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INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

Sink or Swim?

Navigating the Invisible Sea of Micro-stressors in an Always On World

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Micro-stressors: Invisible Strains on Our Well-being

Laura is exhausted. She sits staring at the message on her screen, knowing she can't put off responding any longer. Her boss is not going to like what she has to say. He had been counting on her to deliver a design prototype by Monday, but Laura knows there's no way her team can pull that off without working all weekend. Even then, it is not a sure thing. But just three months into this new role, Laura wants her boss to see her as a reliable go-to person. If she pushes back now, she worries she might not be given another high-profile project.

She had vowed not to be the kind of leader who dumps work on people at the last minute and throws their lives into a frenzy. But here she is, feeling forced to do just that.

"Suresh just doesn't understand how much work goes into these design prototypes," Laura thinks. *"If Aarushi were here, she'd get it."* Laura and her old boss, Aarushi, were a seamless tag team. For 15 years, Aarushi had been her mentor. She knew the business inside and out. They spoke in shorthand and got the job done. But with her new boss, Suresh, Laura has to explain everything and justify her plans at every turn.

Laura's head is starting to pound. The clock is ticking and her inbox is piling up with a steady stream of emails that threaten to divert her attention from the Monday deadline. One of them is about the slides for next week's executive team meeting – yet another tight deadline and the topic of cutbacks is sure to be controversial. Last time she presented to the executive team, she got raked over the coals by leaders who were trying to solve problems that didn't exist, and Suresh just sat there. Aarushi would have had her back. *"If only Aarushi were here to stand up for me again,"* Laura thinks. *"I never realized how she protected me from the politics until she was gone."*

When Laura peers at the clock on her screen, she realizes it's almost five o'clock and she's nowhere near done. With her husband out of town on a business trip, Laura had promised to pick up her father-in-law, who has been recovering at rehab after a fall. She has about ten minutes before she has to dash out to get him and pick up some sort of take-out for dinner for them all. This weekend she knows her family will have to have the difficult conversation about moving her father-in-law to transitional living. She has not yet figured out how to approach the conversation with her father-in-law, who is fiercely independent and proud.

"Focus!" she reminds herself. Ten minutes! Feeling cornered, she quickly starts to type her reply to Suresh about the Monday deadline, having no idea what she should say...

Does Laura's day sound familiar? The specific details might be different, but for most of us the onslaught of "micro-stressors" throughout the day add up. In a single afternoon, Laura has to deal with a barrage of stressors coming at her through relationships, at a volume and velocity that increases as the

day progresses. Her new boss isn't buffering her against company politics like her old boss. The lack of trust between them increases the work required to advance her ideas and his lack of understanding of the work is creating stress both in their relationship and then in how she has to buffer her team from the consequences. By pressuring her to get work done over the weekend, he's making it hard for her to preserve her ideals as a leader. On top of everything, she's managing a surge in her family responsibilities as she tries to find more time to care for her aging father-in-law.

Individually, stresses like these might not seem like much; we are used to dealing with non-stop meetings, deadline pressure and juggling the balance of work and life. But with 24-7 work demands, technology that allows (and seems to require) us to be "on" all the time, and the pressures of collaborating with a wider and wider range of people – who themselves are under broad pressures and deadlines — many of us feel immersed in an invisible sea of stress.

Swimming in this particular sea is not a good thing. Stress makes you more susceptible to chronic illness, such as heart disease and diabetes,^{1,2} and mental health conditions, such as depression.³ Stressed-out people are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking, drugs, or overeating.⁴⁻⁶ In fact, between 60-80% of all doctor visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.⁷ Stress is so harmful to employees that The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has declared stress a hazard of the workplace.³

Stress also has a negative effect on work productivity. Under stress, individuals tend to make lower-quality decisions and

are often less motivated⁸, productive and innovative in their work.^{9,10} As stress increases, engagement declines and the result can be presenteeism — when employees are physically present but mentally disengaged.¹¹ Absenteeism rises as well. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work cites stress as a factor in at least 50% of all lost working days.¹² Ultimately, chronic stress can lead to employee burnout, which is characterized by exhaustion, detachment, and poorer performance at work.¹³

Many people are quick to point to a single source, such as unreasonable clients or demanding bosses as the primary driver of stress. What you might not realize, however, is that there are many smaller touchpoints contributing to your everyday stress that go far beyond just an unpredictable boss giving you too much work to do in too little time. Where is all this stress coming from? The volume, diversity and velocity of relational touch points we all experience today is beyond anything we have previously seen in the workplace. With our connection to an ever-widening span of relationships at work and at home

comes increased exposure to a steady stream of what we are calling **relationship-based micro-stressors**. While relationships are — and have always been — critical sources of well-being, today our work and personal relationships are also increasing, not decreasing, our stress. While some people successfully navigate the sea of micro-stressors, others are overwhelmed and just treading water or slipping beneath the surface.

So, if it's more than an unreasonable boss, what are the other relational micro-stressors that are dragging us down? We launched a research program involving dozens of top tier companies, engaging hundreds of people across industries such as technology, life science, finance and manufacturing to share with us their experiences of relationship-driven stress, using both quantitative studies and in-depth interviews. Through this work, we identify 12 common “relational” drivers of stress, which can be grouped into 3 main categories, that are likely taking a significant toll on your mental and physical well-being, without you necessarily being aware of their impact.

Broadly speaking, relationships create stress for us in three detrimental ways:

- 1 Draining Your Personal Capacity**
- 2 Depleting Your Emotional Reserves**
- 3 Challenging Your Identity or Values**

The problem is that it's rarely one major event in our day but the accumulation of small moments — a disagreement that you sense but remains unspoken in a conference call, observing a team-member who needs to be coached (for the third time this week!) or the worrying tone of a text you just received from your oldest child. We endure these micro-stressors throughout the day, often without ever being able to put our finger on what is draining our well-being.

And most of us are already running at full capacity, over-taxed by a baseline of collaborative demands across work and personal life. The time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has ballooned by 50% or more over the past two decades. Most people spend 85% or more of their time in meetings, on email or on the phone.^{14,15} Our home lives have become more collaboratively demanding as well, with the ability, and what often feels like the obligation, to stay in constant contact through texting or social media with kids, schools, and a wide range of family, friends, causes and organizations. Time gets squeezed from both ends, work and home. Micro-stressors just push us further and further into the red zone. They kick in when a conflict or friction in our interactions adds to an already full plate, requires us to draw on already-strained emotional reserves, or assaults our personal values.

Consider Brandi, a mid-level manager working in a large pharmaceutical company. Her boss values face-to-face

interaction so she commutes an hour and a half each way into the city, getting up at 5 am to squeeze in a workout when she can. A typical workday requires her to navigate a maze of collaborative activities with other functional leaders and to make sure she's keeping touch with each of her ten direct reports. At the end of each day, she has typical family responsibilities, which consist of “that crazy sprint from walking in the door to getting the kids in bed where a lot has to happen in a small window of time, including making dinner, cleaning up from dinner, showers, homework.” That's what she calls “just the normal stuff.” Then come the micro-stressors, driven by the inevitable tensions and conflicts that arise when working with and caring for others. For example, when one of her subordinates becomes upset over a poor performance evaluation and she has to draw on her emotional reserves to be constructive, firm and empathetic all at the same time; or when a colleague drops the ball and Brandi has to work late, depleting her personal capacity and her energy the next morning; or when her workday is interrupted by a text saying that her younger child bit someone at school, and Brandi questions what kind of mother she is to have raised a child who expresses her anger in this way.

