The American Institute of Stress

CONTENTMENT

Connecting the Relationship Between Stress, Health and Longevity

Volume 15 Number 3 ***Fall 2026***



How Stress Can Be Your Friend

Inside: **Eustress and Our Brain's Response to the Progression of Stress,** *By Nancy Jernigan* • **Your Brain on Digital Stress: An Ancient Operating System in an Always-On World,** *By Brian P. Ramos* • **Stress Can Be Your Friend,** *By Jeff Jernigan* • **The Pocket,** *By Michelle Lores* • **The Eustress Nobody Talks About,** *By Joelle Kaufman* • **Under Pressure: What the Ocean and the Office Have in Common,** *By Pavlina Mihhaleva* • **The Inside-Out Nature of the Stress Response,** *By Carla Hay-Perdue*

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Contentment is a quarterly magazine published in Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter with news and advertising designed with the general public in mind. It appeals to all those interested in the myriad and complex interrelationships between stress and health because technical jargon is avoided and it is easy to understand. *Contentment magazine is indexed by EBSCO and archived online at stress.org.* Information in this publication is carefully compiled to ensure accuracy.

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Understanding Stress: Our Mission, Your Wellness

A Look Into the History, Vision, and Impact of The American Institute of Stress

Stress is so deeply woven into our daily lives and vocabulary that it's easy to forget how recently the term took on its modern meaning. It wasn't until 1936 that stress, as we understand it today, was coined by our founder, Professor Hans Selye, MD, PhD. In a groundbreaking paper published in Nature, Selye introduced the concept of the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), describing the physiological responses of rats to various stressors—paving the way for decades of research into human stress culminating in 1,700 scientific publications and 40 books by Selye alone.

The American Institute of Stress (AIS) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1978 by Dr. Hans Selye and his protégé, Paul Rosch, MD. It was created to serve as a central resource for all things related to stress. Other founding members included distinguished individuals such as Linus Pauling, Alvin Toffler, Bob Hope, Michael DeBakey, Herbert Benson, and Ray Rosenman—along with other leading physicians, scientists, and thought leaders dedicated to exploring how stress affects our health and well-being. Click here for a full list of founding trustees. For a fascinating first-hand account of Professor Selye and the founding of The American Institute of Stress by Dr. Rosch, click here.

AIS remains committed to its mission: improving public health through education about how we naturally respond to both internal and external stressors—and, most importantly, how to manage them before they manage us. Our goal is to help people master stress in ways that promote peace of mind, productivity, and lasting happiness. We do this by offering evidence-based tools and resources designed to prevent illness and enhance mental wellness. Visit our website, stress.org, to explore scientifically validated online stress assessments, educational courses, documentary films, our free podcast Finding Contentment, webinars, and free subscriptions to Contentment and Combat Stress magazines.

This mission is ambitious—and essential. Thanks to the dedication and generosity of our members and volunteers, The American Institute of Stress continues to make a meaningful impact on those who need it most. Interested in supporting our mission? Learn how your donation can help us continue this important work here.

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EDITOR'S MESSAGE



For the Fall edition of *Contentment* Magazine, we want to take a breather and consider how we can remain in our energy zone when it comes to eustress. Eustress is good stress, a term coined by Dr. Hans Selye, a founder of The American Institute of Stress. Eustress does not occur in the face of an overwhelming challenge or threat. But it does come into play when we step outside our comfort zone to enjoy activities that may be challenging. We experience eustress when we feel capable and confident, like spending time with good friends or taking a walk in the park. Starting an exciting new job, spending time with our children, engaging in recreation can all be sources of eustress. These examples involve stress in diverse ways, but the outcome of eustress is rewarding and fulfilling. We do not live in this place of good stress all the time. But creating opportunities to experience eustress in our rhythm helps us manage our apathy and distress much better.

We introduced the Editor's Corner in the last edition. This is where readers comment on articles, your favorite AIS author, Stress Tech info, and requests for topics will be found. Yes, there is a Factoid in this edition as well. Here is to enjoyable reading and good hunting!

Nancy Jernigan, PhD, LPC, FAIS, in Eustress and *Our Brain's Response to the Progression of Stress*, assures us that we all have a secret sauce when it comes to stress management and keeping ourselves in the good stress zone where we are energized, motivated, and at our happiest. Dr. Jernigan begins by helping us understand how we handle our stress. Stress is a progression from good stress through healthy stress to distress that can happen multiple times throughout the day. She points out that stress is something our brain helps us handle, and we can train our brain to handle it well. Her personal story of what happens when eustress runs right into distress is something we all can identify with! Here solution to this dilemma is something called stress inoculation. No, this is not a shot a nurse gives you, and a lot less intrusive. Dr. Jernigan calls these short practical remedies a Neuro Simple Secret in her blog of the same name.

Brian Ramos, PhD, FAIS, takes us on a fascinating ride in his article *Your Brain on Digital Stress*. We can train the brain for calmness, he explains, but first we need to understand understand how our nervous system works against us when our brains are constantly on. The solution Dr. Ramos leads to is the neuroplasticity (flexibility) of our brain which can be trained away from all those things that keep the mind busy all the time toward greater depth of focus. Unpacking what constant connection does to the brain, he reveals how our brain is tuned for depth in concentration but spends hours in a fragmented mode that can be defragmented. Sleep is important to this process in surprising ways. Most stress advice, he says, targets behaviors. The solution to getting your mind back on track is found in five levers described for retraining your nervous system. A great read about loss of focus, the stress it causes, and what we can do about it.

Jeff Jernigan, PhD, BCPC, FAIS, helps us understand how stress can be beneficial in *Stress Can Be Your Friend.* Dr. Jernigan begins with a rock-climbing story as a metaphor for how we may experience eustress and distress in various times and in diverse ways. This is in part because stress

is produced by triggers that can be internal or external and neurologically involve different structures in the brain at different times. This concept is made simple through stories and illustrations of the spectrum of responses to stress we can have. The idea of an energy zone is introduced. The energy zone is where eustress (good stress) exists. Too little stress can create apathy while too much stress over time can push us into stress fatigue or burnout. This energy zone is different for everyone and can change throughout the day. Managing your energy zone will involve some degree of emotional intelligence and five key lifestyle practices.

Michelle Lores, Master CPT, DAIS, writes a beautiful essay about being in the pocket, in *The Pocket*. This is a thoughtful essay to read slowly, repeating phrases softly to let your mind slip from knowledge to transformation. Most people are familiar with the term "in the pocket," referring to a quarterback's protected position when the football is hiked, or having things under control, or a great groove in musical timing. This last metaphor fits well with the personal stories and explanations of how quality is measured by awareness and not by time. Michelle goes on to explain that the quality of an experience has an 'it' factor that many of us pursue and exclaim, "This is it!" when we find ourselves in the pocket. However, she goes on to reveal, the 'it' factor is not something you take or achieve, it is a place you can access. Want to know how? Enjoy the article.

Joelle Kaufman, MBA, DAIS, shares very transparently her journey as a cancer survivor. In *The Eustress Nobody Talks About*, Joelle bravely shares how you can generate good stress in the middle of a crisis through a focus on some sense of control, a finish line you can see, and a reason it matters to you. One would think this is the standard pep talk given to all patients wrestling with a major life-threatening health issue. No, this is not a trite statement based on good intentions. Joelle poignantly describes with great courage and power how she found profound moments facing hard things that brought with them moments of motivation, peace, resolve, and eventually victory.

Pavlina Mihhaleva, DAIS, compares the ocean to the office in *Under Pressure: What can the Ocean and the Office Have in Common,* taking us into the world of professional diving to better understand how and why stress at the bottom of the sea is no different than stress at the office. Our bodies and minds respond the same way in either environment. She points out that in diving there are emergency responses and people who can solve the problem in your best interests. While, in the office there is often nowhere to turn to for help, no moment of resolution, so the state of things hangs in limbo until the system breaks down. The parallel between Freediving and corporate stress is not a metaphor but a physical fact. Explained and illustrated, a question is put forward: The body already knows how to handle pressure. The only question is whether we are willing to give it the conditions it needs to do so. Fascinating reading, you will enjoy it.

Carla Hay-Perdue, DNP, APRN, FAIS, addresses the inside-out workings of stress in our bodies in her article *The Inside-Out Nature of the Stress Response.* Dr. Hay-Perdue likens stress as the final frontier and directs the cascading process our body produces just to keep us safe. Unpacking the hormonal chemistry involved, she notes that circumstances do not create our anxiety. It is our thoughts about the circumstances that trigger the inside-out response to the perceived cause of our fear and anxiety. She expertly describes ways to minimize chronic stress that is available to everyone. This is an article to pass on to others you may know struggle with chronic stress. Straightforward, easy to absorb and apply, this article can take the mystery and fear of stress out of someone's stress.

Kind Regards,



Jeff Jernigan, PhD, BCPC, FAIS

Eustress *and* Our Brain's Response *to the* Progression *of* Stress

The Role of Eustress in Handling Chaos and Thriving Under Pressure



By Nancy Jernigan, PhD, LPC, FAIS

Do you know YOUR secret to handling stress? Yes, YOU have a secret sauce to stress in your life. We all have a sweet spot that allows us to flourish under stress. The key is we need to figure out what our secret sauce is for dealing with stress.

One of the first places to start is how we handle eustress in our lives! Eustress is a positive, manageable form of pressure that pushes you to stretch your limits without overwhelming your system. It acts as a catalyst for becoming stronger, transforming challenges into growth, resilience, and personal development. It is a motivator.

Eustress is a natural part of our lives, helping us develop the strength and resilience to handle life's challenges. It is crucial to the progression of stress to build strength along the stress continuum. Eustress is a catalyst for becoming stronger.

Stress has a continuum going from eustress through healthy stress, leading to distress, and ultimately can lead to burnout. The key to developing the strength to handle all types of stress is much like a physical workout. You develop a capacity to handle greater stress at a manageable pace. Eustress is important in the developmental process. The stretching process from eustress to distress is best done in healthy doses to build the strength needed to handle harder situations well. Resilience is built by handling difficult situations over and over, developing the strength to respond well and in a healthy manner.

Joyful situations like planning for a vacation, delivering a baby, a family celebration, a day at Disneyland, and a fun hike with friends can all involve eustress as well as the entire stress continuum. High emotions can be both eustress and distress. All these situations add to our strength and help us avoid stress atrophy. Stress atrophy is when we have not grown from previous stressors and have not cultivated an improved ability to handle stress. How we respond to eustress is a critical element in our path to handling chaos and advancing our ability to handle pressure positively. Staying calm, developing practices, and having a presence to handle a broad spectrum of stressful situations all add to our well-being.

