THE EMPLOYEE STRESS REDUCTION & RESILIENCE HANDBOOK

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-James E. Porter
HOW CAN I BE MORE RESILIENT AT WORK AND LESS BOTHERED BY STRESS?

Here’s some news that may surprise you. Sarah Damaske, Ph.D., a professor of labor and employment at Pennsylvania State University, wanted to find out if workers were truly experiencing more stress at work, or just thinking that they were. So she asked 122 volunteers to swab their saliva (six times a day) in order to check their cortisol levels (a stress hormone). This would objectively determine their levels of stress throughout the day.

For the majority of her volunteers, the most relaxing parts of the day occurred while at work. If you are surprised by this finding maybe you shouldn’t be. There are many important ways that our work positively affects our lives and perhaps our health too:

- Work is a primary source of income
- Work can be a source of pride
- Work can be a source of social support
- Work can be an opportunity for personal growth

So why is it, that so many people find work stressful and how can we go about truly experiencing LESS STRESS at work?

One easy way to lower your stress at work is to simply change your MINDSET about stress. Stanford professor, Dr. Alia Crum, suggests that a “mindset intervention” – a simple exercise that changes your perceptions of stress – can actually LOWER the stress you experience, even in the workplace. To prove it, Crum recruited 300 workers at UBS (a global financial firm) to watch two different 3 minute videos. The first group got the video with the standard message that stress is bad for you. The second group got the message (which promotes resilience) that stress is a positive and should be embraced. After the study was completed the second group reported “greater focus, engagement, collaboration, and productivity at work.”*

The purpose of this handbook is not only to change your mindset about stress, but to give you the coping skills you need to handle demanding situations that employees typically encounter in the workplace. This is what building resilience is all about. To that end, this workbook will show you how to be an effective, more durable, more flexible employee who isn’t thrown off balance by the stressful moments that occur each day. You’ll learn how to work to your strengths, manage your time better, communicate better, deal with conflict better, learn how to say no, delegate better, and deal with emotions like anger, sadness and frustration better than you ever have before.

*From the book “The Upside of Stress,” by Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

RESILIENCY TIP:

Resilience is often defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity with no lasting negative effects. In the long run, adversity can make you stronger. Knowing how to cope with stress is what makes you more resilient. This handbook will help you do just that by giving you the tools you need to cope with a variety of stressful situations typically encountered at work.
DEALING WITH A TOUGH CUSTOMER OR CLIENT

CUSTOMERS GET STRESSED...

When customers get stressed about the product or service you provide they generally want to take it out on you. But interestingly, the customer’s stress may have little to do with you and little to do with the product or service you provide and it may be more about how they are feeling on that particular day.

Rather than viewing your customer as being difficult or demanding, try thinking of him or her as someone who is having a really bad day. Generally when WE are stressed we want someone to listen, validate our concerns and help us solve the problem that is upsetting us. And this is exactly how you can help your customer lower his or her stress.

Read the five tips on the next page and try any one of these techniques the next time you are dealing with a difficult customer. See your interaction with this stressed-out customer as an opportunity to literally help them manage THEIR stress, and by so doing, helping your company acquire a customer.

8 WARNING SIGNS OF A DIFFICULT CUSTOMER OR CLIENT

1. Irrational statements that make little or no sense
2. Exaggerated claims that don’t sound true
3. Lack of eye contact
4. Flushed face
5. Your own internal feelings of discomfort; even before the customer starts getting angry
6. Use of profanity
7. Increasing use of hand gestures
8. Blaming you (or the company) for things you had little or nothing to do with

“The customer’s stress may have little to do with you or the product or service you provide.”
HOW TO TURN A TOUGH CUSTOMER INTO A LOYAL CUSTOMER

1. **Breathe.** While your customer’s stress is going up, you can keep yours down by simply noticing your breathing. As much as you can—even while your customer is carrying on—just notice your own breathing.

2. **Listen.** Letting the customer blow off a little steam, reassuring them that you’re listening intently (I understand, Sir; I can see how you would feel that way, I might have done the same thing if I were you) and letting them complain unchallenged will eventually allow their stressed-out energy to dissipate. When you feel like it’s time to speak, wait a second or two before starting.

3. **Sympathize.** Try to remember a time when YOU lodged a customer complaint and maybe even lost your temper a bit, too. By doing this simple mental exercise, you’ll be able to relate to your customer and react with empathy, and empathy can help you transform the customer’s stress energy into something more positive.

4. **Apologize.** There’s a sign in the lobby of Stew Leonard’s in Norwalk, Connecticut, the world’s largest dairy store, that is literally written in stone. It’s carved into a giant granite rock. It says:

   **RULE #1** The customer is always right.

   **RULE #2** If the customer is ever wrong, reread rule #1.

   One of the reasons this store got to be world’s largest, is because the owner, Stew Leonard, realized it is much more important to give in to a customer’s modest demands than quibble over something that might result in losing that customer. So sometimes it’s good business to apologize, and give in to the modest demand— even if you feel like the customer doesn’t deserve an apology or a small refund or an exchange for something new.

5. **Don’t take it personally.** Customers just want a chance to vent their stress. If you find you DO take it personally, refer back to rule #1: Breathe!

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**RESILIENCY TIP:**
Don’t catch second-hand stress from your customers and clients. Keep reminding yourself: This is their stress and not yours.
Co-workers can say mean things. They can be rude, moody, angry, and have annoying habits. It's predictable as rain, right? And yet, when a co-worker is mean to us we act surprised and stressed and as if this stressful interaction shouldn't be happening.

This differential between how we know people ARE and how we want them to BE is part of the problem. We know that people can be difficult at times. We know that WE can be difficult at times. But we maintain the view that it's NOT OK when people, particularly co-workers, are difficult with us.

So how do we reconcile these opposing positions? To some extent, a business environment is like a big family. You see the same people day after day. You spend more time with some co-workers than you do with certain members of your own family. We know there is friction in families and yet we want ALL our business relationships to be cordial, polite and free of stress or conflict.

Occupational stress experts say that this need to keep up appearances at work can be truly exhausting: In other words, when conflicts and difficulties arise, you have to act like it doesn't bother you. When you wind up having to do this all day you will often arrive home tired and crabby and not even know why. Now that you are aware of this phenomenon, where you have to act like things don't bother you, you still have to make a decision.

What are you going to do about it? This is the point where problems break down into two categories. The problems that you have to deal with yourself, and the problems you have to take to HR. Read the article on the facing page to find out how to deal with the problems you can cope with yourself, and check the box below for the problems you should consider taking to HR (or, someone in your company who handles worker complaints).

6 WARNING SIGNS YOU SHOULD TAKE YOUR PROBLEM TO HUMAN RESOURCES (HR)
1. Feeling like you are being bullied.
2. Feeling like you have been threatened in any way.
3. Co-worker is being verbally abusive.
4. A witness confirms your feelings.
5. Anything with sexual content or even sexual overtones.
6. Use of profanity.

RESILIENCY TIP:
Find someone who ISN'T bothered by the same co-worker that bothers you and ask them: why aren't you bothered by this person? What you learn may teach you a lot about managing stress.

“We know there is conflict in families and yet we want our business relationships to be free of conflict. This isn’t always a realistic expectation.”
HOW TO GET ALONG WELL WITH YOUR CO-WORKERS

1. Avoid the blame game. Blaming other people for the bad things that happen to you leaves you feeling helpless and out of control. When you get in the habit of blaming others, you will find that you are suddenly working with a lot more “difficult people” than you ever were before. When you feel the urge to lay on the blame, step back and try to determine what YOUR role in this situation might have been. Take responsibility for the aspects of the situation that are under your control. Watch how this dramatically reduces the number of difficult people you work with in the future.

