

STRESS UNCOVERED

A large, crumpled ball of paper is the central focus of the image. The paper is crumpled into a dense, textured mass. The color of the paper transitions from a vibrant red on the left side to a bright white on the right side, with various shades of pink and light red in between. The background is a dark, gradient grey, which makes the crumpled paper stand out prominently.

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STRESS UNCOVERED

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Preface

Sat in the Doctor's consulting room, the pain in my limbs was draining, and I could feel myself shivering, even though the room was warm. She took one look at me, placed her pad in front of her and began to scribble something on it. As she wrote, she glanced at me and said "Mr. White, there is absolutely no chance you are going back to work any time soon". Those words marked the beginning of the rest of my life.

But it's a life that may well not have happened but for the love, kindness, patience, understanding, compassion, forgiveness and acceptance of some very special people. Rob, Ivor, Kathy, Paul, Sue, Zoe, Phil - you gave me the space and the scaffolding I needed to haul myself from the pit I had fallen into, and for you all I will be forever grateful.

There is one person, though, without whose utterly unconditional embrace I genuinely don't think I would be sat here today writing this preface to a book that has been forming for nearly two decades: My soulmate.

Kate, you never wavered, even in my darkest moments. As the storm kept coming you stood firm, no matter what it hurled in your direction. Our roles reversed, you provided me with shelter, warmth, love and safety. No longer were you the protected, you were the protector. In a matter of moments, all you had expected when we said "I do" not even a decade before, was cast into disarray. And yet, unflinchingly you found new depths of resilience to mine, new strength with which to hold your family, and you carried me through what was definitely for me, and must surely have been for you, one of the, if not *the*, worst of times. This book is dedicated to you, because you are who made it possible. Quite simply, my love, without you I would not be here.

The simple fact is stress nearly killed me. Sounds dramatic, I know, but it's true. And I count myself as one of the lucky ones, because it could so easily have been different. From relationship and family breakdowns, through to debilitating physical illnesses, and, ultimately, suicide, stress can have devastating effects. But there is a way back when it strikes, and there is a way to limit, even tame completely, it's capacity to wreak havoc in the

first place.

This book is written in remembrance of all those who are no longer with us because of stress, in support of all those grappling with it, in gratitude to all of those who helped me grapple with it myself and not become a stress statistic, and in the hope that maybe even one person will read it and be able to avoid the pit that I fell into.

I don't write as an expert, nor as someone with all the answers. I write as someone with first-hand experience, a perspective, and an unwavering vision to see a generation live the life it was made for. And for that vision to become a reality, a significant part of my mission is to help people recognise, understand, tame and manage stress, so that they can be free to discover, and step into, their best life.

Introduction

My name is Andy White. I am a husband, a father, a leader and a follower. I've been called a pioneer and a visionary, and I am very comfortable knowing that, when it comes to the norm and the status quo, I am a complete misfit.

My background?

Passionate for the arts, and detesting all things routine, I took a psychology and philosophy degree. And then became an accountant. I know, right? I don't quite understand that, either. I spent ten years practicing corporate restructuring at a top-four accounting firm, before moving into the third-sector and, from there, into self-employment – a space I have occupied as a consultant, coach and trainer for the last sixteen years.

Over those years I have worked with clients ranging from those struggling with homelessness, addiction and offending behaviour, through to graduates wondering what to do post-university, professionals looking for a change of direction, start-up entrepreneurs, and well-established businessmen and women. And, to a man and woman, no matter what their background, they had one thing in common: they were beginning to realise that the life they were living was not a good fit for them, but didn't know what to do about it.

But much more than all of that practical experience and expertise – as valuable as it is – I have *lived* it. I know how the men and women I have worked with felt; or, at least, I had a pretty good idea.

You see, I've been in that place where life does not fit. Where you don't know where to turn to make things better. I've been in that place where stress, guilt, tension and struggle consume you, to the point where the wheels completely fly off, and there is no other option than change. I know what it is to go from the crest of a wave to the bottom of the pit literally overnight. I have been there. Done it. Have the scars to prove it. And I came out the other side. And all of that experience lies at the heart of my vision: a generation living the life it was made for.

I have spent the best part of two decades pursuing that vision through a very simple mission: to unlock vision in others and unleash their potential. Because, when I look out from the mountaintop and survey a world where everyone is living a life that fits – a life that they were made to live – their *best* life – I see a world transformed. And that world is why I get up each morning.

It's why I'm here, now, writing about one of the biggest obstacles, yet also one of the biggest launchpads, for stepping into the life you were made for, and building the future that you want.

And that obstacle, or launchpad, is stress.

As this conversation unfolds, we'll look at how stress operates – the impact it has on physical and mental health, and the knock-on effect that has on life and work. We'll explore why stress has the effects that it does on mental and physical well-being, and we'll also look at the effect that our own response to the stress we experience has on why stress does what it does. And, perhaps most importantly, we will dive into practical steps you can take in the short, medium and long-term to put yourself in the driving seat, take control of your stress, and convert it from being an enemy and an obstacle, to an ally and a launchpad.

Chapter 1: A Little Myth Busting

But first, let's do a spot of myth busting, and get a few things straight.

It's tempting to dismiss stress - to see it as something that isn't real. Or, if it's real, certainly not as bad as it's made out to be. You may even think that stress is not something you need not concern yourself with - it's something that might afflict others, but never you. But, here's the thing with stress: it does not discriminate. Stress couldn't care less about your age, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, or anything else. No matter who you are, or how you identify yourself, to stress you are fair game.

So, here's the first myth we need to bust before we do anything else: you may think that stress is for other people, because maybe up to now it's passed you by - but trust me, you are not immune. *Everyone* has vulnerabilities and triggers. *Everyone*, at some point, faces situations that expose those vulnerabilities, and activate those triggers. And that's when stress strikes.

And when it strikes (and it *will* strike, if it hasn't already), there are a couple of crucial facts you need to hang on to, and a few more myths you need to bust. And the first fact to cling to, and the next myth you need to bust, is this: feeling stressed does not mean you are weak.

For a decade I battled with the idea that to admit stress was to admit weakness. And I couldn't afford to be weak. Too much was riding on me being strong. Impenetrable. Unbeatable. But, when stress struck to the point where I discovered I *wasn't* impenetrable or unbeatable, I also discovered that *being* penetrable and beatable was *not* a weakness - it simply made me human.

And the second fact you need to cling to, and third myth you need to bust, is about failure. Experiencing stress does not mean that you have failed. Stress is not a matter of success or failure, winning or losing. There isn't an achievement standard or a stress scale you need to excel on - there is just stress. And what is stress for one, may be a blast for

someone else, and vice-versa. Stress is *personal*, so it simply isn't possible for experiencing stress to be failure.

That said, however, not *managing* the stress you experience, while not failure in itself, certainly sets you up to fall short of ever achieving the life you really want to have – whether in work or at home. You see, when you tackle the stress you feel at source, take control of it and manage it, rather than being something to derail you, it becomes something to *propel* you.

The final myth to bust is this: stress is not your enemy; or, at least, it needn't be. The simple fact is that when you identify the sources of your stress, the impact it is having, and what needs to change to put things back in order, you start to eliminate the toxic elements from your life and establish new practices, habits and boundaries that drive you towards, rather than away from, the future you so long for.

In fact, far from being something that drags you into a pit, your stress can - when you understand it, take control of it, and manage it - become a platform for change, upon which you build the future you really want.

Chapter 2: Stress Facts and Figures

To understand, take control of, and manage stress, you first need to understand the extent of its reach, and the impact that it can have. So, here's some interesting facts, just to set the scene...

This first one will likely come as no surprise. According to the American Psychological Association (the APA), money and work are the biggest stressors. "Tell me something I didn't already know", right? And, to deal with stress, the American Institute of Stress (the AIS) reports that 60% of adults turn to alcohol.

But it gets worse. The Journal of Ageing carried out research that came up with some rather sobering findings. They found that chronic stress – that's stress you just can't seem to get free from – increases your chances of meeting an early demise by 50%!

And remember how we said stress doesn't discriminate? Well, the Mental Health Foundation provide evidence that shows that to be the case when it comes to age, with 60% of 18–24-year-olds *already* feeling stressed about the need to be a success. Stress isn't just the domain of the old and the haggard - that battle weary and scarred - it is the stuff of those just stepping into their prime, too.

And if all of that isn't alarming enough, Study.Com point to research that indicates that 13% of *children* will end up with anxiety disorders as a consequence of stress - that's more than one in 10; or, to put it another way, roughly four children in every secondary school class in the UK.

But, while it is utterly shocking that the school classroom and playground should be somewhere where stress can run amok, the place where stress *really* has a field day is in the workplace. And for 35% of employees in a Korn Ferry Institute study, the stress they experienced at work started at the top, with their boss cited as its primary cause.

The Korn Ferry Institute also found that in the last three decades, there has been a 20% increase in employee stress – which for me represents a 20% increase across pretty much my entire working life to date. And, from what I see in the work I do, and have experienced personally, I'd have to say that figure may well be on the conservative side.

The impact of workplace stress, both on the employees themselves and the organisations within which employee stress is a feature, can be highly damaging. For example, the American Institute of Stress found that 14% of employees had the urge to respond to their stress with physical violence. And you may be surprised at just how easy it is to find yourself grappling with those feelings as part of your response to the stress you're experiencing – in fact, I can *personally* vouch for stress affecting people in that way.

I remember the incident vividly. I've never been in a fistfight in my life, nor do I have any desire to ever find myself in one. But, after a ridiculously stressful period at work, sat opposite my boss (who was the root cause of that stress) I could feel a rage inside me, as he ranted on about something or other. And, as he ranted and railed, I could actually picture myself flying across the table, landing an uppercut, and watching as he flew backwards into the filing cabinets behind his chair. It was a shocking moment – one that I thankfully managed to gather myself from before it was too late. But it scared me that stress could bring up such rage in me.

And stress doesn't just affect your emotions and your mental wellbeing – according to a study by Eastern Kentucky University, 77% of employees experience *physical* stress symptoms. In fact, the AIS estimate that those increased stress levels in the workforce account for upwards of 15.4 million workdays lost to stress in the UK alone every year.

And finally, something I'm guessing you know only too well – stress plays havoc with your sleep; and, again according to research by the AIS, 48% of employees can't sleep at night due to stress.

But, while that all seems pretty bleak, it's not all doom and gloom. And, if you want some proof that stress can be brought under control then look no further than Psychology Today, who cite evidence that 85% of people surveyed, reported that doing Yoga lowered their stress levels.

So, while stress is a big deal and can have a big impact, as those few statistics and research findings demonstrate, it *can* be brought under control. And, as we'll explore as this conversation unfolds, Yoga is not the *only* way to put yourself in the driving seat with your stress.

Chapter 3: What Actually is Stress?

OK, so knowing some facts about stress is one thing, but to actually manage, control and use your stress to build the future you want, you need to really understand what stress is.

In 1989, a psychologist and coach by the name of Stephen Palmer put forward this definition: Stress is the *“psychological, physiological and behavioural response by an individual when they perceive a lack of equilibrium between the demands placed upon them, and their ability to meet those demands, which, over a period of time, leads to ill-health”*

In other words – stress is what you experience when there’s a gap between what you *have* to do and what you feel you’re capable of doing. Experience that gap for long enough, and you get sick.

And it’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that stress is all in the mind – either a psychosomatic effect, or something that just impacts your emotions or mental state. But as one of those ‘fun facts’ in the previous chapter showed, that would be wrong. Stress is very much a *physical* thing, and it results from a cocktail of hormones.

When you experience a stressful event, a ferocious communication between the hypothalamus and the pituitary - two areas of your brain – is triggered, out of which all roads point to the adrenal gland.

The adrenal gland manufactures and releases the stress hormones - dopamine, epinephrine (also known as adrenaline), norepinephrine (noradrenaline), and cortisol. So responsive to the adrenal hormones are basic body functions like blood flow and breathing, that even minute changes in levels of these substances can significantly affect health.

And, that responsiveness *can* be a positive thing. You see, there is good reason that your body responds that way – it can be the difference between life and death. *Literally*. Because those stress hormones govern, and trigger, what is known as your fight or flight response,

which prepares your body to either stay and deal with a threat, or to run away to safety.

When you perceive threat – back in the day maybe a bear or a sabre-toothed tiger, but these days more likely your angry boss - your sympathetic nervous system is activated by the sudden release of hormones. The sympathetic nervous system then stimulates the adrenal gland, triggering the release of the stress hormones.

This chain of reactions results in an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate. The resulting alertness that all that brings about can help you simply avoid unpleasant outcomes, or actually save your life.

So, like I said, stress *can* be a good thing. But stress can also be a very bad, very ugly thing, leading to a sense of a loss of control, despair, helplessness and serious illness.

You see, your body's stress-response system is usually self-limiting. Once a perceived threat has passed, hormone levels return to normal. As adrenaline and cortisol levels drop, your heart rate and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume their regular activities.

But, when stressors are always present, and you constantly feel under attack, that fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on. And, the long-term activation of the stress-response system, and the overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones that follows, can disrupt almost *all* your body's processes. This puts you at increased risk of many health problems (which we'll explore later).

So, how do you know when stress is shifting from helpful to harmful – from potential *lifesaver* to potential *life-taker*?

Well, you spot the signs, and next, we'll explore a few of the key ones.

Chapter 4: Key Signs that Stress is Doing its Thing

The good news is that, when it comes to spotting the signs that stress is doing its thing, it's actually not that difficult. You see, stress generally doesn't hide in the shadows. When it does its thing, you know, not least because of some common tell-tale signs.

WEIGHT GAIN

And one such sign is fluctuations (particularly unexplained or unexpected increases) in your weight. When you get stressed across a prolonged period, you can easily gain weight without any immediately obvious reason.

Perversely, when you are stressed, you may actually experience a loss of appetite, which you'd expect to cause you to eat less and, therefore, potentially *lose* weight. But, increased cortisol drives your insulin levels up, your sugar levels down, and, while you have no particular appetite for food in general, you sure as heck *do* have an appetite - make that craving- for fatty and sugary food. So, what may once have been an apple now becomes a doughnut. And so the pounds pile on.

