STRIVE *TO* THRIVE

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Mastering Stress: Thrive at Work

In our accelerating world, we can often experience feeling trapped on a life-treadmill struggling to keep up with the demands. Each day, we navigate growing to-do lists, fulfilling responsibilities, and striving for success personally and professionally, and eventually collapse into bed exhausted - which also impacts our sleep quality!
Dissatisfaction becomes our foundational norm, making escape seem impossible, and our overall well-being begins a downward trend.

Experiencing varying degrees of stress is integral to our lives, manifesting in diverse forms. From the joy of significant life events like weddings and new jobs to the weight of responsibilities such as caregiving or professional duties, stress infiltrates our daily existence. Our schedules brim with commitments and stress begins to seep in. While some stress is beneficial, distinguishing between what you perceive as good and bad stress becomes important - and this varies for each individual. When stress impedes our ability to relax and hinders the body and mind's capacity for repair, it becomes problematic. Like trees bending under a hurricane's force, we may endure pressure temporarily, but prolonged strain can lead to fractures, producing various challenges, and at worst catastrophic results.

When contemplating stress, it's beneficial to understand R.S. Lazarus's perspective that *stress arises when demands exceed resources*. Burnout isn't indicative of weakness, laziness, or having done something wrong, but rather of demands exceeding capacity for too long. This leads to resource depletion over time and hinders our ability to thrive.

It is vital you understand your own needs in response to stress, while finding supportive resources. Recognizing that everyone copes differently with stress and have varying resources. Your ability to manage stress does not mean others also are able to manage in the same way. By embracing this nuanced view, you can better protect yourself from stress-related issues like burnout.

Our objective is to assist you in safeguarding yourself against burnout by emphasizing the importance of heightening your awareness of your experiences and responses to stress. This awareness empowers you to tailor strategies uniquely suited to you to combat stress. Stress profoundly impacts mindset, often narrowing focus and trapping us in survival patterns. Shifting perspective, managing stress effectively, and reclaiming control are essential for growth and performance. Remember, if you don't manage your stress, it will manage you.



Foundation Mindset

This guide aims to help you identify and break habits and patterns that may not be as beneficial as you perceive them to be. It offers a toolbox of new ideas and techniques to de-stress at your desk and allow you to create habits that pave the way toward a thriving life. Central to stress management is your mindset. It starts with recognizing your perception of good and bad stress, understanding your responses to stress, and experimenting with various techniques to resolve and release stress.



Techniques for Mastering Stress

1. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique aimed at alleviating tension accumulated throughout the day from activities such as working on the computer, driving, or carrying heavy loads. Our brains often perceive this tension as a potential threat, hindering relaxation. By systematically tensing and then releasing muscles from head to toe, this method promotes bodily relaxation, grounds our minds in the present moment, and facilitates the transition from heightened stress responses to a state of calm. It's a versatile tool, effective not only at bedtime but also during periods of increased stress, such as "de-stress at your desk" or managing road rage.

2. Gratitude

Research indicates that individuals who can focus on positive aspects rather than dwelling on dread and negativity tend to experience a higher quality of life, improved productivity, and greater happiness. One effective strategy is to allocate a few minutes each evening for reflection, jotting down three things you are grateful for from that day - whether it is as fundamental as being thankful for waking up or having three nourishing meals. Additionally, noting one thing you are looking forward to for the upcoming day can foster a sense of anticipation and positivity.

> ***Try it now:***
> I'm grateful for:
>
> 1.
>
> 2.
>
> 3.
>
> I'm looking forward to:

3. 4-Count Breathing

At times we are advised to take a deep breath to relax, but instead we end up taking a quick, shallow breath, which offers little relaxation. Consequently, we may abandon the practice altogether. However, employing a proper 4-count breath - where we slowly inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, and exhale for 4 counts - initiates a relaxation response. This technique slows down our respiration rate, akin to when we are asleep, signaling to the brain that we are relaxed. Consequently, the body adjusts its chemical production, promoting relaxation. Additionally, this deliberate breathing allows us to intake more oxygen, slows down the breathing rate during the hold, facilitating red blood cell oxygenation, and ensures a slower exhalation, aiding in the release of toxins like CO2.

> ***Try it now:***
> Breath in.. 2, 3, 4
> Hold.. 2, 3, 4
> Breath out.. 2, 3, 4.
>
> *And repeat*
>
> Breath in.. 2, 3, 4
> Hold.. 2, 3, 4
> Breath out.. 2, 3, 4.
>
> *Repeat a further two cycles*
>
> Now, notice how your body feels, and how you feel overall. Can you sense a difference from when you began?