2. Accept that people are different. Most human beings have very little tolerance for even the minor personality differences that occur between two people. It’s often this intolerance that turns normal co-workers into difficult co-workers. If we want to live and work in harmony with all types of people we need to begin to see the importance of diversity, not only from the perspective of racial differences, but from the perspective of personality differences too. Obviously, we need BOTH accountants AND creative types to make a business run. And yet when someone is a nitpicker (an accountant type) or always running late (a creative type) it drives us crazy if we’re the OTHER type.

3. Give people a free pass. Everyone deserves a free pass now and then for being grumpy or rude or annoying. Everyone, including you, occasionally has a bad day, and when you see it in this perspective, you are the one who will benefit.

4. Manage your own stress. Remember, your stress levels play into every negative interaction you have with another human being. If you know your stress is high, and you are having problems getting along with someone, think about the outlets you can find for managing it. Exercise, meditation, deep breathing, yoga, massage, listening to relaxing music and reading something inspirational are all outlets for coping with stress.

5. Offer to help the person you are having trouble with. Doing the opposite of what your emotions are telling you to do is sometimes the absolute best way to bring those emotions under control. If someone is bugging you offer to give them some help, with no strings attached. If you really expect nothing back in return, a simple gesture like this can completely short-circuit a stressful situation.

6. If all else fails, let someone else do your police work. If you do need to address a problem that doesn’t go away with the above methods, let someone else do the enforcing. That’s why we have hierarchies at work to deal with problems that won’t go away even after you’ve tried not to blame, applied tolerance, given them a free pass and managed your own stress. When all these efforts fail, carefully document what is happening to you, noting times, language used and your efforts to avoid any trouble. Bring these complaints (in writing) to the management and let THEM decide how to deal with it.
HOW TO WORK WELL WITH YOUR BOSS

Time pressure, cutthroat competition, economic pressure and even your boss’s boss can all contribute to the stress of work, and your working relationship with your boss. Still the more you know about how to get along with your supervisor, the better your relationship will be.

Probably the thing we crave most in any job is a sense of autonomy. Having autonomy means more control and having more control often means having less stress. We all want our bosses to trust us to make decisions that allow us to function semi-independently most of the time. This is very much in the interest of your boss, too.

But there’s a catch.

You have to earn this trust by showing that you can work independently and even think like him or her in certain situations. Here’s five ideas for how to earn more autonomy:

1. Volunteer to do an assignment nobody else wants.
2. Always ask for a deadline: when do you want this by?
3. If the deadline is unrealistic, negotiate: I think I’m going to need x number of days to get this done.
4. Get the work done on time or even a bit early.
5. Check with your boss midstream to see if you are doing the work correctly.

RESILIENCY TIP:
There are always going to be SOME difficult moments with your boss no matter how good a boss you have. Resist the urge to constantly relive these moments. Let them go. Try to start each day with a clean slate.

QUALITIES OF A GOOD BOSS

A good teacher. Doesn’t mind sharing what he or she has learned and is good at explaining things.

Gives recognition. Acknowledges good work and gives you good feedback when the work needs to be better.

Encourages risk taking. Is willing to accept occasional mistakes in order to encourage self-sufficiency.

Encourages suggestions. Asks for feedback from employees, builds team spirit.

Defends your rights. A GOOD supervisor realizes that he or she is part of a larger team and must defend the rights of his or her team members to higher level management.

Understands the importance of family. No matter how busy it gets, this boss fully realizes there are many times when you have to put family ahead of the goals of the company.

Ethical. Sets the highest standard in this regard and expects the same of you.

Doesn’t MAKE you work overtime. Too much overtime and/or bringing work home eventually takes its toll. A good boss will often leave this decision up to you.

High EQ (Emotional Intelligence). A good boss doesn’t blow his or her top, use curse words or is verbally abusive, ever. Knows how to control his or her emotions and is a good communicator.
HOW TO GET ALONG WITH YOUR TYPE OF BOSS

The micro-manager. Yes, this boss checks your work probably more than is necessary and wants to get involved in every decision, no matter how small. So find a way to use this trait to YOUR advantage. Whenever you have a stopping place, run your work by this boss and share your decision making process, to see if he or she agrees before continuing on. Don’t resist this trait. Flow with it and let him or her help you make your work even better. When you deliver the final product everyone will be happy with the result.

The silent type. Take the initiative and talk to your boss. Ask directly what’s expected of you and how you’re doing. Take advantage of both formal (at work) and informal (after work) opportunities to get to know him or her better. Make a list of things you believe you ought to be working on and see if he or she agrees. Better yet, let him or her prioritize the list for you.

The minimal-manager. This boss is the opposite of the micro-manager. You have a certain freedom with this boss that you won’t find with the other types so use it. He or she may not be looking over your shoulder or breathing down your neck, so you want to make sure your goals are in alignment.

Once you know exactly what you should be working on, you now have the freedom to do this job on your own terms. Whenever you can, work to your strengths on tasks you enjoy doing and by getting recognized for doing good work you will eventually do less and less of the work that you find tedious and more and more of the work that you find satisfying.

The perfectionist. This boss probably thinks more highly of you than you realize but may never say so. Get to know what this boss likes and dislikes by allowing him or her to check your work on a regular basis, particularly when you first start working for him or her. Once you get to know the things that absolutely HAVE to be perfect, it becomes much easier to work with this kind of boss. Even though this boss will seem overly critical, don’t take it personally and use these criticisms to take your work to an even higher level.

Your boss is human too. We all have preconceived notions of what a good boss should be: a supportive, kind, parental figure who uses gentle prodding whenever necessary. But is there anyone who lives up to this description all the time? Probably not even your own parents! Try making a list of how your ideal boss would treat you and then honestly ask yourself if YOU could be the person you want your boss to be, day in and day out. If the answer is no, maybe you need to lower your unrealistic expectations.
WORK-LIFE BALANCE: FINDING PURPOSE AND MEANING

There’s nothing quite as stressful as having to choose between work and family: To go to work when there’s a big deadline or stay home with a sick child, to stay past quitting time or leave a few minutes early to visit an elderly parent, to put your baby in daycare or take an extended maternity leave, to stay late and get one more thing done or be late for dinner with a friend or spouse, to attend that important meeting or miss your child’s (or even your niece or nephew’s) starring role in the school play or soccer game. These are just some of the stressful work/family conflicts that arise every day. Learning how to handle conflict well is one of the hallmarks of a resilient person.

Still, a lot of these tough decisions are going to be made along gender lines: A woman is more likely to decide in favor of family and a man is more likely to decide in favor of work. (Not always, of course.) But don’t jump to the conclusion that this tendency works in either gender’s favor. What’s most important is who gets to live a more balanced life.

So how do we lead a balanced life? Any stay-at-home mom or stay-at-home dad will tell you that preparing the meals, doing the dishes, buying the groceries, changing diapers, doing the laundry and cleaning the house all day is no walk in the park! And it’s certainly not a balanced life, either. Many of the people filling these roles would jump at the chance to go on a business trip, eat out for lunch on occasion, attend meetings, wear nice clothing, or just have a reason to get out of the house every day and GET PAID FOR DOING IT.

On the other hand, no one wants to miss their baby’s first steps, miss seeing a school play, or even miss the memorial service of a beloved aunt. And sometimes these moments are reserved for the stay-at-home parent, or someone who only works part time. Let’s face it, in this day and age, we want it all! And that being the case, we are just going to have to learn how to deal with work/family conflict.

The more conflicts you have, the more interesting your life is going to be: Because what it’s really saying is that you have choices to make, sometimes hard choices, but choices, none-the-less. The trick is to make these choices in a way that supports your true values. Take a look at the list below and see if the tough choices that you’ve had to make reflect what’s most important to you.

RESILIENCY TIP:
How would your life be different if you put peace of mind or stress management as your highest value? Would you be a better worker? Would your family like you more? Would you carry the same level of debt?

WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT YOU VALUE MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wealth</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Hobbies</th>
<th>Children</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alone time</td>
<td>Socializing</td>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>Stress Management</td>
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<td>Fame</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Peace of mind</td>
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<td>Fun</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Helping others</td>
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<td>Family</td>
<td>God</td>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Driving a new car</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Success</td>
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Be honest with yourself about what you actually value vs. what you think you “should” value. See box on the next page.
HOW TO LEAD A MORE BALANCED LIFE

1. Keep ONE calendar of everything that’s important in your life. We often keep one calendar for personal events and another calendar for business appointments, or if we keep it all on an electronic device, we are not always diligent about jotting down important family events. Be extra careful to add occasions like birthdays, school plays, and graduations to your calendar whenever you first hear about them. Whenever anybody asks you to do something work-related, always respond by saying: “Let me check my calendar and get back to you.” This can help you avoid a large percentage of the work-family conflicts that do arise.

2. Analyze the conflict. Is this a one-time conflict or does it recur on a regular basis? If it recurs, find a way to eliminate it from EVER recurring again. Let’s say you usually work on the weekends, but you always decide at the last minute exactly when this is going to take place. The family wants you to participate in an event, but you opt to work instead and this causes conflict. So that there's no recurring conflict, announce to your family that Saturday mornings, or Sunday afternoons (or whatever time is best), are set aside for work. Whether you go into your place of business or do that work from home, let everyone know that this is YOUR work time and that family events should be scheduled around it. By scheduling your work ahead of time, even on weekends, these predictable, recurring areas of conflict will be eliminated.

3. Call a friend. If a conflict does arise (and it’s big enough) get some advice from a trusted friend who is presumably not a part of the conflict. Choose a friend who understands the circumstances. Your single friends may not understand work-family conflicts: call someone who has handled similar conflicts. Choose a good listener. Just giving you the opportunity to sort it all out in your head may be exactly what you need to resolve the conflict in a peaceful way.

4. Volunteer to finish the job at home (if you can) or come in early the next morning. If it’s your responsibility to see that a job gets done at work, and for some reason a family conflict is calling you home, volunteer to come in early the next morning, or take the work home with you. Unless you commonly work out of your home, don’t make a habit of taking work home, but if it resolves a crisis or conflict, it’s certainly worth trying.

5. Incorporate your values into every decision. We all value different things. Some people value family, some religion, some integrity, some people value wealth or fame. What you hold near and dear to your heart is very personal. But when your work life runs counter to your values, you are going to experience conflict and stress every day (like a vegetarian working in a meat-packing plant). So take some time to write down your values in the box on this page.

WHAT DO YOU VALUE? (Choose from the list on the previous page or add in your own values.)

1. ____________________________
2. ____________________________
3. ____________________________
4. ____________________________
5. ____________________________

Now list your top five values, thinking carefully about what your most important and next most important values are. Obviously, a person who values success over family is going to be a very different person from someone who values family over success.

1. ____________________________
2. ____________________________
3. ____________________________
4. ____________________________
5. ____________________________

Now think about what you actually value vs. what you think you SHOULD value. If someone followed you around and watched what you DO for a week what would they think you value most?
HOW TO MANAGE TIME AND STRESS

You will often find that **urgent things are seldom important and important things are seldom urgent**, especially when you divide all your tasks up into four blocks as we have done here. The trick to managing time and stress is to do more and more of the things in Q2 and less and less of the things in Q4.

**Quadrant 1: Urgent AND Important: The quadrant of STRESS.**
These are the tasks that we absolutely need to do like dealing with a medical emergency, last minute negotiations with important clients, and any dead-line-driven project. If you spend all day in this quadrant, chances are you are going to go home feeling stressed and exhausted, too.

**Quadrant 2: Important but NOT Urgent: The quadrant of Resilience and PERSONAL GROWTH.**
These are the important tasks that we often put off because they are not urgent. Relationship building, taking a community college course, planning, organizing and stress management activities like exercise, meditation and yoga are all quadrant 2 activities.

**Quadrant 3: Urgent but NOT Important: The quadrant of DECEPTION.**
These are the tasks that are urgent but not necessarily important. When your cell phone rings or a text comes in, you feel obliged to respond right away, even if you’re in the middle of a lunch date with a good friend or an important client. These interruptions are often NOT that important. People who spend a lot of time in this quadrant THINK they’re being productive when they’re not.

**Quadrant 4: NOT Urgent AND NOT Important: The quadrant of BURNOUT.**
These are the tasks that are neither urgent nor important. These activities include browsing on the internet, opening junk mail, many of the personal calls we make at work, TV watching, playing computer games and video games. Often times we waste hours in this quadrant recovering from the stress we’ve experienced in quadrant 1!
HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME WITH THE LEAST AMOUNT OF STRESS

Keep track of your time for the next 24 hours. Be sure to pick a workday, so you can see how you manage your time under pressure. The goal of this exercise is to make you aware of the time you essentially waste in Quadrants 3 and 4, (especially Quadrant 4) and the time you spend feeling stressed in Quadrant 1. (You may LOVE Quadrant 1 and be a Quadrant 1 junkie.)

Generally, we put off doing the activities in Quadrant 2 because these activities aren’t urgent. Exercising, spending time with family, taking a community college course, prospecting for new customers and planning out your day, all fall into this quadrant. Typically the more time you spend in Quadrant 2 the less time you’ll spend in Quadrant 1. This planning helps you avoid last minute emergencies and having to put out fires all day.

RESILIENCY TIP:
Make copies of this page and track your activities for a full week. Steal time from Quadrant 4 and apply it to Quadrant 2. Attempt to spend at least one hour doing Quadrant 2 activities every day.

Ex: FedExing out a big order. 30 min
Ex: Making a To-Do list. 10 min
Ex: Taking a friend’s call at work. 10 min
Ex: Watching TV. 4 hrs
WHERE RESILIENCE AND ASSERTIVENESS MEET

How do you tell your boss that that his or her deadline is ridiculous? How do you tell a coworker that he or she is just being mean? How do you tell higher management that their policies are flat out wrong? (Hint: You don’t.)

You have to be assertive AND diplomatic. So you DON’T tell anyone that they are mean or that a deadline is ridiculous and that the policies are flat out wrong even if they are! You find a way to say it more diplomatically.

Keep your reaction about you (not him or her) and be specific. So, to your boss you might say: I don’t think I can finish this assignment in that amount of time. To your co-worker you might say: I feel put down when someone addresses me in that way. To management you might say: I have strong reservations about this policy for the following reasons...

Assertiveness can be challenging:

1. Most people don’t want to cause any conflict.
2. The very people with whom you need to be assertive are probably a little insensitive by nature or you wouldn’t have this problem in the first place.
3. This person may also have a fiery temper so the outcome of your action may be unpredictable.
4. It’s hard to be rational when you’re angry.
5. It’s hard to make yourself do this if you’re NOT angry.
6. When you plan carefully what you’re going to say, or write it down, you look uptight.
7. When you don’t plan carefully, you may say something you wish you hadn’t.

Hendrie Weisinger, who wrote the book “Anger at Work,” says that when you’re angry it’s impossible NOT to show it. People often try to conceal their anger but it is usually apparent to the other person. So if you’re really upset, it’s going to be hard to be assertive and still be diplomatic. Weisinger defines assertiveness as the ability to express your feelings in a socially appropriate way, without being aggressive. Weisinger further defines aggressiveness as the act of getting what you want at the expense of others. When you are trying to act assertively Weisinger suggests you ask yourself:

Am I expressing my feelings appropriately?
Am I getting my needs met at the expense of others?
Am I forcing my way on another?

So when it comes time to tell your boss not to raise his voice, you certainly don’t want to raise your voice in order to get your needs met. Resilient people know how to communicate well. Resilient people know how to listen. Resilient people know how to get their needs met. This is where resiliency and assertiveness meet.
HOW TO BE MORE ASSERTIVE

Make a list of situations that recur where you feel you need to be more assertive. Rank them in order of importance. Give the most important item a 1 and move on down the list.