Part of our secret sauce is how we allow eustress to be a catalyst for managing stress. When we allow stress to be a stimulus that strengthens us, we build resilience. Resilience is a key part of excelling on the stress continuum and staying in the healthy range of stress.

Eustress is a positive, manageable form of pressure that pushes you to stretch your limits without overwhelming your system.

The Brain and Our Response to The Progression of Stress

Your brain helps you handle stress through training, management, and development. When you encounter eustress or distress, the amygdala is engaged, senses danger, and then sends an alert. As you train your brain to handle levels of stress, the amygdala is trained as well. We have talked about neuroplasticity extensively in Contentment Magazine. As you develop patterns and activities in handling



stress, some call this reframing, you can remain calm instead of reacting under pressure. You can train your brain how to respond in stressful situations. This growth and change is called neuroplasticity. Breathing exercises, outdoor exercise, sighing, auditory practices, shifting activities like reading a book, and other activities are helpful ways to build a strong ability to help the amygdala avoid panic mode.

What happens when Eustress runs right into distress

Here is a personal example: Our air conditioner was working but making a funny clicking noise. The noise prompted my husband to call an air conditioner repair company. The air conditioner was not broken, yet during the assessment, the air had to be turned on and off repeatedly for an extended period. While I was writing, researching, and working on this project, the good news was that the air conditioner was not broken, and the bad news ran right into it. I had to work in a room that was now 86 degrees and deal with a hot, not-so-happy dog. It turned out the compressor needed to be repaired. Good thing my husband heard the funny clicking noise that alerted us that the air conditioner was about to have more serious problems. The whole air conditioner did not need replacing and was still in warranty = good news = eustress. Yet the good news ran right into a point on our graph showing healthy stress edging into distress.

What is the best mental wellness response to eustress and distress in the same period of time?

Our evolving process for fighting stress includes fortifying ourselves so we can

be prepared to deal with the harms of stress and have strong physical and emotional defenses against unwelcome stressors. We need to be fortified to protect ourselves from harm, like having a physical defense. This is a strengthening technique that builds upon the past. Developing the ability to handle eustress and healthy stress takes practice and often builds our self-esteem and confidence. Remaining strong under pressure is a needed life skill.

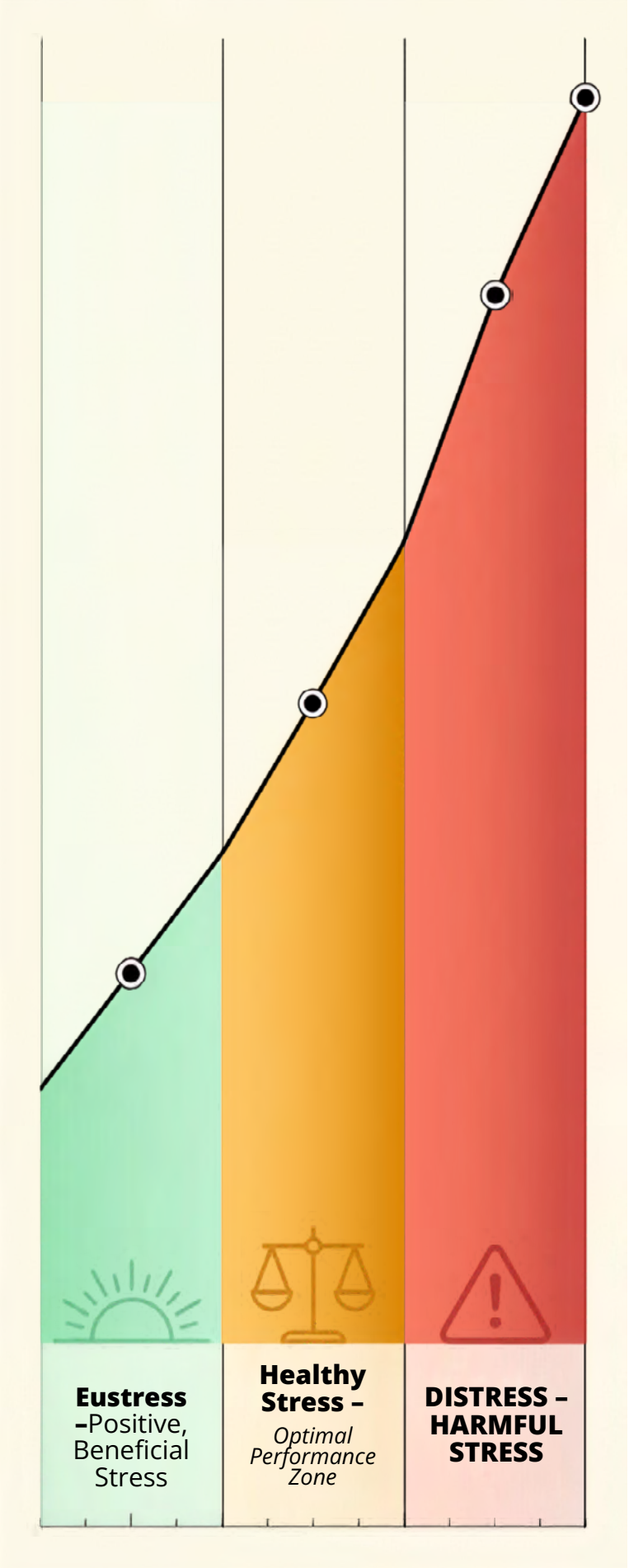
Eustress was identified by Dr. Hans Selye, an endocrinologist and pioneering researcher who coined the term eustress from the Greek prefix eu-, meaning "good," to describe positive stress.[1]

It is not possible to stop all stress in our lives, as you have already experienced. Trials will come. Eustress is the foundation for building our patterns to fortify our ability to handle stress; in other words, to become stronger and more resilient to its effects.

Did you know it is difficult to love well when we are in a fight, flight, or freeze mode?2 When you are in survival mode, you cannot orient well and act on love well. The physiology of stress is filled with self-preservation. Love requires some form of self-sacrifice, and trauma often prompts self-preservation. You cannot do both at the same time. Our physiology needs safety to function at a healthy level.[2]

Stress Inoculation

The feeling of safety is a place we want to guide our body to experience. This is why breathing and activity practices are key to calming down the amygdala! Something as simple as sitting back and rubbing our hands together can reset the amygdala and bring us to a state of calmness. It is called stress inoculation when our brain rewires itself



STRESS PROGRESSION





to remember and cope with past stressors.[3] Developing resilient practices to physically and emotionally handle stress better in the future is more important than trying to stop stress in our lives. Stress inoculation is a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) designed to build resilience to stress. A healthy community will also help us process the stress and talk through practices. A community of friends is an essential part of our continuous growth spectrum.

We need to feel safe to handle stress well and develop disciplines that are our personal secret sauce to experiencing a calm response. Everyone is different, so we each need to find what works best for us. Handling chaos and stress is both a muscle to be developed and a set of skills and practices that allow the body to calm down and thrive under pressure. Learn and understand your stress progression methods that are personal to you, and use them to experience recovery and healing.

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Nancy Jernigan, PhD, LPC, FAIS, *is an internationally recognized leader and educator known for leadership development, mental wellness, and developing healthy teams amid growth and change. She is the President and co-founder of Hidden Value Group, LLC, and serves as a Board Member and Finance Director for Olive Branch International, Inc.*

Together, the two organizations provide healthcare, mental wellness training, education, leadership development, and family support in risk and conflict zones on three continents. Nancy gets personally involved internationally in teaching and training as a mental wellness expert, treating trauma, anxiety, and stress disorders. As an executive coach, leadership expert, and educator, she is passionate about developing and multiplying leaders. Nancy is also the co-author of Thin Spaces: Recognizing When God Breaks Through. *She is a Fellow of The American Institute of Stress.*

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The American Institute of Stress is an executive producer of Body Electric: Electroceuticals and the Future of Medicine, a documentary film aimed to revolutionize the way we think about health and the human body. This 68 minute movie, by British producer/director/writer Justin Smith, is available online through AIS.

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Your Brain on Digital Stress: An Ancient Operating System in an Always-On World



Why constant connection keeps the stress response switched on, what the research shows, and how to train the brain toward calmness.

By Brian P. Ramos, PhD, FAIS

For most of human history, stress had a shape. A threat appeared, the body mobilized, the threat passed, and the system discharged any leftover energy, eventually returning to rest. The stress response was useful for short, sharp episodes with a clear beginning and a clear end. What it was not conditioned for was the environment most of us now live in: a low, steady hum of activation that never fully switches off.

This is the quiet signature of digital stress. It rarely announces itself as a crisis but instead lurks in the background, eventually surfacing as a familiar and corrosive set of contradictions. You feel wired yet tired. You are busy but scattered. You may be rested, yet you never feel fully recovered. Many of the highest performers I work with do not describe a breakdown. What they describe is a sort of baseline that has slowly drifted upward, a sense that the nervous system is always half-bracing for the next shoe to drop.

In this article, I will make the case that the problem is neither a lack of willpower nor that modern people are simply weaker than their grandparents. The problem is a mismatch between the operating system our nervous system runs on and a modern environment engineered to manipulate it. As I often tell the people I teach, the issue is usually not a productivity problem. It is a rhythm problem.

An Ancient Brain in Modern Environment

The human brain is, in evolutionary terms, essentially the same organ it was tens of thousands of years ago. It thrives in sync with natural rhythms and a sensory world that moves slowly. In that world, novelty was information worth noticing, because a new sound or a sudden movement could mean either opportunity or danger. The brain learned to orient itself towards anything new or potentially harmful.

Now consider what happens when that same novelty-detection system is pointed at a device running algorithms designed to deliver an almost infinite stream of novelty on demand, capable of hijacking your chemistry. For our nervous system, every notification is like a small rustle in the grass. Remember that our nervous hardware has not changed. The environment is what changed, beyond anything our physiology could have ever anticipated. It is this mismatch that sits underneath almost everything we call digital stress.

There is also a simple bottleneck at work. Most of us believe we can multitask, but the brain has difficulty running two attention-demanding tasks simultaneously. It switches between them, and each switch

Most of us believe we can multitask, but the brain has difficulty running two attention-demanding tasks simultaneously.

incurs a cost in time, energy, and accuracy. It can feel overwhelming.

The encouraging half of this story is that the same brain that is vulnerable to the mismatch is also neuroplastic, that is, it can adapt and be trained away from fragmentation toward depth of focus.

What Constant Connection Does Inside the Brain

When you are inside the scroll-and-respond doom loop, three systems are working hard at once. The first is your attentional networks, which are being pulled from target to target. Each notification triggers what researchers call an orienting response, an involuntary reflex that directs cognitive resources toward the new stimulus, whether you want it to or not. This is why working with your cell phone nearby, with notifications buzzing as you glance over at it, can be so disruptive.

