

*"Prevent Your Job
from Killing You..."*

How to Reduce Stress at Work



*5 Steps to Getting
Your Life Back*

By Sonya Shelton

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About the Author

Sonya Shelton founded Being Present to Win to help people reduce stress and enjoy their lives. Being Present to Win offers workshops and coaching programs designed to help people thrive in stressful situations with the most powerful tool available to them: BEING PRESENT.

Sonya designed the programs at Being Present to Win based on her training in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). The MBSR program was created at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979 and since then has been proven effective in reducing stress by two decades of published research.

Sonya has a background in communications, organization development and change management and has personally applied the tools in the Stress Reduction program in many stressful, deadline-driven work environments, including publishing, advertising and entertainment. She has also helped her Fortune 500 clients create strategies to mindfully manage organizational change through mergers and acquisitions, business transformation, workforce reduction and large-scale system implementations.

She has done research on the effectiveness of mindfulness meditation on employee attitudes during organizational change and is currently working on a research project on the effects of mindfulness on creativity in partnership with Pepperdine University.

For more information about Mindfulness and the Stress Reduction coaching and workshops at Being Present to Win, please visit <http://www.beingpresentnow.com>.

Introduction

Stress Kills

Stress kills. We hear and read about it regularly. It taxes the heart and the immune system. Stress makes it difficult for our bodies to stay healthy, even through the best nutrition and exercise efforts.

But many people can't even make it that far. People under stress lean on things like alcohol and comfort food and caffeine just to make it through the day. My clients that look for help with stress frequently say that they know they need to eat better, sleep more and exercise more, but they just don't have the time or the energy. When you're in overwhelm, adding one more thing to your "to do" list can add even more stress to your life, even if that thing is designed to reduce your stress.

So... we know stress can kill us, and for many, stress comes from work. But when we don't have the time or energy to add "stress management" to our day, what can we do?

Why "Stress Management" Doesn't Always Help

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, one-fourth of all U.S. employees view their jobs as the number-one stressor in their lives. Employees associate problems at work with health complaints more than any other life stressor — more so than even financial problems or family problems. And the American Institute of Stress Research reports an estimated 1 million workers are absent every day due to stress.

I work with people who are under tremendous stress at work or in their lives and don't know how to manage it. Let's take Mike as an example. As a Director of IT for a large Fortune 500 corporation, he is constantly in stressful situations. He manages a team of 40 people, some of whom create issues for

him. He has a boss who keeps asking Mike to produce more work with fewer resources and has his own set of management challenges. And he works in a highly political organization where he frequently needs to navigate both the formal and informal networks to get his job done.

Mike has attended Stress Management classes to try to learn to bring some balance to his life — to get rid of the constant stress and exhaustion and get back some of his enthusiasm for both his work and his life. What Mike heard in these classes was a list of all the things he needed to add to his day. He needed to take the time to eat more nutritiously, exercise at least 30 minutes three times per week, sleep at least 8 hours each night, and do some sort of regular relaxation exercise or meditate.

Yes, these are all excellent methods to reduce stress. But practically, Mike's work schedule didn't always cooperate with the requirements of his stress management program. If he did manage to work it in to his hectic day, he didn't really get the results he needed or expected. He was still overwhelmed.

My experience wasn't much different from Mike's. During my career as a journalist, I never had a week without some sort of deadline pressure. Once I moved into a corporate executive position, I added even more to the mix: organizational politics, management issues (both from those I managed and those who managed me), and the constant pressure to do more with less. I didn't think stress management worked in the real world. Instead, I finally discovered a realistic solution that works every time:

In order to "manage" stress, we must first learn to manage ourselves.

In *How to Reduce Stress at Work: 5 Steps to Getting Your Life Back*, I share what I've learned about how to deal with stress. This report is designed to help you get started on your own journey to becoming free from the impacts of stress so you can get back to enjoying your life.

Step 1: Understand Your 3 Dimensions

Stress Is More Than Just Physical

One of the greatest things about being human is that our minds are constantly moving. This creates a source of wisdom and innovation and at the same time gives birth to terrible stress and suffering.

Many “stress management” programs and classes suggest many methods to relieve stress that focus on the physical. Yes, we should eat more nutritiously and in healthy portions. We should get plenty of sleep. We should exercise regularly. And yes, these suggestions can go a long way to help us cope with the stress in our lives.

However, many of my clients respond these suggestions with questions like: “With what time?” or “How do I fit that into my already packed schedule?” or “What happens when I start to experience more stress in my life trying to fit in all the things I’m supposed to do to manage it?” And several of my clients already do all these things, and it’s just not enough to reduce their stress.