Pro-Technique: Use your smartphone to record yourself speaking each step slowly and calmly. When you are ready to practice, simply close your eyes and listen to the guidance as it leads you through each step. With the recording readily available, you can access it whenever - and wherever - you need it.

4. Eat the Frog

Drawing from a Mark Twain quote that by tackling the most challenging task early in the day is akin to "eating a frog". The concept underscores the importance of addressing procrastinated tasks promptly. By confronting daunting responsibilities first thing in the morning, you not only experience a sense of accomplishment but also prevent them from lingering and draining valuable mental energy throughout the day. Proactively dealing with dreaded tasks sets a positive tone for the rest of the day, alleviating feelings of unproductivity and ensuring a more fulfilling day ahead.

5. Leaves on a Stream

For many, achieving a state of pure meditation or even reduced mental chatter can be challenging. Instead of trying to clear your mind, a beneficial strategy involves visualization. By imagining a serene setting, such as a stream flowing through a forest, water gently pouring over an edge, or ocean waves rolling onto a beach, this practice allows thoughts, feelings, memories, and experiences to be gently acknowledged by visually placing them, one by one, onto a floating leaf, pebble, seashell, or other object, and allowing them to drift away. Rather than forcefully pushing thoughts out of your mind, this approach encourages acceptance and detachment. If thoughts return, instead of experiencing frustration, you have the opportunity to notice the mind at work, and place it onto the next object until it gradually dissipates.

> ***Try it now:***
>
> 1. Find a comfortable and quiet space where you won't be disturbed for a few minutes.
> 2. Sit in a relaxed position, whichever feels most comfortable for you.
> 3. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to relax your body and calm your mind.
> 4. Now, imagine yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream in a peaceful forest. Visualize the water flowing steadily downstream.
> 5. As you watch the stream, imagine leaves floating on the surface of the water. Each leaf represents a thought or feeling that enters your mind.
> 6. As a thought or feeling arises, gently place it on one of the leaves and let it float away downstream. Watch it drift away until it disappears from sight.
> 7. If another thought or feeling comes up, do the same thing. Place it on a leaf and let it float away.
> 8. Remember, if the same thought returns, it is okay. Congratulate yourself for acknowledging it, and then place it on a new leaf to let it float away once more.
> 9. Continue this process for a few minutes, allowing any thoughts or feelings that arise to come and go without judgment or attachment.
> 10. If your mind starts to wander or you get distracted, simply bring your focus back to the image of the stream and the leaves floating by.
> 11. After a few minutes, gently bring your awareness back to the present moment. Take a few deep breaths and slowly open your eyes.
> 12. Take a moment to notice how you feel after completing the meditation. You may feel more relaxed, centered, and present.

Remember, this technique is a practice, so don't worry if your mind wanders or if it feels challenging. Each experience may be different, allow whatever comes up. Experiment with it and discover when it is most impactful for you.

Pro-Technique: Use your smartphone to record yourself articulating each step slowly and calmly. When you are prepared to engage in the practice, just close your eyes and tune in to the guidance, allowing it to direct you through each step. Listening to recorded instructions helps you focus more on the technique, as you are not distracted by reading. With the recording at your fingertips, you can easily access it whenever and wherever necessary.

6. Grounding

At times, it is critical for us to detach from intense stress and emotional distress. It does not imply avoiding difficult thoughts, emotions, or situations altogether, but rather, it is acceptable to take an occasional "adult time out" or “rest periods” to calm down and regroup before addressing challenging issues and situations. Grounding exercises offer an opportunity to shift focus from stress and overwhelm to intentional strategies for decompression. These may include physical techniques, psychological exercises like the berries exercise, or self-soothing methods. These exercises interrupt your brain thought processes and create a therapeutic distraction that supports your system.

> ***Try it now:***
> Give yourself 30 seconds and write down 10 different types of berries... Go!
> Did you get them all?

7. Buffer Time

It is common for work schedules to become so tightly packed that you hardly have time for essential breaks or meals, especially during busy workdays. It is also possible to fall into the trap believing there is no room for change. Packing your schedule tightly, or allowing others to pack it tightly for you, leads to extended work hours, missed deadlines, feeling deflated about your performance, and increased stress. You can easily find yourself playing catch up late at night, or early in the morning, or at weekends.

Time for a revised approach. Adjust meetings you host to efficient durations - make them 25 minutes instead of 30, or 50 instead of 60 - this creates valuable breathing room for everyone involved. And be sure to announce this at the start of the meeting too so you begin to communicate an expected behavior change and an adjustment in culture. Everyone can impact and change culture, it does not just come from the top. These micro adjustments in time create big wins, allowing for reflection, note-taking, composing follow-up emails, taking a moment to recharge, and making an improvement in the culture signifying you not only respect yourself but your colleagues too.

