

Extracts from a new book

# Stress Unmasked



Causes and solutions for  
emotional fatigue in the workplace

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123 pages

# The real meaning of “stress”

Remember “RSI”? Sore arms were nothing new, but when someone changed the name, nobody knew how to fix it.

Stress is the same. Ask someone “how do you feel”, and they’ll respond with words like “exhausted”, “angry”, “miserable”. There are age-old solutions to these problems, but if the doctor says “you’re stressed”, nobody knows what to do!

Stress is a major health issue, but to find solutions we need to use the right words. This new book, “Stress Unmasked”, peels away that confusion and places stress right back where it belongs – in your hands, where you can fix it.

## **The job can leave you tired**

- Constant interruptions?
- Can’t finish your work?
- Job unclear?
- Worried about making mistakes?

## **Social relations can tire you too**

- Feeling put down, but can’t fight back?
- Nobody appreciates your efforts?
- Taking problems home with you?

This book shows you how to resolve these problems of emotional fatigue. The author, David Brown, has over 20 years of experience in workplace psychology and ergonomics in Australia and New Zealand. Whether your problem originates at work or at home, you’ll recognise yourself in his clear examples, and you’ll find strategies that you can start using today.

## **Stress. Now in plain English!**

(Back cover)

## ***About the author***

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When I was four I began inventing things. Then as a shy teenager, I became interested in psychology. Later I graduated as a physicist and psychologist from Sydney University.

My interest in stress began in 1971. I worked with hypnosis, relaxation, biofeedback, meditation, exercise, assertiveness, and fear control. I studied the brain circuits and hormones that were thought to be the pathways of stress. I concluded that conventional ideas about stress were misleading, and I started down my own path.

For a decade I worked at a Government centre rehabilitating people who were suffering pain and stress after industrial and motor vehicle accidents.

In the 80's I became interested in occupational health. I spent thousands of hours in almost every conceivable workplace, talking to people about their jobs, hearing what works for them, exchanging ideas and experiences, suggesting and testing changes to their workplace and work methods.

After nearly 20 years of applying my ideas about stress, in 1995 I decided that it was time to share them, so I wrote 'The Pocket Stress Reliever', a booklet-sized summary of my ideas.

The book you are reading arose from the workshops titled 'Pruning the Stress Tree' which I then ran with my good friend Frank Darby in New Zealand. Gaynor Foster, a professional writer, reworked my rather didactic workshop notes into a far more readable and friendly format. In the hundreds of hours we spent reviewing the book, I think I learned how to write.

This book is aimed at managers and staff as individuals; the next book in the series is for human resource professionals and therapists.

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The first edition of this book was called The Pocket Stress Manager.

## ***Key points and quick fixes***

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### **Stress is like sore muscles.**

Weightlifting is good for you; although it makes you sore at first, that soon passes. But no matter how strong you become, even a small weight will make you sore if you hold it up all day, and equally:



### **Time is the key to stress.**

Even a small effort can hurt if you keep it up for a long time. Here are two ideas you need to bring your stress to an end:



### ***Each day, find ways to finish your work.***

Until you finish a task it stays on your mind, and while it's on your mind you can't relax. But to finish things, you need to be in control of them. This book will show you what control means, and how to get it.



### ***Find real words for your bad feelings, so you can resolve them.***

Bad feelings go on and on because we don't call them by their real names. So tell me, what's the problem?

Don't say "I'm stressed". It's an empty word. Just tell me, are you feeling tired, drained, resentful, frustrated, feeling put down, feel undervalued...

When you find real words, you start to uncover real feelings. Then you can help yourself, and others can help you too – because they've felt the same way at some time in their lives.

We're on a journey out of stress and into a positive way of working. So let's get started!

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# Stress means emotional fatigue

Ask a hundred people “How do you feel?”

They probably won’t tell you that they feel stressed (unless they’ve just read a book about it).

Instead, they’ll use words that have meaning to them, and one that crops up often is the word “exhausted”<sup>1</sup>.



**“I’m exhausted” literally means “my energy has drained out of me”.**

To the ancients, emotional energy is a fluid, like air or steam. The Greeks call it “pneuma”, the Chinese call it “chi”, the Japanese “ki”, the Indians “prana”. They all say that if you have too little of this fluid-energy, you feel tired, lacking in “vitality”.

Our civilisation is descended from the ancient Greeks, and in everyday life we still use the idea that feeling is a fluid.

Just listen to the way we speak about exhaustion – “feeling drained”, “nothing left to give”, “running on empty”. We might not understand the meaning of what we’re saying, but that ancient idea of energy as a fluid still runs through our language.