We all face similar micro-stressors in one form or another. The key to avoiding a downward spiral is recognizing our sources of stress and acting on the ones we are able to influence.

1 Draining Your Personal Capacity

In recent years, the need to collaborate as part of our daily work has become standard in virtually every profession. We work hard to keep colleagues in the loop, we seek input and support from others, we are added—seldom dropped—to cc lists. All of this, of course, comes with ever-escalating productivity expectations. Beyond the “deliverables” that drain us, there are unspoken inefficiencies that arise from the way we work together. These collaboratively complex times create stress when they generate work or reduce our ability to do what we already have on our plate. We call these micro stressors that diminish our ability to complete our work **drains on personal capacity**. They happen in at least five predictable ways.

1. Misalignment of Roles and Priorities

In today's workplace, the bulk of work is done through teams and performance hinges on effective collaboration inside the team and beyond. But people are scattered across so many teams that there is no time to follow traditional team development advice: aligning on vision and purpose; building team cohesion and personal relationships of trust; and committing reliably to deliverables and timelines. And of course, there is often underlying tension as team members engage in the work in a way that prizes their functional contribution or aligns with incentives from their home unit. Sussing out these invisible relational differences just takes too much time – but not doing so creates inevitable down-stream micro-stressors that have become a taken-for-granted part of all of our lives. According to one leader, “Everything gets so busy...and something that seems easy might not be easy or fast, especially if you have competing priorities at the time. So stuff just flies over the wall...”

We all experience a lot more of this than we realize. Teammates send partially thought-out emails to clear their plate late at night – and then we end up having to send two more emails to get clarity on what they wanted, or we start working on something that we thought we understood but find out later in the week that we had wasted our time. Disagreements escalate when our colleagues don't know us well enough to trust our good faith in working together, or they may politely agree with our suggestions but then never come through on their end. A functional counterpart announces that their group is starting a task – but ours is already working on it so we have to set up a meeting to clarify who is doing what. The myriad ways that groups can be misaligned increases the amount of work we need to do to straighten things out, distracting from our ability to complete what's on our plate and creating a constant hum of stress.

Consider Pablo, a leader in a west coast technology company. He had recently joined a cross-functional team with five colleagues, all carrying the same excessive commitments as he. At one point, Sarah, the engineering team member, sent a

long email full of technical jargon, which Pablo felt like he was supposed to understand but in either case, it was way too much to sort out. By the time he got to the email, all five of the other team members had responded. None asked for clarification and he couldn't imagine that they understood Sarah's proposal either, but they all offered opinions. The marketing person seemed upset about the implications for pricing and Pablo didn't want to get in the middle of that. He had tried several times to schedule a group meeting to resolve the contentious issues but the team member from sales kept rescheduling at the last minute and Sarah was so consumed across six projects that the next window of time she had was almost six weeks out.

As things were getting tense, Pablo wanted to add some levity but he didn't know the others well enough to be sure how they would respond. Meanwhile, he faced a rapidly approaching deadline for another team he was on, and Sarah's email was becoming a black hole, having consumed twenty minutes already thinking about how to rein things in and respond constructively. Clearly, Pablo's team would have benefitted from better aligning their efforts and getting to know each other better. But as a group they couldn't carve out the time, resulting in continued headaches as they lurched from one issue to the next. In this case, misalignment drained Pablo's personal capacity through time spent trying to understand and address points of contention in the team, trying to schedule a time to meet and even time worrying about how he would be perceived. All relatively small drains to capacity – but ones that accumulate through a day.

2. Unreliable Colleagues

When we depend on colleagues who don't deliver their piece of a joint project on time, continually have last minute requests/changes, or provide poor quality inputs, more work lands on our already overflowing plate and the stress increases exponentially. The difficult thing is these can be small misses that accumulate and cause us enormous stress due to the inter-connected nature of work. Take Pablo's team from above. Just five people right? In all honesty how stressful could that be? Well, imagine if one person didn't understand her commitment fully, a second gets pulled into a priority project from his boss and put in less time than was anticipated, a third had yet another priority sales meeting that took time from the team and the fourth quite honestly has always put you in the position of having to save the day. Say all of these people just miss the mark by 10% — all for different reasons — the cumulative effect on you is 40% — on a schedule that is already maxed out. You have to scramble to compensate for what's missing, upending the plans you had for your time and stacking more work on top of an already-full plate. Or you end up delivering less than you would have – which creates stress as you worry about what others think and how this affects your reputation in conversations you are not a part of.

The stress is compounded if you're a leader and one of your subordinates is not delivering, in which case you have double duty: getting the work done and managing the performance issue. Kunal, a senior leader in the automotive industry, shared the frustration he felt when a subordinate turned in a sub-standard work product. "I just needed to get it done. But that's the worst because that creates a sort of seething bitterness and stress because I'm now doing something I shouldn't be doing. It's displaced other things and is contributing to an environment where I don't have the energy and time to be developing my team." Addressing the performance issue took its toll as well. "It requires energy because you have to be understanding and then follow almost a Socratic process that walks someone through the preparation they should have done. That's handling it right, and I'm happy when I handle it that way, as opposed to creating a sense of shame for not delivering, which would be fast, easy, and totally unfair." For Kunal, each step in this process generated new, unplanned work, upending his day and making it harder for him to focus on his priorities.

3. Unpredictable Authority Figure

Unpredictable behavior from a person in authority, such as a boss, senior leader or client can create an undercurrent of stress. Shifting demands or frequently revisited decisions can throw us off balance or create uncertainty about where to commit our energies. *Is this a priority or that? Am I supposed to drop everything to turn to this new assignment or was that just a passing comment from my boss?* We may over-think what we're doing or produce twice the work we actually need to in attempts to cover all the bases. All of which – in large and small ways – drains our personal capacity to get work done.

Justin, a senior scientist at a pre-eminent research institution, struggled with a boss who was unpredictable and difficult to please. In a typical encounter, Justin's boss sent him an early morning email with an urgent request for specifics on a research program. Justin dropped what he was doing and prepared a detailed report based on exactly the issues they discussed. But when they got on a call to discuss it, the boss said, "No, no, no... what's this? That's not what I wanted." Next thing Justin knew, the boss was off on an entirely different request, equally urgent. Justin felt like the objectives were constantly shifting and he never was quite sure what he should be preparing because his boss would invariably ask for something different. The boss's requests came at random times, disrupting Justin's workflow. His stress rose in part due to the ever-increasing volume of demands but also as he saw how his boss's behavior interfered with making real progress on the projects that mattered to him.

Shifting requests from clients are highly disruptive to a team, consuming inordinate amounts of time and energy just to get back on track. Let's go back to Pablo's five-person team later in the project when mid-stream, the client changes their ask and no one on the team feels sufficiently empowered to push back. Suddenly, the team needs a coordinating meeting which

ends up taking 31 emails to schedule. Given the urgency of the request, they resort to an 8:00 pm meeting time. Pablo's family gives him "the look" which says "here he goes again, missing story time and leaving the dishes to us." At 10:00 pm, when the call is finally over, Pablo has to schedule two additional meetings with functional counterparts to re-align their work. He knows he's going to face the invisible push and pull as people negotiate responsibility for the additional workload and try to diplomatically shift it to others. He also will have to speak to his boss to now shift the timelines for the other three projects he has ongoing. Pablo's stress rises as he walks back into the family room and finds the lights out and his spouse and children asleep, all the while ruminating on the ripple effects of this one change on his entire workload.

