



## 8 Ways to Reduce Stress — Part 2

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

Tim Stevenson

**IMAGINE I WAS** preparing to climb Mount Everest. In the days leading up to the effort, you heard me say, “I don’t have time to eat or rest! I’m too busy! I have the mountain to climb!”

You would probably reply, “I don’t think you’re going to make it.”

Strenuous activities like mountain climbing or running a marathon require dramatic increases in calories, sometimes three or four times what a person normally eats. Preparatory rest is also required, because participants will not succeed if their bodies are in a run-down condition. That’s common sense.

The same principle applies when we are experiencing greater stress in our lives or work. That’s the time to *increase* our deliberate efforts to remain refreshed, nourished, and strong.

Oddly, having observed people for over three decades, it is remarkable to me how many do the exact opposite. They *neglect* doing self-maintenance activities just when they need them the most.

In this second article on the subject, I will suggest two more important ways to better manage the stress in your life and work.

### 4. Define and practice a deliberate self-maintenance system

If you were fortunate enough to own a high-performance sports car, you would take for granted its needs for meticulous care. High maintenance is the cost of sustainable high performance.

People are the same. If you are a dedicated professional, committed to your pursuit of excellence, you cannot neglect your own needs. This is even more critical in this



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stress-intensive environment. High *personal* maintenance is the cost of sustainable high performance.

In Sherpa Executive Coaching we use a process called “Support Mountain” as a tool to examine a client’s self-maintenance practices. It is a 3-D snapshot of your support system. I will summarize it here.

### **Lens 1: The Intrinsic Zone**

The key question is “What?” *What* things do you do for yourself that bring about refreshment, recharging, and reenergizing? Think “activities” here. Try to come up with four or five. Possible answers include exercising, reading, watching TV or movies, listening to music, hiking, arts and crafts, and many more. Answers are highly individual.

### **Lens 2: The Extrinsic Zone**

The key question is “Who?” *Who* can you go to for support, advice, or encouragement? Think of individual names, which can be from your personal or professional life. Again, try to come up with four or five.

### **Lens 3: The Environmental Zone**

The key question is “Where?” *Where* can you go that are places of peace, rest, safety, sanctuary, and refreshment? These can be as specific as a certain chair in your home or a park bench. Other potential answers might be a library, restaurant, coffee shop, or your car.

Once you’ve put down your initial answers there are two questions to consider:

**Question 1:** What observations do you make looking at all your answers as whole? Are there any holes, anything missing or out of balance?

I coached a woman who was a powerful leader in her company. She filled in the Extrinsic and Environmental Zones with ease. The Intrinsic Zone (“What?”) was blank. She stared at the page and slowly said, “I don’t do anything for ME. I’m always serving other people at home and at work. But I never do

anything just for ME.” As a result of this analysis, she decided to make some major changes in her life.

On two occasions, I’ve had clients who filled in the Intrinsic and Environmental Zones quickly, but whose Extrinsic Zone (“Who?”) was blank. I vividly remember one, a CFO, saying sadly, “I don’t have anyone in my life.” That should be a serious warning to take stock and make some decisions.

More commonly, clients fill in the entire page with ease. Then comes the big question:

**Question 2:** “How are you doing working your system?” Too often, I’ve heard people say, “I haven’t done anything on this page in months.” A support system you’re not actively taking advantage of will be of no value.

## **Why people neglect themselves**

What keeps people from taking care of themselves? First, **excessive busyness**. They don’t believe they can jump off the hamster wheel to do so. Second, **guilt**. They feel guilty for doing things just for themselves. Both attitudes should be challenged directly.

Those who believe they’re too busy to do self-maintenance are fooling themselves. If you are run down and stressed, you will not produce excellence no matter how hard you work. You will tend to be inefficient and ineffective, and your judgment will be impaired.

To those who feel guilty about self-care, I say, “It is not selfish to see to your own well-being. It is common sense and self-respect.”

For those who protest and say that they’re all about serving others, I say, “That’s great, I share your value of serving. *But what good are you going to be serving others if you break down in the process?*”

I maintain that if you want to be the best servant possible for others or produce sustainable excellent performance, take steps to

care for yourself so you can be mentally and emotionally sharp and at full strength.

If you're feeling overwhelmed by the demands of work, do this analysis and make some decisions. Plan each week with pockets of time to recharge and refresh. Then when you do go back to work, you'll bring your best self to the task.

## 5. Establish and protect boundaries based on your values and convictions

One major cause of stress is experiencing conflict around one's personal boundaries. Weak or nonexistent boundaries are the root of much confusion and anxiety. Boundaries based on clear convictions, on the other hand, provide security, guidance, and protection.

I divide convictions into three categories:

### 1. Personal convictions

These stem from your beliefs regarding fundamental human questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? Each of us must work out our own answers to these.

From these convictions emerge your personal boundaries: *How I am willing to be treated as a human being.*

### 2. Principle convictions

These form your ethical and moral beliefs, your sense of right and wrong, which ought to be essentially the same for everyone.

From these flow your principle boundaries: *What I am willing to do or not do morally and ethically.*

### 3. Philosophical convictions

These have to do with your sense of priorities. How important is career advancement to you compared to family balance? How important is financial success compared to enjoying your work? These answers will be highly individual and no one

else can say you are wrong. They are part of your "unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

From your philosophical convictions should arise corresponding boundaries: *How I am willing to invest my time and energies.*

## Look for inconsistencies between your convictions and work demands

Conflict between our daily activities and our beliefs is the root of much stress and anxiety, often on an unconscious level.

If you feel you are being abused or taken advantage of at work, you'll be miserable and resentful, regardless of the number on your paycheck. *Examine your **personal** boundaries.*

If you feel fearful or guilty about things you are asked to do at work, they may be outside your ethical convictions. *Examine your **principle** boundaries.*

If you feel frustrated and empty as if you are on a never-ending hamster wheel, your work may no longer align with your priorities. *Examine your **philosophical** boundaries.*

In my experience, the third category is the one that most frequently gets out of line. For example, if your top values are financial success, career advancement, and recognition, 70-hour work weeks might be acceptable. If your top values are pleasure, recreation, and friendship, you may want to work your 40 and go home. Neither one is right, neither one is wrong. It's for you to decide.

Most important is that your life's demands and commitments are consistent with your own judgment of values and priorities.

We'll complete our eight ways to reduce stress in the next article. **L**