SLEEP DISRUPTION

And, like those 48% of employees who can't sleep at night can confirm, tossing and turning in bed, sleeping fitfully and restlessly at best, may be another early warning signal that your stress levels are becoming unmanageable.

Why? Because if you are in the fight or flight response, the last thing your body wants to do is sleep in the face of potential danger. So, at best you sleep in fits and starts, and at worst you don't sleep at all.

And, of course, therein lies the beginnings of a vicious cycle: you can't sleep, so you get tired. You get tired, so your performance levels dip. Your performance levels dip and stuff starts taking longer, and not working out like you planned. And, as a consequence, your

stress levels increase. So, you sleep even worse. And get even more tired. And so it spirals downhill fast.

SKIN COMPLAINTS

Next up is your skin. While it can't directly cause acne, studies show that, if you already have acne, stress definitely does make it worse. Now, you may ask how, if stress cannot cause acne, it can worsen it. Well, it's all to do with the effect stress has on the body's ability to heal.

Research shows that a wound, which is what acne is, heals much slower when you are under stress. And slower healing means pimples stay longer and are more susceptible to becoming more severe. It can also mean that more acne is visible at one time because it takes longer for each pimple to heal during a breakout.

So, if you notice that the condition of your skin is not as good as usual, it may be a sign that stress is present.

INFERTILITY

Next comes a contentious one, because there is some conflicting evidence around it, and there is also the chicken and egg scenario of whether it's the failure to conceive causing stress, or stress causing the issues with conception.

But, putting contention to one side, A 2010 Oxford University and National Institute of Health study indicates that the 25% of women with the highest levels of alpha-amylase, a substance linked to the stress response, have more trouble conceiving than women with lower alpha-amylase, adding *some* weight to the suggestion that stress *may* be a cause of infertility in some instances.

DIGESTIVE COMPLAINTS AND ISSUES

As well as your weight, sleep, skin, and, possibly, your fertility, stress can also play havoc with your digestion. So, if you notice that you are dashing to the loo all the time, or

even going days between visits, it may be a sign that chronic stress has crept, or is beginning to creep, in.

Stress can lead to delays in emptying stomach contents, but it can also increase gut motility and fluid secretion, and speed up passage of material through the intestines. This combination of activity leads to abdominal pain and altered bowel habits. Which is why you might get a bout of diarrhoea, or repeated urges to urinate during or following a stressful event.

If you have a specific digestive complaint - such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome, an ulcer, or gastric reflux, for example - then you may well notice that as your stress increases, so you experience increased symptoms of your complaint. And you'll know just how unpleasant that can be.

HAIR LOSS

Stress can also impact the state of your hair, and it can do that in three ways.

First, it can drive hair follicles (the things that keep the strands of your hair anchored into your skin) into a prolonged resting phase. That prolonged resting phase then results in the hair falling out some months later - a delay that probably means that you won't initially associate the stressful events that triggered the hair loss process, with the actual hair loss when it happens.

Secondly, stress can result in a condition known as Trichotillomania, which is an irresistible urge to pull out hair from your head, eyebrows, or pretty much anywhere. That may sound strange, but hair pulling can be a way of dealing with negative or uncomfortable feelings, such as stress, tension, loneliness, boredom or frustration.

Maybe you've noticed people who nervously play with their hair when they are on edge? Well, this second effect that stress can have on your hair is essentially an extreme version of what is going on there. The person twiddling their hair as they try and answer a question, or try and take in some new instructions, for example, is most likely using that hair twiddling as a way of trying to stay on top of the feelings of uncertainty about what they have to do. The

person experiencing Trichotillomania has taken the twiddling up a few notches, and is actually *pulling hair out* as a way to deal with the stress they are experiencing.

Thirdly, Alopecia – a condition where the body's immune system attacks the hair follicles, causing hair loss – can arise from stress. And, just like with sleep, this can be a nasty vicious cycle. Stress triggers Alopecia, which results in hair loss; and the hair loss causes more stress, which exacerbates the Alopecia. And so it goes around.

LOSS OF LIBIDO

The effect of stress can also make its way into the bedroom, which goes back to the fight or flight response.

The release of high levels of cortisol and epinephrine, triggered by the fight or flight response, can cause decreased sex drive. Stands to reason when you think about it in the context of staying alive - when the body is on alert to either fight a perceived threat, or flee from it, it's in survival mode, not thinking about reproducing.

And, when stress becomes chronic, the body actually uses sex hormones to meet the increased demands for higher cortisol production, decreasing your interest in sex yet further.

FATIGUE

And then there's fatigue - that chronic feeling of lack of motivation or energy. Not just an off-day here and there, but an off-day every day.

Fatigue is not the same as physical exhaustion. Physical exhaustion is the result of something you did, and is generally gone after you take the time to sleep or rest. When you're feeling tired and sleep or rest does not take that feeling away, you *may* be suffering from fatigue that is arising from the stress you feel, and the strain that a perpetual fight or flight response is having on your body and mind.

I remember back in 1999/2000 when I was under prolonged and sustained stress at work,

no matter how much I slept, or tried to rest, I was *always* tired. But it wasn't a sleepy kind of tired, it was a wading through quicksand kind of tired. Everything felt like an extreme effort. I had no energy, no motivation. It was a matter of sheer bloody-mindedness to go to work and get through each day. That feeling of waking up at least as tired and drained as when I went to bed, I discovered some time later, was fatigue. Maybe you know how that feels, too.

HEART DISEASE

Some of the physical signs of stress we've explored so far would go down as being more annoying and distressing, than actually life threatening. Hair loss and acne can be very distressing for the person suffering with it, and loss of libido may be annoying for either or both partners in a relationship, but none of those things are likely to kill you. Heart disease, on the other hand...

Research published in *The Lancet* showed how stress may be linked to heart and circulatory disease in humans. Constant stress has been linked to higher activity in an area of the brain connected with processing emotions, and, in turn, an increased likelihood of developing heart and circulatory disease. Indeed, researchers in a study from Harvard University suggested that when it comes to your cardiac health, stress could be as important a risk factor as smoking or high blood pressure.

DEPRESSION

By now, you are probably getting the idea that stress is far from trivial and, just as packets of cigarettes have to, should most likely carry a health warning. But heart disease is not the only potentially life threatening effect of stress, because stress can have a profound impact on your mental health; and, in extreme cases, even lead to that impact causing a person suffering with it to take their own life.

You see, sustained stress not only leads to increased levels of cortisol, but also reduced levels of serotonin and other neurotransmitters in the brain, including dopamine. And the absence, or reduced levels, of serotonin and dopamine has been linked to depression.

When these chemical systems are working normally, they regulate biological processes

like sleep, appetite, and energy, and allow the expression of normal moods and emotions. But, when the stress response fails to shut off and reset after a difficult situation has passed, it can lead to depression in some people. And, left unchecked and allowed to reach extreme levels, depression not only damages quality of life, it can be a significant contributing factor in suicide.

Chapter 5: The Impact of Stress on Life in General

So, it's not too hard to spot when stress is doing its thing, but what do all those stress-signals lead to if you don't respond to them and get stress under control?

Well, apart from when it's helping you evade a sabre-toothed tiger or your angry boss, which would most likely be a *good* thing, the result of unmanaged, untamed and ever-increasing levels of stress in your day-to-day life is usually a trail of destruction that can manifest itself in a number of ways.

NUTRITION

One of the biggest impacts on an individual level, rather than specific to the workplace, is on your diet. As stress puts in an appearance through one door, your self-care around what you eat and drink can make a pretty sharp exit through another.

Stress affects your motivation, saps your energy, and draws you towards food that is easy, convenient and 'feel-good', all of which tends to also mean 'bad for you'. And they aren't just bad for you in terms of piling on the pounds (think back to how we said that stress hormones lead you into sugar cravings). Sugary foods are not only linked to simple things like weight gain and tooth decay, they are also linked with serious ailments and conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.

ALCOHOL AND OTHER SUBSTANCES

This next one will most likely come as no great surprise: stress can lead to increased use of alcohol and other substances.

Prolonged stress can quickly lead to one glass of wine a few times a week becoming a glass of wine a day, becoming half a bottle a day, and more. And while it may not cause you to *start* smoking in the first place, it may tip you back into it if you have quit, or see you smoking more if you are already a smoker.

The reason? Your body wants the stress to go away, and a quick fix (albeit very short-term and full of other unfavourable consequences) is to drink or smoke it away. The problem is, though, that the knock-on effects of increased use of, and reliance on, substances - a dip in your health and well-being, your ability to perform at a high level disappearing, and even relationship issues bubbling to the surface, for example - cause your stress levels to increase, not subside, and the problem escalates. More stress leads to more substance use, leads to more stress, and so on.

PERCEPTION

Stress can also throw your whole perception of reality out of whack. And, when your perception is out of whack, the world can quickly become a very strange place, indeed.

Little niggles become huge issues. A small mistake at work becomes a catastrophe and a reason to quit or be fired. And those words of encouragement from your friend? Well, they didn't really mean it, they were just being nice.

And, as your perception of reality, yourself and others becomes distorted, so a vicious cycle resulting in ever-increasing distortions begins. And, guess what? As the distortions increase, so does your stress. Which in turn, of course, increases those distortions.

RELATIONSHIPS

When it comes to your relationships, the impact of over-using substances in an attempt to manage your own stress is not the only damaging effect stress can have.

When you are stressed, you can find yourself withdrawing and pushing others away. Your temper is short, your patience is non-existent, every request becomes a demand, and every observation becomes an accusation. People who reach out to help are viewed with suspicion, or seen as an interfering irritation.

But, the more you withdraw and push people away, the more your relationships suffer. The more your relationships suffer, the more stress you feel, as your support network seems more and more remote and out of reach. The more stress you feel, the more you withdraw

and push people away, and so the more your relationships suffer, and, well, you get the picture.

MOTIVATION

Now, I'm no expert on the outdoors, and I definitely have no first-hand experience of quicksand. But, from what I have read, what I do know is this: the more you fight against it when you find yourself in quicksand, the more you sink into it, so the best thing to do is just stay still. And, for some people, stress becomes akin to their very own pit of quicksand. Don't fight it, just stay still. Do nothing, and it'll all be OK.

The problem with that approach though, is that stress thrives in a 'do-nothing' environment. I get the reasoning: you are stressed and you feel pretty rubbish. Everything is going wrong and you feel like you are failing at pretty much everything. So, if you don't set goals you can't fail, and if you can't fail then you won't feel so bad. And, after all, setting and trying to achieve a goal is only going to pile on more pressure and stress, which you absolutely *don't* need.

But, when you don't set goals, you give yourself nothing to aim for. You eliminate a sense of hope or optimism for the future, and you take away a sense of meaning and purpose from your daily life. And, without hope, optimism, meaning or purpose, the world starts to look a pretty bleak place, and your motivation to even *maintain* the status quo, never mind build a future you'd love to live in, disappears. Your levels of engagement drop, as do your performance levels, and the temptation to simply throw the towel in looms large.

SUICIDE AND SELF-HARM

At the absolute extreme, stress can be a significant contributing factor to suicide. Among more than 67,000 students surveyed by Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, over 20 percent said they had experienced stressful events in the last year that were strongly associated with mental health problems, including harming themselves and suicidal thoughts or attempts.

Now, while stress may not be the underlying reason – that stress may arise from financial

worries, a relationship breakdown, anxiety over future prospects, and so on – the effect on the mind and body that the stress response has, can lead someone to consider suicide as their only escape from what they are experiencing.

Chapter 6: The Impact of Stress on the Workplace

Alongside meddling in your personal life, one of stress's favourite places to make its presence felt is your workplace. Whether you are the boss, or a worker, or both, your workplace is a happy hunting ground for stress, as, allowed to go unchecked and untamed, it feeds expectations, discontent, problems and division, turning minor grievances and issues into full-on conflict.

And one of the first things stress loves to do, and one of its most seemingly innocuous yet deeply destructive tactics, is to rob you of any sort of job satisfaction.

JOB DISATISFACTION

For a business, and its workforce, to perform at full potential, job satisfaction is vital. When you are satisfied at work, whether you work for someone else or yourself, you perform well in your role. You are better company inside and outside work. You are more motivated. More committed. More willing to go the extra mile. And when you are part of a satisfied workforce, work is something you look forward to, your workplace is somewhere you enjoy being, and colleagues are people you like to be with.

But job satisfaction is as fragile as it is vital. A satisfied employee can become a dissatisfied one in the blink of an eye. And, when you find yourself caught up in a spiral of job dissatisfaction, what was an enjoyable (or maybe even simply a tolerable) job becomes a grind. All you can see is the bad bits. When things go well, you brush them aside as a passing moment, and when things go badly, you see it as confirmation that your job is not what you thought, or hoped, it was. And, as with so much of the way stress loves to work, as job satisfaction dwindles, stress increases, which drives down your levels of job satisfaction yet further, and causes your performance levels to keep on falling.

And, just as one rotting apple can ruin the whole barrel (or so the saying goes), so one dissatisfied employee can quickly drag down an entire workforce. What flowed out of one person's stress becomes widespread; and a once happy workplace becomes unhappy, and a once high performing business begins to languish.

DISENGAGEMENT

As job satisfaction disappears, engagement and commitment follow suit. You don't enjoy your job as much as you used to, if at all, so you withdraw. You stop chipping in with ideas, you step back from the banter, and you keep quiet at the team meetings. And, the more you disengage, the more your performance drops.

Sometimes that disengagement and drop in performance may be because you can't be bothered any more. And sometimes you're trying harder than ever, desperately fighting the apathy and loss of commitment, but you just seem to be off your game. Your thoughts are jumbled, you can't process information like you used to, and you just seem to forget things. You feel permanently on edge, just waiting for the next mistake or piece of bad news.

