



## 8 Ways to Reduce Stress — Part 3

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

Tim Stevenson

**“I WORK TOO** much ... I’ve noticed that if I stay busy enough, I don’t feel any need to ask myself if I’m getting anything done or accomplishing anything significant. Being busy dulls my senses and soothes my conscience at the same time.”

I was rereading a book written by a friend of mine named Dave DeWitt when these comments brought me up short. After 11 years as an executive coach, I immediately realized that the same words might have been said by dozens of clients I have served.

Rampant busyness is the characteristic state of people in any field of business today. The

effects of this extend not only to their work. It has much to do with the enormous stress and pressure people feel. In this third article on the subject, I will suggest three more ways to manage stress better.

### 6. Reaffirm your freedom

The feeling of being trapped and helpless multiplies your experience of stress. Stepping back, recognizing, and reaffirming your freedom is one of the quickest ways to release building pressure and frustration.

I found a helpful illustration while learning about one of the ancient orders of monks and how they initiated new members.

They would bring the initiate into a room, and he would be surrounded by the other monks (all men). In the ceremony, they would remove the initiate’s street clothes and put on him a habit, the rough robe with a rope tie that he would wear from then on.

Here’s the interesting part: What do you think they did with the old street clothes?

I have posed this question of many people. The most common answer is, “They



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probably burned them.” Others suggest that rather than destroying them, they might have donated them to the poor.

No. What they did was to *fold them neatly and place them in an unlocked closet.*

Why do you suppose they did this? It’s obvious. To protect the monk from ever developing the most poisonous and destructive of attitudes: “I made a horrible mistake. Now, for the rest of my life, *I’m trapped! I’m a prisoner! I can never leave!*”

Because those clothes were always readily available, a monk could decide to grab them and be back on the street this afternoon. He could never say that he was being held prisoner. Positively, therefore, he could get up every day and *reaffirm his free decision* to devote his life and energies as a monk.

I have shared this illustration with many clients and witnessed an immediate release of pressure in them as they realized they are not prisoners. “I don’t have to do this,” they say. “I can choose to do this if I want to, but I don’t have to. I could choose to do something else.”

We may “have to” in the sense that we must earn a living and can’t immediately jump ship. But there are other options in life, other occupations, other companies, and other options within many companies. When you step back and recognize your freedom, you feel stress drain away, and your ability to think and solve problems returns. Most of the people I share this with choose to remain where they are with renewed positivity and effectiveness.

## 7. Practice *thanksgiving*

We have a national holiday called Thanksgiving. I suggest that one of the healthiest lifestyles is one of *thanksgiving*. An attitude of gratitude is usually one of the first things that disappears when we focus on the pressures and problems challenging us.

Focusing on the causes of our stress produces several negative effects:

- *Loss of perspective.* Our focus narrows to where problems are nearly *all* that we can see. The whole world becomes negative.
- *Reduced creativity.* That narrowed perspective prevents us from seeing options for solutions or improvements.
- *Preoccupation with self.* When we focus on the negative, we tend to turn inward, hindering relationships and shutting us off from potential aid from others.

If these responses continue, we are in danger of triggering a downward spiral of anger, self-pity, and eventual depression.

Thanksgiving can be a deliberate lifestyle, one that provides an effective antidote to the dangers above. Like stepping back and reaffirming your freedom, thanksgiving means pausing to broaden your perspective and recognize the innumerable things any of us has to be thankful for in an average day.

Some of the benefits:

- *Problems are put in proper perspective.* Instead of the whole world being wrapped up in the sources of stress, they are seen as simply a normal part of life.
- *Giving thanks returns us to the present.* Much of the stress we feel comes from dwelling on the past or future, neither of which we can do anything about. Returning to the present enables us to think and act.
- *A sense of peace and well-being.* We realize that we have walked through innumerable challenges in the past and have survived. One day, this one will also be in the rear-view mirror; maybe forgotten altogether.

Someone might think I am making light of the seriousness of stress, but I am not. There are deadly serious problems we can face in this world. This is not about minimizing them.

I maintain, however, that much of the stress people feel is self-imposed, unnecessary, and out of perspective with the whole of life. For stress in that category, one of the quickest antidotes is the practice of thanksgiving.

## 8. Focus on effectiveness

Everyone should be interested in practicing **efficiency**: “Doing things right” (quicker, easier, cheaper). The real and never-ending battle, however, is the pursuit of **effectiveness**: “**Doing the right things.**”

While both are essential, a moment’s thought makes you realize that it’s possible to be efficiently doing the wrong things. That’s why Peter Drucker stated, “There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.”

One of the greatest sources of stress in the workplace today is a nagging sense of failure, no matter how hard people work. They are busy to the max, yet not feeling that they are accomplishing much. They are running furiously for ten or more hours a day, but they are not *effective*.

The only way off this hamster wheel is to stop, analyze, and identify “the right things” you should be accomplishing. Here are some questions that help in this analysis:

- *What are the most important results and functions for which I am responsible?*
- *What, ideally, is the highest and best application of ME in my role?*
- *What are the 20% of my responsibilities which lead to the most important results?*
- *If I only accomplish ONE thing today (or this week), what must it be?*
- *If I do nothing else, I must \_\_\_\_\_.*

The second step is to sculpt your weekly schedule to make sure there are times carved

out to pursue these things. You must create space and protect it.

I understand perfectly all the objections that are raised at this point: Boss’s directives, organizational requirements, urgencies from coworkers, interruptions. Face it. *No one* has total control over their time. But by building a plan, you can win *some* of the battles and become more effective.

Yes, there are hundred things that “should” be done. Face this, too: It is literally *impossible* to get them all done today. What would be better? To flail away without a plan, reacting to stimuli in the environment? Or to decide that if you can only do so many things in a single day, you will determine so far as you can to concentrate on the most important functions and results for which you are responsible? When you build an intelligent plan to pursue effectiveness, you can let go of the ridiculous idea that you “should have” done everything on the list. Tomorrow’s another day. Come back and hit ’em again.

Having a clear conscience that you have done your best to be effective proves to be another great stress reliever.

## The necessity: Time to think

In these three articles I have shared eight ways to better manage stress. There is a common denominator in all seven: **Each method requires thinking time**. The common denominator in the stresses is the opposite: The tendency to run, run, run through our days without reflection, passively reacting to our environment.

While time to think is essential, *it does not have to be a lot of time*. 15-20 minutes to plan, and occasional pauses to reflect are usually enough. Try it.

Don't give in to passivity. Make your plan and practice these tools. You'll be glad you did. **L**