4. Inefficient Communication Practices

We've all been on long email chains that seem to add to rather than resolve confusion. Or we scan emails that are too thick with verbiage and can't seem to get to the point. Or the opposite, someone shoots us a quick email with a request so short on detail that we're left scratching our heads wondering what they're really asking for.

All of us bemoan email. But in reality, it is not so much email that kills us but the culture around when and how we use it. All the communications we receive contain implicit choices made by the sender about how rich a medium they will use (e.g., email vs. phone), and the content they will provide (e.g., brief vs. lengthy, bullet point vs. full text.). We may not realize it but we also have choices about how quickly we respond to emails and texts. One executive in our study came to this as a surprising revelation when he started traveling overseas. "When I was in Europe traveling, of course, the US doesn't start until around 11:00 in the morning and then it keeps going through the evening. And a lot of people would go back to their hotels at night and stay up answering emails. I never answered emails at night — and nothing bad ever happened." Unfortunately, most people and most organizations do not consider the norms of email use and like any tool – a hammer swung wildly – email and other collaborative applications can cause damage and place an enormous drain on our personal capacity if we fall into unproductive patterns.

Too often in our interviews, we heard from people suffering from a mismatch one way or the other between the communication modes they needed and what they received. Richer mediums (e.g., face-to-face in-person, phone, zoom) better support collaborative work that is more exploratory (e.g., defining a problem space or brainstorming solutions) or integrative in nature (e.g., points where people with different expertise, perspectives or work assignments need to produce a joint solution). Email works best for informational purposes and with norms limiting volume and celebrating clarity (e.g., clarify the objective or the "ask" in the first three sentences.) And informal technologies (e.g., IM) are best used once

relationships are established and quick synchronous exchanges help you sustain momentum. Departures from these standards, most often when a leader shoots off a brief email that sends everyone into a frenzy, make it harder to work efficiently and create a stream of micro-stressors throughout the day.

Rita, a senior leader in the consumer electronics industry, saw how a single email from Anthony, the head of Marketing, escalated stress across the entire organization. Sent off to a half dozen leaders and forwarded down the chain of command, Anthony's email asked people to create materials for an upcoming executive presentation. Lacking detail, the email left everyone with similar questions: When does he need to see them? Slides or talking points? Is there a common template? Importantly, what's the story he wants to tell? Emails flew across Marketing as people tried to read between the lines. A dozen one-off conversations with Anthony yielded twenty different versions of what he wanted. Rita summed up the costs of Anthony's communication choices: "When he has a story in mind he wants to tell but doesn't share that right away, it creates a situation where you spend a lot of time preparing something and then ultimately, it doesn't meet his expectations." That's the impact of a

single email. Multiply it by hundreds of messages coming at us every day with varying levels of clarity, and it's easy to see how poor communication choices from colleagues can pile on stress, one email after another.

Confusion over the norms and expectations around email response also create stress. Arvind, the head of a lab at a biotechnology firm, found that some leaders clearly expected instant response. "Their life is work. So if they email you at 9:00 PM, you better get back to them by 9:30." Other leaders would claim to set boundaries but behave differently. According to Arvind, "A lot of the leaders who do have families, their kids go to bed. They're back online and email at like 10:00 PM or check it on the weekend. And so people talk about setting boundaries but they don't necessarily walk the talk."

As for Arvind, "I tell my team this all the time, 'Unless it's urgent, you don't need to be getting back to people on the weekends.' But I have to be careful to monitor my own behavior. Beyond the emails themselves, the uncertainty and variation in expectations for response can create micro moments of stress.

Coaching Break: Driving Down Meeting Impact

Meetings are the number one driver of collaborative overload, today, with many people scheduled in back-to-back meetings from early morning until late evening—when they finally get time to do their 'real' work. Whether virtual or face to face, meetings are here to stay, but we can exert discipline to reduce their impact on our personal capacity. Consider:

Pre-Meeting

1. Set expectations for desired outcomes.
2. Use pre-reads so that face-to-face or virtual time is spent on highest and best use of attendees' expertise.
3. Establish a norm that pre-reads are to be done and anyone who missed a prior session owns catching up before the meeting.
4. Have a clear attendee list and set of expectations for how people will contribute.
5. Create space for those who do not need to be there to not show up (e.g., post information/outcomes).

Meeting

1. Employ appropriate structure via a stated purpose and clear objectives, agenda, timeline and facilitative role(s).
2. Set norm for people to be fully present (not answering emails or texts) and contributing concisely/on point or not at all if they agree (rather than contributing for status or visibility).
3. Adhere to meeting process guidelines to keep on task within rough timelines; end five minutes early to ensure you keep all participants on the same page – don't run late and convey important information as people are leaving .
4. Consider agile methods for meetings, like 20-minute limits, no food, gathering in a common area that is readily accessible to all.

Post-Meeting

1. Send a follow-up email outlining agreements, commitments and next steps.
2. Reinforce the expectation that people who don't attend are responsible for catching up and being informed about what they missed (i.e., it's not acceptable to use the groups' time at the beginning of the next meeting to recap for one or two people).
3. Create standards for disagreement while in the room, such as discouraging sidebar debate or passive-aggressive dialogue outside of the team; remind people not to initiate or enable such interactions initiated by others by engaging.

5. A Surge in Responsibilities

A surge in responsibilities — at work or home — can escalate stress in unexpected ways. For example, consider Russell, a senior leader at an engineering firm undergoing a major transformation. All of a sudden, he found himself responsible for leading a culture change to shift mindset and behaviors across an organization where people were anxious and unclear about their future. This work came on top of his “day job.” It created an enormous surge in workload and as Russell describes it, “I was pushing a lot of energy into the system everywhere, every day, trying to provide emotional and instrumental support for others. I started to feel like, ‘Why is this all coming to me? Why do people need me on all these things?’” Eventually, Russell’s personal capacity maxed out and his energy plummeted. “I ran out of energy and that made me short and sharp, and I lost the patience to understand things.” Fortunately, Russell’s colleagues and wife started to notice, and Russell was able to take a sabbatical and come back recharged with new energy and perspective. He was also newly vigilant of the stresses created by a surge at work and the need for mechanisms to be aware of and replenish his stores of energy.

Surges can happen at home as well. One example is the birth of a child. One of the happiest moments of our lives to be sure! Most people prepare for a spike in responsibility when the baby first comes home, with frequent feedings and round-the-clock care. But less well-anticipated is the long tail of micro-stressors created by the increase in emotional, task and cognitive workload, fatigue, and over time, compounded family management responsibilities. The everyday logistics of a family — coordinating children’s schedules, transport and homework — can become a new source of stress for all family members. This only grows with time as new responsibilities arise, such as caring for an ill loved one or supporting a family member having a difficult time (such as your child being bullied at school.) Home responsibilities can also surge when we find ourselves taking responsibility for an elderly family member. Family dynamics may change as an elder, used to being the parent, suddenly becomes more dependent on you, and conversations around

things like transitional care or safe driving create stress for all. When either personal or work responsibilities surge, the two compete for an ever-shrinking amount of time in the day, and we may feel like we literally need to be in two places at once — performing a job that gives us purpose and satisfaction, and by a loved one’s side in a time of need.