When you incorporate buffer time into your schedule it offers flexibility, which is helpful in addressing unexpected emergencies or assisting colleagues by choice, without derailing your productivity. By implementing these strategies, you can enhance your efficiency and ensure a more balanced and productive workday.

8. Planned Neglect

In various aspects of our lives, it is common to feel overwhelmed and out of control, especially when faced with endless tasks and obligations. The pressure to accomplish everything can lead to feelings of inadequacy and perpetual busyness. The concept of *planned neglect* offers a solution by empowering individuals to prioritize and choose what tasks to forgo in order to prioritize others.

For example, “I give myself permission to order takeout instead of cooking in order to generate space for quality time with family”, or I give myself permission not to do the laundry this morning so that I can focus on arriving at work slightly earlier than I normally would to feel ready for the day.”, or “ I give myself permission to say no to going out for drinks after work so that I can practice self care and go on a walk in nature.”

By actively deciding what to say no to, you reclaim control over your own priorities, task lists, and schedule and alleviate the burden of perpetual busyness. You begin to recognize you are making choices that best support your needs. In doing this, you shift control and empower yourself from life happening to you, and instead you happen to life!

9. Daily Plan Sheets

It is common for our schedules to spiral out of control, leaving us feeling overwhelmed and perpetually short on time for the things we truly value. One effective strategy to regain control is to create a daily plan sheet. Begin by blocking out your schedule for the week from wake-up to bedtime, and include non-negotiables like work and meals. Then, utilize the remaining white space to prioritize activities you want to engage in. If work takes up 99% of your day this is your opportunity to exercise the planned neglect technique and explore what you can say no to.

Color-code each activity by category—for example, blue for work, red for time with kids, and yellow for self-care like exercise or sleep. This visual representation allows you to assess where you're allocating your time and identify areas where adjustments can - and need - to be made to prioritize what matters most to you. By scheduling enjoyable activities alongside responsibilities, you cultivate a balanced routine that fosters creativity, learning, and overall well-being, ultimately enhancing productivity and fulfillment. Remember, if you do not plan and organize your schedule someone else will so it is better that you make the choices about your own schedule.

10. Connection

Research indicates that social interactions are crucial for mental well-being, offering protection against issues such as anxiety and depression. Considering that we spend a significant portion of our lives - over 90,000 hours - with our coworkers, fostering meaningful connections is paramount for helping us balance stress and enhance our overall quality of life. By prioritizing time for building and nurturing your professional relationships it provides support and creates a safe and trusted space to share personal experiences, rather than feeling isolated or facing challenges alone.

Every organization has a handful of very task focused individuals who will not want to open up for what they believe to be wasted time, that is ok, respect their wishes and choice. Remind yourself that everyone has unique needs. Your only responsibility is to recognize what supports you. There are plenty of people in the organization who will be happy to share a conversation about their weekend or evening activities. Leave naysayers to their own devices and give them support by recognizing their needs and style.

11. Reframe Your Thinking

Our brains are wired to form habits as a means of conserving mental energy for new challenges. This automatic processing is beneficial in tasks like driving, where actions become second nature once we have learned how to complete the task. However, this automatic processing can lead to unhelpful patterns of thoughts in other situations. For example making the assumption someone is doing something maliciously on purpose, or thinking we are bad at something and minimizing our confidence.

When this happens it is crucial to recognize the pattern, interrupt the “autocomplete”, and engage in deliberate evaluation. By examining the evidence for and against our assumptions and reframing our thinking we change the narrative. When we do this, we can avoid unproductive outcomes and gain deeper insights into our perceptions and decision-making processes. This approach changes our experienced reality and promotes healthier responses and enhances our understanding of how we interpret the world around us.

Conclusion

Navigating life’s demands can be overwhelming, resulting in you feeling trapped and exhausted. Stress becomes a constant companion, infiltrating every aspect of your life. But it is not always negative; you just need to know what to look for. Intensely felt ornegatively experienced stress is often a signal that your resources may be stretched thin. By acknowledging your unique needs and resources, you can reclaim control, balance out stress, change your story, and shield yourself from potential burnout.

Cultivating a resilient mindset and adopting effective stress-management strategies is key to thriving.

- Techniques like progressive muscle relaxation and mindful breathing help release tension and restore balance.
- Grounding exercises and visualization shift focus away from stress, promoting calm.
- Challenging negative thought patterns by reframing perspectives and interrupting automatic thoughts, offers you insights, helps you reach better decisions, and changes your reality for the better.

Mastering stress means harnessing its intensity which can be transformed into growth. With the strategies in this guide, you can further cultivate resilience and thrive in the face of life's challenges.



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MIND IMPACT CONSULTING

mindset influences needs & decisions

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