The second is the reward system, the dopamine-driven circuitry that learns from unpredictable rewards. Intermittent and uncertain payoffs are the most powerful schedule for building compulsive checking and addiction, which is the same principle that makes a slot machine difficult to walk away from.

The third is the executive control system in the prefrontal cortex, which is working overtime to keep you on task against all the pulls. As the prefrontal cortex goes, so does our attention, working memory, impulse control, and even emotional regulation.

Here is the finding that tends to surprise people. In brain imaging research, heavy media multitaskers do not appear more efficient. They look like they are straining. Moisala and colleagues found that heavier multitaskers were more distractible and showed increased activity in the right prefrontal cortex during attention tasks, suggesting they expended more mental effort for worse results.[1] The earlier and now classic study by Ophir, Nass, and Wagner at Stanford found that heavy multitaskers were more susceptible to interference from irrelevant information and performed worse when switching between tasks, which is the very thing they do all day.[2]

Together, these results suggest that our brain is tuned for depth but spends hours a day in a shallow, fragmented mode that imposes unnecessary burdens in the background. Habits like poor posture, shallow breathing, and constant worry keep the nervous system on alert, like a gazelle scanning for lions, even when we are safe at a desk. That is a reasonable working definition of digital stress.

What the Research Actually Shows, and What It Does Not

A common claim is that every scroll floods the body with cortisol. The evidence does not support that notion. When Oppenheimer and colleagues had people use social media or watch a curated video playlist in 20-minute sessions in 2024, they did not observe a consistent increase in heart rate or salivary cortisol. If anything, both drifted downward over the course of the session.[3]

The real mechanism here is much subtler than that and, in some ways, more concerning. It is chronic, low-grade vigilance, a sort of long-term, daily alert mode that keeps your stress pathways on. You do not get an acute alarm; instead, you miss the all-clear. It is like we are driving with the accelerator fully engaged, no brakes, and a cliff on the horizon.

Across dozens of studies, Vahedi and Saiphoo found a small-to-moderate association between smartphone use and stress and anxiety, and that association grew stronger specifically for problemat-

ic, compulsive use.[4] Khan and colleagues reported a clear dose-dependent pattern in Australian adults, in which depression, anxiety, stress, and poor sleep all climbed as smartphone use moved from moderate to severe.[5]

Much of this research, however, is correlational and bidirectional. People who are already anxious or depressed often reach for the phone more, so the device can be as much a symptom as a cause. And raw screen time, taken alone, is a weak predictor. In other words, the danger signal is not simply time on a screen, but compulsive use, and, more importantly, the disruption of sleep.

The Exhaustion of a Fragmented Mind

Picture a typical knowledge worker on a typical Tuesday. She sits down intending to write a strategy memo, and within ninety seconds, a message arrives. She answers it, returns to the memo, checks a notification, replies to an urgent email, and glances at a feed while a document loads. By six in the evening, she has been busy without pause, yet the memo is only half finished, and she cannot say where the day went. It was not that she was lazy or lacked effort. She started over, in small ways, more than a hundred times.

Every time her attention was distracted by a notification or an email, her brain incurred what psychologists call a switch cost, a sort of tax or penalty for context switching. Your brain must disengage from one mental set, upload another, and suppress the first so it does not bleed through. However, do it hundreds of times a day, which is roughly what a Digital Age notification-driven day looks like, and those small costs will compound hour-by-hour, day-by-day into real cognitive fatigue.

The exhausting part is not only the switching but the constant filtering, holding back everything irrelevant, so the task at hand can survive. There is also a lingering effect that researchers describe as attention residue, in which a portion of your mind remains stuck on what you were doing even after you have moved on. Work takes longer, small errors accumulate, and you finish drained. Train the brain toward deep focus, and it is permitted to do the single thing it was built to do very well.

Sleep, Where the Evidence Is Strongest

I was recently asked, "If you could protect only one thing, what would it be?" It would be sleep, because it is upstream of nearly everything we have discussed so far. Ruin the quality of your sleep, and anxiety and burnout tend to follow. This is where the science is least ambiguous.

Deep in the eye are specialized cells, the intrinsically photosensitive retinal ganglion cells, whose job is not to help you see images but to tell the brain's master clock whether it is day or night. They are most sensitive to the short-wavelength blue light that screens emit in abundance. When that light reaches them in the evening, the brain interprets it as daytime. It suppresses the conversion of serotonin, the daytime molecule, into melatonin, the hormone that opens the gate to sleep.

The numbers are sobering. Gooley and colleagues found that ordinary room light in the hours before bed suppressed melatonin and delayed its onset in 99% of people, shortening the body's biological night by roughly 90 minutes.[6] Phillips and colleagues showed that the circadian system is so sensitive that even typical indoor lighting, comparable to the levels produced by ordinary lamps and screens, is enough to suppress melatonin in the average person, with a more than fiftyfold difference in

Gooley and colleagues found that ordinary room light in the hours before bed suppressed melatonin and delayed its onset in 99% of people, shortening the body's biological night by roughly 90 minutes



Ruin the quality of your sleep, and anxiety and burnout tend to follow.

sensitivity between individuals.[7] However, do not run to buy blue light filtering glasses just yet, as the main culprit behind this sleep shift is the content on the screen, often engaging or activating, which keeps our mind aroused precisely when it should be powering down.

The practical implication is straightforward, and it is the single highest leverage change most people can make. We cannot be in go-mode, keep stimulation going into the evening, and expect our nervous system just to shut off. The slow-wave sleep that does much of the brain's overnight housekeeping, including clearing metabolic waste and consolidating memory, is concentrated in the first cycles of the night, so a later, disrupted start eats into exactly the sleep that matters most. Chronically shortchanging it is linked, over the long run, to cognitive decline and possibly increases your risk for Alzheimer's disease.

From Stress Management to Nervous System Training

Most stress advice targets behavior, which can help, but it treats the symptom while leaving the underlying system unchanged. Telling someone to relax is well-meaning yet incomplete. Telling a person with a dysregulated nervous system to relax on command is a little like telling someone who has never trained for a marathon to run one this afternoon.

Relaxation is a state you visit. What protects you over time is a capacity you build: the trained ability to move smoothly between activation and recovery. We are clearly better at switching the system on when performance is required, but struggle to turn it off when it is time to restore our functions. This is why I tell people that I do not teach stress management; instead, I think of it as nervous system regulation.

We can measure this capacity too. Heart rate variability, the subtle beat-to-beat variation in the heart's rhythm, offers a window into the vagus nerve and our parasympathetic brake. Higher vagally mediated heart rate variability is associated with better stress resilience, steadier emotional regulation, and greater cognitive flexibility. In a large meta-analysis pooling more than 200 studies, Laborde and colleagues found that voluntary slow breathing, especially by enhancing the exhale relative to the inhale, reliably increases mediated heart rate variability vagally, both in the moment and for weeks after practice.[8]

Coping is what you do after you are already overwhelmed. Training raises your baseline and moves you away from extremes, so that you are harder to overwhelm or to push off a cliff. You are not at the mercy of your stress response. You are learning to operate its controls and, eventually, to turn stress into the flow state. I always say we do not rise when faced with adversity or stress but fall to the level of the system we have built. Calmness is not something you find; it is something you train for.

Five Levers for Retraining Your Nervous System

The framework I teach organizes this training around five domains that the modern brain is often starved of. I call it my Zen Brain Code, and it includes: Mindfulness, Breathwork, Movement, Nature, and Sleep. None of them is exotic, and that is the point.

Mindfulness is a training of attention. By gently and repeatedly returning the mind to the present, you strengthen your brain's ability to focus and to choose a response rather than react. A five-minute seated practice, following the breath and returning without judgment whenever the mind wanders, is enough to begin. Paired with practi-

cal guards like silencing notifications, closing extra browser tabs, and blocking time for emails can compound the gains.

Breath work may very well be the best and fastest lever for regulating the vagus nerve, because the breath is the one part of the autonomic nervous system you can consciously take hold of. Slowing the breath to roughly five or six cycles per minute, with the exhale longer than the inhale, engages the vagal brake and shifts the body toward recovery and stress reset. Two minutes of a four-count inhale and a six-count exhale can measurably change your state.

Movement metabolizes stress chemistry and signals to the body that the threat has passed. You do not need a gym, just consistent movement through the day, ideally every thirty minutes or so. A short walk after focused work, simply standing, twisting, or stretching, allows the body to complete the stress cycle it started. Remember to keep a cyclical approach to your daily schedule: stress, then recover, continually throughout the day.

Nature lowers physiological arousal, boosts the immune system, elevates the mood, and restores depleted attention. Consider stepping outside for a few minutes as part of a walking break. You can combine movement taken outdoors in a natural setting, a local park or your neighborhood, to engage three of these levers at once: nature, movement, and breath. Walking mindfully, you engage four levers at once!

Sleep, as described above, is the foundation on which the Five Levers depend. Protecting sleep with a consistent wind-down and a steady wake time is not a luxury. It is basic nervous system maintenance. Therefore, lock in a healthy morning and evening ritual.

Holding these five together is a single, connected practice: the deliberate placement of boundaries around technology. A phone kept out of the bedroom, notifications off by default, and defined windows for email and social feeds will do more than any single technique, because none of the five levers can work if the input never stops.

Ancient Practice, Modern Confirmation

Neuroscience excites me because at every turn, I find a new laboratory confirming what contemplative traditions arrived at through direct experience centuries before anyone could capture images of the living human brain. The practices may be old, but not our ability to watch what they do.

Take mindfulness, for example. Kral and colleagues found that mindfulness training reduced reactivity in the amygdala, the brain's threat detector, and strengthened its connection to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, the region that helps regulate emotion.[9] Just as important, Desbordes and colleagues showed that these effects persist outside of our formal practice period. After an eight-week training period, participants showed a reduced amygdala response to emotional images, even when they were not meditating.[10]

In other words, the practice does not produce a calm state only when on the cushion. It gradually reshapes the brain's default reactivity through neuroplasticity and adaptation, which is why I say that calmness is a skill you develop through practice and becomes an integral part of your nervous system's response to everyday life stressors. Thus, Zen Brain was born of the idea that anyone could achieve what was once considered attainable only by the enlightened master. Anyone can develop a regulated brain with flow-state and calmness chemistry, available whether you sit in a temple or a busy office. Science and



By gently and repeatedly returning the mind to the present, you strengthen your brain's ability to focus and to choose a response rather than react.

contemplative practice are not in conflict now. They are describing the same thing in two languages.

Where to Begin: Bookend Your Day

If a reader takes only one practice from this article, please make it this. Protect the first and last hour of your day from screens. These two windows are disproportionately powerful, and they are the ones most people surrender first. Your brainwave state during these two time periods is like that of a young child, and anything you take in through your senses will have a stronger, more lasting impact.

