

June 2009

“If you drop your keys into molten lava just let 'em go 'cause, man, they're gone.”

-Jack Handey, Saturday Night Live's Deep Thoughts

“Make your life itself a creative work of art.”

-Mike Ray, The Highest Goal: The Secret That Sustains You in Every Moment

Reduce Your Stress. Yeah, Okay.

I received a brochure in the mail the other day, lauding the virtues of taking care yourself. In addition to getting your check-ups, the brochure advised one way to take care of yourself in these challenging times was “reduce your stress.” I turned the brochure over. Nope, nothing else written there. That was their advice. Just reduce your stress. In fact, many news stories of late have talked about how we need to reduce our collective national stress. Well, okay. How do you do that when you're lying awake at 3 a.m., worrying about your job, your home, your bills, your future, and your world in general?

Research shows companies undergoing layoffs and other financial problems have a dip in productivity. You think it would be the opposite with people trying to act the model employee, but the stress, uncertainty, and depression take its toll, turning people into anxiety-ridden zombies for a while. Everyone walks around with a shocked expression, waiting for the axe to fall and for small signs of hope.

People under stress react in different ways, including anger, insomnia, eating more, fatigue, and moodiness – just to name a few. My birthfather passed away in March, and I can tell you firsthand how crazy grief and depression make you. You blow up at the smallest thing and later wonder why you were so angry. Was it really about the issue or was it the stress talking? But you're supposed to reduce your stress, remember? So how do you do that? I have some solutions for you.

Exercise and Eat Right. Exercise is a great stress reliever and helps you sleep better. By eating better, you can save money by bringing your own lunch and snacks, making your own coffee, and making better choices at the grocery stores. Don't forget to treat yourself once in a while.

You don't have to adopt a healthier lifestyle by yourself. Sparkpeople.com and Livestrong.com (Lance Armstrong's organization) are two sites offering FREE help with creating new habits, such as losing weight, eating more fruits and vegetables, and exercising more.

Get Enough Sleep. Someone I know was in a life coaching group, and one of their assignments was to get eight hours of sleep. Every night. She said she didn't realize how hard it would be to actually get eight hours of sleep but found it made a real difference. Try it. You might like it.

Just Breathe. Meditation and breathing deeply can help relax your body and lower your heart rate. There are quite a few CDs and books out there on meditation, and yoga classes focus on breathing. If you get worked up about something, step away from the situation and just take a few deep breaths.

Find Your Funny Bone. When I worked at the Galveston newspaper, I received a stress management book to review. According to the book, one way to reduce stress was to stop reading newspapers and watching TV news. We had a good laugh about it since we worked at a newspaper. But it is true. Escaping the news headlines and heading for pure fun and escapism is a great way to reduce stress.

Laughter is the best medicine, and it's okay to laugh even in bad times. Humor is a good thing, and find your humor wherever you can find it. Here are a few suggestions:

- For political types, check out <http://www.cagle.com/>. They feature the best political cartoons from around the world.
- For jokes, check out www.ahajokes.com. Under the one liners category, the site even features gems from Jack Handey's *Deep Thoughts*.
- TV is a nice short-lived escape. You don't have to think about anything. Just let those TV rays wash over you. Some of my faves which always make me laugh out loud are: *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Office*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *30 Rock*.
- Watch your favorite new or old shows on Hulu.com, a FREE website. Gorge yourself on *The Simpsons* or the latest *Saturday Night Live* clips. Need a blast from days when life seemed simpler and less chaotic? Check out *The A-Team*, *Airwolf*, *The Facts of Life*, and *Miami Vice*. The website adds new series and movies all the time.
- The Fruitcake Lady was a frequent, straight-talking guest on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Search for her clips on YouTube.com, but a warning – the lady is very, very frank and swears a lot so check this out at home without the kids.

And by the way, do you know what a pirate's favorite letter of the alphabet is? Rrrrrrrr.

Music. Playing music is good for the soul. Play something upbeat and peppy when you're cleaning house or need to pound away on a project. Right now, I'm into Lady Gaga's *The Game*, a dance record that gets you moving. Sometimes you have to dance. If you need to relax, put on something dreamy and chill.

Find Some Friends. Spending time with pals is a great way to drag you out of any doldrums. We all need time with friends and family, and having face time is much better than hunkering down behind a computer screen, scrolling through Facebook every night. Stop hiding out, and get out. Each city has free activities, such as free nights at local museums. The important thing is to spend time together.

Reduce Clutter. You know I had to include it, but truthfully, reducing clutter and getting more organized does reduce stress. Being able to find things (and not buying a replacement!), getting what you want to get done, and having a clean, organized space all makes you feel better about life. By ridding yourself of old things that drag down your energy and spark bad emotions, you are preparing yourself for a brighter future.

