

Twenty Ways to End Your Partnership with Stress

Understanding stress can help you from falling victim to it.

BY LYNN HOMISAK, PRT

Is work stressing you out? While the podiatric profession is not at the top of any of the “Most Stressful Jobs” list, it is also not exactly “footloose and fancy free” of stress either. One can agree that our jobs do not entail putting our lives on the line like heroic firefighters, enlisted military personnel, or police officers do. Neither do we carry the weight of airline pilots, responsible for the lives and safety of hundreds of passengers each time they take to the skies. Or how about those U.S. Navy Blue Angels pilots? Not even close! They eat danger for breakfast, not to mention the physical toll (read: stress) that 1,200 mph speeds has on their bodies. Still, just because our job-related stressors fall on a lesser, non-life-threatening scale doesn’t mean they don’t exist.

Let’s face it. We’re all human and we all feel stress on some level. It’s interesting that even the word “stress” is presumed negative when, in fact,

certain types of stress are good, even beneficial. This good stress is defined as eustress, and not unlike negative stress, it also triggers that “fight or flight” feeling whereby our sympathetic nervous system kicks in, adrenaline is released, and our bodies are boosted into a high-energy, high-alert

state. Why then is eustress considered good? That same high-energy state enables us to achieve or overcome challenges, work out hard, engage in competition, stimulate our thinking and learning, or simply ride those outrageous, death-defying roller coasters. Sure, running a practice was simpler 40-50 years ago, but what

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wasn’t? Charting was done on 4 x 6 index cards; \$8 fees were paid mostly in cash (Co-pays? Insurance codes? What were they?) Audits were what our accountants did, and patient privacy was better known as intuitive professional behavior. As healthcare changed and as podiatry became

more advanced and recognized, so too did our roles and responsibilities. Today, despite more demanding patients complaining about healthcare costs and rising co-pays, oversight, management and staffing, ever-changing insurance rules, coding, audits, and compliances du jour—

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we do what is necessary to keep our heads above water and our practices financially healthy. It's no wonder we're more stressed.

Here are some interesting stats¹ that substantiate how much stress has taken its toll on our lives:

- 77% of people regularly experience physical symptoms caused by stress and,
- 76% experience psychological symptoms.
- 33% say they are living with extreme stress.
- 54% said stress had caused them to fight with people close to them.
- 48% reported lying awake at night due to stress.
- 48% say their stress has increased over the past five years.
- 76% cited money and work as the leading cause of their stress.
- 83% of Americans are stressed by at least one thing at work.²

Stress has been described as a silent killer—one that impacts everyone differently. Stress may initially present as bouts of tiredness, fatigue, sleep difficulties, muscle tension, and aches/pains. While they may seem too common to worry about, it is foolish to just blow them off as nothing—or “normal”. If these “minor” symptoms increase in frequency, however, they should be looked at as indicators, red flags, which, if ignored or unattended, can lead to more serious illnesses and diseases. For some that may mean an eating disorder; for others, alcohol or drug abuse; still others, complete burn-out, heart problems or worse. Stress knows no boundaries and holds no prejudices. Everyone is fair game.

So what are our choices? Do we let stress take charge of our lives or learn to effectively deal with it? For our own well-being, we should choose the latter. To do that, one needs a willingness to change, a successful action plan and the commitment to follow through.

Dear Stress, it's time we break up. Okay, you've decided to end the partnership. Great. Now what? Take to heart these twenty general but sensible suggestions, which can

help guide you into making some improved lifestyle changes at home, at work, wherever. It's never too late.

Remember, change (of any kind) takes time, along with a bit of tolerance and patience, so take it slowly. Begin with just one baby step. You will find that one usually leads to two, and three and so on. Before you

fuse sweating? They all mean something—and nothing to fool around with. If symptoms persist, you should consult your doctor or counselor.

2. Blow off steam with exercise intervals.

- Regular exercise—Even though it may be the last thing you feel like

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know it, you'll create a healthy routine that happens almost naturally, with very little effort. Whether you make one change or go for the gold and attend to all twenty over time, each step you take to reduce your stress will make a difference for the better in your life. Guaranteed.

1. Re-evaluate your lifestyle choices.

- You are what you eat and eating poorly stresses your system. Reduce or replace processed foods (which are stored in your body as fat) with fresh vegetables, fruits, and whole grains as much as possible. Read food product labels to monitor sodium, bad carbs, fats, and calories.

- Eat frequent, small meals throughout the day to maintain blood sugar levels and keep energy up, allowing you to stay focused and avoid mood swings.

- Reduce sugar and limit caffeine intake. The energy “highs” you get from them sound enticing; however, they are almost always followed by energy “crashes”.

- Drink plenty of water. Your organs (brain included) depend on water to function properly. For proper hydration, the suggested amount is between four to eight 8-oz. glasses per day.