Now think of what you could say in these situations the next time these problems occur. Write out exactly what you’re going to say to at least your top three problems.

Now decide exactly under what circumstances you are going to be assertive.

If I say what I’ve decided to say to this person:
1. Will I be expressing my feelings appropriately? (good)
2. Will I be getting my needs met at the expense of his or hers? (not good)
3. Will I be forcing my will on them? (not good)
4. Am I using I statements? (good)

RESILIENCY TIP:
If you are overly nervous about being assertive at work, practice being assertive at home, or in situations where the consequences are minimal, like with your friends or in your community while still carefully following the four rules outlined here. Try it out. See if it works.
HOW TO MANAGE MULTIPLE DEADLINES AND MULTIPLE BOSSES

One boss wants a contract emailed by noon, another boss wants an order shipped out right away. Your bosses’ boss wants you to take the minutes at the morning meeting and asks you if you can type up a summary and send it out to head quarters when the meeting is over. Then there’s your regular work that you are behind on, because you were given the job, which seemed cool at the time, of being the chaperone all last week for your company’s biggest client.

Managing multiple deadlines and multiple bosses can be difficult and stressful too. As companies strive to be more and more competitive in the global marketplace more work is being placed on the shoulders of less and less people. And it’s always difficult to diplomatically say no to a supervisor—or even question the nature of the assignment or the time table you’ve been given. So what do you do when you have conflicting assignments, overlapping bosses and deadlines that seem like they’re never-ending?

Always work from a list. It’s stressful trying to remember all the things you have to remember in your head, so the minute you commit your list to paper, it will calm you down. Be sure to break big tasks into smaller steps. Show your list to your boss (and/or bosses). The more you break a task down into doable steps, the simpler it becomes. Crossing each item off as you go actually releases feel-good chemicals in your brain like dopamine.

Prioritize the list. Once you have your list prioritize it. Let your bosses help you do this. Work your way down the list in order. That way, if it comes to crunch time, anything you’ve left undone is likely to be a low-priority item.

Create milestones and a timeline. Create milestones (or review points) along the way that help you and your supervisor to know that you are on the right track. Meet with him or her to discuss your timeline and be sure to get buy-in. If you think you don’t have enough time to do everything on your list, this is where you can lobby for additional help or time. Provide progress reports in the form of emails to all your bosses regularly.

Work on one thing at a time. When you break your list of things down into tasks and organize them in a timeline, you focus on one task, and one task only, until it’s done. Keep to the timeline even if you have to put other things aside. However, don’t fool yourself into thinking there won’t be any interruptions; THERE WILL BE! You must allow for that in the timeline by setting aside blocks of time every day to move forward on your big projects, while allowing the rest of the day to keep up with whatever else needs to be done.

Keep the big picture in mind. Always having more work to do than you can possibly get done in a day, and multiple bosses is the new normal. Long gone are the days when you could look at a stack of papers in your inbox in the morning and move them to your outbox by the end of the day. Be grateful for the fact that you have more work than you can possibly do in a day, and lots of people needing your help, because this is what keeps you gainfully employed.

When conflicts in multiple tasks and multiple bosses arise, have your direct supervisor decide what takes priority and what the sequence of tasks should be. That will take some of the stress off of you and make your bosses communicate amongst themselves.
**RESILIENCY TIP:**

When you have to juggle multiple priorities, accept the fact, that occasionally you’ll make mistakes. Be OK with that and be OK with the criticism that may follow. Don’t be defensive. Focus instead on taking responsibility and correcting the mistake as quickly as possible.

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**MANAGING MULTIPLE PRIORITIES**

Getting yourself organized is a surprisingly effective way to manage stress and stay on top of multiple priorities.

1. **Set aside 15 minutes each morning to make your list.** This is rule number 1. Think of this like a morning meditation, before you do anything else.

2. **Keep a master to-do list like the one to the left of big projects that take weeks or months to finish.** Refer to this list each day as you make up your daily list.

3. **Find good stopping points.** When you have to juggle multiple priorities, find good stopping points that give you a sense of having accomplished at least a certain portion of your larger task.

4. **Stay organized.** Work from a clean desk, keep your files clean and get in the habit of throwing out or deleting old files you haven’t needed in over a year.

5. **Single handle/Do it now.** Set aside enough time for opening mail and email so you can dispense with the task in one session. When you open a letter or an email, resist the urge to put off making a decision about it until later by telling yourself, **DO IT NOW.**

---

**HOW TO KEEP A MASTER LIST OF ALL THE THINGS YOU HAVE TO DO**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List all the projects you have going on right now.</th>
<th>Needs to be done by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Now break each project down into doable steps.</th>
<th>Needs to be done by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**PROJECT 1**

- Step 1
- Step 2
- Step 3
- Step 4
- Step 5
- Step 6

**PROJECT 2**

- Step 1
- Step 2
- Step 3
- Step 4
- Step 5
- Step 6

**PROJECT 3**

- Step 1
- Step 2
- Step 3
- Step 4
- Step 5
- Step 6
HOW TO DEAL WITH A DIFFICULT COMMUTE

Whether you take the train, the bus, the subway or drive, commuting to work every day can be stressful. The traffic jams, the monotony, the delays, the endlessness of it all is enough to make tempers flare and drive anyone half-crazy!

Despite the difficulties of your daily slog to work, there are things that you can do to make it better. Let’s start with the obvious ones: you could move in the opposite direction of traffic, telecommute, move closer to work, request flex hours so you don’t have to commute during rush hour, or you could just commit to arriving early before the traffic gets bad. Or you could switch to some form of public transportation that allows you to work on a laptop or portable device on the way to work. The key point here is to always see your difficulties as opportunities to make changes that improve your life.

Another less obvious strategy is to think of commuting time as YOUR time. A time to relax, listen to your favorite music, or radio talk show or your favorite recorded book. Don’t assume that just because you’re stuck in a car for two hours every day driving that it is a prison sentence. Examine your thinking about this issue and see if you are just a bit overly negative about it. Sometimes it’s your thoughts about the traffic, more than the traffic itself, that’s what is really bothering you.

Thoughts like “I’ll never get home at this rate.” Or, “this traffic jam is taking forever to clear” are good examples of thinking that’s become irrational and muddled. Usually rush hour traffic patterns (and delays) are somewhat predictable and if you are commuting regularly, you know more or less how long the trip is going to take despite the delays. Talk back to your overly negative thoughts and clarify them at every turn. “I always think these tie-ups are going to take longer than they actually do.”

And finally be sure to leave extra time for your commute in the morning, so you ALWAYS arrive at least 5 or 10 minutes early. Notice that when you do this, the calming effect it has on the whole trip, because you’re NOT spending the entire time worrying about arriving late to work. Also, when you arrive early at work, you can spend that time decompressing a bit, really savoring your coffee, meditating, reading something inspirational, or doing anything low-key that allows you a brief transition time before you dive (head first) into the work of the day.
Nobody likes to say no to a request. (We feel guilty, like we’re letting the other person down, like we’re not a team player.) But if you don’t say no occasionally, you’ll be so deluged with work and stressed that you won’t make anyone happy by always saying yes. Still, there’s an art to saying no gracefully. Here are five simple suggestions:

1. **No, I can’t right now, I’m really swamped.** Remember to keep the excuses to a minimum. This is just one excuse and that’s plenty. When you pile on the excuses, it seems insincere. Get to the no quickly so the other person can move on. (In certain situations you can add “but thanks for thinking of me”.)

2. **I just don’t think I’m the right person for that job.** This is a bit of a hedge, but sometimes it’s a more polite way than just flat out NO. If the person asks why, you can either give a good reason or always just say because you’re super busy.

