

Stressed Less

One of The Nation's Leading Experts Shares Important Insight On Minimizing Personal Stress

By David Hunnicutt, PhD

Stress is a big issue in the U.S. In fact, it's everywhere. It dogs us at work. It plagues us at home. It travels with us on the road. It shares our relationships. Ironically, it even sleeps with us.

In fact, the more I read about the issue, the more sensitive I become to how pervasive it really is. And I'm not the only one who is coming to this important conclusion.

Indeed, according to the findings of a recent NIOSH Report:

- ▶ 40% of workers reported their job was very or extremely stressful; 25% view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives;
- ▶ Some 75% of employees believe that workers have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago;
- ▶ 29% of workers felt quite a bit or extremely stressed at work;
- ▶ 26 percent of workers said they were "often or very often burned out or stressed by their work."

If that's not enough, the 2000 annual "Attitudes In The American Workplace VI" Gallup Poll sponsored by the Marlin Company reported that 80% of workers feel stress on the job. Frighteningly, 25% have felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress; and 14% of respondents had felt like striking a coworker in the past year, but didn't.

Stress As A Precursor To Illness

With stacks of research to support it, researchers have found that the consequences of stress in the U.S. have become very real. According to the latest estimates, experts tell us that 80% of all disease may actually be stress-related.

In my world, 80% is a very big number, especially in a country where more than \$2 trillion is spent on health care services. When it comes to who stays healthy and who gets sick in the U.S., stress may very well be the #1 factor.

Here's A Stress Ball?

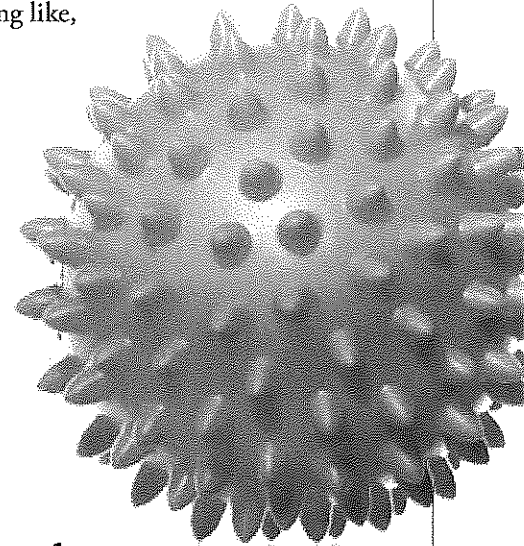
But here's what I find most interesting about all this. In a country where the vast majority of people seriously struggle with stress and 80% of all disease is said to be stress-related, the recommendations for combatting stress are way too simplistic.

For example, who hasn't read an article entitled something like, "The 60 Second Stress Buster?" Or, worse yet, who hasn't experienced the absurdity of being on the receiving end of something like a stress ball. The reality is so ridiculous you don't know whether to laugh or call your therapist.

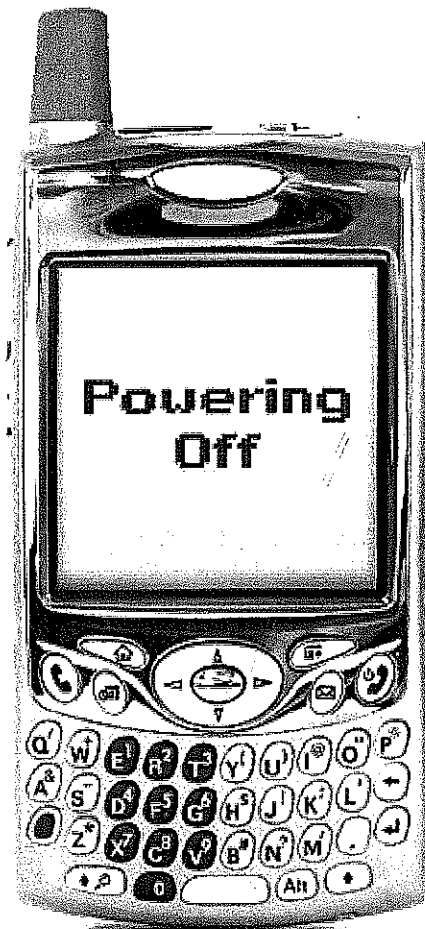
The Four Most Important Things You Can Do To Alleviate Stress

To get a more realistic approach to what our employees can do to alleviate some of stress in their lives, I contacted a colleague and one of the country's leading experts on managing stress, Dr. Brian Luke Seaward.

