal every day activities got harder as I tried to carry on and ignore the overwhelming feeling of exhaustion. After six months it got to the point when I was unable to get out of bed and had to have three months off work. This was one of the hardest and most frustrating times of my life. I'd say that it's taken me two years to recover and fully feel like myself again.”

— Jonathan, *Estate Agent*

Throughout the 'developed' world, there seems to be a mindset amongst business-people that 'doing nothing' is a sign of laziness. Epithets such as 'Time is Money' and 'Sleep is for Wimps' mean that relaxing and resting is frowned upon. Yet rest is a gentle, natural

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healing process that can boost our wellbeing fundamentally. The easiest and most effective thing that any of us can do to support natural wellbeing is to give ourselves time to rest deeply. We all want to do the best we can and often push ourselves when actually what we really need to work effectively is to take time to stop, relax and recharge our inner batteries. We're not like the pink Duracell rabbit that can just keep on going, and it's not natural for us to do that anyway. So while we may believe that we're indispensable and are too busy to take those precious moments to rest, in the long run we pay a high price for ignoring the last stage of the stress cycle as our bodies will eventually go on strike, resulting in a much longer, enforced stop.



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Our Reptilian Shadow

There is another part of the stress response that is also important to be aware of – the personality change that occurs. If you take a moment to reflect back to the last time you were in the stress response, try and remember how you behaved towards other people, whether it be angry thoughts that you internalised, or even said out loud; or kicking a chair or slamming a door... We all do it: our normally rational behaviour momentarily evaporates and is replaced by temperamental aggressiveness. I still cringe on remembering being late for a meeting in London. Time-keeping, or more specifically being late, is one of my personal stress triggers, so in this particular case, every rational thought had disappeared from my head as I ran to the meeting muttering blasphemies at young children taking up space on the pavement; I caused an old man to stumble and shouted at a car that did not let me cross the road. So what is about stress that changes my usually caring self to some alien creature who does not care or consider her fellow human beings?

Well, while I am not making excuses for my behaviour there is a reason for this. When we're in fight or flight mode, blood is diverted from the frontal cortex of our brains and re-routed to the hindbrain, which has several repercussions for us: the frontal cortex is concerned with more humanitarian issues such as reasoning, empathy and compassion. Now in a fight/flight or life/death situations, these qualities aren't necessarily a priority. So it makes sense that the blood is sent away from the front part of our brain, which could potentially hinder our survival and sent to the hindbrain.

Now, the hindbrain is a piece of anatomy that we actually share with reptiles: this part of the brain positively thrives on dominance, power and aggression as these are the exact qualities that we need to get us out of danger – well certainly in the past, when the dangers tended to be more physical. In the boxing match where Mike Tyson famously bit off Evander Holyfield's ear, this kind of instinctive aggression is a good (if not gory) example of the hindbrain in action.

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This helps to explain why, when we are stressed, we behave differently and act in an animalistic way. It can also help us to understand why our colleagues can say and do irrational things when under pressure. Rather than take it personally, it is so much more beneficial to have compassion for ourselves and our colleagues, and see that we all are, whether we realise it or not, in fight or flight mode – in the throes of an ancient evolutionary survival mechanism that operates from our ‘reptilian personality’.

Side-effects of the Stress Response

At this point we need to ask, does it matter? Is there a problem with yo-yoing in and out of the stress response? After all, no one is nice all the time and surely this keeps us alert and on our toes, especially in the office, where (let’s be honest), the sabre-toothed tiger has been replaced by a different type of predator!

Well yes, it does matter for a number of reasons. The stress response evolved as a survival mechanism for extreme circumstances, but the pressures of modern living mean that it is almost permanently switched-on. When we’re exhausting our hard-working adrenaline glands and living constantly in fight or flight mode, this hugely impacts our health and wellbeing. Also, because we stay in stage two (the hormonal reaction) for longer periods of time, this depletes our reserves and immune system so that we inevitably have less energy, vitality and motivation. And this isn’t just contained in the workplace: our physical and mental state spills over into our evenings and weekends.

“Although the sector that I work in is renown for being incredibly stressful, when I first started work, I relished each project as I really believed that I could make a difference. However, 10 stressful years later, I feel exhausted and ground down. Issues and problems that once fuelled me now overwhelm me and I feel constantly anxious. Rather than being able to leave my work in the office, I find myself worrying about my job at home, which makes me impatient and short with my husband and children. I often wake up in the middle of the night thinking about work problems as I can’t seem to get

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my mind to switch off. My whole body feels tight and the tension in my neck and shoulders gives me headaches and a general feeling of heaviness and discomfort."

— Lucy, *Care Co-ordinator*

There May Be Trouble Ahead

In the national media, it seems we are bombarded almost daily by the latest scientific reports that link stress to a whole host of diseases: from irritable bowel syndrome to high blood pressure and heart attacks. The BBC Radio 4's documentary 'Stressed Out' broadcast in 2000 stated that a person in Britain dies every three to four minutes from a heart attack, which they said is often directly related to stress. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that stress has major health implications for the body, rather than focus on all the different stress related diseases that can occur, I feel it is more important to understand how we can manage the root causes of these illnesses to try and prevent them in the first place.