But, either way - whether you just can't be bothered, or you are trying harder than ever to no avail - the net effect is the same: as employee engagement and performance dips, so the performance of the business dips, too. As the performance of the business dips, so the pressure ramps up and, as the pressure ramps up, so stress increases across the workforce, further damaging engagement and performance levels. Yet another vicious cycle set in motion by stress.

ABSENTEEISM

With reduced engagement, lower performance and a declining satisfaction at work, so absenteeism creeps in.

Stress is taking its toll, and the real and perceived effects it's having on your mind and body lead to those times when you just can't do it. The mere thought of being at work fills you with dread. You can sense your heart rate increase and your hands begin to feel clammy. So you stay at home.

And, as absenteeism increases, the pressure on those who *do* show up for work mounts, as it falls to them to pick up the slack and do not only their own job, but the jobs of their absent colleagues. And, you guessed it, as the pressure increases, so does the stress; and as the stress increases, so more and more people begin to experience those morning feelings of

dread, and opt to take the ‘stay at home’ option.

Slowly but surely, what may once have been a happy, cohesive workplace becomes an increasingly unpleasant and unpredictable place to be.

DROPPING PERFORMANCE

As stress levels increase, colleagues become more and more disengaged, and the company’s results begin to suffer. And, sometimes slowly, sometimes with alarming speed, the workplace begins to become not just unpleasant and unpredictable, but toxic.

By this stage in stress’s havoc-wreaking, pretty much no-one is left untouched by its effects. Some people hunker down to ride out the storm, others adopt a siege mentality and behave as if the world is against them, while others come out all guns blazing and look to strike first with some kind of ‘last man standing’ game-plan in mind. Everyone is feeling the strain, and everyone is responding in their own way, but *none* of those ways is proving helpful.

Factions form. Accusations fly around, as the blame-game sets in. One-up-Manship, conflict, gossip, back-biting. Slowly, but surely workplace harmony and genuine laughter become a thing of the past.

With everyone watching their back and focusing on making sure they stay one step ahead of the rest, and as the effects of stress take full effect on energy, concentration and perspective, the errors creep in. Standards drop. Quality dips. Customers and clients begin to notice, and what was already bad gets steadily gets worse.

Add to that the nose-dive in productivity, and the profits tumble. With reduced profits comes challenges to business viability, leading to cutbacks and jobs under threat. And, guess what? With jobs under threat comes increased stress into an already charged environment. Petrol on a burning flame, both at work *and* at home.

THE BOTTOM LINE

OK, sure, that's an extreme example of the way stress can impact a workplace, but it's not far-fetched. In their 2018 "Stress Facts in the Workplace" study, Duke University found that workplace stress was responsible for over 70% of workplace accidents, 50% of absenteeism, and over \$300 billion in associated costs. It is no exaggeration to say that employers, employees, and those who work for themselves in the role of 'solopreneur' ignore stress at their peril.

The simple fact is that when stress builds at work, things generally get ugly quickly, unless it's well managed. And the little sequence that I laid out in this chapter shows how work-life (and, as a consequence, home-life) can quickly deteriorate when stress makes its presence felt and is allowed to do its thing without interference.

Chapter 7: The Causes of Stress

So far, we've explored what stress is, how to spot that it's put in an appearance, and the impact it has when it does make its presence felt. But all of that simply means that you can react to increasing stress, and take steps to manage it and reduce its effects. What if you could actually head it off at the pass? If you could be proactive, and take steps to prevent it showing up in the first place?

Well, like we said right at the outset, stress is a part of life, and you'll never totally eliminate it (nor should you want to, as it *can* be helpful). But, when you know what triggers a stress response in you, you can take steps to minimise the opportunities stress has to put in an appearance, and reduce the need to manage its effects and repair the damage it causes.

So, what causes stress in the first place?

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

Well, in terms of the workplace, sometimes, it just is what it is. Your job is just plain stressful. That may come in waves as deadlines come and go, or it may be the nature of your chosen career or vocation.

For example, the most stressful jobs, according to a recent survey by Workwear Giant, were: teaching and education professionals, welfare professionals, housing association professionals, legal professionals and customer service. Conversely, the *least* stressful jobs were managers, directors and senior officials, administration and secretarial occupations, cleaners and labourers, and factory operatives.

As I think of my own experience of working with people across many of those job categories, I'm not totally sure I'd agree 100% with what Workwear Giant found (I'd argue that several of those managers and directors questioned, for example, simply didn't want to admit to stress, not least because stress is still not accepted as a real thing in so many workplaces, and certainly not at executive level). However, the general finding that some

jobs are inherently stressful, others less so, stands.

That said, as I write this today, we are in the grip of a global pandemic, and ‘the nature of the beast’ has extended itself to pretty much *every* role, increasing your stress no matter what your job.

From frontline workers in the health services and schools who are engaged in a relentless battle against the virus; to families adjusting to working from home, while home-schooling and trying to keep a household running in the most extraordinary circumstances; through to workers who find themselves on furlough, without an active job role to fulfil, having to find new meaning and purpose while wondering what the future may hold. No matter what your job role, no matter how stressful, or free from stress it was in pre-pandemic days, Covid-19 has made sure that stress is an ever-present feature in just about *everyone’s* work *and* home life.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

The impact of a devastating, but thankfully temporary, global pandemic put to one side, the organisation you work for, and the leadership and management styles they promote, can also be a significant cause of stress.

Some managers manage through fear. Some through abdication. Some through collaboration. Some micro-manage, others take their hands off completely. And some styles will suit you, others won’t. If you end up in a workplace where the management and leadership style jars, stress follows almost inevitably.

Maybe you like everything spelled out, step-by-step, and you like reassurance and validation at each one of those steps, so you know you are on the right track. Your manager, however, likes to give you the outline and let you get on with it. Without clear guidance and the reassurance that you are doing the right things, stress is an inevitable outcome. As it would be if you were someone who liked being given the broad outline and set free to just get on with it and make it happen, but worked under someone who wanted to inspect the fine detail of every action and decision you took.

Understanding what makes you tick and how you operate is key to taking steps to ensure that the environment in which you work is not an automatic source of stress for you, simply because it does not align with how you like to fulfil your role.

Just as a point of interest, Glassdoor reported that, in 2020, the top 10 companies to work for, as voted for by their employees, were: Google, Equal Experts, Salesforce, Hiscox, Softcat, Abcam, Microsoft, SAP, Topps Tiles, and Arup. But, I can pretty much guarantee, that in each of those companies there will be at least one or two for whom the leadership styles jar, and stress is a constant companion. Remember: a generally great to work for company is not necessarily a great company to work for, *for you*.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Another factor can be the overall culture, of the organisation you work for. A culture of shame and blame, or long hours, or fear, will contribute to stress; as will a culture where skills and talents are not nurtured and developed.

I recall some advice given to me by a manager when I was a graduate trainee at a global accounting firm: “Always have someone to blame”. At the time it felt like sound advice - I’d seen what happened to people who couldn’t pass the buck. But, as I look back on that advice, with the benefit of nearly three decades of hindsight, I see just how toxic it was, and just how much stress was inherent within it.

I also vividly remember my first day at that same firm. Sat in a room full of eager-eyed graduates, the world at our feet, we were each passed a prospectus. Emblazoned on the front cover was a slogan that would come to be a stick I beat myself with daily.

The words read “Consistently Exceeding Expectations”. A rallying cry, or so it seemed in those early days. A call to blow our clients away with the amazing feats we would achieve for them. In reality it was neither a rallying cry nor a call to wow our clients. It was a statement that nothing - no matter how great it was - would ever be good enough, because each time an expectation was exceeded, the expectation bar was simply raised to an even higher level. You could never win in that game. A decade after reading that slogan I found myself side-lined for 18 months by a severe episode of burnout.

When it comes to stress, the culture an organisation promotes will never be neutral – it will *always* do one of two things: feed, or starve stress

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

But it's not just organisational culture that can be a cause (or, indeed a cure) of stress - organisational structure has its part to play, too.

A structure that is heavily top down, where there is little scope for advancement, can cause discontent, disillusionment and stress; as can a flat structure where there are unclear lines of responsibility and accountability.

I recall a period of working in the public sector, and witnessing first-hand the impact of a 'dead-man's shoes' approach to career advancement. It was in stark contrast to the dog-eat-dog, every man for himself culture of the accountancy firm I'd worked for. There was no doubting the commitment and dedication of the staff - the term '*Public Servant*' was epitomised by how the vast majority tackled their responsibilities. But never had I before, and never have I since, encountered a workplace with less career aspiration.

Even those on the leadership programmes knew that room for them to rise through the ranks was not created, it was vacated. And, more often than not, vacation of a role into which they could advance would only come when the incumbent retired. As that reality sank in, so aspiration faded. And, without aspiration, what started out as a passion became a chore; and the stress of being trapped in a situation that was outside their ability to influence began to take hold.

A period of working in the charitable sector revealed to me the other extreme (although, it should be noted that not all charitable organisations operate this way, nor is this mode of operation limited to the charitable sector - there are a great many private-sector businesses that take this approach, too). In the spirit of 'empowerment and equality', the organisation I was contracting for had adopted a flat structure, with just one role sat above a line of 'equals'.

Everyone reported to one man (who was very much an advocate of 'hands-off' management). And everyone was on the same level. Except they weren't. How could they

be? Their job role and the organisational chart may have declared them to be one among equals, but they simply were not at that level. They neither wanted, nor could cope with, the pressure and responsibility, and being accountable to someone who did not *hold* them accountable was a constant source of stress. They floundered in their day-to-day role, rather as a fish out of water flaps and flails.

Structures can be overly restrictive, and they can be overly free. And both can be a major source of stress.

ROLE UNCERTAINTY

Some people love vague. I do. I love being given an outline and a remit and then being allowed to deliver the outcome my way. I don't need a title or a job description - just give me the end result you want, and let me get on with it. Tie me down with strict role requirements, and I will get very frustrated very quickly. It's why consulting and coaching is a great fit for me. But that's me. It may well not be you.

In fact, it's not most people. Most people love the sense of rigour that a well-defined role description brings. "Tell me what is expected of me, so that I know what I need to *do* in order to meet what it is that you expect of me" is the unspoken cry of the majority of people in the workplace. It brings certainty. It is measurable in incremental steps - have you done x, y and z? - rather than everything riding on the end result. And it provides clarity on how well, or not, you are performing, so you can take steps to ensure you stay on track.

And it's not just the workplace that this applies to - people love to know what their life partner, their parents, or their children, for example, expect of them, and they like to be able to put forward their own expectations of others.

And, when you like to have that sense of rigour attached to your role - whether that's in work or in life - if your role is unclear, or you do not feel empowered to fulfil your role, feelings of stress can emerge. And, where that lack of clarity continues unchecked, a sense of helplessness and being 'out of control' can creep in, opening the door for stress to extend its reach.

WORKLOAD

Then there's workload. Where resources are too low, or expectations are too high, workloads increase and a sense of overwhelm and helplessness can take hold.

I remember vividly, back in my accountancy days, sitting in a meeting with a bank, scoping out a corporate investigation. In my mind I was totting up the tasks, how long they would each take, and how long and how many staff we'd need overall to deliver a good result. I arrived at a team of two, maybe three, and seven working days from start to finish. As we got to the 'how much' part of the meeting, I was about to share my thoughts with the partner on the job, as he opened his mouth to say, "we'll only need Andy, and we can turn it around in a week".

Turns out he was right. It did only need me. And we did turn it around in a week. A week where I worked 97 hours, returned home on more than one occasion at 2am simply to pick up a clean shirt and head back to the office, and at the end of which I was picturing that leap across the table to land an uppercut and see some filing cabinets destroyed, that I mentioned earlier.

Unrealistic, unachievable workloads cause stress. And all those workplace stresses can spill over and create stress at home. As I discovered.

In the office, on the last day of that same 97-hour, I took a call from my wife. We were supposed to be going to the rugby to watch a Friday evening fixture. I had the corporate tickets, and she hadn't seen me in days, so this was supposed to be some downtime together, and a bit of much needed and long overdue fun. But I was still in the office, and kick off was in less than an hour. It wasn't happening.

She was upset, and she told me just how upset she was. And, undeniably, she had a point, but I didn't want to hear it. Not then, anyway. So I let her have it, both barrels down the phone line. Mid-sentence I felt the receiver being taken from me and the voice of the other partner (not the one I pictured flying into those filing cabinets) said "Kate, he'll call you back".

I was frog-marched into his office and given a proper ‘father-son style’ dressing down. Once reprimanded and set straight over my treatment of my wife, I was instructed to call her back, tell her to dress up and be ready in an hour, as he and *his* wife would be picking us up to take us out for a meal, no arguments.

That partner, who I have very fond memories of, may have averted a crisis in my relationship with my wife, and certainly taught me a thing or two on keeping work out of the home. But, while it’s not an excuse, it is a simple *fact*, that without that unreasonable workload I would not have worked 97-hours straight, I would have held onto a much more rational and level-headed perspective and, most likely I would not have taken that call in the office from Kate - because we’d have been enjoying a bite to eat before the match kicked off. Sure, I would not have learned the lesson the partner taught me, but nor would I have needed to (not in that moment, anyway).

MAJOR LIFE EVENTS

Major life events – even ones that should be cause for celebration - can be a significant trigger for stress.

Births, deaths, marriages, divorces and break-ups, house moves, redundancies and the like, all disrupt the normal patterns of your life. They throw up new challenges, they ask new questions of you. They present an unknown. And, in doing so, they activate that fight or flight response and let stress in.

A new arrival bursts onto the scene (and we could be talking puppy, here, not just babies) and suddenly there is a new responsibility, a new routine (such as there can be with babies or puppies), new pressures. As much joy as a gurgling baby or cute puppy may bring, they also bring with them a whole host of stress triggers. Sleepless nights lead to tiredness and exhaustion. Tiredness and exhaustion lead to frustrations, distorted perspective and friction. And all of that leads to, and is exacerbated by, stress.