- Get plenty of sleep. Sixty million Americans do not get sufficient sleep, leaving their bodies incapable of recovering or re-energizing for the next day's activities. Even 20-minute naps help.

- Listen to your body signals. Chest pounding? Feeling unusually tense? Back aches? Headaches? Dizziness? Pro-

doing when you feel stressed or down—it's actually the best thing. Raising your heart beat and perspiring (also thought of as blowing off steam), can elevate your mood, increase your energy, sharpen your concentration, and relax both your mind and body.

- For optimum stress release, a good 30-minute workout of heart-pounding activity is ideal. If you can't take 30 minutes all at once, separate it into two or three 10 or 15-minute segments. For example, park your car 15 minutes away from the office, walk to work and back, and voila! You've just completed your 30-minute workout for the day.

- Exercise releases your endorphins (mood-boosting hormones), so starting an exercise program first thing in the morning will get you moving and maintain better energy levels throughout the day. Evening workouts, on the other hand, allow you to get out your frustrations after a long day. In the end, anytime you choose to work out is a good time. Just do it.

- If you're a desk sitter, take five minutes to stretch your arms, legs, and neck several times during the day. Better yet, make it a point to move those dormant muscles by occasionally getting up and taking a walk around the office for a quick stretch.

3. Relax and re-charge.

- Everyone has a personal way of relaxing and yet taking that “me time” often leaves some people feeling guilty, so they avoid doing it. The

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pleasures derived from setting special time aside for you to enjoy life are second to none. There is nothing selfish about it. Keep in mind that no one's epitaph ever read "If only I had worked harder and longer."

- Try doing something that helps you unwind, e.g., go for a walk, call a friend, work in your garden, curl up with a good book, get a massage, take a long bath, light scented candles, enjoy a cup of your favorite coffee or tea, play with a pet, listen to music, practice yoga, meditate or watch a comedy. Go ahead; give yourself permission. You'll feel so much better.

- Take some deep breaths if you find yourself tensing up. Simply inhale for five seconds, hold it for five and exhale for five. Do this several times. It will help you return to calm.

4. Set "SMART" goals.

- SMART is simply an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely. For example, if you said your goal was to make more money, stop and clarify—how much

very young age are learning to "Let it go". Princess Elsa of the movie *Frozen* has drilled it into their heads over and over again. Maybe we adults should take a lesson.

- Stress often comes from trying to control situations that are beyond our control, when in actuality, "The only thing you absolutely can control is how you react to things that are out of your control." (Thatonerule.com)

- Ask yourself this question: Will I feel stressed about this situation five years from now? If yes, then take control and do something about it. If not, then let it go.

- Surrender your control hold and just go with the flow once in a while. You just might like how it makes you feel.

- You may be familiar with this story, entitled, "Know when to yield". It is presented as a conversation between the American ship USS Lincoln and a Canadian officer and sheds light on how pursuing a course because you need to be in control could have serious consequences:

Canadian: "Please divert your

five degrees north, or counter-measures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship."

Canadians: "This is a lighthouse. Your call."

6. Communicate!

- The inability to effectively communicate is pervasive and causes some of the biggest problems.

- Don't assume. Clarify.

- The expectation that one individual can read another's mind (or should be expected to) is illogical, so verbalize what you need to say in order for others to understand you and avoid disruption, complication, and an expected outcome (This is especially true in the training process.).

- Focusing on the strengths of others, as opposed to their weaknesses, builds bridges, not walls.

- Effective and influential communication involves paying attention and listening to others, making eye contact, smiling, watching what you say and how you say it, and understanding via bilateral dialogue. Communication is not a one-way conversation.

7. Look for humor in situations.

- When used appropriately, humor is a great way to relieve stress in the workplace.

- When you or those around you start taking things too seriously, lighten the mood by sharing an appropriate joke or funny story.

- Think of comedians like Lucille Ball or Jerry Seinfeld and how every tragedy they faced made us laugh. There is humor sometimes when and where we least expect it.

- Don't be afraid to laugh out loud. It improves your immune system, relieves pain, stimulates your heart, improves your mood, stimulates circulation (for up to 24 hours) and relaxes your muscles. You can't ask for better medicine than that.

8. Smile more, frown less.

- "One smile can light up a room; one frown can darken a day."—David Jeremiah

- It takes ten muscles to frown and only six to smile. Why exert yourself more than you need to?

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more money? And how do you plan to accomplish that? Is your plan realistic and what is your timeline? Until you can put an action plan together that answers all those questions, it's not a true, SMART goal. You are just hoping that wishes are real and dreams come true.

- Did you know that planning something in advance and attaching specific details (i.e., where, when, how you plan to do it) will actually double or triple the chance that you will actually follow through?