According to Dr. Seaward, there are really four techniques that can (and should) be employed to better cope with stress. Interestingly, none of the solutions can be physically squeezed or done in under 60 seconds.



Technique #1: Set Boundaries



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According to Dr. Seaward, if you really want to alleviate stress, you have to set healthy boundaries. And, in the world of work, that means setting boundaries with technology.

"I'm really a big advocate of boundaries," said Seaward. "In fact, I see a huge addiction problem going on today with people with their cell phones and with e-mail. In fact, I was doing a conference out on the East Coast not too long ago, and the new code name for the Blackberry is now the 'Crackberry,' with the underlying message that people are addicted to these things. Don't get me wrong, technology's great but it's supposed to serve us; we're not supposed to be slaves to it. So the number one priority is to learn to unplug from these things—if you want to survive, you've got to set boundaries."

Technique #2: Learn To Quiet The Mind



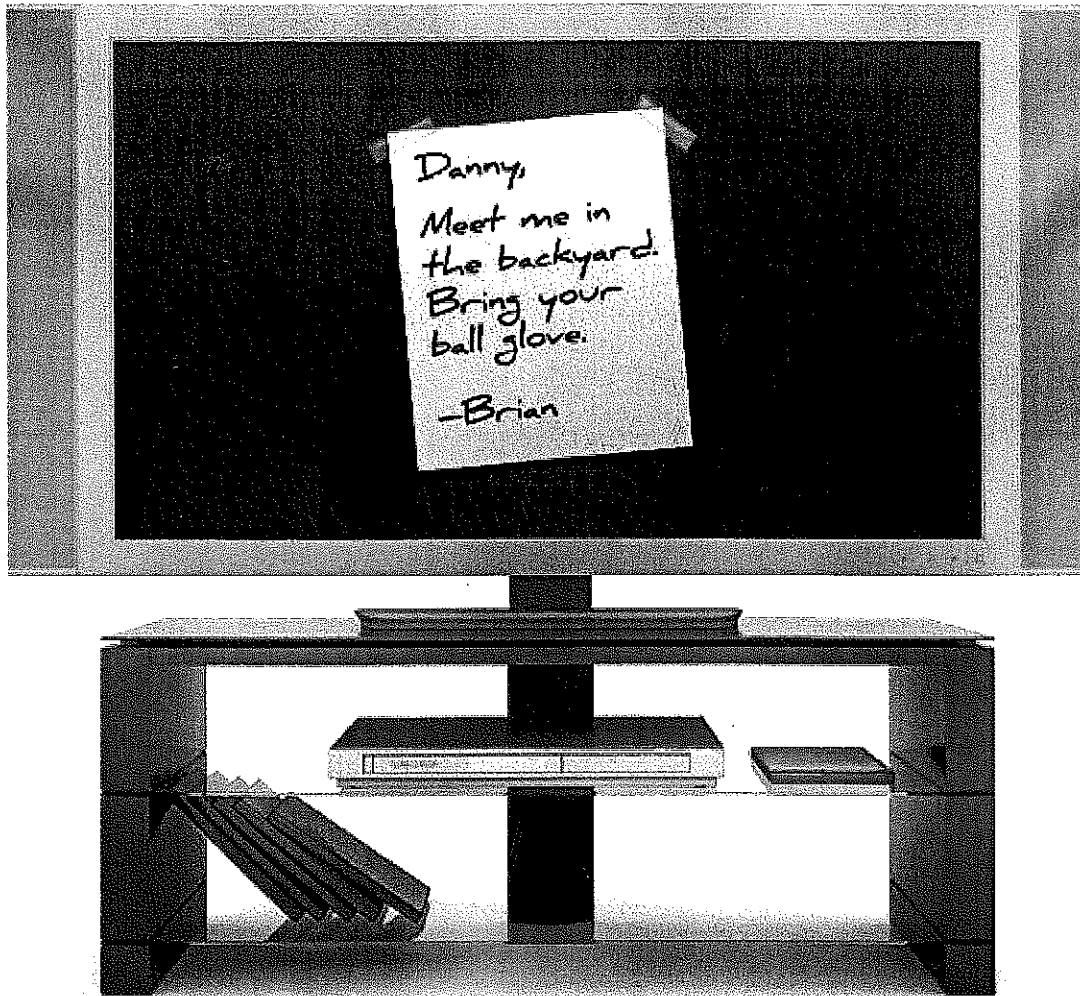
Technique #2: Learn To Quiet The Mind

The next thing Dr. Seaward recommends is learning to quiet the mind—and this is easier said than done.

“We’re at a time right now of sensory overload, sensory bombardment actually. I think that people need to take time just to sit still and focus on their breathing and quiet their minds. I just saw this movie which I think is great. It’s called *The Peaceful Warrior*, based on Dan Millman’s book, *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*.”

“Dan Millman is a gymnast who is trying to augment his athletic abilities so he can compete in the Olympic games, and comes across this mentor, who he calls Socrates. One of Socrates’ great lines in this movie is ‘Dan, empty the trash.’ And, of course, Dan Millman goes to the trash barrel to empty it, and this guy points to his head and he says, ‘No, I mean up here.’ And I think that we, in this day and age of information overload and too much information, we get bombarded with things that take up a lot of space that we should better direct toward the things that really matter in life. So taking time to sit still, taking time to be quiet, to calm the mind is analogous to taking out the trash.”

Technique #3: Turn Off The TV



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The third technique Dr. Seaward recommends for managing stress is turning off the TV.

"Television obviously is a great form of entertainment, but like anything else, too much of it has become human kryptonite. I like the quote from (at least I think it was) Karl Marx who said religion is the opiate of the masses. I think if he were alive today, he'd change that to say, television is the opiate of the masses."