Off-screen when you wake, off-screen before you sleep. It costs nothing, it is available to everyone, and it returns the two most important hours of the day to you.

The last hour matters for all the reasons the sleep research makes plain. Evening screen light delays the biological clock and erodes the sleep on which everything else depends. Guard that hour, and you protect the foundation of brain health.

The first hour matters for the opposite reason. How you begin sets the tone for your nervous system for the day. If the first act of the morning is to reach for a device and pour the world's urgency into your brain, you start the day already reactive. Trade that for a little stillness, some natural light, and a few slow breaths, and you begin regulated, carrying that steadiness forward.

So, bookend your day. Off-screen when you wake, off-screen before you sleep. It costs nothing, it is available to everyone, and it returns the two most important hours of the day to you. None of this needs to be done perfectly, because it is a practice rather than a performance. The point is simply to keep returning to it as if your life and your daily rituals were a constant mindfulness practice. Calmness, in the end, is not the absence of stress. It is a nervous system that knows how to return to baseline. Stay Zen.

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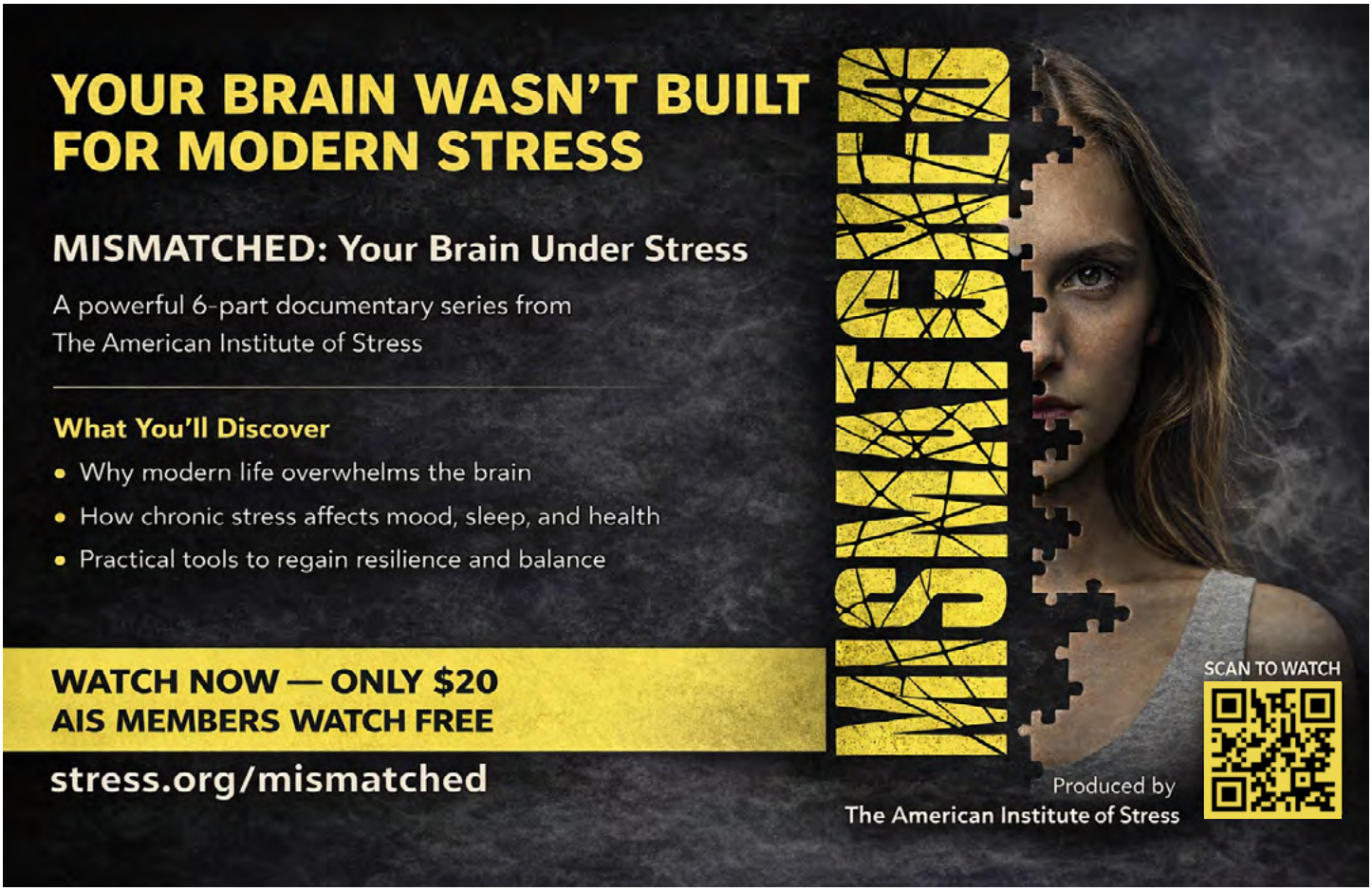
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He is the author of two books on stress and calm, The Art of Stress-Free Living *and* Inside Out Calm*, and the creator of the Zen Brain Code, a five-pillar system built around the science of nervous system regulation. Through writing, teaching, and coaching, he helps knowledge workers and entrepreneurs move from a state of chronic stress activation toward what he calls trained calmness, the learned ability to shift deliberately between effort and recovery to optimize and properly regulate the nervous system. He lives and works in South Florida as an educator, influencer, and Head of Research and Development at Simply Nootropics and Drink Tmrw.*

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Stress
Can
Be
Your
Friend

By Jeff Jernigan, PhD, BCPC, FAIS

Some years ago, a lot of years ago, Nancy and I were professional Rock Climbers. That means teaching climbing and rappelling to children and adults as a certified instructor. Mostly, college students signed up for Wilderness Survival Camp. We worked with newbies to the sport and some gnarly people with real skill who thought they knew everything. We focused on correcting unsafe practices to reduce the stress and strain on minds and bodies they were about to endure.



We have always loved the outdoors, and rock climbing was a sport that tested the mind, stretched the body, and took us to gorgeous vistas around the world. Our favorite challenges were multi-pitch, Class 5.12 big walls. We would train and practice for a single climb for weeks in advance. Topping out to views few people ever get to see, we soaked in the victory and relished the exhausting, bruising hours on skinny ledges and tiny cracks, taking in nature's immense beauty. Of course, some climbs were rained out, some climbs we had to back off for one reason or another, and some climbs we never finished because that was not the goal. Every experience we had resulted in mental and physical stress and strain. These were all good experiences filled with eustress. We were worn out and rejuvenated in exceptionally enjoyable ways.

Stress and strain are terms used in material science and engineering.[1] Stress refers to the force applied, while strain refers to a deformation or change that results from the force applied. These terms are also used in physics, medicine, and other industries due to similarities in their applications: stress is the cause, and strain, under sufficient stress, is the effect. Or, we could say stress is an external force, and strain is a possible

The body needs some stress to function properly, but not so much that resilience fails and must be reestablished

internal outcome. You can have stress without necessarily creating damaging strain. In psychology, stress is the external experience of a threat, challenge, or event, such as workload, financial difficulties, or a personal crisis. The internal undesirable effect (strain) is exemplified by exhaustion, anxiety, depression, physical illness, or burnout.[2] When a stressor is sufficient to create an injury, recovery is needed to restore the individual.

Neurologically, stress is a brain-body regulatory process involving several brain systems.[3-4] This includes the Amygdala (threat detection), Prefrontal Cortex (regulation, planning, inhibition), Hippocampus (memory, context interpretation), and Hypothalamus (hormonal stress response). Now, back to rock climbing. You can imagine how rock climbing can challenge the mind and emotions, as well as the body physically. Mental and physical stress are involved. But if we overdo it, those stressors can cause mental and physical injury (strain) that will need a period of recovery to spring back, even though those may be the result of good stress, what we call eustress. Moving forward now, we will call good stress eustress and bad stress distress. This will make several distinctions clear and easy to understand why we need stress in our lives.

Our minds and bodies are designed to handle stress of all kinds, both eustress and distress. However, too much of a good thing can become undesirable. Recovery from psychological stress and strain varies with resilience. The more resilient we are, the quicker we bounce back. In fact, if we have no stress at all, our physiological health takes a nosedive.[5-6] Conversely, if we have too much stress, the same thing happens. We move from energized to burned out.

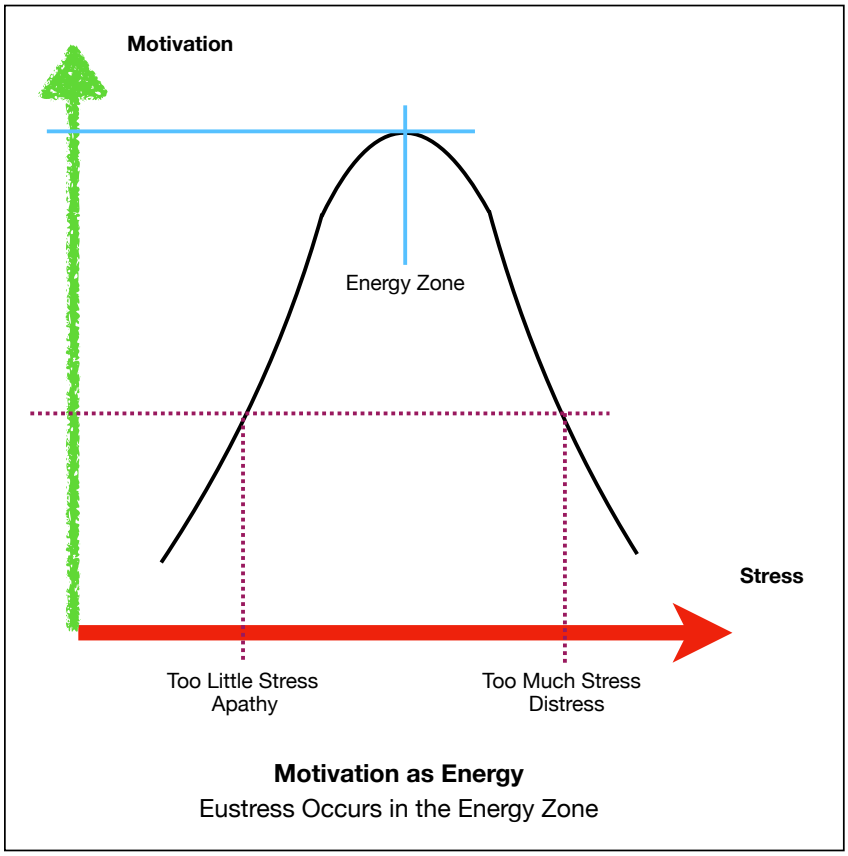




This dilemma helps explain why too much eustress or distress can have the same effect on us. The illustration below captures this idea of motivation, or energy, and its relationship to stress.[7] If we allow ourselves to become as stress-free as possible, we will lose motivation and become more apathetic. If we allow ourselves to become overloaded with stress, we now create distress. The energy zone is where we find balance between eustress and distress. This is because the brain trims

back neural pathways that are not used (apathy) or become damaged (distress). The body needs some stress to function properly, but not so much that resilience fails and must be reestablished[1]. Our level of eustress reflects our resilience. How high is your motivation? Do you find yourself consistently running out of gas before the end of the day?