That’s because they’re only looking at it from one-third of the total picture.

We Have 3 Brains – Not Just One

Paul MacLean, former director of the Laboratory of the Brain and Behavior at the United States National Institute of Mental Health, developed a model of the brain based on its development. He called it the “triune brain” or three brains in one. Each layer manages separate functions of the brain, but all three layers regularly interact with each other.

So what does this have to do with your stress at work? Everything, especially if you’re only relying on physical

solutions. You see, only the first layer of the brain is responsible for your body — physical survival and maintenance. The other two layers are responsible for your emotions and your logic/thinking respectively.

So if we want to reduce the effects of stress in our lives, we need to have a holistic approach, including all three layers of the brain. And sometimes, one of these aspects — our bodies, emotions or thoughts — may actually be the cause of our stress as opposed to reacting to outside stress. The key is to learn the difference and how to deal with both.

Step 2: Use Your Body as an Early Warning System

Listening for the Alarms

You may already be taking great care of your body. Or you may be so overwhelmed at work and in your life that it's the last thing on your mind. Either way, it doesn't matter. If you haven't put nutrition and exercise at the top of your list yet, you will have more energy and time to do it after you've started to reduce the stress in your life. If you're already in good health, you will just be that much more ahead of the game.

As adults, we have learned to "work through" the warning signs our body sends, particularly when it comes to stress. This is why so many people don't find out they have health problems until it's already serious and in some cases too late. We become experts at tuning out the messages and sometimes alarms our body sends to us on a regular basis.

So the second step in reducing stress is to use our body as an Early Warning System.

Becoming Aware of the Signs as They Happen

You know from experience that your body reacts when you're in a stressful situation. Your heart rate increases, your breathing becomes faster and shallower, and your muscles tense up. This is called the acute stress response or the "fright, fight or flight response." In other words, your body is reacting as if it is in danger.

This response is designed to protect us against predators. But in today's society, stress in humans comes from different sources than it did when a tiger was chasing us. Now we have traffic and money and relationships and work to get our stress responses going.

But that doesn't mean that these physical responses can't still help us. We just need to become more aware of them at the time that we're in a stressful situation.

It's at these moments that your body can become an Early Warning System. Most people don't develop the awareness that can help them respond to stress as opposed to react to it. Since your body is the first to react, awareness or mindfulness can help you pause, clearly observe the situation and potentially put it into perspective or create a solution before spinning out into a stressed-out reaction.

Exercise #1

The first step in managing ourselves under stress is to understand what we're like when we're not under stress. This mindfulness exercise is designed to develop your awareness of what's happening in your body. You may also notice that just by bringing awareness to different areas of your body will cause them to naturally relax and let go of the tension.

- 1) Find a place where you can either sit or lie down comfortably without being disturbed.
- 2) Begin by closing your eyes and focusing on your breathing without forcing it or trying to change it in any way for approximately 10 breaths (inhalation and exhalation).
- 3) Starting with your feet, bring your attention to each area of your body. Notice any sensations you feel, contact with the floor or furniture, areas of comfort or discomfort. Just observe what's happening in that area of your body without judgment and without trying to make it different.
- 4) Once you've observed each area of your body, return your attention to your breath for approximately 10 breaths (inhalation and exhalation).

Exercise #2

The next time you find yourself in a stressful situation, bring your attention to your body. Notice your breathing and any other physical reactions to the stress.

Before reacting to the situation, take three, deep, down-through-the belly breaths. Then, notice how your body feels. Where do you feel the stress now?

Step 3: How Do You REALLY Feel?

Emotions Are Our Fuel

When I bring up awareness of emotions with some of my clients, they tell me there is no place for emotions in the workplace or even that all emotions are bad.

But emotions are not good or bad in and of themselves. They simply exist whether we want them to or not. And the less we're aware of them, the more they can be in control.

In general, our emotions can provide the fuel for our actions (or even reactions) in a way that works for us or in a way that doesn't. If you are in love, this emotion may spur you on to constantly improve yourself and to become a better person or it could distract you to the point of obsession and you might not get anything done at all. If you are angry, you could be motivated to take a positive action or you could decide to hurt someone.

Either way, emotions can be a very powerful force, whether we like it or not. Even ignoring our emotions or pushing them down can cause them to come out in other ways — either through physical illness or disease or through blowing up at someone for the smallest thing.

Taking Back Your Power

Just like our bodies, our emotions are trying to tell us something. When we can acknowledge our feelings, at least to ourselves, we can begin to see the situation and ourselves more clearly. Sometimes the act of simply bringing our attention to emotional pain can begin to heal it.