At the other end of the emotional spectrum, losing a loved one, your job, a relationship, or hitting financial problems, are far more cause for commiseration than celebration. But their impact is not limited to a sense of sadness or despondency. Bereavement (which

concerns loss in general - a relationship breakup, a redundancy, losing your home to financial issues, for example, are all a bereavement of sorts) and the grief that accompanies it, inflict changed circumstances in your life that, more often than not, you neither wanted, nor invited.

And the adjustments that those changed circumstances require - living alone (maybe for the first time in a long time), moving to a new home, or having to find a new job (maybe in a new part of the country), for example - all have the potential to open the door to stress.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

A huge cause of stress in your personal life can be health. A diagnosis with an unfavourable or unwanted prognosis can be a significant source of stress. And with the advent of a seemingly endless source of ‘medical advice’ appearing on the Internet, you don’t even need a visit to the doctor to get that prognosis. And through the numerous opportunities for misguided and ill-informed self-diagnosis that so many of those same sources of ‘medical advice’ afford, the scope for, and scale of, the stress that health issues create has been extended almost exponentially.

A lump or bump, a persistent cough, a sudden loss of weight, pains in your chest, and more besides, can all set those alarm bells ringing and start the worry cycle off. The more you worry, the more you notice the symptoms. The more you notice the symptoms, the more you worry. And the more you worry, the more stress you experience.

And, if you *do* succumb to the temptation to just ‘have a quick Google’ to see if you can find out what may be going on, the worry (and, therefore, stress) is likely to go through the roof, as a multitude of ‘helpful’ articles convince you of the possibility, maybe even probability, that you should get your affairs in order for your remaining days on this earth may be few in number.

And the same is true when those symptoms belong to a loved one – research shows that health-scares for our nearest and dearest can elicit a stress response that can be every bit as strong as if those symptoms are our own.

FINANCES

Like we said back in Chapter Two, when we shone a light on some ‘fun facts’ about stress, money, or, at least, our relationship with money, is a massive source of stress.

Debt, household bills, uncertain income, unexpected outlays, all place a household under strain and create stressful situations. When the ability to ensure that you and your loved ones have life’s essentials - food, water, warmth, shelter, clothes and so on - is under threat, stress levels quickly spiral. Not only is your health and well-being cast in doubt (which is stressful enough by itself), the loss of control and sense of helplessness that financial issues often create, take an already stressful situation to all new levels.

The negative impact on well-being of facing a financial *crisis* have been well documented, and it’s all too easy to end the discussion around how finances impact stress there. But that would be a mistake. You see, having an *abundance* of wealth, and an apparently *secure* financial future, can also be a source of stress. If you doubt that, just take a look at the path a number of lottery jackpot winners took once their winnings landed.

Coming into money when you have never before experienced it causes stress. Building a lifestyle based on a certain level of income also brings with it a level of stress, as that lifestyle has to be maintained - often resulting in pressure to succeed at work and an underlying anxiety that what you have built could come crashing down any second. Fear of being taken advantage of (the whole ‘gold-digger’ scenario) can also cause stress in relationships, sometimes to the extent that relationships become impossible.

And *all* of that – from having nothing to having it all - is exactly why your *relationship* with money is the deciding factor in how much stress your finances cause you.

If your reliance on a particular level of finance is absolute, then the slightest fluctuations or uncertainties can cause stress. But, if your relationship is more ‘easy come, easy go’ - you like all that you have, but you don’t define yourself by it, or you are content with the little you have - then when those financial bumps in the road come along, you are better able to take them in your stride. They may still be a cause of some momentary stress, but the effects of that stress are nowhere near as extreme as if your relationship with money is one of

absolute reliance.

RELATIONSHIPS

Every relationship - even the great ones - has its good days and its bad days. But, prolonged periods of bad days can lead to massive stress. And that massive stress can lead to even longer periods of bad days. And so it goes on.

It's easy to think of relationships purely in terms of the romantic. Husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends. But relationships are many and varied, occurring in just about every area of your life. Parent/child, boss/worker, friends, colleagues, professional (doctor, dentist, accountant and the like), clients and customers, siblings, neighbours, and people you encounter at church, in the gym, and down the pub, are all examples of relationships you may have. And tensions can arise in all of them.

From simple differences of opinion to abuse, the spectrum of potential sources of relationship stress is vast. And the degree to which those *potential* sources become *actual* stress is often influenced by how important a relationship is to you. The more it matters to you - the more you value it - the greater the impact of it going wrong (however seemingly trivial the 'going wrong' may be).

The simple fact is this: relationships are a part of life, and so is the potential for stress to emerge in those relationships.

TECHNOLOGY

And, of course, last but by no means least, there is good old technology. For all the good things that technology gives us, there is a price to be paid. Not least the fact that technology has ensured that pretty much everything is instant.

Back when Kate and I were at university, you had to queue for a payphone; and (assuming we got access to our designated payphone at the same time, so that we actually ended up speaking to *each other* rather than some random stranger), if we had a bust-up on the call, when the pips went and the money ran out, that was it.

The only ways to carry on the argument was: to jump on a train and hightail it to where the other lived and demand entry to their house in order to continue hostilities as close to ‘in the moment’ as rail timetables would allow; to hold onto it until the next pre-arranged pay-phone visit; or, to write a letter and hope that ‘first-class’ mail really did get delivered the day after you sent it. In those days, there was no other way to resume hostilities and fan the flames of discontent, no matter how .

And the absence of easy ways to keep arguments simmering, or even raging, generally meant that, by the time we’d each caught a train, found something to write on, or the next scheduled call finally rolled around, usually we’d forgotten what we’d fallen out about in the first place.

Not so these days. These days you may have a blow up at school or work, which, rather than being paused at the office door or school gate, giving it time to fizzle out and be forgotten, carries on via text, or WhatsApp or, worse, social media. There is *no* escape. And with no escape comes stress.

And that stress is present even when there hasn’t been a falling out. When the trend of texting started, it was all about sending a short message to a loved one to say you were coming home, or to ask them to pick up some milk, or to stay in touch with people who lived far away. However, nowadays, the incessant stream of messages on an ever-increasing range of platforms, cause your phone to blow up on a minute-by-minute, never mind day-by-day, basis.

And that minute by minute barrage of messages is a significant source of stress, as confirmed by Viber, who conducted research in the US and the UK on the topic of text messaging habits and various attitudes, finding that texting is a daily source of stress for 31% of people!

Chapter 8: Reasons to Keep Your Stress Under Wraps

So you can see that stress comes at you from all angles, and has all sorts of effects on your life both inside and outside of work.

And, in recent years, thankfully (and most definitely not before time) stress has become a topic of conversation that receives increasing coverage. And rightly so – stress has a big impact, and creating an environment where it can become part of a more mainstream conversation, rather than being the stuff of hushed conversations held in secret is an important step. But, while it is *becoming* more mainstream, there is still a long way to go, and stress remains, in large part, a taboo topic.

But, stress should not be a taboo topic. Already you have seen the scale of the impact it can have on individual lives, families, as well as collective communities, such as workplaces. So why is it that we find it so easy to talk about the effects of illnesses and afflictions such as cancer, heart disease, physical disability, but it becomes way too big of a deal to mention when we feel like stress is getting the better of us?

Look, the simple fact is this: if you have a dodgy heart, had received a cancer diagnosis, or suffered life-changing injuries, you'd seek help, and probably share the news (and your fears), with close friends and family. So, why not so with stress, which in a great many cases has the potential to be every bit as devastating?

THE STEREOTYPE

Well, there are a number of reasons that stress is a topic we'd rather avoid, not least the stress stereotype.

Manic, volatile, emotional, irrational, angry, unreliable. Dishevelled, haggard and out of shape. We've all seen the cartoons, the memes, and watched the TV shows where that caricature of stress is put front and centre. And, let's face it, no-one wants to be *that* person.

Which is why you can't admit to stress. Because, to admit that you are experiencing stress is to say that's who you are. Or at least, it's to invite the opportunity for other people to *think* that's who you are, which is way too big of a risk to take. Because *you* are predictable, dependable, going places. *You* are not that person. So, you hold it all in, and brush off that loss of appetite, those sleepless nights, and that extra glass of wine as just part of the everyday twists and turns of life. They aren't down to stress. No way.

Of course, the irony is that you *really aren't* that person, no matter how much stress you are experiencing, because that is a stereotype, not reality; but the more and more you hold it all in, and try to avoid admitting how you are feeling, the more likely it is that your *behaviour* will start to suggest that you actually are morphing into that stereotype.

A SIGN OF WEAKNESS

And then there's the idea that to be stressed is to be weak. We bust the myth that stress is a sign of weakness back in Chapter One, but, myth or not, the fear that you might be seen as weak if you admit to stress remains a big reason why many people try to cover up any sign that stress may be affecting them.

Like I already mentioned, I know that one first-hand. I lived and worked in an environment where I had to be strong. Bulletproof. A superhero. I used to think of myself as Superman, with one major difference: not even Kryptonite could touch *me*. And then the wheels came off. And there was my Cheese Sandwich Incident (more of that later). And I realised I wasn't Superman after all. But I wasn't *weak*, either - I was human. And to be human requires vulnerability, not impregnability.

One of my favourite authors is Breneé Brown. She writes extensively about the importance of vulnerability, and how it is one of the greatest shows of strength we can make. Which is the irony I had to wrap my head around as my life imploded - my attempt to be impregnable – to show my strength - had been my undoing - the very thing that I thought would protect me was the very thing that caused my world to crumble.

I could not admit stress, because to admit stress was to admit I was fallible - that I had a weakness. And, I lived and worked in a world where weakness was derided and capitalised

on by others, so to dare to admit to stress, and therefore to weakness, would surely be the death-knell to all my hopes and dreams. Except that it was the *not* daring to admit it that sounded that death-knell.

And Brenee Brown's reasoning stacks up. Like we've said a number of times - stress is a fact of life. It's not going anywhere. And experiencing a fact of life does not mean you are weak - how can it? - it simply means you are alive.

A SELF-INFLICTED PROBLEM

Next up is the idea that your stress is your fault. You brought it on yourself. You only have yourself to blame.

Let's face it, you should *be* better than this. You should *know* better. You should *do* better. You should have made better choices. You should have followed the advice you were given. But, oh no, you knew best. And look where that got you. If you'd just been *better* you wouldn't be stressed now. This is all on you - 100% your own fault. In fact, looking at you now, when all is said and done, you are something of a disappointment.

To admit your stress, is to have that scenario where your stress is all on you that you played out in your head, play out for real. And *that* is not an option. The last thing you want to be is a disappointment - you already feel bad enough, and you definitely don't need to be made to feel any worse. So, best keep your stress under the radar. Just suck it up and do the best you can. Hopefully, no-one will notice.

But here's another irony with keeping your stress hidden - in your attempt not to 'be a disappointment', you actually risk disappointing pretty much everyone around you, as you allow stress to overwhelm you without ever asking for help, and begin to fall short of the mark in many areas of your life and work.

GUILT

Another reason to hide your stress away, and one that I grappled with right up until I imploded (and for a while afterwards), is guilt.

Who are you to feel stressed anyway? Your life is great. You have a great job, a great house, a great family. You go on great vacations, drive a great car, wear great clothes, and drink great wine. So many people would rip out an eye to have what you have.

That's what I told myself over and over. I had what should have felt like the perfect life. I was so lucky. Sure, I'd worked hard but, unlike so many people who graft all their life with little or no reward, I was *already*, in my mid-twenties, seeing the fruits of my labour. Trouble was, I didn't want to eat the fruit. I didn't even want to *have* the fruit. I hated my 'perfect' life. And *that* made me feel guilty, because I had no right to feel like this.

So I hid my stress, painted on a smile, and pretended like everything was fine and dandy. But, underneath the surface, a volcano was getting ready to erupt and I was fast losing the battle to keep a lid on it.

Look, you make choices. You follow certain paths, and you build a life. Others may yearn for what you have, but that doesn't mean *you* have to. Sure, maybe you love the life you've built - and that is a *great* place to be, if you do. Or, maybe you hate it - which is *not* such a great place to be, but is a totally *valid* way to feel. Yes, people may raise an eyebrow if you declare your 'perfect' life to be not quite so perfect, but they'll raise even more of an eyebrow if the lid blows off that volcano building inside you, as you try to bury the stress you feel from living a life that does not line up with who you are.

FEAR

And then there's fear. If you admit to stress, the wheels may come off your life (spot the irony, yet again), and that is something you dare not even contemplate.

So you try and rationalise your situation in order to allow yourself to be guided by your fear. Sure, right now you don't feel like your life is that great, but better the devil you know. The devil you know is not a very pleasant companion, but at least you are clear on what you are going to get from them. Which is not the case if you put yourself out there and openly admit to how you're feeling.

Will people understand, or will they gaze at you with a blank expression, as if you are

speaking a foreign language? Will they support you, or turn their back on you? Will they put an arm around your shoulder, or laugh mercilessly in your face? Will you lose your job, and with it everything it buys you, or will they cut you some slack? What about your family – do they want to be shackled to a weak, shameful loser, or will they be proud of you for facing up to the truth? Far too many unknowns. Far too much uncertainty. Let's not even risk it. Just keep quiet.

As the conversation about stress becomes more mainstream, fear's power over you - it's ability to silence you - is fading. But, while it's power may be fading, it hasn't disappeared altogether, and fear remains a significant factor in people's reluctance to speak out about their stress.

Chapter 9: Responses to Stress

All of those factors – the reasons we try so hard to hide the fact we are experiencing stress - are why we have turned stress into a big deal.

Stress is the elephant in the room. We may admit to it with an almost flippant “I’m so stressed!” or “You are so stressing me out!”, before making light of it and laughing it off. But admit the *truth* of our stress? Way too risky.

Which is one of the reasons stress is known as ‘the silent killer’. Because all those factors - the stereotype, the weakness, the self-infliction, guilt and fear - feed your responses to stress, and those responses, more often than not, rather than taming it, give your stress more and more freedom to do as it pleases.

HEAD IN THE SAND

And one of the responses – and it’s a super-common one – is to recognise it, but then simply ignore your stress and hope it goes away.