To understand this we need to step back and gain a bigger perspective of how our bodies work. We can only ever be in two states:

1. Fight or Flight
2. Rest and Repair

These states are also referred to as the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems, which we'll talk about more in Chapter 7. As we know, when we're in fight or flight mode, we're in a state of defence/attack – while this important in our long term survival, it's actually pretty exhausting as we're constantly on edge, waiting for the onslaught.

The second stage – rest and repair – is where our body does all its core maintenance work, repairing cells, detoxifying blood, ensuring that our bodies can maintain natural homeostasis (balance) and wellbeing. This vital work is often done when we're relaxing or



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asleep. It's impossible for our bodies to be in fight or flight and rest and repair at the same time.

So, if we're spending longer in fight or flight mode than rest or repair, it means that our bodies are unable to carry out vital maintenance work, which stops us from functioning at our optimum level and our natural wellbeing will be eroded. These signs are often very gradual and it can take many forms: from frequently picking up colds, coughs or flu and having trouble getting rid of them, to feeling exhausted even when you wake up – or just some inner sense that things aren't quite right and that you're not functioning at 100%. Any upset to your digestive system or noticeable change to your sex drive is also a clue, as during fight or flight our digestive system and sex drive shuts down as blood is sent to extremities and muscles. These are just some of the signs that we're spending too long in the stress cycle.

Just How Stressed Are We?

Although there are stress tests that we can take, I don't advocate a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, as we all deal with stress differently depending on what is going on in our lives. Some of my clients would not even consider that they are stressed, however on gentle investigation of their physical state, it becomes clear to them that there are signals that stress is building up.

We're all different and will have different stress tolerances – sometimes we can cope with many triggers at once, and other times, it can be something very small such as someone snoring opposite us on the train, that can send us into the stress response. The most important thing is that we listen to our bodies and notice our own reactions. The list below highlights certain symptoms that are representative of stress being present:

Mental stress symptoms

- ☀ Tiredness
- ☀ Difficulty sleeping – either getting to sleep or staying asleep
- ☀ Irritability
- ☀ Lack of vitality

Physical stress symptoms

- ☀ Tiredness
- ☀ Headaches
- ☀ Tightness in muscles - especially shoulders and neck
- ☀ Irritable bowel syndrome
- ☀ Any digestive problems
- ☀ Excessive sweating
- ☀ Shallow breathing

The workplace is where we are likely to experience our highest levels of stress, if we are not proactive in managing our stress levels. The somewhat artificial environment at work – where we have to spend long hours with people we don't necessarily like, in a space that is often poorly designed and ventilated – can be a stress hub. It is not surprising therefore, that according to the Work Foundation's 'Stress at Work' report, work-related stress results in the loss of nearly 13 million working days each year. Research by Professor Tarani Chandola for the British Academy shows that women are more likely to have higher stress levels than men as they often take on responsibility for managing home life too. Many women actually start their working day highly stressed, dogged by the feeling that there is too much to do and too little time to do it.

Dealing With Stress – a pill for every ill?

Allopathic or 'mainstream' medicine focuses on suppressing stress symptoms. So whilst a painkiller gets rid of a headache, what is of utmost consideration is that the headache is telling us that something is not quite right. So, rather than blocking-out pain or

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discomfort, we would be so much better off taking some time to listen to our bodies to find out what we need to do to alleviate the specific symptoms. This can be unnerving and it requires courage to trust ourselves, but the current quick-fix mentality is doing a disservice to our bodies, which work so hard for us.

“Before I left my marketing job in London, days were long and stress levels were high, although at the time, I didn’t realise how stressed I was, because it was my normal state of being. My digestive system was slow, I had tingling sensations in my hands and I often felt like I couldn’t take enough breath. Combined with late nights of drinking, my immune system wasn’t very happy and I’d often come down with colds and flu, but I didn’t want to take time off work for fear of projects and campaigns falling behind. I self-medicated with Nurofen to block out my sore throats, headaches and feeling of being ‘run down’. This only worked temporarily and enabled me to get through the day (taking a higher dose than recommended!) but eventually my body started shouting louder and I’d be forced to bed with a fever... and ultimately had to take more time off work than I would’ve done if I’d just rested for a day and looked after myself with nutritious food and natural remedies. Now when I start to feel run down, I make time to rest and listen to my body, because no job (no matter how important) takes priority over my health.”

— Katie, *Copywriter*

Each chapter of this book will share a secret for natural wellbeing so that by the end of this book, you’ll not only understand your own reaction to stress but have a raft of techniques to lower your stress levels and rebalance naturally. When we take responsibility for our own wellbeing rather than avoiding and shutting off from what our bodies are trying to tell us, then we really will thrive inside and outside the workplace.

Visualisation Exercise

- ✿ Close your eyes and take three deep breaths:
- ✿ See yourself in the office at your most stressed. How does it feel in your body? Where are you noticing tension being held? How are people reacting to you? What word describes how you are feeling?
- ✿ Now imagine yourself in the office feeling cool, calm and collected. How does that feel in your body? How are other people reacting to you? What word describes how you are feeling?
- ✿ Write the first words that come to mind for each exercise on a Post-It note and keep it in on your desk. When you notice your stress levels rising, use these words as a reminder of the two different ways that you can be in the office.