3. **Let me check my calendar and I’ll get right back to you.** This gives you a chance to really think about how much work you have to do and whether you’ll be able to handle the added assignment. If you really can’t handle the extra work, have your reasons ready as to why you can’t, and get back to that person immediately.

4. **(To your boss) I want to say yes, but before I do, I just want to be sure that we agree on your priorities.** Is there something you don’t mind me putting aside, so I CAN say YES? This line lets your boss do the job of prioritizing your work for you.

5. **I’m in the middle of a deadline right now; can it wait until tomorrow or the next day?** People are always in a rush for things that can actually wait a bit, particularly bosses. If it can’t wait, they may have to find someone else to do it. If it can wait, you get to do the job on your terms and on your deadline.

Remember, bosses like workers who say YES. It’s a real pleasure to work with people who aren’t afraid to take on extra work and who are willing to go the extra mile to get something done. But don’t say YES to any task unless you believe you truly can do it in the time allotted. When your boss comes up to you and asks you to have a report ready in one day and you suspect it will take two, you have to be ready to tell him WHY it can’t be done. **Don’t wait till later.** Clearly explain the amount of time you think you need OR the consequences of putting some other task aside like “our best client isn’t going to receive their order on time if I switch to doing this thing you’re asking me to do now,” for example.

And in this case, don’t feel the least bit guilty about saying no. You’re just looking out for your boss’s (and the company’s) best interests.
WHY CONTROL LOWERS STRESS  
(AND INCREASES YOUR RESILIENCE)

A study of hospital patients who were given CONTROL over when to take their own pain medications produced a surprising result. Even though these patients could take as much pain medication as they wanted, whenever they wanted, they took LESS pain medication than the other group of patients who had to ask the nurse for it. Having more control apparently increased their ability to tolerate pain.

As this study shows, having more control can dramatically lower your “perception” of stress. When we apply this concept to the workplace it usually means having more autonomy over what you do. In other words, having more autonomy results in more control which often results in less stress. But in most workplaces, you have to earn the right to work autonomously or semi-autonomously. Here are some simple suggestions that can help you do this:

Try to do more than what is asked of you. Go the extra mile. This positions you in your supervisor’s eyes as someone that he or she can depend on. That’s exactly how you gain autonomy over what you do.

Volunteer to take on a job that no one else wants to do, but you know can be done with little or no supervision. You prove to your boss by completing this job in a timely manner you can work independently.

Establish goals and objectives with your boss. Be sure to meet those goals. This is probably the simplest yet most effective way to create more autonomy at work.

Work on a small project with a budget that YOU control. It is in your boss’s best interest to allow you to work independently. But you always have to prove yourself at every step of the way. Having power over any kind of spending, and ALWAYS doing it on or below budget, will build trust with any boss.

Find tasks that you can do on your own. Running errands across town, representing your company at conferences, making in-person sales calls, doing any kind of sales work, conducting surveys, event planning, and other unique work opportunities can take you out of your comfort zone, but put you into a productive zone, where you are truly in charge of your own time.

RESILIENCY TIP:
Any step you take, no matter how small, to bring more control over any situation will help you to feel more in control. In other words, even something small, like going to the library and finding a book about how to solve your problem, will help you begin to feel more in control of the problem.
Research shows that people who feel like they are in the driver's seat of their own lives are more in control and less stressed. Psychologists call this trait an "internal locus of control." People who feel like somebody else is in the driver's seat of their life are less in control and more stressed. Psychologists call this trait an "external locus of control." Some things, like the weather and the economy, you can't control. But putting away a certain amount of money each month and carrying around an umbrella in your bag can help you gain a sense of control over even these issues. So this helps you see that control is, to some degree, all in your mind. If you believe you are in control of a situation, you will undoubtedly experience less stress than someone who feels like they are not. Use this worksheet to help you better understand what it is you can control, what it is you can't and what falls in between.

Think of an example in your own life, where you are in complete control of an activity and, because of this, your stress has been lowered. (Example: I feel more comfortable when I'm driving the car than when I'm a passenger.)

Think of something that you're responsible for, but not in control of. (Example: I'm in charge of keeping the supplies in the office supply cabinet but when it's time to reorder, I have to go through purchasing.)

Does the lack of control in your response to the above question cause you any additional stress? Why? (Example: Yes, when I place the order, there's sometimes a delay and I feel responsible and stressed when we run out.)

Think of one or two ways to solve this problem. (Example: Ask my boss if I can order the products directly. Or, ask him or her if we can keep more than we need in stock, so that we never run out.)

Make a list of three things you'd like to have more control over.

For each of the three things above, make a list of three more things that could help you bring them under your control.

Think about a situation where your control over what you do is still evolving, like starting a new job, learning a new kind of computer software or learning a new skill. Now think about how stressful it can be to move through this learning process where you have less control over what you do. For example, when you first started learning how to drive a car, you were probably terrified and stressed. Now you probably drive without even thinking about it. But you had to survive an interim period where you had to live with less control and more stress in order to get to a place where you had full control and almost no stress. Now come up with as many (current day) examples of this as you can: Where your control over what you are doing is still evolving. In the column to the right, predict a date by which you will be in full control of this activity.

Notice how much better you feel when you can confidently predict, when you will be back in full control of a situation where your control is still evolving. This supports the notion that, if you believe you are in control of a situation, you are.
FIGURING OUT THE RIGHT LEVEL OF CHALLENGE FOR YOU

Everyone experiences stress differently. Some people seem to thrive on being super busy while others seem to feel overwhelmed by it. So how do you decide how much stress is the right amount of stress for you? Take a look at the Optimal Performance Curve to the right and you will begin to understand exactly how to answer this question.

The vertical axis represents your level of productivity. The horizontal axis represents your level of stress. As your stress (or arousal) increases your productivity increases too. But it can only go so high. At some point, and it’s different for everyone, you fall over the top of that upside down U and your productivity starts to decline.

At the left side of the curve, your life is NOT stressful enough. At the right side of the curve your life is too stressful. So, while you don’t want a life with TOO much stress, you are NOT looking for a life with zero stress, either. That would be dreary and dull (and that’s an important mindset shift you need to make). What you want is a life with just the right amount of stress for you.

Let’s face it, every job (and every life) is going to have a certain amount of stress. And as the Optimal Performance Graph shows, that’s exactly what you want out of life. So think about where you fall on the horizontal axis and try to decide how much of your stress is coming from work and how much of your stress is coming from your personal life. If you feel your level of stress puts you squarely on the left side of the axis, look for opportunities to grow both in your personal life and your work life. Sign up for a community college course, start a hobby, volunteer to do some challenging assignment at work, or take on some new responsibilities. These are just some of the ways you can elevate your overall levels of performance by elevating your levels of arousal.

If you feel like your life puts you squarely on the right side of the curve, don’t despair. There are lots of things that you can do to get yourself back at the top of the curve. If you are going through a lot of changes at home (for example, relationship problems, financial problems, or moving from place to place) think about how you can resolve some of these issues. If you are going through a lot of changes at work, think about improving your coping skills. This entire handbook is designed to help you do this, so if you are dealing with ANY of the issues you see in the table of contents, be sure to address each issue, one by one.

Check out the next page for additional insights into how you can get yourself operating at peak performance and put yourself and your life at the top of the stress and performance curve. To build your resilience, also consider exercising on a regular basis, practicing yoga, taking up meditation, or eating a healthy diet as ways to improve your energy levels and increase your stamina. Staying at the top of the upside down U is as much about building your resilience as it is about finding just the right amount of stress for you.

RESILIENCY TIP:
The term stress was originally used exclusively by engineers to describe how much load a bridge could take before it would collapse under the strain of that load. Think of yourself like a bridge. When it comes to handling stress, you can either lighten the load, or strengthen the bridge. Resiliency is about strengthening your bridge through exercise, meditation, yoga, and healthy eating so you can literally handle more load.
MOVING YOU TOWARD OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE

Take another look at the stress and performance curve on the previous page, and ask yourself, where do I fall on the curve today? (Far-left, Mid-left, Near the top, At the top, Mid-right, Far-right)  

Where did I fall a year ago? Where did I fall five years ago?  