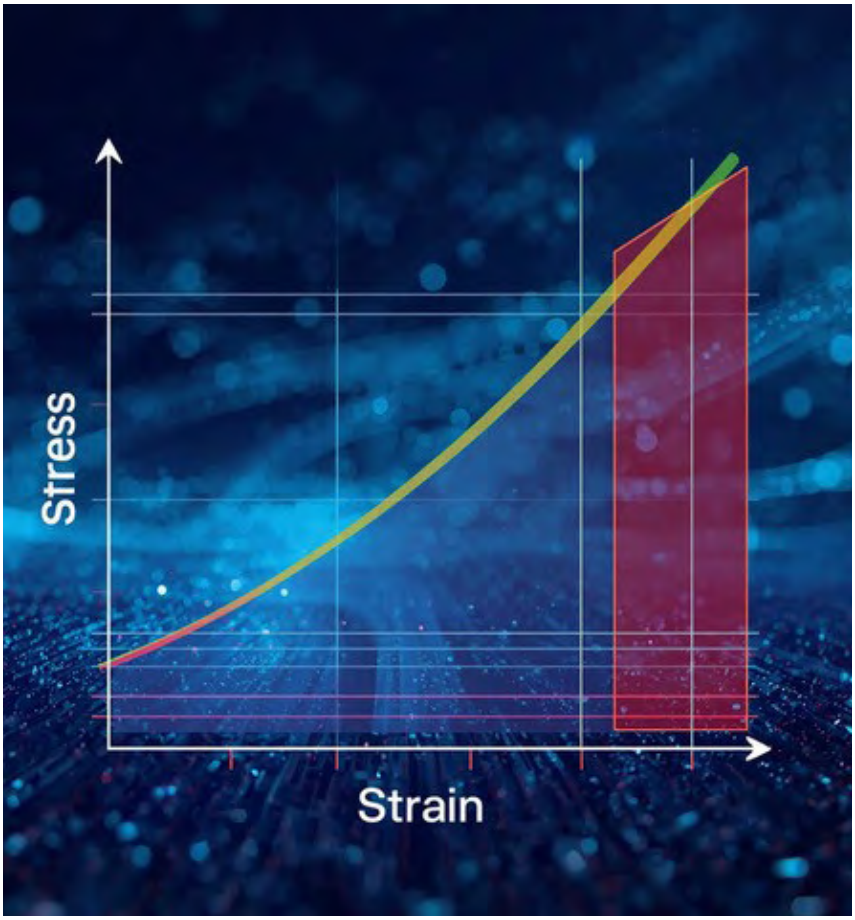
Most of the time, people suffering from burnout, stress fatigue, or trauma do not have a disorder or even a condition. They may have a habit built on self-protective behaviors that pushes them to the point of exhaustion and beyond. Sometimes I am asked to consult on complex cases where a diagnosis is difficult to make. In one recent case, no diagnosis was found because the clinician saw nothing diagnosable. So, how do we explain the behavior that put this matter through their counselor to my desk? As it turns out, this becomes a great illustration of growing stress that reaches the tipping point, changing first from eustress, then to distress, and finally a psychological strain injury.



Motivation as Energy
Eustress Occurs in the Energy Zone

The client had difficulty taking responsibility for their actions, blaming others, and avoiding confrontation. This is self-protective behavior. Self-protective behavior and attitudes can be a coping mechanism for dealing with fear (anxiety). This may be fear of rejection or disparagement, or a belief that they do not measure up or are not enough. This fear of criticism, ridicule, or rejection by friends or a group is a habitual response to perceived unwanted exposure. Taking a path of lesser risk, placing unnecessary expectations on circumstances and relationships, making regressive decisions, or having difficulty making decisions can be signs of self-protective behavior. It may look like passive-aggressive behavior, but most often it is not. Being self-critical and sharply critical of others can become a way of disengaging from perceived risk. There are many causes for self-protective behavior. In most cases, the absence of more serious issues (like depression) is an unconscious response to potential injury to the person's identity and who they believe they are or would like to be. It is natural to strive for safety, security, and significance, all of which we need. When we think these things are unavailable to us, we seek what we have by minimizing

Most of the time, people suffering from burnout, stress fatigue, or trauma do not have a disorder or even a condition.



the loss. Here is a picture of what is happening.[8]

This individual worked in a factory as a team leader. With a small team, their anxiety, passive-aggressive behavior, and poor self-image were not triggered to any great extent. They controlled the environment, communicated well with their teammates, and were perceived as confident. Then they were promoted to line supervisor, and the stress mounted. They lost some of that confidence faced with more responsibilities. It became harder to manage the image they wanted to project to others. As this pressure (stress) grew, it moved beyond the enjoyment (eustress) she experienced as a team leader and became a source of distress. It eventually became impossible to keep up the facade, and distress turned into strain (red zone).[9]

One way we can deal with distress by building new habits is to focus on emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence allows us to avoid some stressors in the first place and, secondly, to build resilience through better self-management. For some, developing good emotional habits comes easily. For others, it may take work. If we are the kind of people who will not do hard things, we are on the apathy side of the bell curve in the earlier Motivation as Energy graph. The five keys to emotional maturity may require us to do hard things that will make a difference.[10]

Self-Awareness: How objectively aware are we of our own thoughts, behaviors, and emotions? Are they aligned with our values? Do we understand our strengths and weaknesses? Of course, there are things we do not see or understand about ourselves. This is the realm of unconscious personality. However, there are many things we are aware of and can build upon. Self-awareness is the foundation for emotional intelligence.

Self-Management: This is also part of the foundation of emotional intelligence and reflects how we use what we know about ourselves. Good self-management depends upon a willingness to be appropriately authentic in relationships to the point of being transparent and vulnerable.

Note: Self-Awareness and Self-Management are inseparable, taken together as foundational, even though treated separately here for clarity. Together they form the first of five keys to developing emotional intelligence. Without self-awareness, self-management can quickly become ineffective.

Energy: Ego strength is a measure of inner power we use to carry out what we want or need to do. Motivation is a measure of our ego strength. Our ego strength will vacillate between the extremes of wimpy and outrageous, with humility as the governing factor. The goal is not a precise balance in the middle, but smaller pendulum swings between the extremes of out-of-control egos.[11]

Self-Mastery is the ability to put into practice what we are learning about emotional intelligence through self-awareness, self-management, and ego-strength (energy). This is where growth begins to require investing in changing relational habits, which may take repetition, time, patience, and feedback, in other words, doing hard things.



Compassion is an open response to suffering, which includes an active desire to alleviate it. Compassion allows you to put yourself in someone else's shoes, understand their situation as best you can, and act kindly toward them. It is more than empathy calling for action. You may not be able to do anything, but your compassion allows you to come alongside others in ways they understand, so that you understand as much as you can what they are going through. This will require learning more about human nature.

Inoffensive Social Skills: Require knowing when to be receiver-oriented in communication and when to be message-oriented. How well do you read people? Is it easy or difficult for you to understand where other people are coming from, their context, or culture? Have you ever been accused of having no filter in what you say verbally or non-verbally? This is the most difficult key to better emotional intelligence. No one can master this completely because we cannot control our thinking or our tongue completely at times, which is why we ask for forgiveness for the gaffes and mistakes we make, which is also a sign of maturity.

Five lifestyle practices support the building of new habits and the maintenance of resilience. These echo our parents' past generations, encouraging us to eat right, exercise, get enough sleep, keep good company, and enjoy the work we do. I can hear my parents echoing my grandparents! What they have learned over many generations is now supported by wisdom science. Here are the practices and why they are important to enjoying life in the eustress zone.

Nutrition: All the nutrients our body needs are developed from the food we eat. Most of these nutrients are used by the brain after being developed in our gut. No kidding, our bodies are amazing chemical factories! If we eat right, we will think right.

Exercise: When we exercise consistently, an enzyme produced in our muscles travels to our brain and triggers a neurotrophic factor that activates a clean-up process in our brains during deep sleep. Get enough sleep, and you will wake up smarter.

More energy is available to heal than when we are not running errands, working the job, or cheering on the Diamond Backs in the World Series.

Sleep: Yes, but this is worth repeating. While we sleep, our bodies recover from physiological stress and strain. More energy is available to heal than when we are not running errands, working the job, or cheering on the Diamond Backs in the World Series.

Meaningful Relationships: Friends you can trust with who you are, who are not critical or judgmental, who listen well, and who have your best interests at heart produce brain chemistry linked to optimism, positivity, rejuvenation, and recovery. Good friends make life easier.

Finding Purpose in Work: The secret here is not whether you like your job, though it is a factor. The more important consideration is what you do vocationally or avocationally, like a side pursuit you enjoy, a hobby, or other passion, that connects to your purpose in life. It may be your primary job that provides this sense of fulfillment, or not.

My job is helping people, groups, and communities be all they can and could be. It is very fulfilling and very exhausting. My avocation is art in various media. Creating beauty flows effortlessly from my mind through my fingers, bleeding off stress and converting distress to eustress. Do you have something like this that serves that purpose in your life? I find beauty in people even when they do not find it in themselves. Helping our close friends find rhythm in their lives is another of our artful passions. And they help me keep rhythm in mine. Spending time hanging out with no other purpose than hanging out is therapy for my soul. Do you have friends like this? I hope you can find a rhythm in your life that brings balance and contentment.

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Jeff Jernigan, PhD, BCPC, FAIS, *is a board-certified mental health professional, hospital administrator, and engineer. These describe Jeff's 47-year career focused on influencing change in people and organizations by capitalizing on growth and change. Jeff's healthcare, engineering, and higher education work has taken him to 44 countries worldwide. He is an internationally recognized thought leader and educator on stress and trauma injuries. The Wellness Council of America rates Jeff as one of the country's top one percent of wellness experts. He serves on the Science and Education Board of The American Institute of Stress, the Veteran's Task Force for the American Association for Suicidology, and the Wiley Psychology Panel. He is a co-founder, Board Chair, and Medical Programs Director for Olive Branch International, Inc., serving where war and violence, natural disasters, disease, and famine have devastated communities. Jeff also serves as CEO of Hidden Value Group, LLC, providing healing, health, and hope to the world. As adjunct faculty and visiting professors, Jeff and his wife Nancy continue teaching disaster mental health fundamentals at National Universities in Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Central Africa. He is the editor of* Contentment *magazine and a Fellow of The American Institute of Stress.*

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THE POCKET



By Michelle Lores, Master CPT, DAIS

This article explores how awareness in time determines the quality of life and performance. Through The Pocket, Mental Tonicity, Quantum Leap, and True Currency, the reader is guided from momentary peak experiences to sustain internal authority and meaningful impact.

