

## Don't Let Stress Get the Best of You

by Suzanne W. Zoglio, Ph.D.

It's easy to feel stressed these days with a roller coaster market, unemployment, corporate corruption, terrorism around the world, and wacky weather that makes one wonder if we have irreparably riled Mother Nature. What we once "knew" no longer is, and what we never dreamed of has--in many cases--come true. No wonder we're stressed!

However, even in an insane world, we don't all respond to stress in the same way. Two coworkers are given the same deadline; one sees it as enormous pressure--the other as needed motivation. One woman perceives divorce as increased freedom, while another feels great loss. Two breadwinners laid off will both be stressed, yet one gets an ulcer while the other gets a new job. Why such a wide range of responses? The answer is this: *stress is very personal*. It's based on our personal perceptions of a threat, our level of confidence or faith, and our ability to turn desire into action. In other words, to manage stress, we need to protect our best parts--our inner wisdom, our faith, and our creative inspiration. The question is: "Will you take charge and manage your stress...or let it get the best of you?"

Assuming you'd prefer to be in the driver's seat, here are three things you can do to keep your stress in check (please notice that not one of them involves pulling out your hair, escaping to Tahiti, or telling your boss off).

### Stress-Buster #1: Listen To Your Inner Voice...Often!

Imagine if you will, that you have at your disposal a wise old mentor who knows much about life, and love, and growth and challenge. As your generous guide, this sage replies to your questions with assurances, suggestions, and reminders of your past successes. Whenever you hear that clear, calm, and caring voice, you know in an instant just what to do. You know in your soul the path that is right for you next. Now, imagine further that you actually take the time to listen to this priceless wisdom. What would your life be like? Would your focus be clear? Your heart grateful? Your confidence at an all-time high? Isn't that your desired state?

That may be the desired state, but in today's 24/7, busy-is-better world, we more often race through the day at a break-neck pace, without noticing what hurts, what's great, or our own internal state. If you have ever noticed a bruise that you don't recall making, you'll understand how much we tune out throughout the day. Although we each come equipped with our own STS (stress tracking system), we often fail to use it. We ignore the churning in our stomachs or the ache in our backs that signal we're under stress. We deny that our lost sense of humor or intolerance of others is really a sign that we're obsessing about something. In short, we miss the warning signs of stress, making it harder to manage. Instead, try visiting with your inner sage more often, sitting silently--perhaps three times a day--to clear your mind, take stock of what feels right and what doesn't, and to get some perspective on what's best for you next.

You might just close your eyes and notice how your body feels, or invite your wise companion to help you see what is scaring you, or take a walk in the park and focus on what you really want. To manage stress effectively, give more time to your "wise" side. Take a break, turn up the quiet, and pose a question (How am I feeling? What am I afraid might happen? How do I want to feel? What can I do to feel clearer, safer, happier, more in charge?). Then, go about your business, and expect a revelation to hit you some time soon. You might be in the shower, out for a run, weeding your garden, or finishing a meditation break when--zap--it hits you! That's it--the answer to your question.

Taking the time to listen to your inner voice is best when it is a daily ritual (for example, first thing in the morning, at noon, or at sunset), to provide you with a kind of all-purpose stress-shield. However, mini-retreats become even more critical in times of stress because once a "survival" mode kicks in, it overrides the senses, making it difficult to sniff out the right path, see things in perspective, or hear the sweet music of "what to do next." So, next time you're feeling stressed, close the door, turn off the phone, and take a few deep breaths...then listen to that wise voice within.

## Stress-Buster #2: Tame Your Brain Critic

So once you know what's beneath your stress and what you can do to reduce it, you've got to tame your brain critic...the one that likes to poke holes in your best solutions. You know, the voice that grumbles: "Who are you kidding--you can't do that!" or "Get real--that will never work." or "THEY will have a fit." It's the voice that likes to minimize your coping abilities and catastrophize outside situations.

As a friend's father once said, "Yep, I can't never could do anything!" To move your life forward--from wherever you are--you've got to fuel your faith in your ability to change. Every time you hear that little weasel squeal, "You're not enough!" hit the delete button fast and replace the phrase with an enabling one. Switch each "I can't..." to "I can if ...." Change every "They'll never..." to "Whatever they do, I can choose my response." Take every dreadful image (of pain, loneliness, failure, or worse) that pops onto your mind's screen, and click to a fresh image of whatever you wish to see in your life. Beat back the negative with affirmations, and nourish your spirit with images that inspire you.

One sure sign that your brain critic is winning the race is when you see no light at the end of the tunnel. Perhaps you have slipped into a *catastrophizing* mode. You know...your boss won't just be displeased; you'll be fired! Your blood pressure is not just rising; you're going to have a stroke! You're not just getting a divorce; you'll be alone forever. You know how it goes...from disappointment to a life-threatening event...in less time than it takes for you to remember your social security number...especially if you're past fifty.

So what can you do, to break out of "the sky is falling" mode? Go to the balcony. No, not to jump...to an imaginary balcony where in your mind's eye you can view your past, your present, and what's on the horizon. As you look back and remember the times when you pulled yourself up, bravely moved on, or creatively turned a block into a new opportunity, you will be reminded of your strength and resilience. As you look forward you will see the wide horizon...limitless opportunities...just waiting for you. The perspective you will gain from going to the balcony is just the view your brain critic would like to hide from you. Go often. If you really want to tame your brain critic, keep an ongoing S.T.A.R. (simple thanks and recognition) folder with a running list of your successes, notes of thanks, and symbols of your personal progress. Whenever you get stressed--and fear you can't cope--pull out the file and climb to your balcony.

## Stress-Buster #3: Act on Behalf of Serenity

Once you take the time to map a new path and get the upper hand on your brain critic, try a third stress-buster: commit to making choices based on whether or not they are in alignment with what you really want. When your outer actions support your inner aspirations, you will feel reduced stress and a heightened sense of inner peace. A certain calmness or serenity will surround you. While that may sound like a lofty ideal, it can be simplified by asking yourself one question as you make choices in your daily life. Each time you are about to take an action, ask: "Will this step move me in the direction of what I *really* want?" If so, take the step. If not, consider a different action. For instance, suppose you lose your job and are thinking that it's kind of a mixed blessing because it's the push you've needed to start your own business. You scout about, find the financing, and then your old employer invites you back. Should you resume the familiar job or take a shot at your dream? Which will reduce your stress? Short-term, the old job will be less stressful than the new because it is "safer." However, long-term it is likely the old job will increase your stress because it's not the choice that moves you toward what you *really* want. The test, then--of what will add or reduce stress--is whether the decision is on behalf or in conflict with your heart's desire. If you're considering telling someone off, but what you really want is harmonious relations, the action obviously will not be on behalf of your serenity. In fact, it will likely leave you churning inside. So make your choices going forward based on what's most important to you--as the person you aspire to be--not on an impulse, a fear of failure, or because someone else thinks you "should." Act on behalf of your serenity and you will be living your life from the inside out. Do what is important, use what gifts you've been given, and take charge of your choices to create a life that feels right. THAT is acting on behalf of serenity.