We all experience a lot more of these surges than we think, and they come in all shapes and sizes. For example, one leader we spoke with described what she called “parent homework.” These are the assignments your child brings home from school that are far beyond their capacity to complete independently. It takes planning and preparation, and supplies you have to run out and buy. It lands in your lap on a Friday and your child has one week (and just one weekend) to get it done — but at that point the weekend is already spoken for. You’re nagging the kids, you’re rushing, and everyone is feeling upended. Or maybe you’ve volunteered to lead the PTA plant sale and for the month prior you’re launching school-wide communications, coordinating a roster of volunteers and ensuring that hundreds of plants get transported to the school gym intact. Or you had a full week to finish off a major project but then your child got sick so you had to work nights while caring for her during the day. Or you agreed to hold a family reunion in your backyard and as the date approaches, your life becomes consumed with a hundred last minute emails to coordinate the event, create a six-foot collage of photos, and get all the patio furniture cleaned.

A mental surge can also overwhelm your capacity. According to one senior leader, “I’m an executive during the day, and I’m an executive in our household as well.” In the midst of one busy workday, she realized, “My teenage daughter can’t drop off my younger daughter at her play date because we won’t have the car seat,” and, “My husband won’t be back till 4:15 and we have to take the dog to the vet at 4:30. But what if there’s traffic?” It all consumes an already limited bandwidth and when pushed either momentarily or over time to the edge of our personal capacity, the result is stress.

2 Depleting Your Emotional Reserves

Not all micro stresses cause us harm through their impact on our capacity. Some do this through negative feelings that drain our emotional reserves: worry for people we care about, uncertainty over the impact of our actions, fear of repercussions, or simply feeling de-energized by certain types of interactions. Our work on energizing networks over the past two decades continually shows a significant performance impact from positive, energizing interactions.^{16,17} But the effect of negative ties — those that de-energize or create fear — are equally important to attend to. They come at us in a nano-second but leave a footprint of worry that lasts hours or even days.

We all have a capacity to deal with these negative feelings that is partially fueled by our emotional reserves, which can help us to counteract difficult interactions, see ourselves as following positive trajectories, and learn from all interactions whether positive or negative.¹⁸ Negative relationships are typically only a small portion of our networks, but their effect is significant. Our work, and social psychology in general, has shown that negative ties have at least twice the impact of positive ties. So, while it is important to develop reserves to help you absorb these interactions, it is also important to think about how to shield or remove yourself from those you have the ability to control.

1. Managing and Advocating for Others

Managing others and feeling responsibility for their success and well-being can create its own unique drain on our emotional reserves. None of us wants to be seen as a “bad” boss. We want to do the right thing for the people we are responsible for but often we can feel limited in our ability to provide subordinates with sufficient time and attention, the tools and training to be successful, or the rewards and recognition to feel appreciated. We have to manage performance issues, give critical feedback, resolve group conflicts and, in unfortunate circumstances, even fire someone. Handling these situations in a way that is simultaneously constructive, empathic and moral can push us past our emotional limits.

Gerhard, a manager in a biotechnology company, describes the constant concerns he feels as he leads his group through a reorganization. “I’m responsible for an organization of about 2,000 people. And everyone’s going to go through substantial change in the next four to five years. How do I get everyone through the change curve? Is everyone being supported in the right way? Are we communicating in the right way? How do I get through this reorganization effectively with the team and for the team? That’s where my angst comes from.” Behind Gerhard’s stress lies a fear that he’ll fall short, that he won’t get it right and will let his people down. He also has incomplete control over his people’s fate. “What information do you let people know and when? Everyone has a different opinion about how to do that. And sometimes I have to mediate differing opinions between management versus my leadership team. If it were just up to me and I was in a bubble, it would be less stressful.”

Advocating for a team can be stressful, especially when it pits us against people we otherwise would be working with as partners. Michael, for example, is a senior director at a Wall Street investment firm and has responsibility for one of their specialist groups. End of year bonuses make up the majority of compensation so he feels responsible to advocate to get as much as possible for his team. The other three leaders in his division are also doing the exact same thing for their teams. Michael ends up with a sense of conflicting loyalties: “It’s hugely frustrating because I want to do one thing for my team but I feel like I also need to get in line with my partners. That’s important to me, too. But taking care of my team is also very important to me so you have these competing forces that are really tough to unpack.” The whole process is de-energizing for Michael, especially when he starts questioning himself and feeling like he may have come up short for some people on his team.

2. Confrontational Conversations

Corporate cultures may ask us to say “yes” to every new demand, but to survive you have to find ways to navigate conversations in which you say “no” to people or push back on unreasonable work demands — while maintaining positive relationships. We’ve all had to become better at having

confrontational conversations, but have very little training or preparation on how to do that. We face confrontational conversations when we have to give performance reviews that are less than glowing or when we don’t see eye-to-eye with peers in other groups and must find a way to come to an agreement. Laura, from the first story in this piece, faces a confrontational conversation with her boss over the three-day deadline he’s imposed. She’s anxious about the impact that conversation will have on her reputation as a performer and on her career prospects — which would be a significant drain on anyone’s emotional reserves. And anyone who has had to handle client complaints can tell you how loaded these conversations are with fear of repercussions for long-term relations.

Consider the case of Stephanie, a manager in the financial sector, whose group produces research reports on corporate performance. One of her main sources of stress is the periodic calls she receives from a corporate client with complaints about the quality of a report. Stephanie worries about the rippling repercussions of these calls. She has to maintain the integrity of her group’s research and can’t have her analysts unduly pressured. At the same time, she has to be tactful with the client, as they are important to the corporate side of the business. According to Stephanie, “I have to not be overly defensive and let people speak their mind. Those conversations are definitely stressful.”

3. Lack of Trust

Mistrust in our networks can send a constant stream of micro-stressors our way. When we feel that others cannot be trusted — especially if it’s our direct boss or senior leader who sets false expectations, misleads, or fails to have your back when work goes off course — it’s hard to find ourselves on sound emotional footing. When a colleague all of a sudden becomes harshly critical, argumentative or moody, or cuts people down at random times, we feel like we have to constantly be walking on eggshells. We may over-think what we do and say, in hopes that we can avoid becoming the next object of criticism.

Examples of how mistrust drains our emotional reserves abound. Opemi, a manager in a venture capital firm, felt that his supervisor had clearly indicated he would be “kept whole” during a downturn in the markets, then was stunned to see a major reduction in his bonus. From that point on, he second-guessed any of his boss’s promises. Laura, from our initial example, couldn’t trust her boss to have her back in meetings with executives. Those meetings became more stressful and draining for her. Others have described holding back on speaking their minds or bringing their big issues to the table because they couldn’t trust that it wouldn’t somehow come back to bite them.

Our interactions with peers or teammates can also be fraught with micro-stressors when we feel they have hidden agendas at odds with their stated motivations. Working with peers who

promise and then don't deliver is, of course, stressful, as is working with someone who never admits that there are limits to their expertise, so we're left wondering when they know what they're talking about and when they don't.

Zack, a senior scientist with a biotechnology firm, feels like he works in an environment that is overflowing with hidden agendas. "Everybody is trying to build their personal brand so they can start a company or whatever. And you never know what their agenda is. It's really draining because you're never quite sure where they're coming from." Having to think twice about his colleagues' underlying motivations and feeling like he can't unreservedly partner with them puts a strain on the energy and enthusiasm that Zack otherwise brings to his projects.