The Pocket is where power is accessed

Mental Tonicity is how power is stabilized

Quantum Leap is how power becomes belief-realigned behavior

True Currency is how power becomes impact in the world

I was training for CrossFit and decided to start running to improve my endurance. I hated running at first, but my times at the box improved immensely. I began to notice that as I ran more frequently and adopted excellent rhythm, breath work, technique, and energy disbursement, I was no longer thinking about how tired I was, how much I wanted to stop, or how much further I needed to run. Instead, I began to organize my thoughts regarding issues, projects, relationships, and circumstances. And I could direct the flow of thought.

When I entered this state, it was as if the systematic function was buffering. I did not feel fatigue or discomfort, and my heart rate was very close to my resting rate. I ran as if my feet did not even touch the ground. But the moment I became aware that I was flying high, I would come crashing down. It was my awareness of my body that hindered me. And I became almost obsessed with this phenomenon. I wanted to remain in this heightened state where I could override fatigue, control energy at will, and sustain peak performance indefinitely.

I realized that the quality of my time could not be measured by the lapse of time, my enjoyment of that time, or even the occurrences within it. Quality of time is measured by awareness. You have the capacity to extract from time with the same measure you can inject yourself into it. This realization was foundational to my practice. This awareness, this flow, this ability to elevate the mind above the body, to command energy, endurance, and execution with absolute authority was the 'it' factor. And I recognized that the 'it' factor is not something you must take. It is a place you can access. I call this place 'The Pocket.'

This awareness, this flow, this ability to elevate the mind above the body, to command energy, endurance, and execution with absolute authority was the 'it' factor.

Most people have already been there, in 'The Pocket.' It is not something foreign to you. You have experienced it, often briefly, and then you have come back down again. And it becomes a memory. A moment. A fluke. You look back on it with fondness, never recognizing that it is a place you visited. A place that still exists. That winning touchdown you scored in high school. At that moment, everything slowed down, and you could not miss. That heroic act. The rush. The win. You thought it was a stroke of luck. Something you outlived. Outgrew. Sometimes, age or inability is now prohibiting your access. The good old days are far behind. But the good old days are not gone.

Those moments were not accidental. They were access points. Doors that open inner rooms. You spend your life chasing the circumstances that once produced it, or

believing that it is something unattainable, at least for you, instead of developing the internal pathway that sustains it. And this is where the disconnect begins because the world teaches dependence on external systems: money, environment, validation, conditions, while The Pocket is accessed internally.

So, you set your sights on fleeting moments, dopamine spikes, and once-a-year vacations. But what sustains you in between? Mindless scrolling? A coping mechanism? Television? You go through the motions. You find comfort in monotony. What you are really doing is buffering. Not your body, your mind. For this reason, I developed Mental Tonicity to increase one's awareness over time. Access without governance is temporary; to remain in 'The Pocket,' the system must be trained to hold it.

People often speak about stress as if it must be eliminated. But stress, in its optimal expression, eustress, is not destructive. It is activating. Stress can be converted. The problem is not exposure to stress. It is how you perceive it and the inability to process it without fragmentation. When pressure exceeds internal organization, the system shifts. The body takes over. Feelings are loud. Fear takes hold. You want to fight, take flight, flee the scene, or fawn and the mind buffers. Reaction replaces response. This is where most people live. Bottoms up. You do not move through stress. You are consumed by it.

Mental Tonicity flips the script. It is the process of restoring governance of thought and process. It develops a structured, self-regulating system capable of overriding emotional and physical reactions and commanding a sound top-down response. A tonic system does not just perform. It informs reality. When Mental Tonicity is present:

- Awareness increases.
- Performance is enhanced.
- Systemic function is optimal.
- Discernment, instinct, and desire heighten.
- Response time sharpens.
- Energy is modulated, not dumped.
- The mind remains in the seat of authority.

You no longer react to the environment. The atmosphere adapts to you. And when you are fully aligned: mind, body, spirit, or desire, you enter 'The Pocket.' Once the system can sustain power, the next shift is not physical, but perceptual; this is where the quantum leap occurs.

So how do you go from watching from the nosebleed section, while the chosen few are getting all the gains, to stepping into 'The Pocket' and making it a place you can maintain? You will have to take a quantum leap. A quantum leap refers to a sudden, highly significant advance, a breakthrough, a transformation. But how, or what, rather, must be transformed? What must be surpassed, penetrated, or converted?

- Not your circumstances.
- Not your environment.
- Not even your level of effort.
- The leap is internal.

It is the shift from dependence to authority. From chasing conditions to cultivating access. From believing that something outside of you produces performance, to recognizing that what you possess internally determines the outcome. Because 'it' is in you, stored as potential. What is in you is powerful. But power cannot be measured if it is not deployed. The world has trained you to believe that your advancement is tied to what you acquire.

- More money.
- More opportunity.
- More access.
- More validation.
- More things.
- More fun.

And while these things may enhance your experience, they do not increase your capacity. Do not miscalculate this. You

cannot elevate your life by increasing what you have materially while neglecting who you are becoming. And this is where the concept of currency becomes distorted. When belief is realigned and authority is restored, power is no longer contained. It must be expressed, and this is where currency is revealed.

The world has programmed your relationship with money. But you can reprogram your beliefs, change your relationship with money, and live abundantly. More money, more youth, more ease. This is called a quantum leap.

If the world can program your relationship with money, then this is not the only relationship that needs reprogramming. Is money really the only thing holding you back? Money is a form of currency. World currency. Some people have all the money in the world, but they are rotting from the inside. Money is seductive because it presents itself as the answer to all things. But true currency is the answer to issues that money cannot answer.

Health, relationships, breakups, divorce, work-life balance, career uncertainty, loneliness, loss, grief, parenting, trauma, PTSD, stress, anxiety, depression, addiction, self-esteem issues, body issues, mental disorders, failure, burnout, lack of purpose, lack of intimacy. These are the things people struggle with. And they can only be answered with true currency.

Everyone has true currency. They do not know how or where to invest it, and so they trade it for money. A quantum leap in the world is a drastic change in your belief in the system. A quantum leap in truth is a drastic



It is the shift from chasing conditions to cultivating access. From believing that something outside of you produces performance, to recognizing that what you possess internally determines the outcome.

change that overrides the system. What is true currency? You will find it in 'The Pocket.'

Currency is what you possess that makes an impact. Your wealth is what you have in abundance. It is exchanged through the vehicle or force you use to transfer it. It is made manifest in who you are and what you do. It is legitimized when you take back your authority.

A healthy confidence is one that considers the opinion of others, keeps to personal values and purposes, and is not arrogant.

Authority over what, though? Your stored potential. The potential has already been revealed to you as power. Power. It is your ability to generate the force with which to transform your abilities, your essence, your consciousness, in this world in the time allotted.

But your consciousness, your power, your ability, your purpose, your meaning, your whole life? It is inside of you. If you do not deploy that, translate that, it dies with you. Because it cannot be measured in this world, that does not mean you do not have it in you. But what a shame it would be never to know. Let me explain it to you the way I see it.

You are not your body. Your body is just the vehicle, the container you are using to move through this life. So, if you are not the body, then what are you? You are the essence. The life inside your body. The energy. The inner person. If the body is the vehicle, and the essence is what gives it life, then what is the spirit? The spirit is the driving force. It is your intention. Whether it is conscious or not, pure or distorted, it is what is actually moving you. So now you have a system:

- Body is the vehicle.
- Essence is the life inside it.
- Spirit is the driving force.

But where are you going? That is where purpose comes in. Purpose is direction. And then there is time. Most people think time is against them, but it is not. Time is the measure of movement. The distance you travel. You do not know how much time you have. So, it is not about the amount. It is about the quality. And the quality of your time is not measured by pleasure. It is measured by awareness. How present you are. How clearly are you actually seeing while you are moving through this world?

Most people trade time for money, spend it, waste it, numb it out, and call that living. But time is not the problem. Lack of awareness is. Because there is something for you in every single day. And if you are not present enough to see it, you are not just missing moments; you are throwing life away. And what you choose to express, or withhold, is ultimately measured in time, where awareness determines the value of every moment.

Because if you lack awareness, you are not living. You are just passing through. Step into the Pocket. The 'it' factor is not a thing. It is a place, and it is available to you.



Michelle Lores, Master CPT, DAIS, *is the developer of The Method, a revolutionary trauma recovery and training system established on January 1, 2015. Rooted in systemic integration and spiritual alignment, The Method is designed to defragment, reprogram, and optimize the individual by resurrecting truth from within.*

With a background in film and television, Michelle brings a rare synthesis of performance, precision, and perception to her work. Her original practice does not train the body — it trains the inner man. She is called to serve high-performance men of valor, aligning them with their original design and purpose through the dominance of internal order.

As a master trainer and trauma-informed practitioner, Michelle is a leading voice in trauma resolution, internal transformation, and military intelligence. Her work continues to influence leaders, warriors, and visionaries who seek not just healing — but command.

Michelle is a Diplomate of The American Institute of Stress.


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The Eustress Nobody Talks About

You can generate good stress in the middle of a crisis. I learned how from a chemo chair.

By Joelle Kaufman, MBA, DAIS

Before my very first round of chemo, I named the port in my chest Voldeport. I gave it a ridiculous name on purpose, so that catching sight of it would make me smile instead of reminding me of the sentence I kept replaying that I had put off the preventive surgery too long, and a Stage 2 breast cancer had caught me. I would rather look at a villain I could laugh at than a regret I could not take back. The first time a nurse went to access him, and I said the name out loud, she laughed so hard she had to set the needle down.

I didn't have a word then for what naming that thing did for me. It turns out there is one, and it comes from the man who gave us the word stress in the first place. Hans Selye named stress's healthier twin eustress. Good stress, the kind that sharpens you instead of wearing you down. Most of us only meet it in the pleasant places, the first day of a job you fought to get, the last mile of a race you trained for, the deadline you know you can hit. What almost nobody says out loud is that eustress is also available inside the worst week of your life, and you can generate it on purpose. Naming Voldeport was me manufacturing a small dose of it before I even knew it had a name.

