

# PERSONNEL NOTEBOOK

*For Your Most Important Resource*

## STRESS ON THE JOB

### Part I

While attending a business conference a few years ago, I met a guy who had a reputation for being a hard, demanding, and intimidating boss with the classic “I’m building my own heart attack,” type A style. In his bold presentation, he stated, “type As don’t have heart attacks, they give them. I don’t have ulcers,” he added, “but I am a carrier.”

Stress. It can be a gift or a curse. It can make you a success, but it can also destroy your job, your health, your marriage, and your life. So, is stress your friend or your enemy? Do you want to nurture or negate stress?

Doctors tell us that stress is the most common affliction in America today. They also tell us that there is a good side to stress. Stress increases our focus on the key subject we are stressed about. Some of us who are procrastinators often have to get to that stressful point in order to get the job done. Stress can shoot adrenalin and sugar into your system. It can increase your blood flow, constrict your arteries, make your blood “stickier” (preparing to heal wounds), release fat into the blood stream (raising cholesterol levels), increase your pulse rate, and, in an emergency, give you an inordinate amount of strength to accomplish tasks you normally would not be able to perform.

Stress is truly the age-old condition humans have experienced from back in our human stage. It’s called the “fight or flight syndrome.”

When faced with danger, the human body immediately experiences stress. All the body’s senses are suddenly tuned and focused on two choices: stay and “fight” or run in “flight.” Depending on that instant decision, our body produces large amounts of adrenaline, concentrates blood flow, oxygen, and energy, and delivers it to the area needed. If the decision is to fight, the concentration is to the upper body muscles and to the production of rage to support an attack. If the decision is to run, the concentration is to the lower body muscles and fear to support flight from danger.

Our human ancestors regularly faced dangerous survival situations. Today, we are not often faced with such dangerous situations, but we are still faced with the stress factors that create those responses. Our adrenaline is still increased, our blood flow accelerates, and energy is pumped into our bodies. And those stress factors can test and fray our nerves, drain our energy and leave us a little disoriented

Although minimum and well-managed stress helps us in sports, at play, in competition, and in increased performance, excess prolonged or frequent stress can result in mental, physical, and emotional damage.

. Unchecked, stress can lead to hypertension, emotional impairment, heart conditions, and skin eruptions. Muscle pain, headaches, shortness of breath, sleep disturbances, sexual dysfunction, diabetes, and hyperactivity of the

thyroid gland are also linked to stress. Ultimately, these things can lead to ulcers, heart attacks, and strokes and other life-threatening conditions..

On-the-job stress can cause uncontrolled illness that can lead to poor performance, safety problems, high absenteeism, and disruption of company production. It can adversely affect employee teamwork and morale, and can lead to arguments that in extreme cases can result in violence. Stress-related problems have become so pervasive in the workplace that more employers are offering stress management courses. These courses are an integral part of the growth in wellness programs, and, overall, such programs are meeting with very good success.

Studies by the American Heart Association indicate that the kind of stress that leads to heart attacks is different in men and women. Women, they found, usually experienced stress-induced heart attacks after an emotional or traumatic experience in their life, such as a death in the family or a serious bout of depression. Men experience stress-induced heart attacks after a strenuous physical exertion. Overall, heart disease is still the number one killer of men and women.

So, how do you go about reducing stress and lowering the risk of developing a life-threatening illness? There are hundreds of remedies to reduce or control stress. Any concentrated effort on your part is likely to produce some positive results.

There is a vast field of research and advice on the subject of stress. The predominate array of supports can be grouped into four categories:

- I. Medical treatment**
- II. Anger management**
- III. Time management**
- IV. Relaxation techniques**

Beyond that of course, is the basic mechanical reaction. If there is a single cause for your

stress, such as a tough, overbearing boss or coworker, financial difficulty, marital problems etc., the best way to deal with that stress is to resolve the underlying problem that is causing it. If you are unable to do that, the four items above may be your best alternatives.

## **I. Medical treatment**

If your stress is induced by a medical condition, then start there. Discuss it with your doctor. Try to avoid the easy-out of taking medication. If that's the only solution your doctor offers, then at least seek a second opinion before starting on programs that often ignore the actual cause and can become habit forming. If you have to go this route, then, by all means, do so, but, trying to control the problem without serious medication is usually preferable. If medical conditions are the cause, focus on other medical remedies over the pills.

## **II. Anger management**

The next time you find yourself becoming annoyed or angry at something unimportant or even trivial, practice letting go. Make a conscious effort to not become angry. Don't waste the energy or invite the pains of stress when it serves little purpose. It's not unusual for anger and anxiety to be connected. Anger can trigger anxiety and stress. You must face your anger and learn to manage it. If you have an anxiety disorder, you may need to seek help with a therapist. One out of every five Americans has an anger management problem.