Stress also escalates when others don't trust us. A peer who feels insecure and copies the boss on every message, or a boss who micromanages our every step takes an invisible toll on one's emotional energy as they undercut our autonomy and give us a sense that we're not working in a psychologically safe place. Mason, for example, describes how he can tell that his boss doesn't trust him. "I can see in her body language and the way she relates to me that something's on her mind but she's picking her words carefully. Because I can see that, I know she doesn't trust me with information and is 'managing me' rather than relying on me as a partner." Mason expends a lot of emotional energy in reconciling the way he's treated with the conscientious and trustworthy person he knows himself to be – and the stress from it all weaves through his day.

Coaching Break: Inspiring Trust

Trustworthiness is neither an inborn personal characteristic nor a mysterious force we either command or don't. Rather, it's a set of small behaviors we can engage in each day that rapidly build others' trust in us. People who do this well experience far less friction in their direct interactions. And they are modeling behaviors for others that when spread create greater contexts of trust.

Consider whether you practice the following trust-building behaviors:

- 1. Act with discretion** — both for yourself and others — by not revealing confidential or sensitive information that people have shared with you.
- 2. Match your words and deeds.** Managing expectations is critical, and so is setting realistic objectives and delivering results.
- 3. Communicate well.** Keep dialogue with people in your network sufficiently frequent and rich to avoid misunderstandings from diminishing trust.
- 4. Establish a shared vision & language.** Early in collaborations, get others on board about why the work matters, with a focus on clarifying common goals and points where interests diverge, so that misconceptions regarding intent do not harm trust.
- 5. Highlight your knowledge boundaries.** Don't be afraid to state what you don't know — it will build your credibility.
- 6. Know when to step out of your role and connect** with people on non-task/job domains such as understanding others' hobbies, interests or aspirations.
- 7. Give away something first**—Share networks and/or knowledge. Demonstrate that you appreciate what others have done for you by paying it forward.
- 8. Be vulnerable.** Admit mistakes and acknowledge when you don't know an answer. If you take risks, others will feel they can, too.
- 9. Create accountability** for trustworthy behavior on your teams and evaluate it.
- 10. Ensure fair & transparent decisions.** Avoid the "trickle down" of mistrust.'Create standards for disagreement while in the room, such as discouraging sidebar debate or passive-aggressive dialogue outside of the team; remind people not to initiate or enable such interactions initiated by others by engaging.

4. Stress Contagion

While some people stay centered in trying times, using humor to diffuse tensions, structured problem-solving to portray a sense of control, or mindfulness to maintain a calm demeanor, others spread a contagion of stress to those around them. They may externalize it to their teams, radiate it to their colleagues or bring it home to their families – and we end up on the receiving end. According to one leader, "If I'm working with somebody who is really anxious and stressed out, it sort

of feeds off onto me. You pick up on it in the tone or words that are used, or the brevity with which assignments are made. It just stresses me out when they are openly stressed or anxious and negative, and so that makes me feel the same way. It's like absorbing other people's negative energy."

De-energizing co-workers create stress when they see obstacles or constraints at all turns and articulate flaws in

plans before you can get the words out of your mouth. They place blame on others and when they disagree, they disagree with you personally rather than your ideas. And they show up physically like Eeyore, sapping energy out of the room just by their presence. We have mapped de-energizers through organizational network analysis for over 20 years and consistently find a small number of people can have a deadening effect on a group. De-energizers tend to have two to three times the negative impact that energizers have on the positive front.

De-energizers can also be found in our relationships and groups outside of work. One leader described to us a de-energizer in her cycling group. “Three or four of us would go cycling after work together. And while the exercise was great, it was almost counterproductive because there was one woman there stressing me out. She was constantly going on about how she hated her job and her husband was so awful and everything. In the end, I actually stopped cycling with them and other people dropped out of the group for the same reason. She was stressing us all out.”

Fear also spreads through interactions in networks and can have a profound effect on our experience of stress. When we have mapped fear in networks of people ranging from 4,000 to 12,000 employees we see three categories of people:

- 1) leaders who create fear through dictatorial styles;
- 2) experts or old timers whose goals of preserving status lead them to undermine or minimize others and
- 3) “fear-mongers” who see and experience fear in a broad number of interactions.

In many ways this last category is the most difficult as they tend to create stress in interactions by characterizing people or projects inaccurately. They see and propagate fear where it simply does not exist. They fail to keep things in perspective and, by over-reacting and spreading this reaction through the network, they make things worse rather than better. According to one leader, “There are so many people that we interact with

every day that cause undue or unnecessary levels of stress for the situation but we can only control how we react to anything.”

Anxious leaders can create chain reactions of stress that reverberate down the hierarchy. When an overloaded leader is unavailable for guidance or decision-making, that stress passes right onto their subordinates. We get two-line emails that launch us into action and we start working without really knowing if we’re on the right path. The tight timelines that higher-ups give to them are passed on to us. Second-hand stress also occurs when, as a result of overload, leaders make snap judgments without taking the time to delve into the issues. We’re then left figuring out whether to follow their lead or push back. Leaders may also pass on their stress by tone of voice, impatience or body language, a transmission of a negative emotional state that can trigger us to feel likewise.

Samantha, a manager in the health care field, had to lead her team in solving one of the company’s highest priority problems. Everyone up to the CEO felt pressure to fix it immediately. Her boss was overloaded, working on too many different high priority projects at once. As a result, Samantha was left on her own to determine the best course of action but unsure how to move forward. “I wound up getting more and more frustrated during that time period because without access to my boss, I didn’t have the space to act or the freedom to work at the level that I know I’m capable of. Between the demands and the limitations, I constantly felt like I was getting squished.” Her boss, meanwhile, would hand down occasional pronouncements that seemed barely thought-through. Samantha found this doubly distressing. “Dealing with a problem like this takes enormous energy because you can’t have a point of view until you have come to understand the issues responsible for it and that takes listening before talking. When I see a time- or energy-depleted shortcut by leadership where they don’t have the time to understand but offer an opinion anyway, it just makes me boil.”

3 Challenging Your Identity or Values

Most of us would like to think that we have a clear set of values that guide our actions, both at work and at home. While this is true, we also have to remember these values and our sense of identity are shaped and clarified through our interactions with people around us. Interactions at work may lead us to shift our values depending on what is celebrated in that context. Experiences and relationships outside of work can also lead to shifts in our values as our lives evolve and we see other ways to live life and measure success. These conversations develop and reinforce our identity as greater than work and are critical to how people build clarity and courage to shape their lives and careers. Unfortunately, too often the people who are “all in on work” have less time for this. One senior leader put this

well: “I don’t feel like I am defined by my work persona or the same person in all of my non-work groups. But I feel very confident in who I am in all of them. It is all these interactions – a sister that just came out of the closet, my small group at church, the parents of my kids friends who all live life so differently, my peers at work — an incredible diversity around me that helps me continually anchor in who I am; who I want to be and who I am not.”

Of course, the moments that chip away at our values don’t usually appear in neon signs: “Warning: this decision will change who you are.” Rather, those moments come in small, incremental decisions – ones we often justify as providing

for our family or simply pursue as a natural career and life trajectory. On the margin, the decisions don't impact us but over years of time they can lead us far away from what we really value. Throughout our interviews we consistently heard many successful people describe stark moments in their lives where they realized they had just spent 5, 8 or 10 years in pursuit of things that were mis-aligned with who they were when they started their career. And these are the lucky ones as they had these moments of revelation. Many people never see how their lives are inconsistent with values and identity.