If you do not feel like you are near, or at the top, was there ever a time in your life when you DID feel like you were at the top? What was that like?  

Take a look at the table of contents for this handbook. What issues have you identified with the help of this handbook that, if resolved, could move you more toward the top of the curve?  

What coping strategies identified in this book (like mindfulness and cognitive restructuring), that if practiced, could move you more toward the top of curve? Make a list of your top five sources of stress:  

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  

What issues could you resolve on the above list that would move you more to the top of the curve?
Ever driven across town and had no idea how you ended up at the wrong store? Ever forgotten someone's name one minute after you met them? Ever walked from your bedroom to the kitchen for something and by the time you got there you had no idea what you came in for? Ever wondered whether you shampooed your hair or not at the end of a long shower? Most of us, at one point or another, have all experienced these moments of “mindlessness.”

When we forget a name or what locker we put our clothes in at the gym we often describe these mental errors as “senior moments.” But, in point of fact, they’re almost always mindless moments. When we do something mindlessly, our body is there, but our mind is off somewhere else, thinking about something that happened last week or something that might happen next week. We can do this form of mental juggling while driving, eating, showering, exercising, sitting in a meeting or sitting at our desks at work.

Since the only moment you can EVER experience is this moment right here and right now, you basically waste those moments when you do things mindlessly because, for all intents and purposes, you’re not HERE (in the moment) where your LIFE is unfolding. This of course begs the question: Where are you?

When you do the dishes, or vacuum the kitchen floor, or mow the grass, or do anything you can do on “auto-pilot,” your mind takes a bit of a holiday from its normal job of FULLY monitoring what you are doing. Maybe you think about the dentist appointment next week or the argument you had with your spouse last week, or the big loan payment that’s coming due next month. In other words, you think about anything BUT the thing that you are actually doing. And quite often the thing you are thinking about is a PROBLEM that you’re grappling with.

Unfortunately, we usually don’t grapple with our problems in a PRODUCTIVE way. They often spin around in our mind over and over (we ruminate over them) thus making ourselves anxious or upset. In fact, much of the anxiety we experience comes from thinking about the future. And much of the anger we experience comes from thinking about the past. Once you fully grasp this mind-boggling concept you can begin to understand WHY being aware of the present moment, or what psychologists call mindfulness, can be so truly liberating! When you actually think about what you are doing, while you are doing it, you focus better, you are less likely to have an accident, your mood is elevated and you experience less stress because you’re not thinking about either the past OR the future. You’re enjoying this moment right here and right now. The only moment you can ever truly experience.

But what about planning for the future? When you are TRULY planning something in the future you ARE being mindful. Because you are thinking about it deliberately. Mindfulness author Jon Kabat-Zinn calls this “paying attention on purpose.” Your mind isn’t wandering off randomly like it often does. And that’s the key. Whenever we deliberately USE our minds to make a plan, or fully monitor what it is we are doing in the present moment, that’s being mindful.

“Perhaps a better way to get a handle on mindfulness is to talk about its opposite: mindlessness.”
OPPORTUNITIES TO BE MORE MINDFUL

List some of the things you do mindlessly or absent-mindedly at home or at work. In other words, the work you can do on "auto-pilot" and when you can think of something else while doing it (like filing papers, dishwashing, mowing the lawn.)

How does mindlessness affect you at work? (I make mistakes sometimes when I don’t pay close enough attention to what I’m doing; I lose my concentration, etc.)

How does mindlessness hurt you at home and in your relationships? (Sometimes I don’t really listen to my kids or spouse or partner, I zone out and they can tell.)

Have you ever held a grudge? Who was it against and for how long?

How would mindfulness help you dissolve this grudge? (Clue: the grudge is holding onto the past, but how do you think being in the present moment with this person would dissolve it?)

Anger is often the result of holding on to the past. What things from the past are you holding onto that you’d like to let go of?

Worry and anxiety are often the result of obsessing about the future. What are your nagging worries that you’d like to let go of?

Whenever you experience worry, anxiety, or anger, try to bring your mind into the present moment. Think of things you could do more mindfully where the activity is quite enjoyable but for some reason you think about something else while you do it (walking, eating or showering, for example).

RESILIENCY TIP: The next time you are in the shower, really focus on how good the hot water feels running down your back. When your mind wanders away from the shower, first notice where it went, and then bring it back every time to the present moment. This is a great example of why the present is considered a gift!
Flow is often described as being so immersed in what you are doing that you lose all track of time. Some people experience flow while rock climbing, others experience it while writing, still others experience it playing, or even listening to great music. When athletes experience flow, they say they are “in the zone.” They don’t have to think about what they are doing; they just do it. These are all aspects of flow.

In order to achieve flow at work, you often need to take on some invigorating challenge for which you are uniquely well-suited. It may cause you to reach just a little outside your comfort zone, but by so doing, causes you to grow also. Job stress is often defined as a mismatch between your skills and what is expected of you. Flow is the opposite. It’s the perfect match between you and ALL your skills.

Flow could be described as an active state of mindfulness, or maybe better to describe it as automatic mindfulness. Mindfulness just happens when you are in flow. It’s a state of relaxed attention that is so totally engrossing it relieves anxiety and doubt, and it encourages the release of dopamine in the brain’s reward center. Whatever this activity might be, it brings on a sense of deep satisfaction to the doer.

Finding flow at work usually requires taking on tasks that inspire you, challenge you, require your full attention and are intrinsically satisfying. You’re internally motivated to do these jobs, so you don’t need anyone breathing down your neck to get the job done. As a result, you’re more productive, more persuasive, more effective and just better all-around at doing this job or task. People who love their work, usually have plenty of opportunities for flow. Or, they figure out how to create them.

If you want to feel this way at work, look for tasks that challenge you to call upon ALL your unique skills (and maybe some skills you didn’t even know you had). There are probably at least a few things you do right now that create flow. Whether that’s talking to customers, training fellow employees, or going to trade shows, figure out what these activities are, and do MORE of them. In addition, look for jobs and tasks that require on-the-job training or that force you to grow or expand your knowledge base and require you to step just a bit outside your comfort zone.

Flow at work can be achieved doing everyday tasks, too. Of course you can find it by reaching, but you can also find it while doing ordinary tasks like creating a new data-base, or getting your office really organized, or just giving a simple task your FULL attention. Ask any cashier in a grocery store and they will tell you they much prefer to work when it’s busy. Otherwise the time drags. They don’t want it crazy-busy but they DO want a steady FLOW of customers.

When you experience flow at work, you’ll know it. The time flies and you feel very productive, and you’ll feel good about yourself at the end of the day. You might feel tired but it’s the kind of tired that comes with a deep sense of satisfaction that makes all your effort seem worth it.

Flow is a state of relaxed attention that is so totally engrossing it relieves anxiety and doubt and you lose all track of time.

RESILIENCY TIP:
The next time you watch a really good movie, notice how you become totally captivated by it and lose all track of time and space. You literally get sucked into the experience. This is also a state of flow.
THINGS I CAN DO TO INCREASE FLOW

List any job or task that you really enjoy doing:

_______________________________________
_______________________________________
_______________________________________
_______________________________________
_______________________________________

What is it that you like about these jobs and is there a common thread to these jobs?

Rank the above list from 1-5.

List any jobs that you dread doing:

_______________________________________
_______________________________________
_______________________________________
_______________________________________
_______________________________________

Why do you dread doing them? Is there a common thread between them?

Is there any way of avoiding these jobs or delegating them to someone else? If so, describe how you would do that:

List any tasks you have performed at work where you might have already achieved flow. (Where you got lost in the work, and lost track of the time.)