"We have an addiction to television. Although there's some great things on it (don't get me wrong; I'm a big fan of PBS and things like the Discovery Channel), but too much of anything is going to zap our strength. I think that so many people actually use the television as a means of self-medication, trying to forget their problems or their situations at work or in relationships. Substituting one set of problems for another is not a good answer."

Technique #4: Practice Compassion



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The fourth and final technique for managing stress that Dr. Seaward recommends is to practice compassion.

"I'm a big fan of the concept of compassion or love, however you want to describe it. I think that the real message here is coming to a place of balance and engaging your sense of compassion; however you conceive this to be. Some examples would be things like practicing random acts of kindness, spending time with family and friends, and doing service for others."

"With this in mind, there's a wonderful book called *Life's Little Instruction Booklet*, by Jackson Brown. In this book, Brown shares a little tip he gives his son going off to college. 'Just remember son, no one ever said on their deathbed, 'Gee, I wish I'd spent more time at the office.' The message here is that we need to actually honor our relationships with friends and family, colleagues; and I'm going to include pets, because in this day and age of isolation with people who spend so much time with their computers and their jobs and families that are fragmented, pets play a very important role in our social structure."

Summary

What's most fascinating about Dr. Seaward's recommendations is that each of these techniques takes practice and not much can be done in the short term. That's surprising in a revelatory kind of way.

I guess what it really tells me is that if you want to manage stress you have to take a daily approach to it and practice these things routinely—and in so doing, you'll master the art and science of handling your stress...over the long haul. Unfortunately this is a far cry from the "quick fixes" that are being preached today.

The implications for the worksite are legion, but I think the most important is that we have to start including stress management as a primary intervention in worksite wellness programs. Obviously we've got more work to do in this area.

For more information on this topic be sure to contact Dr. Seaward at <http://brianlukeseaward.net/>. ☆



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