- It's important to set smart goals—they motivate, add purpose, and allow you to acknowledge and recognize progress.

5. Understand what you can and cannot control.

- Thanks to Disney, children at a

course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision."

Americans: "Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision."

Canadians: "Negative. You will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision."

Americans: "This is the captain of a U.S. navy ship. I say again, divert your course."

Canadians: "No. I say again, you divert your course."

Americans: "This is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States Atlantic fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course 15 degrees north, I say again, that's one

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- Don't look so grouchy. Smiling makes you much more attractive, releases bottled up emotions, and makes you appear more trusting and approachable.

- Smiling is contagious. You can actually get others to smile, if you do it first.

9. Be more assertive.

- Assertive should not be confused with aggressive. Assertive people present their opinions with respect; aggressive people attack others' opinions in favor of their own.

- Don't take a back seat in your own life by willingly letting others intimidate you.

- Sticking up for yourself increases your confidence and earns you respect.

- Communicate. Ask for what you want—otherwise people won't know.

- Anticipate and deal with issues (no matter how uncomfortable) head on and do what you can to prevent them from recurring.

10. Manage your time better.

- When you're stretched too thin and always running to catch up, it's hard to stay calm and focused.

- You can reduce the amount of stress you feel by planning ahead via Action Plans—taking one step at a time, or you know, eating the proverbial elephant one bite at a time.

- Time-saving strategies include making a to-do list of daily tasks and responsibilities, prioritizing it and crossing items off as you accomplish them.

- Separate the "shoulds" from the "musts". Define what is truly important and why. Not everything needs to be treated as an emergency.

- Organization is key. Clean your work area at the end of each day. Avoid starting a new day by having to first clean up yesterday's mess.

11. Know your limitations—Know when it's okay to say "no!"

- Why is saying "no" so difficult for some? Perhaps the fear that it might be interpreted as uncooperative? Lazy? Not a team player? Afraid of negative repercussions?

- Saying no, when appropriate,

allows you to successfully manage your workload, set realistic expectations and limits, and let others know they are pushing too far or too hard.

- Take off your superman (or superwoman) cape. Overcommitting yourself does not make you a superhero. Accepting more than you can handle (or think you can handle) at home or work is a surefire recipe for anxiety.

- Delegate. If other people are trained to and can effectively handle a task, let them. Let go of the desire to dominate or oversee their every

Maybe it involves moving away from your desk and finding a quiet place to regain some tranquility, or maybe it's just a quiet place to go to in your mind.

- Change your computer screen to something calming. A sunset. A beach. Form a mental image of this place by closing your eyes and picturing yourself there. Use the stimulating power of imagination to experience all the smells, sounds, and tastes. Feel as if you WERE there.

- Temporary daydreaming (or

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little step. There is a name for that. It starts with "Micro" and ends with "managing".

12. Resist perfectionism and procrastination.

- Projects, situations, or decisions can't always be perfect all the time, so insisting upon perfection (for yourself and others) will add needless stress to your day.

- Do your best and aim more for excellence, rather than perfection.

- Compare your progress to yourself, not to others. In other words, how well are you doing this year compared to previous years and where/how can you improve?

- Progress doesn't always have to be enormous. Learn to appreciate "small wins".

- You will set yourself up to fail by creating unreachable goals. (See #4—SMART goals)

- There is a lot to be said for not putting off until tomorrow what you can do today. The more you postpone your tasks, the more stress you create for yourself. Last minute efforts create pressure situations and usually result in more mistakes and unavoidable do-overs.

13. Change scenery. Visit your own "Fantasy Island" in your mind.

- Push your "reset" button.

mind vacations) are wonderful stress releasers and when you feel better, it positively affects everyone around you.

14. Try journaling.

- There are many different types of journaling. Pick the one that is most comfortable for you. They all have emotional and physical health benefits because they allow you to clarify your thoughts and put things in perspective.

- a) Grab a pen and one or two pieces of paper and for 20 minutes just write (yes, handwrite) whatever comes to mind with stream of consciousness. Don't worry about spelling or punctuation or even making sense. Just let it all out. It's a great way to clear your subconscious of useless information.

- b) Every day write 10 things you are grateful for. Hang your list up where you can see it and focus on these throughout the day.

- c) Did someone anger you? Are you feeling stressed about an event that is about to happen? Do you just need to express your thoughts? Write them down—then rip it up and throw it away (or delete it). It actually helps. A word of warning: If you are angrily typing a response to an email you received, it is strongly suggested that you first remove the sender's

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email address before you begin, just in case you hit the send button by mistake. It's been known to happen. If you still intend on sending it, let it rest and re-read it again the next day. Chances are you will either soften it up or delete it altogether.