List any jobs or tasks where you think you might be able to achieve a sense of flow.

List the ways in which you could change your working environment to achieve more flow. (Find times when you won’t be interrupted, organize your environment, work at home, etc.)
Imagine being IMMUNE to stress. When someone manages their stress it implies they are coping with it. But being resilient to stress implies a certain immunity to it. Resilience is about inoculating yourself against stress by exposing yourself to controlled amounts of it in the same way we expose ourselves to a controlled amount of a virus when we get a flu shot or a vaccination.

Remember the Biosphere? There was an interesting story about resiliency that came out of this early experiment in sustainability. The biosphere was an entire eco-system contained within a 3-acre building constructed in the early 1990’s outside of Tucson, Arizona. Scientists and researchers lived in the biosphere -without leaving- for two years. It was supposed to mimic what it might be like to live on Mars: with enough plants, trees, animals, earth and water to sustain the occupants indefinitely.

It turned out that soon after the Biosphere was sealed off the trees started dying. They were collapsing under their own weight. They had everything they needed to grow strong and tall except wind. Wind causes this type of tree (Acacia) to grow a resilient skin (i.e., bark) that is actually called “stress wood.” Stress in the form of wind makes these trees stronger.

Stress helps make us stronger, too. Whenever we practice something difficult under lifelike conditions it builds our resilience. The trees in the Biosphere were leading a “sheltered existence.” Children who lead a sheltered existence struggle when they reach adulthood.

We can LEARN resilience even as adults. Firefighters practice putting out real fires in real (cement) buildings designed for this purpose. Airline pilots and astronauts experience every emergency situation imaginable in simulators. Armies create mock battles with live ammunition. At Quantico Marine Corp base in Virginia an entire town has been erected so that battles, rescues and terrorist attacks can be played out with the utmost sense of realism. All these “exercises” performed under real-life conditions build resilience.

One metaphor for resilience that really helps explain this concept occurs during weight training. When you do any kind of resistance training you are actually tearing your muscle fibers. This explains that feeling of soreness you get after you exercise muscles you haven’t exercised in a while. When the fibers heal (usually in a day or two) they grow back even stronger than they were before you exercised. This is the concept of resilience in a nutshell.

We can “grow” the same kind of resilience by becoming accustomed to stressful circumstances in our own lives bit by bit. Whether you want to become a public speaker, learn how to drive a truck, or even climb Mount Everest, you can deliberately expose yourself to increasingly difficult conditions in order to fully master staying calm under those conditions and eventually become resilient to the same stress that would have stopped you in your tracks previously. This is how one LEARNS how to be resilient as an adult and eventually becomes immune to all kinds of stress.

RESILIENCY TIP:
The things you do to build your resilience, like exercise, yoga, meditation, and healthy eating, all require willpower to begin. But, once you do get started, it gets easier, according to Stanford Professor, Dr. Kelly McGonigal and author of “The Willpower Instinct.” “These activities will actually help increase your willpower.”

“Whenever we practice something difficult under lifelike conditions it builds our resilience.”
HOW TO BUILD YOUR RESILIENCE

Is there something that you do now that you used to be afraid to do? How did you get over that fear?

Describe a situation in which you were able to let stress just roll right off your back, when you didn’t let it bother you one bit. What did it feel like afterwards?

What are three areas of your life where you’d like to develop more resilience?

1.  
2.  
3.  

Resilience is often defined in terms of the qualities described below. Give yourself a score on how much you agree with each statement below based on a scale 1-5. (1= totally disagree; 2= somewhat disagree; 3= right in the middle; 4= somewhat agree; 5= totally agree.)

I’m flexible. ................
I see setbacks as only temporary. .................
I take action when confronted with a problem. (I don’t often get stuck in inaction.) ................
I always bounce back quickly from adversity and difficult times. .................
I have a strong sense of faith or belief that things are going to work out for the best. ................
I like to work out regularly, or have a regular yoga or meditation practice. .................

Total score ................ divided by 6= ................

When you divide your total score by six; that’s your overall resilience score. 5=high resilience; 1=no resilience

Here are some ideas for developing more resilience and raising your overall score:

Next time you get into an argument with your spouse or significant other, try just listening. (Don’t argue back.)
Next time someone criticizes your work, try not to be defensive.
Next time someone suggests a restaurant or eating a type of food you don’t think you like, try it anyway.
Try do something that takes you out of your comfort zone.
Exercise five days a week.
Practice yoga three days a week.
When you do get stressed out, just focus on recovering quickly from it. (Forgive people and let go of grudges.)

Learning to be more resilient will help me in the following ways:
You’ve probably heard of the fight or flight response. It’s often cited as the main reason people experience so much stress. This response helped our prehistoric ancestors survive in life-threatening situations and allowed them to react to a threat, at a moment’s notice, with super strength and/or super speed.

Nowadays, we trigger this same response, often numerous times a day, in situations where we can’t fight and we can’t flee. We use this response in circumstances we perceive as threatening but really aren’t. We activate it when someone cuts us off on the highway, or criticizes our work, or cuts ahead of us in line. In these situations, we can almost feel our muscles tensing, our hearts racing and our blood pressure rising.

Unfortunately, this response serves almost no useful purpose in our modern, relatively safe, world. Sure, you might occasionally need it, like 22-year old Lauren Kornacki, from Glen Allen, Virginia did when she lifted a BMW off her father. But occasions like this are extremely rare. In 99.9% of cases we activate this high-octane response in situations where we can’t possibly use it, like when someone lobs a verbal insult, or breaks the rules in some flagrant way, or even when someone you really don’t like walks into the room!

This response, which saved the lives of our ancestors, is literally killing us today. What feels to us like a minor disturbance on the surface is, below the surface, causing our heart rate to quicken, our muscles to tense and our digestive system, immune system and even our reproductive system to temporarily shut down. Over time, with the constant turning on and turning off of this stress response, our bodies become “dis-regulated” and we suffer from stress-related health problems such as recurrent colds, skin problems, allergies, infertility, gastro-intestinal disorders, chronic pain, high blood pressure, and even heart disease.

As a result, we need to learn how to deactivate the fight or flight response, on the fly, while our stress is happening. And we certainly need to learn how to do this at work, where this response is the least needed and the most unwelcome. There’s just one problem with most of the solutions you will encounter for managing stress. You can’t do them at work!

Check out the exercises on the inside back cover. You can do them all while you are at work. In fact, it’s what sets this handbook apart from other self-help books on stress. The advice here is designed to either prevent stress from happening (see the following articles on the ABC’s of Cognitive Restructuring) or to be used while your stress is happening. It’s designed to help you nip stress in the bud, to stop stress before it sets off a chain reaction inside your body that may eventually lead to a whole host of chronic conditions that will ultimately make it difficult to even come to work.

"We need to learn how to deactivate the fight or flight response on the fly, while our stress is happening."
Cognitive restructuring (or changing the way we think during a stressful event) is the best method for managing stress at work according to a “meta study” published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. In this study of studies, which focuses on techniques used in the workplace, cognitive restructuring was compared against other popular “stress interventions” like meditation, deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. Cognitive restructuring came out on top. Why? According to the Journal: “Cognitive restructuring promotes the development of proactive responses to stress.” In other words, it helps prevent stress.

Cognitive restructuring is a technique drawn from cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT as it is commonly called. The two founders of this form of therapy, Drs. Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck, wanted to create simple tools that people could use to control their thinking during a stressful event. What Beck and Ellis discovered was that most people tend to be overly negative, and exaggerate the severity of a stressful event. Ellis liked to call this phenomenon: “stinking thinking.” He invented terms like “awfulizing” and “catastrophizing” to describe those times when we ALL tend to see circumstances as being worse than what they actually are. This style of thinking is illustrated in what psychologists call negative self-talk: I’ve got the world’s worst boss. I’ll never get all this task done. It’s taking forever. My co-worker is completely useless. I’m a complete loser.