What surprised me when I went looking for the research is that eustress and distress run on the same wiring. Same racing heart, same adrenaline, same flood of activation. Your body does not keep two separate stress systems, one for good news and one for bad. What separates the two is not the event. It's how you read it: as a threat that will flatten you, or a challenge you have some power over. Alia Crum's research at Stanford found that people who believe stress can be useful show a healthier hormonal response to stress than those who treat it as purely destructive. The belief moves the biology. Not the affirmation. The appraisal.

Three things tend to tip hard stress toward the useful kind: some sense of control, a finish line you can see, and a reason that matters to you. Duration matters too. Eustress tends to spike and then release, with recovery built in, while distress is the version that never shuts off. A cancer diagnosis strips the control, hides the finish line, and refuses to switch off, which is exactly why it flattens people. So, generating eustress in a crisis is really the work of handing yourself back small pieces of control, meaning, and an end you can picture, one deliberate move at a time.

I know how much it strips, because I was inside it. I carry the BRCA1 gene, an 80% lifetime risk of breast cancer, the same gene that gave my mother cancer at 36 and my sister at 29. I am a planner, and still, I kept pushing this one plan down the road. When I finally scheduled the preventive mastectomy to take my breasts before cancer could find them, my breast surgeon called the day before to say the biopsy was already malignant. I was outrunning cancer right as

Research on exercise during chemotherapy shows that roughly 150 minutes per week can improve patients' response to treatment and reduce the odds of recurrence.



What you get is your swing. You can rename what scares you, choose the challenge you lean into, and build the good stress that keeps you facing forward instead of folding.

it caught me. Chemo went on the calendar, and with it the port, a small disc under the skin feeding into the vena cava, routing the harsh drugs into high-volume central blood so they spared my heart and the small veins in my arms.

So, I went to work, handing the pieces back. Naming Voldeport was not denial, and it was not me being brave. It moved a daily reminder from dread into a punchline. Then I renamed the infusions themselves Cancer Obliteration Day. Not the day the poison went into me, the day I went in to wipe the cancer out. Same chair, same drip, but I walked in as the one doing the obliterating. Language structures how we meet the world. I did not get to choose the pitch. I got to choose my swing, and a swing is a physical act, not just a mental one.

There is a second way to generate good stress in a crisis, and it is completely literal. My friend Jessica showed up at my door three mornings a week at seven a.m., all through chemo. We had been working out together for seventeen years, and she was not about to let cancer end the streak. So in my garage, wrung out from treatment, I lifted heavy weights and threw medicine balls at my best friend at an hour when every cell in my body wanted to lie back down.

That is eustress in its purest form. Exercise is a stressor. You are deliberately taxing the muscles, heart, and lungs. The dose is what makes it medicine instead of damage, a principle biologists call hormesis: a controlled amount of a stressor that leaves the system stronger than it found it. And this was not only good for my mood. Research on exercise during chemotherapy shows that roughly 150 minutes per week can improve patients' response to treatment and reduce the odds of recurrence. Jessica, hurling a

weighted ball at a cancer patient at seven in the morning, was improving my odds. Every good thing in my treatment had a clinical footnote.

None of this is toxic positivity. The people who tell you to be grateful for your cancer have never had it. Generating eustress is not pretending the hard thing doesn't hurt. It hurt. I cried. I was scared for my kids in a way I could feel in my teeth. Good stress does not erase the distress sitting next to it, and the goal is not to feel wonderful while your life is on fire. The goal is to keep part of your system pointed toward challenge rather than collapse, so you can still think, still connect, still make a choice that isn't pure panic. Cortisol clouds. The challenge channel clears.

So, what do you do with this, before you need it and while you're in it?

Rename the thing that scares you. It sounds ridiculous until you try it. Give the tumor, the treatment, the audit, the divorce a name that makes you laugh instead of flinch and notice how it stops owning the room.

Pick one hard thing you can control and lean into it on purpose. A workout. A project with a real deadline. A cold morning walk, you have to talk yourself into. Choose a challenge, so the crisis isn't the only stressor writing your days.

And build your list before the crisis arrives. Write down what pulls you toward a challenge instead of dread: who you would call, what movement you would protect, what you would rename. When the hard thing comes, and it comes for everyone, you will not want to design your response from scratch at your lowest moment. You'll want to reach for something you have already made.

None of this makes the hard thing optional. You don't get to choose the pitch, or the diagnosis, or the year that flattens the one you had planned. What you get is your swing. You can rename what scares you, choose the challenge you lean into, and build the good stress that keeps you facing forward instead of folding. That part is available on the worst day, not only the good ones.

You'd never pick the pitch, but you always control your swing.

Joelle Kaufman, MBA, DAIS *is a keynote speaker whose TEDx talk, Happiness Tripwires, will be released in 2026. As a strategic performance coach for C-suite and VP-level executives in B2B technology, she has spent twenty-seven years inside companies where small decisions accumulate into outcomes that nobody saw coming. She is the founder of GTM Flow, the bestselling author of Crushing the Cancer Curveball, and the host of the Kicking Cancer's Ass podcast.*

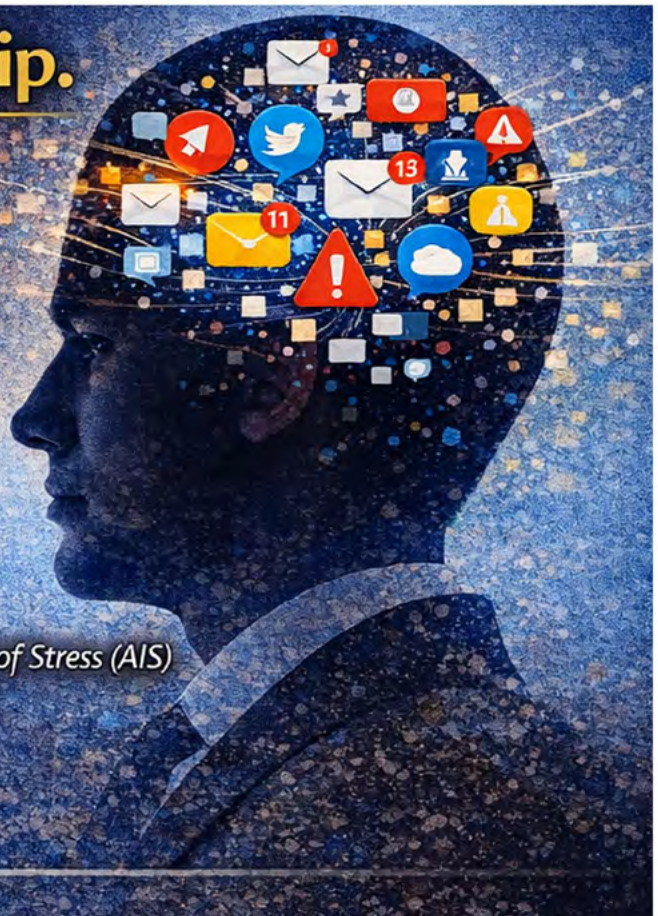


Joelle's work sits at the intersection of high-stakes leadership and human health. She is a self-described stress eater. The intersections of leadership and human health are what she writes about most. As the twelfth person in her family to receive a cancer diagnosis, she has spent a lifetime studying what sustained stress does to a body, and what protects it. She brings the same evidence-based clarity to her coaching that she brings to the boardroom, and she has been a featured speaker for executive audiences and patient communities alike.

She is a certified Process Communication Model expert team coach and writes regularly on resilience, leadership under pressure, and the science of small interventions that protect long-term performance and long-term health. Joelle is a Diplomate of The American Institute of Stress.

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Anxiety Disorders

Depression

Insomnia

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Tension Headaches

Migraines

Chronically experiencing any of these persistently over time suggests a need for qualified professional help.



UNDER PRESSURE: WHAT THE OCEAN AND THE OFFICE HAVE IN COMMON

By Pavlina Mihhaleva, DAIS

When a Freediver descends to forty meters on a single breath, the heart rate drops significantly and blood shifts from the limbs toward the vital organs in a response so ancient and precise that it operates entirely without conscious instruction. At the same time, the lungs compress to a fraction of their surface area.[1] The body, in other words, already knows exactly what to do under extreme pressure, provided the mind does not get in the way.



Now consider what happens in the average corporate office. According to a 2025 report by Mental Health UK, ninety-one percent of adults experienced high or extreme levels of stress in the previous year.[2] Workplace stress now costs the United States economy approximately three hundred billion dollars annually, and over eighty percent of employees are currently at risk of burnout.[3] Nearly half of American workers report feeling stressed every single day, while eighty-three percent say they regularly lose sleep over work.[3] The body is receiving the same distress signals it would receive from a physical threat, and it responds in the same physiological way, flooding the bloodstream with cortisol and adrenaline and driving the heart rate upward in preparation for action. The difference is that in the office, there is nowhere to run and no moment of resolution, so the emergency state continues, hour after hour, day after day, until the system begins to break down.

My sister, Varvara came to Freediving from competitive gymnastics, a sport that had trained her body to override its own signals and perform regardless of how it felt. I came to it from a different direction entirely, as a senior project manager who had spent years managing the separation of two enormous organizations and had grown so accustomed to chronic pressure that I had stopped noticing it. We arrived at the same water from opposite ends of the high-performance world, and what we both found beneath the surface changed the way we understood everything that had happened above it.

What Freediving makes immediately and uncomfortably clear is that the body does not distinguish between the stress of

Nearly half of American workers report feeling stressed every single day, while eighty-three percent say they regularly lose sleep over work.

Research confirms that elevated cortisol levels over extended periods impair sleep, weaken immunity, and disrupt the mood regulation that leaders depend on to sustain their teams.



depth and the stress of a difficult quarter. The mammalian dive reflex, which activates when a human being submerges and slows the heart to as few as forty beats per minute in trained divers,[1] functions properly only when the nervous system is genuinely calm. A diver who enters the water in a state of anxiety will find that the reflex is suppressed, oxygen consumption rises, and the dive becomes dangerous far sooner than it should, because the ocean rewards not those who push through but those who have learned to regulate.

Research confirms that elevated cortisol levels over extended periods impair sleep, weaken immunity, and disrupt the mood regulation that leaders depend on to sustain their teams.[2]

Among leaders specifically, a 2025 Global Leadership Forecast found that seventy-one percent reported increased stress compared to three years prior,

while trust in immediate managers has dropped from forty-six percent in 2022 to just twenty-nine percent in 2024,[4] which suggests that the physiological cost of leading from a chronically activated nervous system does not stay contained to the individual but spreads through organizations the way pressure spreads through water, affecting every team beneath the surface.