When we talked to people who were on their second or third marriages, unhealthy to a point of crisis or with family relationships that were estranged, we would almost always find people who had allowed life to become uni-dimensional. Work success correlated directly with life success and slowly took people out of all groups and activities not associated with this trajectory. And often this felt great: like they were doing critically important things, with other people who were their friends, and they were taking care of their family. This all made sense right up until it didn't:

"My mother battled cancer and passed away after seven very difficult months...No one from the company I had given eight hard years of my life to showed up at the funeral."

"I suddenly had a free day and realized I had given up all my hobbies – tennis, guitar, fishing – and had no real friends to do something with."

It is this loss of dimensionality in life that makes us susceptible. When all of our relational investments lie in work, we are often pulled into being someone we don't want to be and experience the vagaries of corporate life deeply.

1. Conflicts With Your Personal Values

There are hundreds of decisions being made by us and those around us every week, and not all of them feel entirely "right" to us. Sometimes those decisions feel like they place pressure on us to pursue goals that are out of sync with our personal values. Have you, for example, ever felt pressured to push expensive pricing for a client, or meet "the numbers" rather than aim for client satisfaction, or to go along with a decision to fire someone who has been with the company for decades? This pressure also applies to expectations around work practices such as 24/7 availability or an expectation for immediate responses to emails which does not fit with your need for work/life boundaries or the demands of your personal life. Making matters worse, you may start to feel self-doubt for not pushing back harder, which takes a heavy toll on your sense of who you are and what you stand for.

Carter was working in an entry level sales position in the software industry and having a hard time with it. It wasn't so much the product he was selling as the price, which he felt was exorbitant, given that they were selling to small businesses. Also, his boss was an aggressive salesperson who ate, drank

and slept sales. Each Friday she would post the number of sales calls each person made up on a leaderboard, and Carter was inevitably in last place. To Carter, it wasn't the number of calls he made that mattered, but how he could use the company's products to help small businesses grow. The whole experience was stressful to him as it revealed how his goals and priorities were different from those of his employer. "My boss thought the leaderboard would be a great motivator, but it was just super de-motivating to me."

2. Having Your Confidence or Control Undermined

One of the most subtle but pernicious forms of stress occurs when someone undermines our sense of self-confidence, worth or control. Feeling unappreciated, unfairly evaluated for our performance, or dealing with a leader who is difficult to please takes a toll on our sense of worth. Likewise, if we're not given sufficient autonomy or the opportunity to contribute to our full capabilities, our sense of control can suffer and erode our engagement with our work. When we feel pressure to set aside our authentic self in order to please others or fit in it creates stress as we struggle with the misalignment between how we see ourselves and how we are being treated.

Mila, a rising star in a mid-size bank, had just been given a promotion. Before accepting the position, she shared with senior leaders her concern that she lacked the experience to take on the new role but they assured her that she was more than capable and had their full confidence. Now in the new, higher-ranking position, Mila was making decisions about things like promotions and project priorities – and having to say no to people. She approached these challenges in her own way, bringing people around to understand her thinking rather than bluntly turning them down. But she started getting feedback from her new boss that she wasn't assertive enough, which she found upsetting. "It's like, 'Here's how you have to act in the new role. Your style is one way and you're going to have to act another.' Which is entirely stressful because you're telling me I have to change who I am." Mila felt that her style worked in her old role and like her identity was being challenged just trying to do her job.

3. Network Disruption

Part of how we think about who we are is the connections we have with others around us. When those connections shift it can dramatically affect our sense of identity. Disruptions to our networks can create stress that permeates through our personal and professional lives. When we lose connections to people who are important to us, especially with the death of a loved one, mentor or friend, or when going through a divorce or marital difficulties, it's as if part of us is lost and has to be recreated all over again. The loss of workplace relationships are also micro-stressors. In the workplace, one of the most stressful events is a leadership change – cited in one study as stress-inducing by 80% of respondents.⁸ Losing a boss or mentor may deprive us of the well-worn paths of interacting

that gave us predictability and, in the best cases, an easy and enjoyable flow of work. The bonds of trust that we have built over time may need to be re-established and we may have to prove ourselves all over again. Losing an advocate or a leader who has buffered us from politics or unreasonable demands means we now have to stand up for ourselves and fight the good fight without them. Role shifts can also create stress as they require us to learn how to execute work through a network of people we don't know as well. One of the greatest stressors in life is relocating for a job, in large part because we lose many of the connections that support us at both work and at home.

Warren, a senior manager in the financial sector, had an enviable relationship with his boss, Max. Their communication

was seamless. "He could say a few words and it would be kind of garbled nonsense to anyone on the outside. But I had absolute clarity around what he wanted." In meetings with the firm's heavy hitters, Max shielded Warren from the "arrows" being fired across the room, and his commanding presence quelled any doubts that people might express during Warren's presentations. When Max passed away, the whole character of Warren's work life changed. With his new boss, all of a sudden, he didn't have credibility. And communication that used to flow with ease now became an exercise in frustration. "I didn't know what he was asking for and he didn't know how to talk to me." Over time, Warren and his new boss were able to build a familiar, trusting relationship but getting to that place involved a lot of micro-stressors along the way.

Coaching Break: Identifying Your Micro-Stressors

First, indicate two or three micro-stressors that have the greatest impact on you at present. Place a large X in the appropriate cells to identify the source(s) of each. Focus on those you can take action on. Then take a second pass through the table and reflect on micro-stresses that you are creating for others. Place a large Y in those cells. Finally, in a third pass through the table, reflect on micro-stresses that you are un-necessarily magnifying – points where you need to learn to keep things in perspective a little better. Place a large O in these cells. As you read through the next section, think about how you can act on your top micro-stressors and de-escalate the others.

WHAT IS DRIVING YOUR STRESS?	WHO IS YOUR STRESS COMING FROM?					
	Boss	Other Leaders	Peers	Clients	Team	Loved Ones
Draining Your Personal Capacity						
Misalignment of roles or priorities						
Unreliable colleagues						
Unpredictable authority figure						
Inefficient communication practices						
A surge in responsibilities						
Depleting Your Emotional Reserves						
Managing and advocating for others						
Confrontational conversations						
Lack of trust						
Stress contagion						
Challenging Your Identity or Values						
Conflicts with your personal values						
Having your confidence or control undermined						
Network disruption						

Strategies to Manage Micro-Stressors

Stress, of course, is not unique to today. What is unique is the volume, velocity and diversity of these micro-stressors and how they come to us through relationships in so many forms. They are part of the rhythm of our work lives and we take them as a normal “cost of doing business” in a collaboratively intense world, so they rarely rise to the level of deliberate examination and action. After all, who has the time when you are constantly in motion to fight the next fire at work or at home.

Traditional advice on coping with negative or stressful interactions doesn’t work in this domain because micro-stressors are deeply embedded in accepted ways of working together. They come at us through interactions that are too numerous and high velocity to handle one-by-one. Have you ever tried to take just one micro stressor from the above – like a colleague who missed the mark on a joint project or the emotional toll of a trusted work colleague moving on – and explain it to someone close to you? Often these discussions are helpful to process and manage the stress. But it can take

1. Isolate and act on two to three micro-stressors that really matter

The chart on the prior page enables you to select two to three micro-stressors that have a persistent impact on your life. Micro-stressors create an emotional build-up that needs to be released before you can think rationally about a constructive response so it often helps to first undertake an activity that helps you to **decompress** (exercise, time with family, a favorite hobby, etc.) You’re then in a position to **reflect on and process** your stressors. The true source of stress can get lost in the “noise” of anxiety or defensiveness, and conversations with others can help to unpack what’s really bothering you and why. One leader facing a work situation that almost drove her to leave her job found that sitting down with a trusted colleague helped her to diagnose what the issue really was. “I remember at the time just feeling really frustrated. And I couldn't exactly unpack where the frustration was coming from. Is it just the pressure? And, ultimately, through the questions that she was able to ask, I was like, “You're right. It's because I don't feel like I'm having the space to contribute to what I'm capable of.” Pinpointing the problem enabled her to then engage in a dialogue with her boss and relieve the tensions.