It won’t. Trust me. I tried that, and it didn’t work. In fact, far from going away, the chances are, that stress you are experiencing will get worse. *Much* worse.

It’s not rocket science. If you got a splinter, and you ignored it, it would get inflamed. And if you continued to ignore it, maybe Staphylococcus or Tetanus would follow. And no-one wants that, right? So, no matter how squeamish you may be, and no matter how low your threshold for pain, you get the tweezers, remove the splinter as soon as you notice it, disinfect the wound, and it’s all good. No Staphylococcus. No Tetanus.

Well, in the same way as a splinter is a foreign body that will do you harm once lodged in your finger, stress is a foreign body in your system, and the hormones it’s sent racing around your body will, just like the splinter, do you harm if they are not removed.

It's this simple: ignore stress and it gets infected. Deal with it and, maybe not right away, but eventually, the chances are, it'll all be good. Burying your head in the sand may help you avoid the issue for a while, but eventually you are going to have to face it, reach for those tweezers, and deal with it before it's too late.

DENY ALL

A twist on ignoring stress is to deny it. I tried this one, too. It doesn't work, either. This is the full-on, no holds barred, head in the sand, fingers in your ears approach. The whole idea that if you don't acknowledge it, it doesn't actually exist. It's that way of thinking that says "If I don't say it out loud, it isn't true".

Only, if it's true, it's true come what may, whether you speak it out loud, or not. And, if you are suffering with stress, whether you acknowledge it or not, you are suffering with stress. Denying it doesn't make it not exist, it makes it worse.

Just as you might say to an alcoholic that, until they acknowledge their dependency they cannot change it, if you don't admit to, and acknowledge, the stress you are experiencing, then you will never deal with it. And stress left undealt with will quickly run amok. If stress is not to be your undoing, then denial is not an option.

JUST SUCK IT UP

Of course, there's also a school of thought that stress is inevitable. It's a part of life. Always has been, always will be. And that's true. But, just because something is a part of life does not mean you have to like it, or that you need to welcome it with open arms and encourage it to pull up a chair by the fire. You can, and you should, only engage with stress on your terms. And you definitely should not be cosy up in front of the fire with it.

You see, the danger is that, the cosier you get with stress, the more risk there is that it becomes so much a part of your life that you are used to it. Comfortable with it, even. It's not a problem any more.

But, remember the fight or flight response? Remember how when that continues

uninterrupted for long periods of time, the overload of stress hormones plays havoc with your system? Well that's why embracing the inevitability of stress to the point where you are more than comfortable for it to be an ever-present in your life, is potentially an unhealthy response. Sure, you will *always* face stressful situations, but stress is not something to get comfortable with, or used to, and nor do you have to find ways to just 'suck it up and carry on'. Far from it. Stress is something to keep on a *very* tight leash, and *completely* under your control.

GO TO WAR

There are those for whom their response to stress is to wage war against it. To beat it. It's them versus their stress. Last man or woman standing. And there are those for whom to be the one left standing is not just victory, it's a badge of honour that signifies just how strong and in control they are.

But to wage a war against stress is ill-advised. Yes, you may come off the battlefield the victor, but few wars are made up of just one battle, and stress doesn't concede defeat willingly - in fact, it's generally happy to fight to the death. Sometimes quite literally. So, while you may win those initial skirmishes, that *won't* be the end of the story, and it almost definitely *will* get ugly.

And remember, in a war there are always casualties, even for the victor. And, sometimes, those casualties have a lasting and detrimental effect on the future that unfolds. Relationships scarred, sometimes permanently. Finances ruined. Careers flushed down the toilet. All because you went to war with an opponent who, every time you knocked them over, refused to stay down.

You cannot defeat an opponent you do not understand and, once you understand stress and how it works, you will realise that it is an opponent that can never be (nor *needs* to be) defeated, but rather *can* (and *should*) be tamed and managed.

PLAY IT DOWN

Another default response for many people when they begin to experience stress is to play

it down. I mean, is stress really that bad? There are good bits, too, right? We already said how it can save you from a sabre-toothed tiger or your angry boss, so clearly there's an upside. And, let's face it, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, so stress offers a great learning experience. It's character building. It keeps you on your toes. Just focus on the positives, and you'll be well-placed to deal with all the negative bits of stress.

Nice idea, but it doesn't work that way.

Yes, stress *can* have its upsides – like keeping you alive when you face imminent danger - but just one negative impact of stress can undermine and undo *all* the good bits that may be present. It *is* a learning opportunity, and it *can* build character. And yes, it's true, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. But stress *can* kill you.

And, perhaps, therein lies yet another irony with stress: playing down its potential to do you harm - minimising the negatives and overstating the positives - may, in extreme circumstances, mean that rather than making you stronger, your stress ends up being your downfall.

A MATTER OF CHOICE

This next one ties back to one of the reasons so many of us like to hide our stress from the outside world: it's self-inflicted.

Now, I am a huge advocate of the principle of choice, and the fact that you always have a choice. You may not like the choice, but you always have one. And you usually have more choices than you think you have. So maybe being stressed is a choice? Maybe I chose to feel stressed, so maybe I can just 'unchoose' it? Maybe I can just choose to not feel stressed anymore?

Nice idea, again, but, again, not going to happen.

Being stressed is *not* a choice, nor is not being stressed. The factors that lie behind being, or not being stressed, *are* very much a matter of choice - who we are in relationships

with, the way we spend money, the job we do, and so on - but stress itself is *not* a choice, it is an *outcome* of those choices we make.

So, while simply choosing not to be stressed any more, or flinging your arms in the air and declaring that you chose your bed and now you have to lie in it, are both ways people react towards stress, *neither* is an appropriate response.

IT'S ALL IN THE MIND

What about the school of thought that stress is just in the mind? That it's not a real thing? And that it only exists in the confines of your head? This is a prevalent response, and very much sits at the heart of the reluctance that still exists to open up a dialogue about the stress you experience.

But, like we've already talked about, stress is not purely in the mind - it is very much in the body, too. Weight gain, sleeplessness, infertility, fatigue and irritability, heart disease, hair loss, loss of libido, bad digestion, worsening acne. Those things are not afflictions of your mind, and they are most definitely *not* a figment of your imagination. Those things are *very much* physical, and *very much* point to the reality of stress.

To dismiss stress as being 'all in your mind' is to deny that those very real (and sometimes quite dangerous) physical symptoms are a result of that stress, which leaves the root cause of those symptoms (your stress) free to keep on doing its thing. Which, in turn, is likely to make matters worse and initiate another of those vicious spirals in which stress thrives.

A DRIVING FORCE

Another response is to embrace stress as motivational. The more stressed you are, the more motivated you are.

And there is something in that idea. Think about times you have faced an exam, or secured a job interview. The stress you feel around those events drives you to prepare well, and helps you perform at your best on the day. Maybe you are stressed about your weight, or

your health, and that stress motivates you to eat better and get fitter.

So, in the short-term the stress you experience *could* work as a catalyst to initiate a process of change, or to help you raise your game to a level where you achieve a desired outcome. But, as a long-term strategy for goal achievement or personal development, to see stress as a source of ongoing motivation spells disaster. Stress may motivate you to do something different or new, or briefly motivate you to work that little bit harder to get the outcome you want. But, if, day after day, you face the same stresses, your ability to follow through on that new or different something will gradually be crushed.

Remember, stress is a fight or flight response, and you are not meant to stay in that state for anything more than a brief moment.

MEDICATE IT

There is also a school of thought that stress is a condition, just like an infection or the flu, and the only way to deal with it is through medication. Far from being resistant to having their stress exposed, people who respond to stress this way make a beeline for a doctor's surgery and are only too happy to lay their symptoms on the table, so the doctor can give them some tablets to make it all go away.

But this response is a little like sticking a band-aid on a deep wound. It may mask the bleeding for a while, but it won't heal the wound itself. And, eventually, the blood will seep through the plaster and another band-aid on top of the existing one will be required. But the wound remains open, and, no matter how many band-aids you pile on, the blood keeps flowing.

And so it is with stress. Medication may well be (and often is) part of the solution - that *initial* band-aid to stop stress in its tracks and give you the space to regroup and reassess. But where this response falls down is that medication alone won't fix the stress, it'll merely help you cope with it in the here and now. And, if you see medication as the answer, you will fail to address its root causes, which means your stress goes no-where and you remain reliant on medication to remain standing, without ever making progress.

One of my consulting clients works with people who are battling heroin addiction, and this response to stress (using medication as the solution to fix it) reminds me of the cycle that many heroin addicts get trapped in. The only way to break free of the hold of the opiate is to become abstinent, but many find that they become reliant on a substitute (methadone), which is initially prescribed to move the individual away from the street drug, and help them to find stability.

For the heroin addict, methadone is not the answer, it is only ever intended to be a short-circuit – that initial band-aid that provides the space to deal with root causes – a means to end that requires much more besides medication to reach. The same is true for the person suffering with stress - medication is a means to an end, not the end itself.

THERE'S ALWAYS SOMEONE WORSE OFF THAN YOU

This is one of my personal favourite responses. Not least because I used to use it all the time.

At the peak of my periods of stress – right at the point where I should have been reaching out for help – I dismissed what was happening to me by telling myself that everyone was in the same boat and, in reality, a lot of people have it worse than me. In fact, I made sure I could always point to an actual person who had more reason to be feeling the strain than me, because that gave (in my mind, at least) actual justification to my response to my stress.

And those people I could point to genuinely were having a hard time of it. They had reasons a-plenty to feel stressed. More reasons than I had. I mean, I hadn't just lost my partner, or my job. I hadn't just received a terminal health diagnosis. I wasn't in the middle of a divorce. Who was I to feel sorry for myself?

So I hid my stress, didn't get help, and things got worse. Which was a deeply flawed strategy. You see, while other people may face horrific situations that appear to make yours look tame, your situation is *your* situation, and your capacity to deal with it is *your* capacity to deal with it, no-one else's. You cannot compare your situation to another's - it is yours, and the effect it will have on you is unique to you. And, ultimately, if it is a situation that causes stress, that stress needs to be dealt with, not dismissed.

IN THE LAP OF THE GODS

Finally, there's the fatalistic response. This is the 'my future and what happens to me is in the lap of the gods' response.

It is the response that says if you're going to 'get stress' you are going to get it. And, if you do get stress, you are going to have put up with it for the rest of your life. There's nothing you can do to change it. It's fate. Which means that there is no point in fighting it, because the whole thing is outside your control.

Now, I don't subscribe to fate on any level or for any thing, least of all when it comes to stress. To say that your experience of stress is outside your control and a matter of fate is to abdicate responsibility for the choices you make. You see, you very much can do something to change the stress you experience, and it very much can be under your control.

You *will* experience stress for the rest of your life, that's a fact. But that's not down to fate, it's down to life. And, while stress may be a part of your life for the *rest* of your life, it doesn't have to be present all day every day, and it doesn't have to be harmful. But, it will most likely be both those things if you consign your stress experience to the lap of the gods.

Chapter 10: A Different Approach

The net result of any or all of those responses to stress is fear, inactivity and a failure to manage the stress you experience. Which opens the door for all the symptoms and effects we've just unpacked to take hold, and for a negative cycle to be unleashed where guilt, shame and avoidance create more stress, which creates more guilt, shame and avoidance, and so on.

So, if those responses to stress we just looked at in Chapter Nine all lead to such negative outcomes, and, as was demonstrated as we explored each one, they are all unjustifiable, how *should* you respond to stress?

A NEW WAY OF SEEING THINGS

Well, step one to creating a new approach to stress – a more helpful response to the stress you experience - is to change your mindset.

Start by seeing stress through a different lens. Stop seeing stress as the enemy and quit seeing your relationship with stress as a war. Until you do, you will never manage your stress effectively, because you will always be at odds with it – always in a state of conflict.

The only way to win any war and ensure longstanding peace (or at least a longstanding truce) is to make it so there are no grounds for a fight. So, you need to remove the grounds for your fight with stress. And you do that by first figuring out who's doing what to stoke the fire of conflict.

The fact is, stress is not the cause of the conflict – it is not stoking the fire - the circumstances *resulting* in your stress are. Stress is not the bad guy here, he's just the front-man, so to speak. Those *circumstances* are the bad guy.

And only when you identify, and change, the circumstances that cause your stress will you remove the cause of the conflict. And when there is no cause for conflict, there is no enemy. And when there is no enemy, there is no war.

So, each time you experience stress, don't let your attention fall on the front-man - the way you feel - but instead go in search of the *real* bad guy, and ask yourself what made it possible for the front-man to take centre stage - what was the thing that caused those feelings to surface. And, when you find the cause, take small and simple actions to change what you can change, and control what you can control.

And remember, the stress you feel is the product of a release of hormones, and that release of hormones has been triggered by events. Control the events, and you control the hormones.

A 'NOT GUILTY' VERDICT

Next, acknowledge that guilt and shame have no part to play in your relationship with stress. Like we said towards the end of Chapter Nine, your stress is your stress. And your capacity to deal with the situations you face is your capacity. There is no validity whatsoever in comparing your circumstances to those of other people, because their capacity to cope with the circumstances they face has absolutely no effect on your capacity to deal with your own.

Struggling to cope, needing to take your foot off the gas for a bit, changing direction – that's not failing, and it doesn't make you a disappointment. There is no shame in stress, and even less shame in admitting that you are suffering its effects.

And there is no shame in wanting something different for your life. You may have many reasons to be grateful. You may count yourself one of the lucky ones. You may have all the trappings of success – the stuff of glossy magazines and commercials. Your life may appear to be one that stirs envy in the heart of others. But, if success doesn't look like a yacht, a snappy suit, a fast car, a big house, or whatever, for you, then those things will never satisfy. Not because you are ungrateful, but because they are not a part of who you are.

Which means there is no guilt in wanting something different. There is no guilt attached to wanting to change course in order to throw off the stress you feel. If anything, there can only be any room for guilt if you *deny* the things that truly make you who you are, and resign yourself to a version of you defined by those glossy magazines and commercials, when that definition simply doesn't fit *for you*.

