

# De-stress yourself

Self-paced step-by-step guide  
for becoming your own stress master

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## **Dedication**

*This book is dedicated to all people who suffer from stress and who want to take care of their health in order to prevent exhaustion and burnout.*

The Dalai Lama, when asked what surprised him most about humanity, answered:

*"Man!*

*Because he sacrifices his health in order to make money.*

*Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health.*

*And then he is so anxious about the future*

*that he does not enjoy the present;*

*the result being that he does not live*

*in the present or the future;*

*he lives as if he is never going to die,*

*and then dies having never really lived."*

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# Introduction

*Chronic stress is a widespread phenomenon putting health and well-being at risk for many people in Western materialist societies. When I was visiting Bali in 2017, our taxi-driver there asked me what he could learn from Europeans, presuming that life in Europe was more advanced than in Bali. I asked him if he knew what burnout was. The question baffled him, and he responded: “No, what is it?” I explained that it was a kind of disease resulting from suffering from too much stress for too long without enough time for recuperation. He listened silently, and I felt he was struggling to grasp what I meant. After a pause, he said: “We don’t have that here. We have a different way of living. We all help each other in the village where I live. We are all family. If my mother is ill and I have to work, my neighbor will take care of her. If somebody in the village doesn’t have a job or needs money to buy food, we’ll take him food. That’s how we live. It’s our culture.” And then he was silent again, and I could feel that he was disappointed he could learn so little from us.*

*Most of us experience high-stress levels in our daily lives, and we seem to accept it as the price for living a “good” life. However, if we do not handle stress well, it can lead to heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and mental disorders. Almost 50 percent of the people I trained and coached in the past year told me that they had experienced burnout, or had just recently recovered from the phenomenon or were in the process of recovery.*

*As stress can do so much harm to our bodies and minds, I would like to share the tools and techniques I have discovered and also applied to manage negative stress and thus prevent burnout. This book provides you with helpful hints, tools, and techniques to reduce stress and enhance your well-being. And the good news is that everybody can learn to cope with negative stress.*

*Use this book as your guide and companion. Relax and enjoy the discovery.*

EVERYBODY  
CAN LEARN  
**TO COPE WITH**  
NEGATIVE STRESS.



**PART 1**  
**Preparing to de-stress**



# 1 How stress began

The slow-paced way of life that once existed in the Middle Ages has long gone. We no longer walk to work, nor do we take the horse and carriage to take us to the town center. In former times, before the advent of electricity, people would go to bed when the sun went down. In his book *“At Day’s Close. Night in Times Past”*, Roger Ekirch reveals that until modern times people typically slept in two periods during the night: the actual time spent sleeping was split into two phases, known as first sleep and second sleep. People would go to bed at around 7 p.m. and wake up sometime after midnight. They would be awake for a few hours and do whatever they wanted before returning to bed and starting their second sleep.

So, before Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, the day ended for everyone when the sun went down. Night-time was for resting, so people’s minds and bodies could recuperate after a hard day’s work. Today, when the sun goes down, the lights are switched on. We don’t stop then. Instead, we continue to work and email. We continue to rush and push ourselves to have the happy, successful lives we are meant to want, a beautiful house, a car or two, and all the material goods western society prescribes for us. We work hard, filling every minute doing something, and over time we may become overwhelmed with all of our presumed tasks and by the feeling of never having enough time to fulfill them. We do not allow ourselves to relax, to take breaks, or even to be lazy at the weekend.

We are bombarded with stimuli of all sorts from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to sleep. Moreover, we are continually trying to work towards that seemingly perfect life, telling ourselves that: “If I achieve this, then I’ll be happy”; “If I work hard this week, I can relax during the weekend.” We even have thoughts such as: “I don’t deserve a break unless I have worked hard for it first.” Over the past few decades, this dynamic has accelerated, and we have managed to disconnect entirely from our bodies and to live only in our minds. We drag along our body despite its many signals warning us that we’re tired and don’t feel healthy. We may feel that something isn’t right, but we don’t know what, because we are no

longer fully connected to our bodies' needs. We live mainly in our heads. And this takes its toll on our adrenal systems.

If we want to have a healthy mind in a healthy body, we need to recuperate after a day's work.

Already decades ago, Dr. Archibald D. Hart, Senior Professor of Psychology, and author of the book: "*The Hidden Link Between Adrenaline and Stress*" (1995) pointed out that the symptoms and problems caused by stress "are becoming more prevalent and difficult to treat and the time is rapidly approaching, if it hasn't already arrived, when we will be dying less from infectious or invasive diseases but more often from the ravaging effects of too much stress. And stress disease is different from most forms of illnesses – we bring it on ourselves!"

