

How to Harness the Positive Power of Stress at Work

We've all seen or heard the statistics. You know the ones.

They're the numbers that prove that the workplace is changing at an exponential pace—so much so that levels of stress at work are actually killing us. The statistics that explain why so many of us need a vacation from our vocation. That stress.

It's a combination of too much work with too few resources combined with a generation of workers that don't seem to care about anything, sprinkled with a lackluster economy that justifies decisions by management that always seem to hurt the little guy—who is thankful that he even has a job in the first place. Yeah, that stress.

When your “fight and flight” system is activated, it can mess with your “rest and digest” system. That's when you begin to experience stomach problems, sleeplessness, headaches, fatigue, lethargy, lack of focus and more. Chronic stress can eventually lead to negative psychological changes, cardiovascular disease—even autoimmune diseases and cancer. But does it have to?

Does every person who is under chronic stress in the workplace have to succumb? Are some of us more resilient than others? And if so, why? How can some folks respond to and recover from stress while others are crushed by it? What is the secret to resiliency in the face of workplace stress?

Transcendence. If we had to choose one word to sum up the ability to make stress work for you and not let it beat you down, it would be this word. What is transcendence? It is the state or ability of going beyond the limits of ordinary experience. Limitless. This universally attractive theme of living without limits has been explored for centuries, and is

always popular because it touches a nerve with humans.

We all want to know what it would be like to be our perfect selves—to live our lives without limits. In a popular, Hollywood movie, *Limitless*, Eddie Morra (played by Bradley Cooper) is a writer plagued by failure—stunted in every area of his life by his inability to transcend his own human limitations and get out of his own way. He descends into a funk that drives away even his longtime girlfriend. Eventually Morra is transformed by a “wonder drug” that allows him to use 100 percent of his brain and become a perfect version of himself. Invulnerable to the stresses of life, he achieves more than he ever thought possible.

Aside from a wonder drug, are there strategies for achieving this kind of transcendence? Are there things you could be doing right now at work to harness stress and make it work for you? Let’s think about airplanes. Is it logical or rational to look at a machine weighing in at 450 tons and wonder how it can defy the laws of gravity and get you safely from one city to another? It’s only logical when you take into account the *transcendence* of lift.

NASA scientists tell us that lift is an aerodynamic force produced by the motion of the airplane through the air. Lift acts through the *center of the pressure* of the object (the plane), and is directed perpendicular to the flow direction. All that is necessary to create lift is to *turn the flow of air*. That’s right. Any physical body can create lift if it turns the flow of the air that beats against it.

So the stresses at work can become the very air that lifts you up, if you change the flow of that stress. How can we do this? Some strategies suggested by *Forbes* magazine include:

1. Acting rather than reacting. When we believe that things are out of our control, our stress hormones are activated. We can easily get into a pattern of being *reactive* rather than

proactive. In work relationships, you can't control the other person's actions or reactions, but you can control yours. Be impeccable with your 50 percent. Then let the rest go. You are not responsible for the failings of others; but you *are* responsible for your own. Be a person of your word. Act with integrity. Be what you want others to be. Then let go of the expectation that they will follow suit.

2. Take a deep breath. Deep breathing can actually restore balance. If you are stressed at work, take a break and practice some deep breathing exercises. Go outside if at all possible; but if not, you can do this at your desk. Before you write this off as some "hippie dippie yoga crap," realize that Navy Seals use "box breathing" to overcome the primal stress response in preparation for dangerous, life-threatening combat missions. Inhale deeply for a count of five. Hold it for five. Then breathe out for a count of five. Repeat several times.

3. Eliminate interruptions. We are constantly bombarded at work by urgent interruptions that threaten to derail us from what is truly important. At the end of the day, we feel frustrated because we "didn't get anything done." How can we be so busy, yet accomplish so little? Interruptions.

There are three ways to handle interruptions: *Accept, ignore, or diagnose and prioritize*. Sometimes we accept interruptions, forgetting basic boundary issues. You don't *have* to look at photos of your coworker's grandson if it is interrupting you from accomplishing your daily goals at work. Sometimes we can ignore interruptions, but many times those interruptions come from those in authority over us. In this case, diagnose the overall importance of the interruption (as opposed to the urgency of it), put it into your overall plan for the day, and then stick to your plan.

4. Schedule your day for energy and focus. We can't be productive for eight or 10 straight hours without a break, so recognize that and deal with it. Work for 90 minutes, then

take a walking and deep breathing break. Your stress levels will diminish, and in the end you will accomplish more.

5. Take care of your body. By proper nourishment, hydration, rest and regular exercise you can actually decrease the amount of stress on your body's systems and restore energy at the cellular level. Eat a low-sugar, high-protein diet; get at least seven hours of sleep at night; and take the time to exercise and stretch. Your body will thank you for it, and your level of productivity will be ample reward for the investment you make in yourself.

*America's leading stress expert, **Dr. Pete Sulack** is a highly sought-after teacher, lecturer and author. His studies on the effects of stress, coupled with over a million patient visits and attention from medical communities led him to create Unhealthy Anonymous—an organization helping individuals, corporations and nonprofits mitigate the immense effects of stress on health and human behavior. Sulack's book, Unhealthy Anonymous, is available beginning June 16 through Destiny Image.*