When we engage in this style of thinking we are the ones who suffer. Even when we blame our stress on other people or outside circumstances, we never realize that it’s often our own (inaccurate) appraisal of the situation that’s causing us to feel stressed. Ellis came up with a way to change our overly negative thinking that’s as easy to remember as ABC or in this case A+B=C. In this equation the A stands for the Activating event (it’s the source of stress). The B stands for your Beliefs (it’s what you THINK or believe about the stress). The C stands for the Consequence, or the result of A+B. (It’s how you feel inside as the result of the stress plus your thoughts about it.)

Most people think that A=C. That a flat tire, or a traffic jam, or a rude remark all equal stress. But now you know that your thoughts contribute to and often CAUSE your stress. You can’t change what happens at A but you CAN change how you THINK about it at B. So, if you notice your thinking at B is either faulty, irrational, overly exaggerated, or just a little pessimistic CHALLENGE it. Restate the thought in a more objective, rational, truer, or less convoluted way and you will instantly notice a lowering of your stress at C. This is how you lower your stress on the fly, while it’s happening. And no one will know you’re doing it except you.

Every time you practice this ABC technique you will get better at it, and by doing so, you will build resilience. Things that used to bug you don’t bother you anymore. The following workbook page will show you how.
LEARNING YOUR A+B=C’S

Practice disputing your overly negative self-talk:
“I can’t stand it when this happens.”
“I have the world’s worst boss!”
“I’ll never learn how to use this ______________.”

“Why does this kind of stuff always happen to me?”
“My coworker is ALWAYS coming in late!”

Reframe:
I already have withstood it!
How could I possibly know this to be true?
I already learned how to use my smart phone; I can learn how to use this too.
This kind of stuff happens to everybody.
My coworker comes in late 1 or 2 times a week.

The above list illustrates what happens when you diligently try to sort out and reframe your overly negative thoughts and interpretations by restating an exaggerated thought, truthfully and rationally. Be aware of your tendency to occasionally think irrationally. By correcting your irrational thoughts at every opportunity, you will experience significantly less stress. This is the essence of cognitive restructuring.

Think of three recent stressful events where you suspect your thinking might have been overly negative:

ACTIVATING EVENT
Got stuck in traffic

BELIEF
I’ll never get home at this rate.

CONSEQUENCE
Felt totally stressed

Now think of how a stressful event might go if you had a different belief. In other words, if you tried to do cognitive restructuring.

ACTIVATING EVENT
Got stuck in traffic

BELIEF (with reframe)
It always seems longer than it is.

CONSEQUENCE
Felt less stressed

Track your overly negative self-talk in three situations in the near future:

ACTIVATING EVENT
Car broke down

OVERLY NEGATIVE SELF-TALK
This is going to cost a fortune.

REFRAME
I don’t know how much this is going to cost; let’s wait and see.

RESILIENCY TIP:
When you hear the words always or never in your self-talk let it be a reminder that your thinking is probably a bit irrational. Co-workers very seldom ALWAYS come in late and traffic jams that seem like they are NEVER going to end always do. But when you hear these words in your self-talk that’s a sign that your thinking is irrational and is CAUSING you to feel more stressed than you need to be.
10 TECHNIQUES FOR INCREASING RESILIENCE AT WORK

1. **Take a breath.** Take three abdominal breaths. Hold your hand over your belly and breathe in deeply. Notice your hand rise on the in-breath and fall on the out-breath.

2. **Breath awareness.** Notice every in-breath, every out-breath and the gap between the out-breath and the next in-breath. If your mind wanders bring it back to your breathing. Do this for about two minutes.

3. **Stretch in your chair.** Twist in your chair to the right. Grab a hold of the back of the chair in your right hand and the arm of the chair in your left. Look behind you and feel the stretch (a spinal twist) for three breaths. Repeat on the other side.

4. **Stretch in the air.** Stand up. Clasp your hands behind your back. Bend over (forward bend, bringing the head down while bringing the clasped hands behind your back, up in the air). Take three deep breaths in this position.

5. **Reframe.** Notice how your thinking affects your experience of stress. When you hear yourself say things like “I’ve got the world’s worst boss,” or “this traffic jam is NEVER going to end,” or “my co-worker ALWAYS so annoying,” RETHINK these overly negative interpretations. Be sure to restate your beliefs as rationally as possible: “My boss can be difficult sometimes, but sometimes she can be helpful too” “This traffic jam SEEMS like it’s taking forever, but I’ll get there eventually.” “My co-worker is annoying sometimes, but occasionally she can be quite helpful.” The closer you align your interpretations to the TRUTH, generally (since we are constantly exaggerating the severity of a stressful event) the less stressed you’ll feel.

6. **Mindfulness.** Being in the present moment really does liberate you from anger and anxiety since a lot of anger is the result of holding on to things that happened in the past and a lot of anxiety comes from thinking about worrisome things that MIGHT happen in the future. Try just being in the moment when you are in the shower, when you are eating or when you are taking a walk. These moments can be a true respite from worry and rumination.

7. **Guided imagery.** Taking yourself on a brief mental vacation is sometimes as simple as keeping a picture of your favorite vacation spot next your desk. Let that be a starting off place for launching yourself into a two minute therapeutic daydream where you ponder every aspect of what you loved about going there or even what it WOULD be like if you haven’t been there yet. Imagine yourself on the beach, going for a walk in nature and taking an afternoon nap by the pool. This kind of guided imagery will help you relax and is therapeutic.

8. **Scanning.** Notice if there is any tension in the scalp and let it relax. Notice if there is any tension in the jaw and let it relax. Relax your tongue in your lower jaw. Notice if there is any tension in your neck and let that relax. Lower your shoulders, relax your arms and let any tension float right out of your arms and shoulders. Notice any tension in your belly and let THAT relax. Now move down to your legs. Scan your legs for any signs of tension. Take a deep breath in and as you breathe out let your legs and feet relax. Notice your whole body. Notice any last remaining signs of tension; breathe in deeply and let your whole body relax.

9. **Social support.** Whether you are on the giving or receiving end of social support, either way it will lower your stress. Whenever you can help someone at work, do so; you will feel good inside. When you need help, ask for it; you will feel better and they will too.

10. **Listen.** When you talk your blood pressure increases and when you listen it decreases. There is an old saying that you have two ears and one mouth because you should listen at least twice as much as you talk. Enough said.
About the Author

JAMES E. PORTER, President of StressStop.com, is author of the WELCOA publication: “Stop Stress this Minute” and dozens of workbooks, CDs and videos on managing stress and achieving work-life balance. Mr. Porter’s programs and products are used in thousands of hospitals, corporations and government agencies including The Mayo Clinic, Blue Cross Blue Shield, NASA and the US Army, Navy, Marines and the Coast Guard.

He has been interviewed on The CBS Morning News, and his work has been reported on in major news outlets including Good Morning America, Ladies Home Journal, The Associated Press, and The NY Daily News. Mr. Porter is a sought-after speaker having presented programs for Time, Inc, Glaxo Smith Kline, The Department of Homeland Security, The FBI, The CIA, The National Wellness Conference and for WELCOA. He is a Fellow of The American Institute of Stress and has a monthly column in The Huffington Post.

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He has appeared on numerous national and international television programs, including 60 Minutes, The Today Show, Good Morning America, Nova, CBS, NBC, PBS, BBC and CBC network presentations. His editorials and comments have been published in major medical journals such as the New England Journal of Medicine, Annals of Internal Medicine, Journal of The American Medical Association, British Medical Journal and The Lancet. He has been interviewed and widely quoted in Time, Fortune, Newsweek, The Reader’s Digest, The Wall Street Journal, New York Times, USA Today, The Washington Post, The London Times, and numerous other publications here and abroad.