15. Plan ahead. Allow yourself more time.

- Whether you're backed up in traffic or backed up seeing patients, it usually points to one good reason. You didn't leave yourself enough time.

- Leave your house earlier in the morning to allow for (unexpected) delays and arrive at the office when you are expected to.

- If you can't be on time, be early. Starting late is the number one reason our day runs behind. Avoid being the perpetrator.

- Conduct daily morning huddles with staff to review your schedule as well as patient notes. Together create a plan of readiness for the day ahead.

16. Say good things about yourself.

- This one is so simple, yet so under-executed. We condition ourselves to listen more to our negative voice than our positive one.

- Affirm your personal values. On a piece of paper, create two columns. Label one professional; one personal. Give yourself 30 seconds and list three things in each column that you do well. (Another form of journaling). Reread these any time you forget how special you are.

- The next time you catch yourself putting yourself down in thought, flip it and say or write something constructive about yourself instead.

- Accept compliments graciously. Don't make excuses for your good qualities.

- Staying positive keeps your cortisol (stress hormone) levels down and your endorphin (happy hormone) levels high.

17. Find comfort in support people and groups.

- Tap into your support teams—

your family and friends. It helps to talk with someone you feel close to and with whom you can share your innermost feelings. Most times, they also make us laugh; a double blessing.

- Eliminate the notion that looking to others for support is a sign of

weakness. It's not. In fact, reaching out can actually strengthen a relationship.

- Don't expect others to "fix" your problem; just appreciate having them there as a sounding board.

- Spend more time with people

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who enhance your life and less with those who diminish it.

18. Change your (pre-conceived) outlook.

- Also referred to as “cognitive reframing.” By taking a step back, removing your prejudices, you are able to view a problem or situation with more objectivity. Things are not always as they seem.

- Open your mind and you can discover effective solutions, benefits, and practical responses.

- If you continue to focus on the downside of every situation and interaction, you will literally drain yourself of energy, creativity, and motivation, inviting stress in.

- Instead, when you feel down, take a moment to reflect on the positives in your life; things you enjoy; things that make you feel good.

- Pat yourself on the back for small accomplishments—even if no one else recognizes them but you.

- Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people (including yourself) make mistakes. Release pent up feelings of anger and resentment (these only feed pessimistic thoughts and actions) by forgiving more and being less intolerant.

19. Focus on what really matters.

- You can put a whole lot of energy into what you do, but it’s not who you are. Your work does not define you.

- Don’t lose perspective.

- Focus on your “big picture”. Your family, health, love, and friendships are a few examples of the things that really matter in the end. Remind yourself that these are the precious cornerstones of your life.

- As author Richard Carlson suggests, “Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

20. Have fun.

- Each year, Americans work roughly 1,790 hours (based on a new average 8.7 hours/day) so do what you can, personally, to help create and allow a fun environment at work; a place where everyone shares a similar philosophy and enjoys coming to. (Keep in mind: un-

happy, stressful workers are 10% less productive, so be careful not to dilute the happy gene pool by hiring negative people.

- Don’t lose your inner child. Let him or her out every now and again and re-connect with your fun side.

- Work hard; Play hard. Success is learning how to balance the two.

According to *U.S. News and World Report*, podiatrists rank #15 in “The 100 Best Jobs of 2016” listing.³ These are defined as jobs proposing a

ble and extremely rewarding.

Sure, you can neglect or continue to ignore any stress symptoms you may be experiencing. You can even blow off everything you’ve read here and refuse to change one little bit.

Life is too short not to make at least an effort to tackle the issues and problems that may be preventing you from enjoying and making the most of it. Just because part of our stress (at work or home) is the result of mismanaged time. It doesn’t mean we need to stress over how to get

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mix of qualities that: “pay well, challenge us, are a good match for our talents and skills, aren’t too stressful, offer room to advance, and provide a satisfying work-life balance.” Way better than, say, a bomb squad technician!

We can’t eliminate stress from our lives completely. The only people who have zero stress are dead. What we can do is take action to reduce or manage it before it takes control. Identify what those stressors are—both personal and professional—and you’re on your way.

In the world of health coaching, before we are able to help those who feel overwhelmed, we have to understand what brought them to their current state. This is accomplished by using a simple tool to assess their personal and professional levels of satisfaction. By measuring a variety of elements that impact them daily (e.g., finances, career, health, joy, relationships, activities, etc.), they learn just how off-balance their lives have become—a major cause of their stress. The realization is eye-opening for these individuals. The good thing is, as we continue to measure this imbalance over time, and after we’ve committed to small changes in our routines, we experience a major transformation in our happiness and quality of life—just with small changes. It’s very possi-

more done in less time. It means we need to use the time we are given in the smartest, healthiest and, most satisfying way. And after all, isn’t striving to live a satisfying life what it’s really all about? **PM**

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