Absolve yourself of guilt right now, and give yourself the freedom to explore what you really want from life. Maybe you'll come full circle and realise that, actually, what you have already is what you truly want. Or, maybe, you'll realise you want something different. But, when you approach that process free from guilt, you can have greater certainty that the answer you reach – whatever it may be - is the right one.

TAKE YOUR THINKING TO TASK

With a changed perspective on how you view your stress, and a new found freedom from guilt, it's time to tackle your 'stinking thinking'.

By 'stinking thinking', I'm referring to those views you hold of stress that are just plain wrong: that stress is a sign of weakness, it doesn't exist, it's inevitable and so on. Take each view you hold of stress and put it in the dock. Challenge it, test it, accuse it. Make it prove its innocence and, where it can't demonstrate that it should not be sent down to the dungeons, reshape it so that it's accurate - root out the flaws in that view you put on trial, and leave behind the facts.

But be assured – this is not about developing some positive mindset that is not grounded in reality - about developing a *delusional* approach to stress. It's about revealing and holding onto the *facts*, so that you establish a firm foundation upon which you can build solid structures and take control of the stress you encounter.

And remember: no amount of changed thinking will *ever* make stress your friend, but it can help you turn it into your *ally*.

FIND THE COMMON GROUND

And a key element of that process of reframing your relationship with stress as one of allies rather than enemies lies in finding common ground.

If I've learnt anything from years of negotiations, it's that the best outcomes are not found by focusing on what divides the parties around the negotiating table, but what binds them. What do they have in common? Where are they aligned? Where do they agree?

When you find the common ground, you create a starting point. A safe space. A place from which whatever differences and disagreements may arise can be addressed positively.

When it comes to stress, the common ground is found in what lies at its source. Remember, stress is a product of your fight or flight response, and your fight or flight response is designed to do you good, not harm - to keep you alive and to help you make progress, not pummel you into the ground with a hormone overload. So, fundamentally, while it may not feel like it, stress actually wants to be on your side, rooting *for* you not fighting against you. And that common ground that you and your stress response share - that desire for you to experience good things – is your starting point. And, from that starting point, you can explore the root cause events that trigger your stress more constructively – not automatically seeing them in a negative light, but being open to the possibility there may be something positive and helpful to be found.

It is the root cause event that is the fuel that gives stress its momentum. And just like with a fire, when you add fuel it increases in intensity, and when you remove the fuel it goes out, in the same way, if you add fuel to your stress its intensity increases, and if you remove it, it dies away. So, if that common ground reveals that the event triggering your stress is generating a positive momentum, then add fuel. But, if the momentum is negative, and that hormone overload is building, then remove it.

And, as you focus on using that common ground to better understand each new encounter with stress, so your relationship with stress shifts away from enemy and moves closer to ally.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE REALITY

With the common ground firmly established, you have also recognised that your stress really does exist. It is an actual thing. There is no-longer any room to deny it, or ignore it. So, acknowledge it. Say the words out loud: “I am experiencing stress”, or “I feel stressed”. There is something about saying words out loud, as opposed to holding them within, that brings a reality to your circumstances.

Like you, I’ve heard all the motivational stuff about ‘speaking things into existence’, but *this* is not *that*, You see, *that* is about trying to bring something not yet real into reality -

something that does not yet exist as a state of being or as a tangible object into existence. *This*, on the other hand, is about recognising something that already *is* reality, and already *is* in existence - your stress - and acknowledging its presence.

And this is an important step, because, like we've said previously, until you acknowledge the reality of something, you can't change it. Simply denying its existence, or burying your head in the sand, as we said in the previous chapter, may avoid the problem in the short-term, but no amount of ignoring or denying will make it actually go away. To make a problem - whether it be stress, or anything else - go away, you first have to recognise and acknowledge that there even *is* a problem.

Keep in mind, though, that to acknowledge a problem is not to *accept* it. Acknowledgement is realism, acceptance is resignation, and you can acknowledge that your stress exists without *accepting* its presence in your life. In fact, you can acknowledge your stress and *reject* its presence in your life all in the same breath.

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

Having acknowledged it, analyse it. Get to grips with the facts of the matter. Until you understand what you are up against you will simply be guessing what the best way to tackle it might be.

So spend some time unpicking what you are experiencing. Ask yourself some simple, but crucial, questions.

What is causing your stress? Are you stressed because of looming deadlines, or are you trapped in a situation that jars with your values, for example? Is it down to a pressure you put on yourself, or a pressure put on you by others? Are you experiencing upheaval in your life? Are you surrounded by uncertainty?

Revisit Chapter Seven and see which of the causes of stress outlined there apply to your situation. When you know what lies behind your stress, you can begin to identify actions you can take, and strategies you can adopt, to tame it and manage it.

Where does it show itself? Where are you when those feelings of stress surface? At work? At home? With particular people? In a particular place?

Begin to build a picture of when and where your stress shows its face, and look for patterns. The more you understand about the times and locations you experience stress, the more prepared you can be, and the more preventative measures you can take to head it off at the pass.

What effect does it have? When stress does put in an appearance, how does it make you feel?

Think back to the effects of stress outlined in Chapter Four and see which, if any, of those key signs of stress you recognise in yourself. Do you notice any early warning signs that stress is building?

What messages do you give yourself when you feel its effects? When you experience stress, how do you respond? Do you bury your head? Go to war? Suck it up? Deny it? What messages do you tell yourself in those moments? Look again at Chapter Nine and see which of those responses to stress resonate with you.

Putting yourself in control of your stress - taming and managing it - is not rocket science, but it does require intent and action. So, get intentional and (starting with those four simple but powerful questions) take the actions you need to take in order to understand your stress, get to know it, and get underneath and inside it. Unpack it. Figure out what gives it its power, and how you can take that power away. Leave no stone unturned as you uncover the reality of the stress you experience.

PUT YOURSELF IN THE DRIVING SEAT

And with every aspect of your stress uncovered, use what you uncovered to discover what needs to change in order to put you in control.

You identified the causes of your stress, so what do you need to *do* take charge of those

situations? Is it a question of better time management, hanging out with a different group of people, or changing your routine, for example? And, if it is, what changes *could* you make? Or is it something bigger than time management, a change of friends, or tweaks to your routine? Perhaps you need to make wider-reaching changes in your life. Are there circumstances that give rise to your stress that do not fit with who you are? What is it that jars against your values, or robs you of your joy? What would have to be different for that stress you feel in those moments to have no air to breathe?

You took the time, and put in the effort, to uncover your stress, so make sure you don't let that time and effort go to waste. It can seem pretty daunting to take on stress, but now you understand it inside out, you hold all the cards, so use them to your advantage.

TAKE OWNERSHIP

And finally own your stress. The temptation can be to shrink away and brush it aside - especially if you are in a moment where stress seems a thing of the past. Maybe it wasn't actually that bad. Maybe you blew it all out of proportion. Maybe you were just 'having a moment'. No point in fixing something that doesn't actually seem to be broken, right?

Resist that temptation. At all costs.

Remember what we said about acknowledging the reality of stress? You weren't imagining it - your stress was real, and it's going no-where unless you do something about it. It may be lying low and everything may seem to be smooth sailing. You may be having a good day - a stress free day - and that's to be savoured, but you know all too well that there will be days ahead that don't feel this good - days where your stress levels are through the roof. So, don't pass it off, hide it (or hide *from* it), or look to brush it off as no big deal, or even something other than what it is. Own it.

You see, ownership underpins change. When you own your stress, and all that goes with it, you make yourself accountable and responsible. You give yourself the platform to create the change that will establish a new set of circumstances. Circumstances where that difference that's needed is established, and your stress finally has no air to breathe.

And the change that ownership underpins, enables control. When you know what needs to change you can take action. And when you take action, that platform you created is no longer simply a platform upon which you *can* build a new set of circumstances, it is the *foundations* upon which you *are* building those circumstances. A foundation for putting yourself firmly in control.

And control opens up a new future. When you are in control you can set your own trajectory. You can create a future that fits with who you are and what you want. A future that is tailor-made for your best self. A future in which you can truly live your best life.

Chapter 11: Resistance to Change

Own your stress, embrace change, take control. Sounds straight-forward enough, right? No part of that is rocket science. It may be tough, sure, and it may take time, but it's totally achievable. So why don't more people do it? Why do so many people walk to the door of change and then decide to stay right where they are? Why did I do that exact same thing for the best part of a decade? Why, perhaps, do you?

When I think back to that period of my life where stress was building to unmanageable levels and burnout was fast approaching, I knew that where I was, was not where I needed to be. I knew that every day I was sinking deeper and deeper under an ever-increasing tsunami of stress. And I knew that no-one but me could fix it. And yet, somehow, I remained rooted to the spot, trapped in inertia, unable to seize the moment and create a new reality. Until, that is, the option for inertia was taken away and my world caved in around me. Why was that? Why did I do that?

THE BOILED FROG

Well, human beings have an incredible capacity to acclimatise to discomfort, allowing it to become a new baseline for normality. And that's all well and good if it's an acclimatisation that helps you push through the wall when you are running a marathon, or keep working late into the night when you are studying for an exam, or dealing with a ridiculous deadline at work. Or, in other words, it's all well and good if it's confined to the short-term – if there is an end in sight.

It's like the fable about the boiled frog. You've no doubt come across the story - it's a much used, and rather gruesome and inhumane, metaphor. And I'm going to borrow it here to demonstrate a big reason why we so often walk up to the door of change, but refuse to go through it.

So the fable goes, if you drop a frog into a pan of boiling water (put aside questions about why you might want to do that, for a moment), unsurprisingly it'll do all within its power to get straight back out. But, sit it in a pan with some cold water and it will start out

as happy as Larry. Begin to gently heat the water, and it won't try and get out, it will just acclimatise to the increasing temperature, still as happy as Larry, right up to the point the water is so hot it cannot survive, and it's game-over.

And your stressful situation is a bit like that. If stress hits you like a truck out of nowhere, an existential crisis that manifests itself in a single moment - you will do everything you can to avoid it or escape it. You are that frog that has been dropped into a pan of already boiling water. But, if it builds slowly over time - if the heat is gently turned up, and your stress begins to slowly simmer around you rather than drive right over you - you risk becoming that frog placed in a pan of cold water on a gently warming stove.

When stress creeps up on you, rather than crashes into you, if you aren't careful you'll become acclimatised to its slowly rising levels, just as the frog grew acclimatised to the slowly warming water. In fact, you will become so used to the increased levels of stress that, as uncomfortable as it is, you simply accept it as the 'new normal' way of feeling. Until, eventually, your body cries 'enough', a warning that, as I can attest from my own experience, if it goes unheeded, could, at its most extreme, lead you to the same painful end as the frog.

But why *do* we allow ourselves to acclimatise to the harmful effects of stress? Well, the answer lies in the status quo.

DON'T ROCK THE BOAT

The status quo is the easy option. It's comfortable, risk-free and predictable. Change, on the other hand, can be daunting.

Change involves tough decisions. It can mean hardship and upheaval. It may cause tensions and frictions in relationships. In fact, change is everything the status quo is not: uncomfortable, filled with risk, and more-often-than-not, completely unpredictable.

And getting out of that pan requires change. What's on the outside? What will you encounter? Will you like what you find? And, while you may not especially like what you have *already* found, it's familiar, and less scary or difficult, than any uncertain alternatives. As the saying goes, better the devil you know.

And change jars. It jolts. It can be like a bull raging in a china shop. And no-one likes being jarred, or jolted, or ducking flying crockery. So at the first sniff of the status quo being interrupted, society circles the wagons and sets about nipping your desire to do things differently in the bud. The seeds of doubt get sown. The disapproving looks and comments begin to flow. Some friends and family – even some total strangers - may question your motives, or even your sanity. You'll be told you haven't thought it through, that you are never satisfied, that you should be thankful you have it so good, that you are ungrateful, or selfish.

And that all sounds like a lot of heartache, which sounds worse than your present reality. So, on balance, maybe the line of least resistance is the one to take. Maybe you should stick with the status quo. And anyway, back to reason number one – who knows if you'll even like what you'll find on the other side of the pan, so why put yourself through it?

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

And then there's fear. Not only is there the fear of change being hard and unpleasant, and stirring up difficulties and turmoil, there's also the fear of 'what if'.

What if you screw it up? What if what you end up with is worse than what you started with? What if you lose everything – the good and the bad – that you currently have? What if it doesn't work out and there's no-way back? What if you choose the wrong option?

The fear that all those 'what ifs?' creates can be paralysing. My Dad was always looking to answer the 'What if I choose the wrong option?' question, especially when it came to major purchases. I remember how stressful buying a new TV or appliance could be for him. He would research it to the minutest of details. He would weigh every option - the features each had, the cost, the make, you name it. And sometimes he would spend so long researching his purchase that, by the time he'd made his decision, the option he'd decided on had been discontinued and replaced by a newer version, so he was right back at square one.

And I think that a little of my Dad's tendency towards analysis-paralysis rubbed off on me. In my pre-burnout days I was all about answering the 'what if?' question. I had a spreadsheet for everything (well, I was an accountant, after all). I played out scenarios, and I

had contingencies. I wanted to cover every base. Which was bizarre really, because in my heart I loved uncertainty and risk, but I had created a world where only certainty would do, so answering that ‘what if?’ question was what I did. The net result of tackling a plethora of ‘what ifs’ was that I ended up doing nothing. Which was OK, because doing nothing was a safe option. The safe option wasn’t scary. There was no fear with the safe option.

But, as nice as it might be to not feel that fear of the unknown, there is a problem with the safe option: it keeps you firmly trapped in the gently warming water with the frog, because that water feels safe. Sure, it’s a getting a little hot and maybe a little uncomfortable, but you can live with that. After all, who knows what’s going on, on the other side of the pan? And, in any case, what’s the worst that can happen if you stay right where you are, right?