A few years ago, the American Psychological Association, in conjunction with Green River Community College, produced a 10-step program for controlling anger called "*Controlling Anger Before It Controls You.*":

1. Accept that most things in the world are out of your control.

2. Accept that it is *your choice* to get angry about those things.
3. No one makes you angry.
4. Life is unfair. Waste no energy lamenting or trying to change that fact.
5. No one likes to be around an angry person. No one feels like helping an angry person.
6. Why be angry? Maybe you really don't want your problems solved. Maybe you just want to complain, wail, and gnash your teeth.
7. Take stock of yourself. What do you want?
8. You should smile more. Your face won't break. There is physical, mental, and emotional therapy just in the act of smiling.
9. Anger is a weed. Hate is the tree.
10. Anger makes a rich man hated and a poor man scorned — *Thomas Fuller*.

You can gain a much more in-depth wealth of knowledge and assistance for anger management by visiting Leonard Ingram's Web site at [angermgmt.com](http://angermgmt.com). It's full of tips and work sessions as well as books, tapes, forum boards, and phone counseling. Further help may come from this well-known prayer:

*"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."*

### III. Time Management

Do you procrastinate? Do you consistently run late? Are you always behind on projects because you put them off until the last minute? If that describes you, then you are badly managing one of your most important resources, *time*. Bad time management is one of the leading causes of stress in today's world. We live our lives at such a fast pace, often arriving home, and then remembering something we should/could have done on the way home. So, you go out again to get it done.

Americans are famous for being the most productive people on the planet, with individuals who seem to get more done in a day than those in other countries do in a week. But, in fact, much of our fast pace is actually unproductive, stress-inducing wheel-spinning.

Effective time management on the job can provide you with the tools that can help you at home as well. When faced with so many things to do, how do you know where to start? What do you do first? Steven Covey, in his 1994 book *First Things First*, recommends you ask yourself the following:

- Which activities are the most important?
- What can I safely postpone?
- What can I get out of?
- What can I get done in a quicker way?
- How can I arrange my schedule to accomplish what is most critical?

One of the most successful executive recruiters I have ever worked with was Bryan Hoffman. I was always amazed at how much he accomplished every day, and how calmly he proceeded through a catalog of appointments, interviews, phone calls, meetings, business lunches, dinners, breakfasts, and social calls. Because Bryan was forever trying to recruit me to be one of his clients we became good friends, and I asked him if he would share his secret with me.

He said that beyond a diligent and calm focus on what he was doing at that particular time, he had one time management rule: Everything he did was based on the answer to one question, "*What is the most important use of my time right now?*" The answer to that question always identified his next action.

Based on the concept that if you can clearly identify and articulate the problem, it becomes much easier to identify the solution, author Able Mackenzie in his classic book *The Time Trap*, published by the American Management Association, listed 14 big time wasters. As you

will see, many of them are caused by the same problem.

1. **Attempting too much** — Usually caused by unrealistic time estimates, being overly ambitious, and trying to impress the boss.
2. **Ineffective job delegation** — Often caused by the feeling that you can do the job better yourself, micromanaging the work, lacking confidence in your staff, too insecure to trust the work to others, feeling that you must prove that you are capable of doing it yourself.
3. **Drop-in visitors** — Can be caused by the desire to be available and helpful. Ego, the feeling of importance, fear of offending, keeping your door open too often.
4. **Inability to say no** — It may be your desire to win acceptance and approval or a fear of offending. Or it may be not knowing how to refuse (try counting to 10 while considering, and then say “No”).
5. **Leaving too many tasks unfinished** — Too interested in getting to the next task whether finished with this one or not. Failing to prioritize work, inability to delegate, not focusing on the task you are doing now. (Try rewarding yourself for completing each task or set of tasks.)
6. **Management by crisis**-Letting every phone call change your agenda. (A famous response is, “*Your inability to adequately plan does not constitute my emergency.*”) Overreacting, treating problems as emergencies, procrastination, unrealistic time estimates, reluctance of staff to give you bad news before it becomes a crisis, doing easy things first while allowing important tasks to accumulate.
7. **Meetings** — Going to meetings that have no purpose, no agenda, the wrong people or too many people at the meeting, and not starting or ending on time. Allowing interruptions, wandering from the agenda, and failing to follow up on decisions and assignments.

(Try having stand-up meetings with no chairs or tables. Don’t invite people for protocol or politics, invite necessary participants only.)

8. **Personal disorganization** — Lack of priorities; failure to follow up and complete tasks; and being unable to find needed notes, materials, files, and information. (Need to delegate more, need to work from a daily to-do list.)

9. **Inadequate planning** — In too much of a hurry to complete task quickly, to plan each one out in advance, and not knowing how to plan a task.

In Part II of *Stress on the Job*, we will complete Able Mackenzie’s list, and then focus on relaxation techniques.

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