It’s true that Western medicine discarded this idea, saying that emotional energy doesn’t exist, so it can’t be exhausted. So we now talk about depression instead, but it’s hard to see how that is a step forward! It certainly hasn’t helped us to treat people – in fact the treatment of depression is nothing like as successful as everyone would want.

Something very similar happened when, for a while, medicine tried to define health as the absence of disease. Of course it isn’t, health is a positive thing and not just the absence of something negative. But while ever medicine was taking that approach, patients left in droves and headed for the alternative health practitioner.

In just the same way, we shouldn’t allow medicine to define vitality as the absence of depression!

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<sup>1</sup> The word “exhausted” comes from the Latin exhaurire “to draw out” or “drain”.

Perhaps in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, medicine will abandon depression – after all, it didn't help us much – and return to the idea of emotional energy.

I'm going to use those ancient energy ideas, but as a metaphor.

Here goes. I'm picturing you in ancient Rome, among the wine traders.

Perhaps surprisingly, I'm thinking of you as a wine barrel in the marketplace.

It's daybreak. While you were sleeping you were refilled with emotional energy.

Everything that you do today will use up some of that inner wine, your vital force<sup>2</sup>.



Your barrel also has a few cracks in it, which leak when you get frustrated or angry.

Little by little, your emotional energy drains away...

It's nightfall. How much energy do you have left? Obviously it will depend on

- How far you turned on the tap today, and
- How long you left it running.

Of course, it wasn't constant. Sometimes the tap was turned on full, sometimes only a little. It's the **accumulated total** of emotional drains that lead to exhaustion.

Your aim, of course, is to waste as little wine as possible, so that at the end of the day you still feel full of energy, rather than feeling "drained" or "exhausted".

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<sup>2</sup> Osteopaths today use the idea of vital force; again, it's based on the ancient ideas of energy as a fluid.



## Tired feelings are like tired muscles

It turns out that muscles and feelings get tired in similar ways. So I'll talk for a while about muscles.

Watch a skilled carpenter sawing wood. It looks easy.

What you don't notice is how his muscle tension changes throughout the stroke –



At one moment a muscle is tight, the next moment it is loose, then tight again.

The moment a muscle isn't needed, he relaxes it.

Whereas unskilled carpenters (you and me) are tense throughout the saw cut:

- We push the saw too hard, and our hand stays clenched on the handle as we pull it back again.
- We tense our neck, our shoulders, and our back as well.

After a few minutes our muscles ache so much, we have to stop. It's a bad cut anyway, we've ruined the wood!

The good carpenter smiles sympathetically at our discomfort – after all, he was a learner once – and simply says “Let the saw do the work”. That doesn't make sense at first, but when you realise how much energy you've been wasting, suddenly you get the idea!

The better you become at carpentry, the less effort you use and the less tired you become. Your saw cuts are more accurate too, because you're not sending the saw off course by tensing up at the wrong moment.

There's another difference between the novice and the tradesman – preparation. The carpenter uses trestles and clamps to keep the wood steady, but we grip the plank with our other hand (making extra work for ourselves). The carpenter takes time to rule a straight pencil line in the right place – “measure twice, cut once” – so he knows exactly where to cut. But we don't bother with “fussy preparation”, and again we make the job much harder.

## Small, prolonged tensions are the most tiring



We've seen how your muscles can get tired while you're sawing wood, now let's see how they get tired in the office.

Perhaps you work with your shoulders slightly raised. Just at the edge of your awareness there's a vague sensation of tightness in your shoulders and neck.

Your mind is on the job, so you don't really notice that your shoulders are raised, and you don't really notice that vague tight sensation; but **if it goes on for hours**, even that small amount of tension can cause pain.

Small, constant tensions are called 'static load', and are the main cause of discomfort in modern jobs.

The term "static load" comes from engineering, and was first applied to muscles in the late 1980s. It is a helpful term, because it explains a lot in just two words. Until we had that useful expression, most doctors thought that pain in the workplace was caused by repetitive movements, or by straining your muscles. Doctors would diagnose 'RSI', 'OOS', 'CTS' and 'RMI'<sup>3</sup>. So when an office worker went to their doctor and reported pain, they were usually advised to do less work.

Sounds very similar to stress, doesn't it! If someone is stressed at work, they are often advised to slow down, or to take stress leave.

The problem is, stopping work doesn't work.

Whether the problem is pain or stress, people often find that they don't feel any better resting or on light duties.

Here's why.

Static load is the part of the work that you **can't** see.