The parallel between Freediving and corporate stress is not a metaphor but a physiological fact, because a nervous system under chronic stress behaves identically whether the source of that stress is a boardroom or the deep ocean. The interventions that allow a Freediver to go deeper are the same ones that allow a leader to sustain performance without breaking down. Out of our combined experience across two very different high-performance worlds, Varvara and I developed an approach to working with leaders that draws directly on Freediving principles and psychology, built around restoring the body's capacity to regulate itself rather than adding further demands to a system that is already overloaded, because the body already knows how to handle pressure and the only question is whether we are willing to give it the conditions it needs to do so.

Pavlina Mihhaleva is the co-founder of Pavlov Reset Consulting and the author of Calm Under Pressure? The Depth Advantage: Where Leaders Win.

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Pavlina Mihhaleva, DAIS *is the co-founder of Pavlov Reset Consulting and author of* Calm Under Pressure - The Depth Advantage: Where Leaders Win. *She spent over a decade as a senior project manager leading large-scale corporate transformation programs, and it was the sustained accumulation of high-pressure delivery over many years that eventually led to burnout and shaped her deep understanding of chronic stress in high-performance environments. Together with her sister Varvara, a former competitive gymnast and Durham Business School graduate who came to Freediving through a parallel journey in high-performance pressure, they developed an approach to leadership wellbeing that draws directly on Freediving principles and psychology. Her work with senior leaders is grounded in the conviction that sustainable performance requires not more resilience techniques but a restored capacity for the nervous system to regulate itself under pressure. She is a Diplomate of The American Institute of Stress.*



THE INSIDE-OUT NATURE OF THE STRESS RESPONSE

By Carla Hay-Perdue, DNP, APRN, FAIS

Stress! The final frontier? It seems like it! Every time I research the topic, the information takes another twist and turn. I learned a long time ago that the stress response was designed to get us out of danger. I imagined my hunter-gatherer ancestor facing a hungry lion while hunting. This ancestor thought, I am fixing to be lunch if I do not do something!? This thought sent a distress signal to the hypothalamus. That, in turn, activated the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, releasing stress hormones to trigger the fight-or-flight response. Here are the key actors in this cascading process.

Norepinephrine prepares the brain and body for quick action. It boosts alertness, sharpens focus, and helps with memory. It raises heart rate and blood pressure and causes the liver to release glucose. Blood flow increases to the muscles while it decreases to the digestive system.

Adrenalin (Epinephrine) is another hormone released during stress. It makes the heart beat faster and stronger, increasing blood flow. The small airways in the lungs open wider to take in more oxygen, which helps the brain stay alert. Our senses, like sight and hearing, become sharper. It also causes the body to release stored sugar and fats for extra energy.

Cortisol is released to keep our body on high alert when the sense of danger is prolonged. Cortisol helps break down fats, carbohydrates, and proteins to provide energy. It also reduces inflammation, supports blood pressure, and weakens the immune system. Additionally, it lowers insulin production and raises glucagon levels, thereby increasing blood sugar levels.

My ancestor quickly realized he could not outrun the creature, so he prepared to fight. He stared at the lion. He aimed his spear and braced for the charge. The lion leaped, and the spear pierced her flesh, instantly killing her. He took a deep breath, and his body relaxed. The fight-or-flight response served him well in surviving the danger and in providing meat to feed his family.

The stress response is designed to be activated for short periods of time during emergencies. Prolonged activation is hazardous to your health. In today's world, the stress response is triggered many times during the day. Anxious thoughts occur for many different reasons.

- Thoughts about the past often lead to regret. We want to improve the past; however, it no longer exists except as a memory, so we cannot.
- Thoughts about world events often lead to anxiety. We try to anticipate the future based on what is happening now. No one knows what options the future will bring.
- Thoughts about struggles at work, such as staff shortage, increased workload, funding cuts, and inadequate supply availability, contribute to anxiety.
- Thoughts about relationships and finances add to the problems.

Circumstances do not create our anxiety. Our thoughts about these circumstances trigger our feelings. According to philosopher

The stress response is designed to be activated for short periods of time during emergencies.

The stress response is the same whether it comes from thoughts about a hungry lion or thoughts about today's concerning events.



Sydney Banks, thought is the creative agent that guides us through life.[1] The stress response is the same whether it comes from thoughts about a hungry lion or thoughts about today's concerning events.

Tips to decrease chronic stress.

- We are given the gift of thought at birth and have a constant river of thoughts throughout life. Some are happy and peaceful, while others are fearful or angry. The thoughts we focus on shape our emotions. Happy, peaceful thoughts produce good feelings. Angry thoughts lead to angry feelings. When you feel upset, ask yourself which thoughts caused those feelings. Remind yourself that we latch onto hurried, fearful thoughts. Let them go! Aim for a calm mind and a good feeling. I learned never to make decisions when I'm stressed. Let the thoughts settle, and wisdom, insight, and creativity come through. Good decisions come from a calm mind.
- Stay in the present moment. When present, your mind will calm down on its own. When the mind calms down, stress hormones drop, and the body activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which supports digestion, slows breathing, lowers heart rate, and helps maintain healthy blood sugar levels. This brings the body back to a state of rest. Focusing on breath awareness helps me relax. I use box breathing: inhale for the count of four, hold for the count of four, exhale for the count of four, and hold again for the count of four. After a few rounds, I feel calm. Walking in nature, knitting, and gardening also help. Each person has their own way to relax.
- Make exercise a daily habit. Being active helps the body release endorphins, which boost mood and support the growth of nerve fibers around the brain's hippocampus. The hippocampus plays a role in managing emotions, memory, learning, and easing stress.
- Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep per night. People who get inadequate sleep

(defined as six hours or less) have nearly a threefold increase in the frequency of mental distress compared to those with adequate sleep.[2] Stress decreases our natural melatonin production, making sleep more difficult.

- Eat a diet that focuses on vegetables, fruit, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, fermented foods, and healthy proteins like fish and poultry. Avoid or minimize ultra-processed foods. The most fascinating discovery in my exploration of stress is the gut-brain axis and its role in the stress response. According to microbiome researcher Tim Spector, we host 100 trillion microbes in our bodies. Most are in our gut microbiome.

These microbes live in harmony inside us and have a role in much of our physiology.[3] One area the microbiome affects is mental health. The microbiome and the brain are constantly communicating via the gut-brain axis. The gut-brain axis is a two-way communication system that links the brain's central nervous system with the gut's enteric nervous system via the Vagus nerve. Our intestines have the second-largest collection of nerves outside our brains.

The gut microbiome produces hormones, such as the feel-good hormone serotonin and the tranquilizing hormone GABA, that affect this communication between organs. Our brain and gut microbes constantly communicate through nerves and chemicals. According to Dr. Spector, the right balance of food stimulates the right balance of microbes, which produce the right balance of chemicals needed to optimize these interactions. Stress disrupts the microbiome, altering the gut microbiota composition and the gut environment.

It also decreases gut transit time and motility, reducing nutrient availability and negatively impacting microbial growth and diversity.[4] Some studies show that individuals diagnosed with stress-related disorders have lower levels of Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium microbes.[5] Eating patterns such as the Mediterranean Diet promote the growth of beneficial bacteria.

The relationship between thoughts and feelings in the stress response, coupled with the bidirectional interplay of the gut-brain axis and the gut microbiome, deepens my awareness that this truly is an inside-out phenomenon.

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Carla Hay-Perdue, DNP, FAIS *- her wellness journey began during her studies in the Doctor of Nursing Practice program at Texas Tech Health Sciences Center. She completed the Integrative Nurse Coaching program as part of her capstone. Carla obtained board certification in coaching from the American Holistic Nursing Credentialing Center in 2014. In 2017, she learned about the Three Principles of Mind, Thought, and Consciousness and their role in resilience. She completed the coaching program through Advancing Nurse Coaching and has been teaching the principles since 2018. Carla is employed as an Adult Nurse Practitioner and Health and Wellness Educator/ Coach for Palo Pinto General Hospital. She is a Fellow of The American Institute of Stress.*

Tech Report

There are many devices that claim to reduce stress. Some work well depending upon the specific nature of the stress. However, there are just as many that fail to live up to their claims. Apha-Stim takes advantage of proven technology to deliver on its claims.

Alpha-Stim is a handheld medical device that relieves stress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia. It uses a mild, sub-sensory patented micro-current applied through small ear clips and treatments are done at home in as little as twenty minutes. Its therapeutic abilities have been acclaimed by healthcare professionals and patients worldwide and effectiveness has been repeatedly verified through more clinical studies than with any other device in its class. In fact, there have been more than one hundred clinical studies over the past thirty-eight years proving it fast, safe and effective with no lasting side effects and no risk of addiction. For more information visit stress.org.

We have added new authors over the last two issues including Pavalina Mihhaleva, DAIS, *Under Pressure: What the Ocean and Office Have in Common;* Joelle Kaufman, MBA, DAIS, *What is Eroding You;* and Brian Ramos, PhD, FAIS, *Your Brain on Digital Stress.*

Here is a comment on the Summer 2026 issue from Dr. Jian Zhou, PhD, a clinical researcher in China.

"I have read your article in the *Contentment* summer issue of 2026 of the magazine - How stress can kill. Undoubtedly, it is an excellent piece that I greatly appreciate. Not only does it clearly explain scientific principles, but it also offers valuable suggestions, particularly your discussion on 'rhythm,' which is particularly engaging. After reading your work, I've written a few comments and reflections, which I'm now sending to you for your review (see attachment). It would be a great honor if my piece could be published in your magazine with the approval of you and your colleagues."

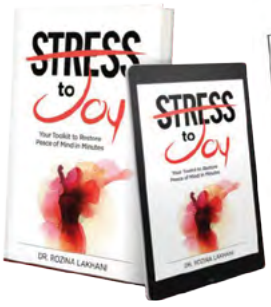
REDUCE YOUR STRESS.

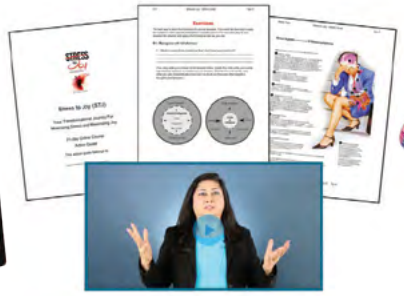
Grow your happiness.



Is stress dragging you down physically and emotionally? The comprehensive, online "Stress to Joy" program, taught by bestselling author and board-certified psychiatrist Rozina Lakhani, MD, MPH, FAIS, gives you the tools you need for a return to joyful living. Dr. Rozina shares her proven stress management techniques in a way that's both practical and inspirational. The program includes a workbook with step-by-step guidance, and it takes just 15 minutes per day for about three weeks. Make this powerful investment in your health and happiness – and turn the corner from stress to joy.

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