Perspectives from others can help us to reframe and see our micro-stressors in a different light. We can then recognize them as less personal. One leader we spoke to was able to see that the problem wasn’t her but the fact that “I was working for someone who at the time was so stressed and so insecure that they were basically micromanaging everyone around them.” This realization helped her recognize how

20 or 30 minutes just to describe the history, dependencies and context so your listener can empathize and possibly make helpful suggestions over the next half hour. We might have time for one of these a day or week – but we are getting hit with 20-30 micro-stressors a day. Who has time to articulate this all? And who, on the receiving end, wants to hear it?

Micro-stressors pose a different dilemma than we have seen before so we need new approaches for dealing with them. Our interviewees pointed to three promising strategies:

- 1. Isolate and act on two to three micro-stressors that really matter**
- 2. Invest in relationships and activities that keep the less consequential micro-stressors in perspective and**
- 3. Distance or disconnect from people or activities that create micro-stressors**

these micro-stressors were challenging her identity. Another leader, who was in the midst of layoffs from industry consolidation, was able to move from, “This is a personal assault against me” to “This is a fact of life that happened because an industry is changing. It happens to other good people as well.”

Stress is often driven by uncertainty or self-doubt. Re-grounding in “North Star” principles helps to put things in perspective. One executive still calls his mother and says, “Listen. I've had this crappy day.’ And she has no idea what I do. But it doesn't really matter because she basically just says, “Well, did you put in your best effort? Did you have integrity when you did it?” Those questions help him see that while things may not be going his way, he is holding true to his values. Returning to our values and principles can also help us to feel more confident in our decisions or guide our choices going forward.

Taking an analytical approach, and seeking out information or points of view to better understand the stressor, can help us to see recurring patterns (e.g., “These two employees have always had some version of this same dispute”) and help us know what to expect or how to prepare. As one leader put it, “Coming up with a plan is a way to deal with stress. And a lot of times, the plan can be I am going to learn more about the problem. Here's what I'm going to do to have more information to deal with this. It's not always just blindly going forward.”

Acting on our sources of micro-stressors prevents them from becoming chronic and can minimize their impact. Often, this involves addressing the issue directly. Having the confrontational conversation can transform relationships, enable people to agree-to-disagree and move on, or just make you feel better to have had it. These conversations often involve asking for what you need but have been hesitant to request because you're not sure if it will be seen as reasonable or will negatively affect your reputation. Others in your network can give you the advice and confidence you need to step forward.

One leader, back from maternity leave, was afraid to approach her manager about a new work arrangement she felt would help her manage work/family balance. She explained, "I just said to my office mate, "It would make a huge difference for me to be able to work from home, but I feel like I can't ask for that." She turned my perspective around by saying, "No. You can have those conversations." And then she helped me think through how to have those conversations in a way that felt good for me and that would be productive." Acting on micro-stressors can also involve pushing back or saying no to unreasonable demands. A well-developed network provides you with access to authoritative opinions or data, or the backing of experts you need to support your position. As one senior leader explained, "I'm not a technology person. But I have three technology people to say, "Back me up here, guys... we're definitely not able to do this in three days, for these five reasons, right?"

Micro-stressors are often predictable and people can avoid them by building the support network, mindset, or other responses in advance. A long-time manufacturing executive explained, "Every time that we launch a new product, when you're trying to get the safety, quality, delivery, and cost together, it's the highest point of the stress. So if we know that every time we are going to have that point of stress, why don't we plan for it? Let's work to start having better communication, better relationships so we know how to help the other person and avoid that point of stress." In many cases, leaders find that the best action they can take to mitigate stress is to practice empathy. Understanding the micro-stressors in other people's lives or trying to see things from their viewpoint can change how you react to their decisions or behaviors. As summed up by one leader, "They're not just the idiot on the other side of the table who's trying to screw things up. Maybe they actually have a view that just is different than yours, and they can't figure out why you're trying to screw things up."

As we see in the table on the next page, Laura's two top micro-stressors are primarily coming from her boss. She faces a confrontational conversation with him, pushing back on the deadline for the design project. Otherwise, she will have to violate her principles and at the last minute, ask her team to work over the weekend. But with a well-developed network

and better anticipation of these stresses, Laura can take positive action.

Laura needs to build an ongoing relationship with the predecessor in her position. That way, she can reach out to him for advice on how to push back while maintaining her boss's confidence. She also needs strong ties of give-and-take with technical experts in her area so she can tap them for authoritative statements on how long comparable projects have taken. With their back-up, it wouldn't be just her word, and it would look less like she was shying from a challenge. She'd be better equipped to compose an effective email to her boss and would feel more confident that she could avoid repercussions.

Laura may be surprised to realize that she is passing on micro-stressors to others. Although she tries to do her best by her team, difficulties with her boss have made her less accessible and she has started to jot off quick emails to team members rather than taking the time for real-time conversations. Awareness of her drift into these behaviors is a first step to stopping them in their tracks before they become ingrained. If she thinks objectively about the micro-stressors she is creating for others, she may also realize that not only is her new boss creating micro-stressors for her, but *she* is creating micro-stressors for *him*. He is perplexed about the intricacies of her team's work and she hasn't been stepping up to help fill in the knowledge gaps. She can reduce micro-stressors for both herself and her boss by more actively playing this role.

The difficulties with her boss are undermining Laura's sense of confidence but here she can find ways to rise above the fray. If she takes a break over the weekend to reflect with a good friend or her husband, she'll hear confirmation that she's a great project manager. They'll point to all the evidence of her track record, not just on the job but in the volunteer work she does for the local humane society. She'll be able to get things off her chest about the difficulties she has communicating with Suresh, and they'll help her to put things in perspective. She'll be able to see the bigger picture – that she's in the midst of a major transition that would be difficult for anyone, and she's handling it better than most. She would feel reinforced in her values, and proud that she stuck to them.

Laura's also experiencing considerable micro-stressors on the home front. Care for her father-in-law is going to be a factor in her life for the foreseeable future and will create some predictable patterns of stress. Laura needs to develop a back-up network of family members or paid care providers so when she finds herself in a bind, she can call on people who expect to be playing this role. Conversations with friends in her running club who are in similar situations can help her to be realistic about the demands of elder care, and embrace it as an integral part the life cycle of the family she cherishes, rather than an annoyance at odds with the flow of her day.

How can Laura better manage her stress?

Let's return to Laura's scenario in our opening. The frenetic pace she experienced in just one day was fraught with a series of decisions she was making to persist – and sometimes propagate – micro-stressors. In the moment she often did not see those that she needed to take action on. Let's reflect on Laura's experience.