THE NEED TO SUCCEED

Finally, there’s the ‘Success Illusion’. Contrary to the messages of many movies, magazines, TV commercials, billboards, novels and more, success is not a one-size-fits-all thing, it’s personal. But that doesn’t fit the norms that underpin the status quo that society craves, so an illusion of what success looks like is presented to you all day, every day.

Fast cars, snappy suits, closets filled with shoes, fancy restaurants, big houses, exclusive vacations, the latest gadgets, perfectly manicured features. The list goes on. Tick some of those boxes and you are on your way to becoming a success. Tick them all, and you have made it.

Only that’s not how it is.

Success *may* look like some, or all, of those things for you. But it also may look like raising happy kids, being in a loving relationship, completing an overseas aid project, living a self-sufficient life on the land. It may not involve cars of any kind, fast or otherwise. You may not really care about the size of your house or how new your phone is. You may, for sure, and that’s fine; but, equally, you may not, and that’s fine, too.

But when the social expectation is the success put forward by magazines, TV screens and

movie theatres, to not strive for and attain at least *some* of that, is to fail. And therein lies the Success Illusion. An illusion that maintains the status quo, represents the safe option, and keeps you trapped in that pan of gently warming water, because no-one wants to fail.

Chapter 12: When the Lid Blows Off

But here's the thing: when you stay trapped in that pan of gently warming water for too long, one of two things happen. Either, you sink yourself into it even deeper, until it's too late and the water gets too hot for you to survive; or you find yourself in the eye of a storm, and change is inevitable, however scary and painful it may be.

In early 2000, sitting in the now nearly boiling water of my own personal pan, I found myself squarely in the eye of one such storm. A storm where two worlds collided. The world of who I really was, but had spent 28 years denying, declared war on the world that I had convinced myself I wanted to live in: a world squarely defined by the Success Illusion. A world that, despite my genuine love of gadgets and cars with a turn of pace, was not a world that fitted who I really was. A world that was forcing me to live as a deeply flawed interpretation of the real me. A world that had become a pan of now *exceedingly* hot water.

And, as I squirmed in my pan, the guilt within me raged. I had it all. I was going places. My life was perfect. How could I be so ungrateful? How could I not want to give my wife and kids all that lay ahead in this world of career stardom?

And then the other voice of guilt would have its say: how could I sacrifice my family for my own selfish gain? How could I prioritise my career over time with my wife and kids? How could I work harder for a fast car than I did on my relationships? How could I be such a jerk?

The battle raged inside. The tensions grew. The stress mounted. Headaches, sleeplessness, night sweats, IBS. All the signs were there. But so were the labels. Loser. Weak. Failure. And I couldn't afford to be weak, or to fail. And I certainly didn't want to be a loser. To admit to stress was to commit career suicide. So I carried on. Until I couldn't carry on any more.

And the lid blew off. Big time.

It was early April, and we were two weeks from exchanging on a new house. Stood in a furnishing shop with Kate, after a busy day in the office, we were trying to complete a simple transaction for some new curtains.

The young girl serving was clearly new, and I really should have cut her some slack. This was probably an after-school job for her, and she was doing her best. But as she fumbled with the till and the minutes ticked by, I could feel the rage rising inside. I don't remember what I actually said, but it couldn't have been good, because I remember Kate apologising to our server and marching me out of the shop with the instruction to "shut up and wait here".

And that marked the beginning. The next day I awoke feeling like I had been run over several times by an articulated lorry. Everything hurt. I couldn't move. I literally had to pick up my legs off the mattress so I could swing them out of the bed. I couldn't stand. I could only crawl to the bathroom. What the hell had happened to me?

What followed was nearly two years off work. Two years of putting myself back together after stress had tipped into burnout and a breakdown. Two years that saw me reach the lowest point of my life. And that lowest point I have since come to call 'My Cheese Sandwich Incident'.

Stood in the kitchen of our new home I had managed to put together the basic ingredients of one of my favourite sandwiches: cheese and ploughman's pickle. I had the bread. The cheese. The pickle. And the butter. I even had a knife and a plate. I knew what I *needed* in order to make the sandwich, I just had absolutely no clue *how* to actually make it.

No amount of telling myself to get a grip, no amount of deep breaths, no amount of retracing my thought processes in my mind, could point the way to turning those ingredients into my lunch. And, as someone used to running multiple projects at the same time, and being totally bulletproof and able to fix any problem, this was a very new, and very humiliating, experience. To have to ask Kate to make me one of the simplest sandwiches you can make, because I could not figure out how to do it, was the lowest moment of my life, and one I never want to experience again.

But it also marked the turning point. For me, literally, the only way from there was up. I began an adventure of self-discovery, learning what made me who I really was, discovering the sources of the stress that had brought me to that point, and what needed to change, so I could start living my *real* life, and leave the flawed interpretation of me behind.

For me, discovering and committing to living my best life, took an existential crisis. A crisis that literally very nearly killed me. But it didn't need to, and it most definitely should not have. And, even if you've skimmed over most of this book so far, please pause here and take note:

You don't need to have your own Cheese Sandwich Incident to break free from the stress and challenges keeping you trapped in your gently warming pan of water.

Chapter 13: Embrace the Adventure

In order to avoid your own Cheese Sandwich Incident (and trust me, you absolutely want to avoid your own Cheese Sandwich Incident), there are two fundamental building blocks you need to take hold of.

THE FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCKS OF CHANGE

The first building block you need to take hold of is the difference between deadline and circumstantial stress.

Deadline stress is the stress you get at work when a report or a delivery is due, or at home when you are rushing to catch a train or a plane. It is not necessarily bad. In fact, it can be good, keeping you focused and on track. And because there is a deadline, there is an end. And, as long as you can manage the factors around that deadline, you can manage the stress it creates.

Circumstantial stress, however, is a whole other ball game. Circumstantial stress arises when your present reality is in conflict with your values, and you have no control or influence over the disconnect. When your present reality does not fit the person you really are, eventually there is a tipping point – a point at which something has to give – either your values, or your present reality.

Circumstantial stress is never good in and of itself, but *can* be good when it becomes the catalyst for change. It was the type of stress that was the root cause of my burnout and breakdown, as I found myself trapped in a workplace that was, for the person I truly am, toxic, and I could do *nothing* to change it.

And the second building block is the realisation and acceptance that change is a *process*. As the saying goes, Rome wasn't built in a day. And, in the same way, stress isn't managed in a single action. Change takes time. It may not be possible to change some things immediately. And it may require a highly strategic, goal-driven approach and bucket-loads

of patience.

And change is a journey. Or, as I prefer to see it, an adventure – filled with highs and lows, twists and turns, laughter and tears. And, when you throw off any preconceptions that you can fix all this with a formula, or a simple 10-step process, and embrace that adventure, the game changes.

Then, with those two building blocks in place, you can begin to tackle stage one of that adventure into a new, changed future.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH STRESS

And that first stage is to get to grips with your relationship with stress, and your readiness for change.

Knowing that you are under stress and knowing that something needs to change does not make you ready to make that change happen. Just like the alcoholic or person addicted to the slot machines may realise that things need to be different, until they are ready for that change, no amount of programs or interventions will make a lasting difference. But, when the time is right, and they are ready, change can happen.

So, where are you in your relationship with stress?

Are you aware of stress but not interested in changing anything right now? If you are, that's OK. Don't for one minute assume that's a bad thing. *Acknowledging* your stress is the big deal here, because, like we've said several times already, you can't change what you don't acknowledge. And there may be all sorts of reasons why, having acknowledged your stress, now is not the time to start the process of change. The important thing is to know that your stress has reached a stage where changes are needed.

Maybe you are at the point of getting out of your pan of warming water. You're ready to make some changes, you have had enough of your stress, and you are prepared for what lies ahead. You don't necessarily want to go on the adventure alone, but you know that you do

want to go on it – you have a good idea what changes need to be made and you *are* ready to start making them.

Perhaps you recognised your stress long-ago, committed to doing something about it, and now you're all over it. Sure, you still have stress in your life, but those stresses are in your life on your terms, and you are becoming something of a Ninja when it comes to keeping it in line and under control.

Or maybe you are so in control of your stress that it is now not even a thing for you. There may be some stress in your life, but these days it just passes you by. So adept are you at managing and controlling your stress, that it's just second nature to you. But, just one note of caution here: if you see your relationship with stress this way, then be sure the reason you don't even notice it is because you are in *control*, and not because you have become so acclimatised to the water in your pan, that you aren't aware of the bubbles rising to the surface.

GET THE EASY MARKS FIRST

Back in the day, when I was doing my accountancy exams, the tutors at the training college would tell us to 'get the easy marks first' It was that whole thing about 80/20 - the Pareto Principle, where 20% of the effort gets you 80% of the results, while the remaining 20% of results will consume 80% of your effort. And that principle applies to how you approach dealing with stress - get the easy marks first; or, in other words, focus on doing the simple things.

Wherever you are in your relationship with stress, there are some simple things you can do that will either prepare the way for change at a later date, if you aren't quite there yet, or help you implement or maintain the change if you are. And those things are what I refer to as your 'short-game'. They are the simple things you can do right here, right now.

You don't need fancy techniques or expensive courses or retreats to get started managing your stress, you simply need to focus on the basics.

For example, spend 10 minutes a day doing some simple mindfulness practice. And

when I say mindfulness practice, that can be as simple as sitting alone, eyes closed, breathing deeply, allowing your mind to clear. Sure, you can get apps, or CDs, or PDFs that will take you deeper into mindfulness, and some of those really are good; but you can also just get started by finding a quiet spot, sitting down, closing your eyes and breathing. Try breathing in through your nose for four seconds and slowly exhaling through your mouth for eight seconds. Try that for one minute to start with (that's just five breaths - easy, right?), and build from there.

Be sure to exercise every day. And I am not necessarily talking about running a 5k, hitting the gym, or cycling crazy distances. You *can* do those things if you want to, of course, but if that's not your thing, take a walk in your lunch hour, walk to the store instead of driving, or just pick up the pace when you walk the dog – all those things get the blood moving and the heart rate up a bit.

Lay off the easy food and start eating fresh. Take time to prepare your meal and savour the experience of creating something from scratch (which *in itself* can help with stress management), and fill yourself with the nutrients your body needs to perform at its best.

Lay off the alcohol. Don't have that extra glass of wine, or maybe give yourself a few alcohol-free evenings each week. And, on those alcohol-free evenings, maybe turn in a little earlier and benefit even more from some better-quality sleep.

Like I said, these are simple, easy to do techniques and, no matter how great or non-existent your stress management is, they should feature as part of your daily practice.

SPOT YOUR TRIGGERS

With the basics nailed down, identify your stressors. We touched on this in Chapter Ten, remember? These are the activities, people or places that cause you to experience stress.

A great way to do this is to keep a Stress Journal to track when you feel particularly stressed, and what was going on when those feelings came up. Each time you experience stress, especially if it was significant, take stock. Open up your journal and record the experience. Where were you? What were you doing? Who was with you? What happened?

Rank those feelings of stress on a scale of one to ten, where ten is my head was about to explode, and one is 'I've never felt so relaxed'.

Periodically, review that journal and look for patterns. Identify common places, people or activities that seem to be present whenever stress makes an appearance. The chances are that in amongst those will be your stressors. And, when you know what your stressors are, you can at the very least be on guard; and, if you're ready to take your stress to task, you can be on the front foot.

IDENTIFY THE SITUATIONS

When you know what, who or where causes your stress, look for the situations you find yourself in where those activities, people or places become a factor. You see, sometimes it's easier not to put yourself in a situation in the first place, than to try and extricate yourself from it later.

Maybe it's at work, or when you visit certain friends. Perhaps it's mealtimes or kids' bath times. It might be social events, or perhaps times of isolation? It could be when you are in the spotlight, or maybe when you are forced into the shadows? Look through your Stress Journal and think about the situations you were in, and what was happening, when those stressful events occurred – focus on the *circumstances* rather than the specific activities, places, or people that were present.

When you know the situations that give rise to your stressors, you can manage your exposure to those situations and, in so doing, manage the stress you experience.

FIND WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

With your stressors, and the situations that fuel them, identified, you can take a step back and survey the landscape. What would need to change for you to not feel stressed?

What would need to change for those stressors not to be a stressor anymore? And, if they will always be a stressor for you, what will need to change so that you can avoid situations where they feature? Start imagining a day where the stress you experience is not present, or,

at the very least, is well and truly under your control. How is that day different from your regular day? What is it about that day that means *you* are in control and not your stress? List out those differences.

Are you simply more aware of, and managing your stress more effectively? If so, why are you now more effective at managing your stress - what are you doing differently on that day compared with your regular day? Are you in a different job, living in a different location, eating differently, sleeping better, hanging out with different people, for example?

As you review your list of differences, what needs to change to turn your regular day into that day where you are in control? What do you need to add into your life, and what do you need to remove? What do you need to do differently, what do you need to stop doing altogether, and what do you need to keep doing at all costs?

And remember, even if you aren't ready to *make* the change just yet, knowing what changes *need to be* made will set you in good stead for when you *are* ready.

GET STRATEGIC

When you know what changes you need to make, it's time to get strategic. Like I said a few moments ago, change is a process, and it takes time. You can't go at it all gung-ho, you need to approach it strategically.

Some changes will need to be made before others. Some will take longer than others. Some will be harder to implement than others. Some will need more groundwork to be done than others. In short, to make the changes that need to be made, you need some goals, and you need a plan to guide your actions as you work towards achieving those goals.

So, start by looking at the changes you have identified and begin to think about the goals you will need to achieve to make each change happen. For example, maybe in your 'in control' day you are in a different job - a job that you love - working for a company that totally aligns with your values. For that to happen, you need to actually get that different job; and to make sure *that* happens, you need to set a goal. So, for that example, you might set yourself a goal of 'working as [insert role here] at [insert name of company here] by [insert

date here].

Then with a goal identified for each change you want to implement, review those goals and pick out which ones seem like they might be easy wins. Then, with the easy wins picked out, identify what needs preparatory work to be done, which changes depend on others having been implemented (in other words, changes that can't be made without another change having been made first), and which will take time.