Work Smarter, Not Harder. I always advocate working more effectively and efficiently versus working longer and harder. Take the time to "sharpen your axe" by getting organized or planning out a project instead of just

jumping in. A few minutes of preparation time will save you time, energy, and money down the road. Some other ways to work smarter, not harder:

- Take a vacation to recoup from stress. When you go on vacation, leave work behind. Do not check the Blackberry, check work e-mail, call in or show up and say, "I'm not really here." If you're here, you're here. And forget taking that international Blackberry with you too. Yes, you may have a ton of e-mails when you get back, but you'll be in a better frame of mind to deal with them. As I always say, the vacations are not just for you, but also for the people who work around you. Check out www.travelzoo.com for great vacation deals.
- If you have to choose between working extra hours or going home to exercise or spend time with the family, go home. At some point, your brain becomes too overloaded to work and you can't even see straight. Then any work you do will be subpar. Best to start again when you're refreshed. Overloading yourself is not the best option. You'll be better off exercising or spending time relaxing at home.
- Utilize the organizational and time management tools you have available. Learn shortcuts on Outlook to save time. Use the Rules and Alerts feature to slim down your inbox.
- Write everything down! When you're stressed, it affects memory and you become more forgetful. Write it down so you don't forget.
- Delegate when possible. If you can, hire a housekeeper or someone to mow the lawn. Figure out ways to free up more of your free time. You may need to set aside some projects for the time being.
- On the weekends, have your weekend. Put the Blackberry in the charger and forget about it until Monday. Don't bring reading home with you. Don't check work e-mails. Recharge for the next week.

Stop Being a Perfectionist. This is not the best time to be a perfectionist. As my organizing friend Donna Smallin put it, "done is perfect." Perfectionists sometimes have a difficult time starting a project when they know it won't be perfect. Jump in and see how far you get, my little perfectionists. Know when to let go and send the project on its way. Otherwise, it will become way too consuming.

Get a Hobby. If you're going to have a life, you need one first. One hobby is much better than several hobbies. Stick to one or two interests to explore, or otherwise, you will overload yourself. Get rid of any hobbies that no longer serve you and make room for the newer ones.

Embrace Opportunities. As author Tom Peters puts it, "If a window of opportunity appears, don't pull down the shade." Recessions are breeding grounds for entrepreneurs and the like, and companies become even more creative, tapping into employees' strengths. Embrace opportunities, explore where they go, and see what happens. Peters advocates brilliant failures over mediocre successes. You never know what's waiting out there for you in the world.

Don't Become a Mad Cow. If you don't embrace opportunities to become more engaged in your work, you may become a [mad cow](#), according to the guys at *Contented Cows Give Better Milk*. This blog posting compares what engaged and disengaged workers look like during the recession. Play to your strengths, continue to do your best work, and keep positive.

If all else fails, seek help. Go to a therapist. Contact your company's Employee Assistance Program and Faculty Assistant Program or ask a friend for a recommendation. Fit is important so make sure you have a therapist that you actually like, or otherwise the therapy relationship won't work.

Drinking, smoking, retail therapy and other vices are not the best coping mechanisms, and these usually exacerbate the problem. Retail therapy, i.e. excessive shopping doesn't help curb your bills, only increase them. Those "bargains" are not bargains when you don't use them, and they morph into clutter.

Money Management Issues

If you have issues with money or mortgages, go see a professional who can help. Check out websites for money gurus Dave Ramsey and Suze Orman. Do your research, particularly on sites like Consumer Reports and Rip-off Report.com.

Stay away from debt consolidation scams. Debt consolidation companies change their names like some people change their socks so beware! Some are now adding "Christian" or other religious names to their titles, but their main goal is greed, not faith. To reduce credit card debt, contact The Consumer Credit Counseling Service, a legitimate company who talks to your creditors, gets payments lowered, and sets up a payment plan for you.

Quick Tip – Dude, Where's My Car?

Allison Carter (Twitter handle: @OrganizeAtlanta) had a great idea to remember where you parked your car. Take a picture with your cell phone! So simple. So brilliant.

Got Clutter? I have developed 30 minute and 45 minute presentations on organizing, time management, and productivity. Moving to a new building? I also have a 30-minute presentation on preparing for a move for your department. I also do one-on-one sessions in your office and help you come up with a solution to your organizing problems. To schedule a presentation or a one-on-one appointment, call 713-792-8061 or email jsimon@mdanderson.org. **For past newsletters, click [here](#).** Follow me on Twitter! Look up JaniceSimon. For Facebook, look for Janice M. Simon. My personal blog is: www.theclutterprincess.com.