WHAT IS DRIVING YOUR STRESS?	WHO IS YOUR STRESS COMING FROM?					
	Boss	Other Leaders	Peers	Clients	Team	Loved Ones
Draining Your Personal Capacity						
Misalignment of roles or priorities						
Unreliable colleagues						
Unpredictable authority figure						
Inefficient communication practices						
A surge in responsibilities						O
Depleting Your Emotional Reserves						
Managing and advocating for others						
Confrontational conversations	X					
Lack of trust	Y					
Stress contagion					Y	
Challenging Your Identity or Values						
Conflicts with your personal values	X					
Having your confidence or control undermined	O					
Network disruption						

X indicates micro-stressors targeted for action.

Y indicates micro-stressors you are creating for others.

O indicates micro-stressors that you are unnecessarily magnifying.

2. Invest in relationships and activities that keep less consequential micro-stressors in perspective

We are enmeshed in too many of these micro stressors to address them all. So if we address two or three proactively what do we do with the remaining eighteen or nineteen? One solution is to keep them in perspective. Mindfulness practices, such as meditation or gratitude journaling, can be helpful here. And of course, maintaining physical health through exercise is probably the most important lever we all have for combatting stress today. But there are also important relational solutions: people who have greater dimensionality in their lives and broader connections just don't experience micro-stressors in the same way. They keep them in perspective.

Throughout our interviews we would routinely hear how demanding and difficult peoples' lives were – again, people most of us would think have it all. But, like clockwork, there would be that tenth person who would tell a different story: one where they enjoyed the positive side of being a high performer but also lived life a little more on their terms. Day to day life was busy – but on the broader plane of life they were less reactive and more effectively shaping their realities at work and at home.

The key difference for these people lay with breadth and dimensionality in their networks. When we talk to people that tell a positive life story they always have cultivated and

maintained authentic connections in two, three or four groups outside of work. These come from many walks of life – athletic pursuits, volunteer work, civic or religious communities, book or dinner clubs, communities of parents met through their children and so on. These groups cohere around some common interest or history and, importantly, help us connect with people from a broad range of life experiences. The interactions with these people broaden our identity and how we look at our lives. And perhaps most importantly they give us courage and become a key source of resilience. Consistently we have found that those people who maintain at least one and often two groups they engage with deeply around non-work topics— athletic, spiritual, civic, intellectual, etc. – tend to be better at keeping micro-stressors in perspective and not allowing them to have the same degree of impact as those without these connections.¹⁹

Two kinds of highly impactful connections can be initiated from simple shifts in how we live our lives. First are those that support physical health. When people are successful in altering unhealthy times in their lives it is rarely a solitary activity. We have all seen the surges in our gyms on January 1 that are empty by January 30th. Or perhaps we have made our own resolutions around diet or exercise that despite good intent fade quickly. What we have seen is that the more enduring shifts occur as a product of situating an activity in networks and – ideally – sharing a goal with others.

For example, one life sciences executive described her foray in this way: “I was the person that did everything possible to dodge gym in high school...I was ok until I hit my late 30s and finally got a rather stern warning from my doctor on exercise.” She started walking around a nearby park at specific times and fell in with a group over the first couple of weeks. “That was key as it made it more enjoyable. We would share challenges in our work and lives and it was fab for me because they came from such different perspectives than the people I spent time with at work.” The group began to set goals on how long they would walk and eventually this moved to jogging and their first charity run. Fast forward over a decade and this executive now

plans vacations with her husband around marathons they run together accompanied by some people from this initial group and other people she has become close to through running.

“The people were critical. And not just because they made me a little more accountable to show up. It is the depth of the connection. These people have seen me at my worst physically and encouraged me on and I have done the same.” This executive’s narrative contains a critical truism about situating the activity in relationships. What happens in these efforts is not just a social pressure to persist but also new friends that add dimensionality to life. And because they often come from varied backgrounds the interactions shape our perspectives on how we look at our own lives, what we see as stressful and what we suddenly become grateful for. Perspective we tend to lose when constantly surrounded by similarly educated or accomplished people.

The second type of relationships that can shield us from micro-stressors are those interactions that generate a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives. Purpose is not just in the nature of our work and employment but also in the spheres we engage in outside of work. Reflect on the common sources of purpose from our interviews below. Could a simple shift in just one activity slingshot you into new spheres?

- **Spiritual:** Interactions around religion, music, art, poetry, and other aesthetic spheres of life that put work in a broader context.
- **Civic/Volunteer:** Contributing to meaningful groups creates wellness benefit of giving and brings you in contact with diverse, but like-minded people.
- **Friends/Community:** Often forged through collective activity: athletic endeavors, book or dinner clubs, relationships maintained with children’s parents.
- **Family** — Caring for family and modeling valued behaviors as well as maintaining identity through interactions with extended family.

3. Distance or disconnect from stress-creating people or activities

Finally, for those remaining micro stressors that are not actionable within your capacity and that are too much work or drama to rise above consider a distancing or disconnecting strategy. A distancing strategy can be temporary or permanent. Examples of this were replete in our interviews: people who left jobs, selectively turned down promotions that would have landed them with an undesirable boss, let go of friendships because of too much drama or negativity, moved away from colleagues that they loved but that did not come through and caused them too much work – and it turned out to be absolutely the right thing to do. Interestingly many people said it took them to age 35-40 to see these situations

and take action on negative relationships. This was especially difficult with friends or family. Overall consider:

- **Prune relations if constantly being negative:** “I don’t mind venting which we all do but there comes a point in time where you have to move on because it is not healthy. Stress and worry can cause physical illness and at some point you can’t keep that around you if people won’t take control of situation.”
- **Shifting nature of interactions:** Altering behaviors in the relationship to more healthy activities or consumption is a common approach. Subtle shifts in dialogue can also make

a difference: “What I thought was an innocent question my boss heard as questioning his ability. I changed first word of sentence so instead of making a statement I was asking a question and it altered the entire dynamics of relationship.”

- **Capitalize on opportunities to re-set relations.** One executive found herself paired with a difficult colleague at implicit bias training. The executive brought her experience of black women in corporate America and the partner brought her disbelief of “what do you mean this is a thing.” The training gave them a device to talk about things that would not have emerged from behind their work personas.

To be clear, relationships that are micro-stressors are not just negative or toxic ones. They can be people who we enjoy spending time with but enable unproductive behaviors or those who do not come through on their work commitments and leave us stranded over and over. From a health standpoint, we far too often will work out with a friend but then have a high carbohydrate meal or retire to a sports bar with the same friend thinking we have done good work. In fact, for most people, if we ask who the most positive influences are on their lives from a health standpoint we will hear some variant of: significant other, children, family and friends. Then when

we ask who the most negative sources are we end up getting almost the exact same list! Of course, you are not going to disconnect from these people but you can adapt the behaviors to a net positive.

Similarly, we end up in situations at work where we may become too dependent on friends or people we like for too many things. These may be great people. But if they don't come through or cause you more work, they add to your stress. The key is to think carefully about the multiple points of reliance we have and diversify those parts of our networks that are overly reliant on certain connections.

Conclusion

In today's hyper-connected world, we all experience relationally driven micro-stressors at a volume, velocity and intensity that is dramatically affecting our well-being. Too often we allow these micro-stressors to pile up in our lives and simply try to fight through each day, develop coping mechanisms or hope that things will get better just over the horizon. Successful people, in contrast, are more proactive as they identify and act on those systemic micro stressors routinely impacting well-being. And they go one step further by engaging in work and non-work connections in ways that create broader perspective in life. This dimensionality enables them to rise above some stresses and to distance from others.

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