By becoming aware of your emotions as they are happening, they are no longer happening to you as if from an outside force. Instead of saying, "My boss made me so angry,"

bring awareness to the anger within you in the present moment. What does this anger feel like? Where does it come from? What is the story I'm telling myself about it right now?

This mindful approach to your emotions allows you to become a participant with your emotions, rather than a victim of them. Awareness brings choice. You can start to observe your emotions and get curious about them. This attention brings a certain degree of wisdom about yourself and how you react during stress.

You may notice that awareness of your emotions begins to cut through the confusion and emotional turmoil in your life, especially at work. You may find that in some situations these feelings are caused by misperceptions, exaggeration or your desire to have things be a certain way.

Surfing the Waves

By becoming aware of your emotions and watching them come and go, you can learn to cope with them more effectively. You can also begin to explore alternative ways of seeing your feelings — what are they telling you? How do you want to respond? This begins to set the stage of shifting from automatically reacting when we're under stress to effectively responding.

At times of great emotional turmoil — grief, sadness, anger, fear, worry, anxiety, humiliation, defeat, etc. — our awareness can help us remember that we are resilient and can weather these moments when they come up. They're part of what makes us human.

It helps to pause in these moments to check in with what's happening with your emotions and with your body. Observe how the emotion unfolds with acceptance and without judgment — just notice what's happening in the moment — and maybe even try bringing compassion and kindness to yourself in the process. There's no other way through an emotion than to feel

it — the more fully we feel it, the more choices we have as to how to respond to it.

Exercise #3

Take a moment to bring awareness to your emotions and what you are feeling. Try observing your emotions as weather system or waves in the ocean. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the thoughts that accompany this emotion?
- Are my thoughts accurate?
- Are my thoughts and emotions affecting my judgment in this situation?
- Am I seeing this situation clearly?
- What can I learn from this emotion? What is it trying to tell me?
- Can I look at this emotion from a different perspective or with a different meaning?

Step 4: What Are You Thinking?

Once Upon a Time

As humans, we love to tell stories. Our minds are always spinning a tale about what's happening in our lives or in the lives of others. Our thoughts are tightly integrated with our emotions. They also can expand or limit our perception. Hence, we have the terms "open mind" or "closed mind."

The stories we tell ourselves with our thoughts can inspire us to greatness or plummet us into apathy or even failure. We can't get away from them. Thinking is one of the things that make us human. But just like with our bodies and our emotions, awareness of our thoughts can bring freedom, empowerment and choice into our work and our lives.

The first step to bringing awareness to our thoughts is the realization that as human beings we're in the story construction business. Have you ever met someone new and created a whole story about them before learning anything about them? Sure, we all do it. We call it a "first impression." You can even attend all kinds of training on how to create a good first impression whether in a business context or a dating context to try to shape the stories people create.

Who's in Charge Here?

The stories we create with our thinking, especially when we're under stress, can sometimes make things worse. For example, Sue's co-worker, Wes, glanced at her in disgust as they passed in the hallway. She created a whole story about Wes being mad about the feedback she gave about his project in the meeting this morning. At first, she felt bad about it and thought about talking to him, but then she got angry with him too. After all, he should be able to take constructive criticism. He had no right to be mad at her!

She kept thinking about it the rest of the day and that night and continued to get more and more angry with Wes. The next day, she complained to her friend Kristen about Wes being mad at her because of the meeting. "Really?" Kristen said. "That's weird, because after the meeting Wes told me how valuable your feedback was and that your perspective gave him some great ideas for how to improve his project. I can't imagine why he would be upset about it."

Sue told Kristen about the dirty look in the hallway the day before. "When did that happen?" Kristen asked.

"Yesterday afternoon, right after lunch," said Sue. "I couldn't believe it. He just looked at me in total disgust."

"Oh yeah," Kristen replied. "Wes told me this morning that his son's school called him yesterday because his son had gotten into trouble, and he had to leave work right after lunch to go deal with it. He was probably on his way out when you ran into him."

This is just one example of how our thoughts and perceptions can create unnecessary stress in our lives. Sure, there are times when the perceptions are real, but there are times when they're not. The key is to start becoming aware of what you're thinking and learning how your mind works. Once you observe your stories and understand your thought patterns, you can decide what works for you and what doesn't. Then, you're in charge of how you respond — rather than automatically reacting to your thoughts.

Exercise #4

Observing your thoughts as stories rather than as truth or as part of your identity can help you reduce the stress you experience at work and in your life.

Find a comfortable, quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Think about a stressful situation that you were in recently. Observe your thoughts about the situation.

- What is the story you have constructed?
- Is it accurate?
- Can you look at the situation from a different perspective?
- Have you seen this story or thought pattern come up before in other situations?
- Is this helpful or unhelpful in this situation?

