



8 Ways to Reduce Stress — Part 1

Stresses of life and work are not going to stop, but you can learn to manage them better

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EVERYWHERE I GO in the world of business, I encounter people who are stressed to the max. Demands for more and more production increase, often at the same time resources and personnel are shrinking. The pressure is not going to stop.

The result of this continuous stress is a wearing down of the business professional. While they continue to work hard and fast, their true production is declining. They lose sight of what makes them effective, diminish in creativity, and grow fuzzy in judgment. These things happen no matter how intelligent, dedicated, or hard-working the person. Human beings are not machines.

This may be aggravated further because we are entering the major holiday season, when many people report feeling greater stress, even depression.

In this and the following articles, I will propose eight ideas for reducing and managing stress. One or more of these may work for you.

1. Fight feelings with facts

The biggest battle takes place in our minds. After all, there are some predictable and unavoidable realities. The number of hours in a day is the same for all of us. No one can be in more than one place at a time. And even though people talk of multitasking, that really doesn't happen with significant matters. We can only concentrate on one thing at a time.

We can, however, *worry* about multiple things. While trying to concentrate on a subject, we can be haunted by ghosts, vague whispers of neglected responsibilities: Matters we “should” be doing or “should” have already gotten done. These only increase the stress on tired minds.



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The unconscious human mind is not rational or intelligent. It does not interject a common-sense reply that no one could have done more in a ten-hour day, or that what we did was truly more important. It just delivers irrational guilt feelings that wear us down and discourage us further. Overcoming this requires direct confrontation: Identifying and distinguishing what we can control from what we can't. Try the following exercise.

Draw a large circle, say four inches in diameter. This is the **Sphere of Concern**. It represents everything in your life you care about from the mega-important (the health of you and your loved ones, world peace) to the trivial (a bad hair day, a cracked nail).

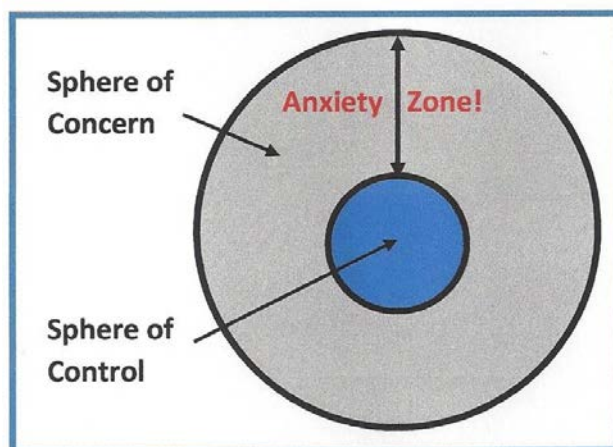
Then draw a small concentric circle inside it about an inch in diameter. This is the **Sphere of Control**. It is always smaller than the Sphere of Concern; how much smaller depends on the issue. In regard to some matters, like world peace, the national economy, or the weather, we have absolutely no control.

In an important relationship, on the other hand, it is 50% as large. In my marriage I have total control over *my own* attitudes, words, and actions. I have zero control over my wife's attitudes, words, and actions. While we certainly have much *influence* on our relationships, we cannot control their quality or outcome on our own.

Whatever the issue, there is always a gap between the two circles. I call this gap the **Anxiety Zone**. You could also call this the **Helpless Zone**, because it represents things you *care* about — perhaps intensely — **but cannot do anything about**.

If there's anything that makes people feel anxious, stressed, and depressed, it's burning mental and emotional energy thinking about, worrying about, obsessing about things they care about but over which they have no control.

The essential application is this: When we spend our mental and emotional time and



energy within the Sphere of Control, we are more consistent, more effective, and, frankly, more happy.

2. Focus on what you can control, and let go of what you have no control over

When I'm coaching someone on this subject, I ask them to take a journal page and divide it into three vertical columns. The headings of the three columns are, first, **My Concerns**; second, **Actions within my Control**; third, **What I have no control over**.

To solve problems, it is necessary to first **separate issues**. That means listing multiple concerns *individually*. You cannot solve several problems at once. The failure to do this is one of the stresses that grinds people down, because worries fly around their minds like a flock of birds. You might as well try to organize a bowl of spaghetti. By separating them individually, you can then come up with *a potential action within your control* to address each one.

Automatically, by identifying an action within your control, you begin to feel better. We always feel better when we are focusing on areas where we are empowered and have a plan. You can then prioritize them and take action accordingly, letting go of those areas you can't control.

“Letting go” sounds easy, but it frequently is anything but. That's where the third column

comes in. By spelling out those areas where you have no control, you can *consciously choose* to let them go. When they cross your mind again, or if those old ghosts return whispering of your failures, you can confront and reject them with the truth that you have a strategy to address and try to improve them.

To help with this, I often give my clients a visual aid, a child's toy. When I was a kid, we called them "Chinese handcuffs." You'll also hear one called a "Chinese fingertrap." It's a small woven tube into which you insert your index fingers. When you try to pull them out, it tightens and traps you. The harder you pull, the tighter it gets. To get free, you must do the counterintuitive thing and *push in*. By pushing in, it relaxes, and you can pull out easily.

Symbolically, that shows how to deal with stresses you can't control. I meet so many people who approach each day with a high level of intensity. They think the way to deal with stresses is to get more intense. No, they need to do the counterintuitive thing, and **relax**.

What good is it to obsess over things you can't change? That's totally ineffective and a recipe for paralysis. For years, 12-step programs have taught the famous "Serenity Prayer" for this very purpose: "Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Developing that "wisdom to know the difference" is the result of working the exercise I've described. The prayer also emphasizes "the courage to change the things I can," another way of saying we should concentrate on what is within our control and act upon it.

3. Examine your expectations

Continuous disappointment is the sure sign of someone with **unrealistic expectations**. These are particularly damaging because they are often invisible to us. They are like lenses

through which we view the world, coloring everything we see. They are unexamined premises behind our thinking and reactions. What would you say to someone who expressed any of the following beliefs?

- "Everybody will always like me"
- "Life will be good and problem-free"
- "I expect health, wealth, and prosperity"
- "Nothing will happen to interrupt the execution of my plan"
- "People will always do the right thing and never let me down"

In response, I am reminded of how the masked hero replied to his opponent during their swordfight in *The Princess Bride*: "Get used to disappointment."

As an executive coach, I routinely meet people living under a continuous cloud of guilt. They unconsciously compare themselves every day to an unrealistic ideal: The top-level professional who unerringly produces, and at the same time is also a great and involved spouse, parent, friend, athlete, etc. I call this the "Phantom Executive Syndrome." *No one* could live up to such a standard. They would need 200-hour weeks to even approach it. No wonder they're stressed.

If you find yourself dealing with disappointment on a regular basis, examine your expectations. Reconsider:

- Are problems normal or abnormal in life?
- Is it normal or abnormal for people to have faults and make mistakes?
- How often do you make a plan and find that it happens like clockwork?
- What are *reasonable* expectations for me regarding work, family, and so on?

The more your premises and expectations line up with reality, the better equipped for life and work you'll be ... and the more stable, effective, and content you will be.

We'll continue our examination of stress management in Part 2. **L**