Next, pick apart each goal so you can figure out what needs to be *done* to achieve it. Some quick win goals may only need one or two actions to be taken to achieve them, and maybe those actions can be done right away. And, it can be super-tempting to take hold of those goals, put the others to one side, and make those easy win. Don't fall into that trap.

You see, some goals, like with getting that new job, for example, may require multiple actions that may need to be spread over a period of time. But, you have to start somewhere and, within those multiple actions are likely to be some that you can get cracking with right now. And, unless you have identified *all* the actions, and have taken steps to get the ball rolling by factoring in the actions you can get on with sooner than later, that goal of getting a new job, for example, will always be some way off in the distance.

Sticking with the goal of a new job, you may, for example, be able to start your job search, update your CV, and submit some applications right away. And you *need* to do that, because until you have your new job secured you cannot resign your current position, serve out your notice period and take up your new role. So, even though the goal may be reached some way down the track, don't miss the opportunity to get started in the here and now on what needs for be done in order to achieve it.

Armed with that knowledge of what you want to achieve (your goals) and what you need to do to achieve those things (your actions), map out a sequence you could follow, remembering the principle of getting the easy marks first. That sequence becomes your plan of attack, and will sit at the heart of you achieving your ultimate goal - that 'in control' day

FOLLOW THROUGH

Finally, you have to follow through. Knowing what needs to change, and having a plan to follow, in and of itself changes nothing. To see those changes you identified become a reality, and to reap the rewards of the effort those changes will take, you actually need to carry out the plan. You actually have to do what needs to be done.

Start by making a permanent reminder of why you are doing this - why you are going to the effort of making all these changes. To do that, create a picture of your 'in control' day in a way that works for you. Some people like to create 'dream boards', bringing together images that represent that day for them, and provide a focal point for their attention to remind them why they are doing what they are doing. Some people write it out as a poem or a piece of prose, or draw it. It doesn't matter how you do it, as long as the representation of that day is meaningful (and inspiring) for you.

Then, with the reason why you are doing all this firmly burned into your mind, take your plan and, with each action on it, build up a to do list. Then do the work. Take that to-do list and knock each 'to-do' over, ticking each one as you go to reflect your progress in your plan, and refreshing the actions you need to tackle as you work your way through your list.

And, you know what? While that 'in control' day may feel like it's a long way off, and requires a lot of hard work, just by identifying those changes you need to make, setting goals, building a plan, and actually getting to work, you will begin to experience a shift in your relationship with stress. You will begin to feel less like *it* rules the roost and more like *you* are taking charge. And, when that happens, those vicious downward spirals that stress loves to create get turned into positive, upward spirals, as you begin to see, and reap the rewards of, the progress you are making.

Chapter 14: Play the Long Game

All that sounds great, I know. And you may be feeling like now is the time to take your stress to task. And that's fantastic. And, if that's how you are feeling right now, then seize the moment and go for it.

However, just pause for a moment while we take a breath and keep expectations in check. There is a longer game to play here, too, and you have to keep in mind that this is not a one-shot deal. Never lose sight of the reality that stress is a fact of life - you can't tame it once and forget about it. Life ebbs and flows, new experiences come and go, and things change. And all of that means that, from time to time, no matter how good your abilities to manage it are, stress will, at some point, reappear.

But that's OK. You see, if you play the long game as well as the short game, you can keep those reappearances both to a minimum, and on your terms. And your long game comprises the bigger parts of your adventure – the parts that take longer, encompass more elements, and are generally a slower burn. These are the parts of your adventure that don't address the here and now, but set you up for what is to come.

And the starting point for your long game is to get to grips with who you really are. Not who you've been *told* you are, or who you have come to believe you *should* be, but who you *really* are.

Take note, though: this is not about creating a 'new' person, it's about stripping away the layers of interpretation that life, fear of change, the status quo and more besides have built up to hide the real version of you from sight. That version of you has always been there, it has never left you. It was there before you drew your first breath, and it is there today. And its greatest longing is to be set free once more. And your long game is all about finding, and liberating that person, so that you can once more become the person you really are, and live the life that you were made for.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS

There are some fundamental elements that go towards making you who you are. They are the things that start out as one thing and, as the Success Illusion spins its lies and the status quo tightens its grip, get shaped into things that no longer fit with who you really are. These fundamental elements are your strengths, your weaknesses, the things that make your heart soar, and those that make it sink, and the things that you are passionate about.

Why do those things matter? Well, quite simply, unless you are playing to your strengths, minimising the presence of your weaknesses, doing more things that make your heart soar than make it sink, and pursuing your passions, the door is left wide open for stress to walk on in. And, remember, we are talking about your actual strengths and weaknesses, the things that actually make your heart soar or sink, and the things that you are *actually* passionate about; *not* the things you have simply come to believe tick those boxes.

So, imagine for a moment that no-one can see you. No-one can judge you, or mock you, criticise you, or laugh at you. Nor can they applaud you, or praise you. You are alone. Free to do whatever you choose without fear. What will you do? How will you spend your time? Where will you go? And, equally, what will you *not* do? Where will you *not* go. And how will you *not* spend your time? When there is no fear of judgement, or criticism - no sense of needing to live up to expectations - the things you do (and don't do) will reflect your true nature, rather than the interpretation of that true nature that you show to the world around you.

Think about what your answers to those questions reveal. What do they tell you about your strengths? Your weaknesses? What it is that puts a smile on your face? What it is that you love to do, and what it is that you hate to do? What do they show you about the things that you are passionate about? How different is that picture of you to the picture created by those strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes and passions that you present to the world at large on a day-to-day basis?

Maybe the two pictures your answers paint are not that different at all, maybe they are poles apart, or maybe they fall somewhere in-between. But, whatever their differences or similarities, you *must* know what they are to stand any chance of unlocking the real version

of you. And unlocking the real version of you is essential to building the future you want.

You see, until you understand who you really are, you will *always* be trapped in an interpretation of you. And, while you are trapped in an interpretation of you, stress - in particular *circumstantial* stress - will be an ever-increasing feature of your life.

A FOCUS ON YOUR VALUES

Next, focus on your values. Your values are the things that truly matter to you. The things you look for in others, and in yourself. They are your inner compass, and guide your thoughts, words and deeds. When you find yourself thinking, speaking or acting in ways that go against your values, it jars. And, if you find yourself going against your values too often, stress builds.

Like I've already mentioned, it was the requirement to go against my core values day after day, that my role at work placed on me, that ultimately tipped me over the edge and led me to my Cheese Sandwich Incident. You simply are not built to live as someone you are not, and when you find yourself trying to inhabit situations that require you to do just that, stress is an inevitable outcome.

But, to recognise when you are being required to think and act in a way that is in conflict with your values, you first need to know what those values are. So, let me ask you: what truly matters to you? What would you fight for? Maybe even die for? What makes rage boil and joy erupt in you? What could you not live without? What can you not live with? In your answers to those questions lie your values, and in your values lies the essence of the real version of you.

Understanding your values is key to defining who you really are and the future you really want, because to live your best life, as the best version of you, that future must align with those values, or there will always be conflict. And, when you uncover your values as part of your long game, you equip yourself not just to construct a future that is aligned to them, but also to avoid the pitfalls of a future filled with elements that lead to conflict; which ultimately leads to a future where your stress can be effectively tamed and managed.

YOUR PERFECT DAY

So now you know those things that make your heart soar (and sink), where your strengths (and weaknesses) lie, and what you are passionate about, as well as what truly matters to you in life (your values), the fun part of your long game can start. It's time to build a picture of what your best life - a life where you spend more time on things you love than things you hate, pursue your passions, play to your strengths and leave your weaknesses to one side, and that is aligned to your values - actually looks like.

I do this exercise with pretty much all of my coaching clients, because it establishes a vision for your life. When you know what your best life looks like, you know where you want your life to end up - you know the direction you want to travel in, and what that direction needs to give you. You give yourself a platform for certainty. Every decision you make has a reference point, and you have a rationale for accepting or rejecting opportunities: does saying yes (or saying no) help you or hinder you to build your best life? You have a reason for everything you do, and when you have a reason for doing what you do, you cut stress down to size, and become its master.

There are many ways to approach this, but I have a particular favourite, which, in my view, helps to take something almost unfathomable - your best *life* - and distil it into something that you can take hold of - your best *day*. If you could live your perfect day – a 24-hour period where nothing was out of whack, and everything was the absolute best it could be - everything you could hope for – what would that day look like? No reality checks, no yes buts, just a simple visualisation of what that perfect day would be.

You see, that perfect day gives you a snapshot of your best life, because the elements that feature in that single 24-hour period will also be a feature of your best life. And because it is simply a 24-hour period, you can hold it in your mind's eye, and use it as your reference point much more easily than the vast expanse of a whole life.

So, go on, what does that day look like for you?

Don't rationalise it. Don't see it as a flight of fancy or wishful thinking. This is not about confining yourself to your present reality, it's about opening the door to possibility.

Will you ever live that day? Unlikely. But, living your perfect day is not the point - the point is that you know what that day looks like and, as a consequence, you give yourself something to aim at, something to work towards - that reference point to guide each and every decision you make: “does it help me move closer to ever possibly living that perfect day, or not?”.

CREATE A ROADMAP

When you know what your best life look likes (or at least what a perfect day within it looks like), it’s time to create a roadmap that will help you navigate not just the here and now of your adventure, but also the parts of that adventure you haven’t even dared to think of yet.

Your roadmap is where you identify the goals you need to achieve in order to build the life you want. And you identify the actions you need to take to bring those goals into a reality, as well as what you need in order to be able to complete each of those actions. It sets out what you will do, when you will do it, and how. Essentially it is a longer-term, wider-reaching version of what you created in the previous chapter, when you set out your plan to implement the changes you identified that you needed to make, in order to have that day where you were in control of your stress.

As you cast your eye over your perfect day, what needs to happen in order for it to become a reality? Who are you with during that day? Where are you? How do you feel? What about where you are living? Do you have a partner? Children, perhaps? What are you doing to earn money, and what are you doing with your down time? Pull apart every aspect of that day and identify the key elements that are present. Then ask yourself what goal you need to achieve for each element to become a reality.

And then, with your goals identified, begin to figure out what you need to *do* to achieve each goal. Remember - a goal is just a wish unless you do something to make it happen, so taking the time to really drill down into the actions you need to take is crucial. For each action, think about what you need in order to be able to do it. Do you need assistance, maybe some new skills, or some equipment? This may seem like overkill and time-consuming, but, trust me, a detailed roadmap is one way to take unnecessary stress out of the equation.

Finally, sequence the actions. What are you going to do, and when? Look for actions that you can't do until others have been completed, and make sure you put them in the right order. Where possible, get the easy marks first (remember what we said about the 80/20 rule). If some actions have deadlines, make sure those deadlines are factored into the sequence. Knowing what you are doing and when you are doing it helps you move forward with confidence and certainty; and confidence and certainty slam the door on stress.

But remember the words of Robert Burns: "The best-laid schemes of mice and men Go oft awry". Or, in other words, a plan doesn't always go to plan. Life is unpredictable, and unforeseen events will often throw curve-balls across your path. So, hold onto your plan loosely. See it as a guide - a companion to help you navigate your adventure; fluid, rather than set in stone.

Be prepared to make adjustments as you go along, and as those curve balls cross your path. To fail to plan, as the saying goes, is to plan to fail; but, by the same token, to stick to your plan with unwavering determination is to plan for a whole bunch of stress you don't need. And, given that one of the intended outcomes of your roadmap is to create a life where you are well and truly in charge of stress, rather than it being in charge of you, that would be no good at all.

So, just as you would on a regular old car journey, put the co-ordinates for the adventure towards your best life into your 'sat-nav' (a.k.a. your roadmap), and be prepared to take diversions along the way.

COMMIT TO ACTION

And the final step in your long game is to commit. Stepping out of the status quo and into your best life is not a single-moment, it is a life-long adventure; and unless you commit to it, it won't happen. And you know what? You most likely will never get to the end of that adventure. You most likely will never experience the full extent of your best life. But, simply by committing to making the journey, you will create a future that carries you towards your best life; and that, by itself, may prove to be the single biggest step you take in taming and managing your stress.

I started my life-long adventure in April 2000. It was probably my Cheese Sandwich Incident, around September of that year, before I realised I was actually on that adventure, but ever since that realisation, I have been committed to it. I'm now more than two decades into it, and I know I may never reach the end of it. I know I may never fully embrace my best life. And I'm fine with that, because my life is closer now to my best life than it would be if I had never made that commitment. And, perhaps more than that, I also know that I am in control of my stress, that I am living a life that lines up with who I am; and if ever I fancy a cheese and pickle sandwich, I know exactly how to make it.

Some Final Thoughts

We covered a lot of ground here, but it was all ground that needed to be covered. Stress is a simple fact of life, and that fact of life can be a force for good, or a force for bad. And stress will play either role with equal skill and endeavour, so you need to be very clear on how you engage with your stress. You need to understand what it is, how it works, what it does, how to spot it, and what to do about all of that. Because, whether stress turns out to be a force for good in your life, or a force for bad, is down to you and how you approach it.

And remember, taming and managing stress is a process. You will have good days, and you will have bad days. You will have days where you feel squarely in charge, and days where stress runs riot. Cut yourself some slack and learn to roll with the punches - if I've learned anything during my adventure it's that 'this, too, shall pass'. It may not feel like it will pass at the time, but it will (it always does), and when it has, you can regroup and pick up where you left off. Yes, you may (in fact, you will) experience knock-backs, but it's not the knock-back that's important, it's how you respond to it. And the best response is to simply keep moving forward.

Not every part of this book will strike a chord. Not every part will fit for you. It would be odd if it did. Maybe those parts that don't fit right now will be relevant sometime down the road, maybe they won't. Simply take from all that's been laid before you what works for you, and apply it in your daily life. Simply leave the rest alone.

And, no matter what, don't ignore stress. Left unchecked, stress can become lethal, and life has too much in store for you to let stress derail your progress.

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