We all know that stress is not good for us, and actually, that is all we know. Because of this lack of knowledge, we can stay in the comfort zone of ignorance and continue to believe that stress won't hurt us. And as Dr. A. Hart says, "because most of us don't really understand the nature of stress or how it does its damage, we do not know how to prevent that damage. However, stress disease, for the most part, can be avoided." At the very core of the stress problem and detrimental to our health and wellbeing, is our Western 21<sup>st</sup> Century hectic lifestyle, the pace of life in general, our "Hurry Sickness" and our insatiable desire to acquire more than we need, be it clothes, money, status or power. Most of us need to "relax more, learn how to unwind and stop and smell the roses occasionally – all important protections against the damage chronic stress can cause..." (Dr. Archibald D. Hart, *The Hidden Link Between Adrenalin and Stress* -1995).

What needs to happen before we believe that chronic stress is not good for our health? What needs to happen before we allow ourselves to take time to relax and recuperate after a period of stress? Do we need to experience burnout before we take decisive action? As mammals, we need to take time to rest after a period of hard work or stress, so that our minds and bodies have a chance to recuperate.

## 2 What is stress?

Stress is the physical and mental reaction to a real or perceived danger or threat. The stress response begins in the thalamus, a part of the brain that is located just above the brain stem, and of which the main function is to relay sensory signals to the cerebral cortex. For example, the sight of a colleague who has an angry look on his face triggers your thalamus and alerts the brain's fear center, the amygdala. The amygdala sends signals to your motor cortex, in turn sending the message along the nerve pathways to your muscles. Your muscles tense and tighten to confront the threat. Your breathing quickens as your lungs take in extra oxygen to strengthen your muscles. Your senses become more acute, your heart pounds twice or three times as quickly as usual, and your blood pressure rises. At the same time, the hypothalamus activates the pituitary gland, which sends adrenaline through the bloodstream to fire up the autonomic nervous system. If the danger continues, the stress hormone cortisol is released. All of these hormones activate your body to react to the imminent threat. If we come face to face with physical or perceived danger, we will respond by defending ourselves or fleeing to safety. And this physical stress response also activates thoughts in our minds that confirm and increase the stress we feel.



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When the threat or danger has gone, our bodies can return to a state of calmness and our breathing, heartbeat, and blood pressure can wind down to their normal state of balance, called homeostasis. We are calm again.

STRESS IS  
THE **PHYSICAL**  
AND **MENTAL REACTION**  
TO A REAL  
OR **PERCEIVED**  
**DANGER OR THREAT.**

### 3 Acute versus chronic stress

Acute stress is unexpected and short-term. **Adrenaline** courses through the body to confront the danger or the threat we are facing. Acute stress is not detrimental to our health. It makes us alert and focuses our attention on the respective danger or threat. It improves our performance and boosts our immune system. When the perceived threat recedes, the adrenaline decreases, and the body returns to a calm and normal state called homeostasis.

Chronic stress is long-term stress. **Adrenaline** is sent through the body **as well as cortisol** to prepare the body to cope with longer-term stress. It can take up to six hours for cortisol to be broken down in the body. But, when you are always under stress, cortisol doesn't have the necessary time to break down and thus be eliminated. This affects our health and causes damage to our organs. Chronic stress-related illnesses are high blood pressure, heart attacks, stomach ulcers, autoimmune diseases, and so on. If chronic stress continues, the cortisol even causes our brain to shrink, eventually leading to problems of concentration and even to severe illnesses such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's.

Chronic stress is often caused by an accumulation of day-to-day demands, irritations, and obligations. It can actually crawl into our lives without notice. Often, we only realize quite late in its development that something is disturbing the way we function. At times we take on more work than we can deal with realistically. Under that work pressure and even more obligations, stress begins to mount. We start to live and work on willpower, pushing ourselves forward and thinking: "I have to do this" and "I have to be able to do that." This is often the main cause of stress at work: taking on a greater workload and filling the agenda with more and more "to do's," not realizing that the workload is too heavy to be sustained for long.

Chronic stress  
is often caused  
by an **ACCUMULATION** of  
day-to-day demands,  
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Chronic stress  
is detrimental  
to our health.



## 4 Not all stress is bad

The good news is that not all stress is bad. At times, even the mention of the word “stress” can cause us to associate difficult and unpleasant situations that create anxiety. However, stress can also be very positive. Some situations and experiences create a thrill and cause adrenaline to be pumped through our bodies, stimulating us and helping us to take on the challenges we face and even allowing us to excel in what we do. Adrenaline drives our performance and helps us achieve our goals. As such, stress can be a true driver of success.



In the illustration above, the people pictured in the wild water are performing under positive pressure. The associated adrenaline boosts their alertness and drives their performance to meet the challenge of their sport. The stress they experience stimulates them to do their best. The sportsmen feel good, healthy stress because they are enjoying the challenge and the experience. After the wild water rafting, they will relax; their adrenaline levels will decrease, and their bodies will return to a state of calmness.

Being exposed to “positive” stress at regular intervals is good for our health. **Positive stress makes us more stress-resistant and also more disease-resistant, but only if the stress level is**