Exercise #5

The next time you find yourself in a stressful situation, follow this strategy:

S — Stop or pause

T — Take a breath

O — Observe your physical sensations, emotions and thoughts

P — Proceed and respond as you choose

Step 5: Understanding Time & Getting Out of Overwhelm

“You can't change the past, but you can ruin the present by worrying about the future.”

— *Unknown*

“The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once.”

— *Albert Einstein*

Time Stress

In today's workplace, time has become one of our biggest stressors. We may often feel like there's not enough time to do what we need to do (or sometimes to do it well). Other times, we don't know where the time has gone. The end of the day comes, and our task list is just as long as it was when we arrived this morning.

It may be a strange concept, but actually, time is another one of our own perceptions. Take a moment to think about a time when you were having fun and enjoying yourself. How fast did the time go? Now take a moment to think about another time when you were uncomfortable or in an unpleasant situation? How slow was time then?

Because time stress is based on our perception, we have a choice about our relationship to time. We can constantly fight it like an enemy. We can feel driven by it, like it is the one in control. Or we can flow with it by bringing awareness to our experiences in the present moment.

Relating to Time

We are all exposed to the stress of time. You can hear it in our everyday language: “Behind schedule,” “Under deadline

pressure," "Pick up the pace," "Battling traffic," "No time for family or friends," "There's no time," "Get going."

It has become common practice for us to feel driven through our day by obligations and responsibilities, fall into bed exhausted and get back on life's treadmill the next day. Technology, while liberating in some ways, has made it easier for us to be connected to work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And of course, there's the constant pressure and expectation to get more done in less time. No wonder we're overwhelmed!

Take a deep breath. It doesn't have to be this way for you anymore. You can be ruled by time or you can free yourself from its tyranny.

The first step to responding to time is to recognize how your thoughts impact your perception of time. We have a mechanical measurement of time so we can meet and communicate in an effective and orderly way. But as Albert Einstein pointed out, "If you are sitting on a hot stove, a minute can seem like an hour, but if you are doing something pleasurable, an hour can seem like a minute."

Taking Back Your Time

Once we see that time is based on our thoughts and perceptions, we can decide to take it back. One way is to explore how you might be creating your own time stress.

- What are your expectations of yourself when it comes to time or your self-imposed timetables?
- What impact are your expectations having on you?
- What is the price you're paying (or will you pay later) for what you are trying to accomplish?

Another way to start taking back your time is to practice living in the present moment. We spend a great deal of time and energy rehashing the past or worrying about the future as

our lives are passing us by. Whatever you're doing becomes much more interesting when you become aware and mindful of the present.

You'll notice that when you become present in the moment, you get things done faster and more effectively and with higher quality than ever before. And if you decide you want to reminisce or plan for the future, do it with awareness, fully in the moment.

This brings us to the next time stress culprit: multitasking. Research has proven again and again that multitasking actually makes us *significantly less* productive and effective. And yet, we still continue to do it. When you practice giving your full attention to one thing at a time, you will quickly watch your stress levels drop and your productivity soar.

As T.S. Eliot wrote, "Only through time is time conquered."

Exercise #6

Review your calendar over the next week to evaluate where you spend your time. Jot down how you're spending your time throughout each day. At the end of the week, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I spend my time doing?
- Is the way I'm spending my time contributing to my values, goals and priorities?
- Are there any commitments or obligations that I can let go of or delegate?
- Are there opportunities to simplify any of the things I'm doing?

Exercise #7

When you find yourself under time pressure or feeling like you don't have enough time, check in with yourself:

- Take a deep breath.
- What is my perception of time right now?
- What is happening with me in this moment: physical sensations, thoughts and emotions?
- How can I approach this situation fully aware and in the present moment?

Taking It to The Next Level

Making a Commitment

Managing stress is really about managing yourself. Whether or not you want to have a stress-free life is up to you. You can do it without trying to fit more hours into your day. You can do it by learning about yourself, becoming aware and mindful and being present.

Your freedom to choose is completely up to you. You simply have to make the commitment to observe yourself and become more aware.

Mindfulness Is a Practice

All of the techniques you learned in this report are based on mindfulness. Learning and practicing mindfulness can keep you going on your path to reducing stress and taking your life back.

Just like a champion athlete or virtuoso musician, you won't put this report down and step into your life tomorrow having mastered these techniques. They take practice — moment to moment. The more you bring attention and awareness to what's happening with you, the more you can choose what works for you at that moment. This power of choice will bring you freedom from stress — at work and in your life.

I wish you the best on your journey.