It's your "readiness effort". It's the work that you do to stay in a posture. It is the part of the work that doesn't produce anything.

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<sup>3</sup> 'RSI' = repetitive strain injury, 'OOS' = occupational overuse syndrome, 'CTS' = carpal tunnel syndrome, 'RMI' = repetitive motion injury. Usually, the terms were incorrectly applied! If you must use a term, use 'Occupational overuse' without the 'syndrome' on the end.

Even a small static load – under 5% of a muscle’s maximum effort<sup>4</sup> – can produce pain if you hold it for long enough. In fact it’s the small muscle tensions that cause most of the pain.

In the same way, **small things can cause emotional exhaustion** if they go on all day.

It’s a vital clue!

## Two issues – how tense, and for how long

It turns out that stress and static load are not just similar, they are related. People who are feeling stressed are often sore as well, and vice versa.

And, strategies that work for pain often work for stress as well.

Most importantly, it’s not just the *level* of ‘stress’, it’s also the *duration* that leaves us feeling exhausted at the end of the day.

How much, for how long. It’s a basic theme of this book, and it gives you three strategies for change –

- reduce intensity (the “how much” part),
- reduce duration (the “how long” part), or
- do a little of each.

First, let’s take a closer look at people who don’t find stress a problem.

Let’s look at people who have **mastered their work**.

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<sup>4</sup> Maximum effort is called “maximum voluntary contraction” or MVC. It is the biggest effort I can get you to make through asking.

# Why you should master your job

Why not be happy while you work?

The good carpenter in the previous chapter wasn't just "stress free" and "pain free". He'd **mastered** his work, it was good for him, and it showed. Work was a positive, sustaining force in his life.

We novices didn't find carpentry to be such a great experience. Why?

## If you practice, you'll improve

Practice has a lot to do with it.

Remember when you learned to ride a bicycle? It took so much effort at first, trying to remember to push down on the left pedal while letting the right one come up.

But then there was that magic moment when it all flowed. I remember that moment so vividly; I can still see the park, the green grass, the old wooden fence.

That's only the first step, of course. The more we practice, the better we get, as long as we're practicing the right action.

In Chinese boxing, the student practices in slow motion, deeply relaxed and avoiding any mistakes<sup>5</sup>, repeating the movement thousands of times until it comes naturally. It seems to be a rule that for any manual task it takes 10,000 correct repetitions before you really can claim the action as your own.

Q: What skills should you be practicing and perfecting?

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<sup>5</sup> This is called "errorless learning". Search for that phrase on the Internet for more information.

## Be interested

Let's say that you found your areas of weakness, you've practiced and improved, and now you can do the job perfectly.

You still won't be happy in your work unless you're interested.

I remember a time when I was developing a new muscle tension measuring device<sup>6</sup>. For weeks I worked until midnight, soldering and assembling parts onto circuit boards, testing and refining the design.

I never felt tired. The work flowed, it was effortless. Nothing in me was arguing, resisting, or telling me that I should be doing something different. This was what I wanted to do. It was the highest point of my life to that time, and it showed me how positive work can be.

Many people have this experience, which has been appropriately called "flow"<sup>7</sup>. An artist in a park, painting a picture of a tree; an old Italian man in a pizza shop, throwing dough; a Japanese cook, preparing your food as you watch.

Those examples are a bit romantic, but you can find flow in everyday tasks too.

My mother sang all day as she worked around the house. She never resented housework, and said that it was her joy to be a mother. She also said that until she was in her 70s, she never felt tired, and wondered what all the young people were complaining about! I'm certain that her accepting attitude to work was somehow connected with her freedom from fatigue.

You have your own examples, perhaps you've just forgotten them. Everyone has had the experience of flow at some time in their lives, when activity seems almost effortless, when time stands still.

Think of flow as liquid. Water running without turbulence. You're interested in what you're doing, whether it's humble or grand; and in the process of doing the job well, you're happy.

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<sup>6</sup> The Muscle Biofeedback Monitor, used in factories and offices to educate engineers, managers and staff, for the prevention of pain.

<sup>7</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in "Flow: The psychology of optimal experience", 1991.

## **Don't be mean-spirited**

Some people deliberately hold back from doing the job well because they don't think that their employer deserves their best effort.

Perhaps; but remember, you're robbing yourself as well!

If you really can't get past that block, start your own business, and excel at that. Because if you're mean about work, it diminishes your whole life.

## **Find rhythm**

Tense, relax, tense, relax. It's music; the rhythm keeps your attention from wandering, and the movement keeps blood flowing through your muscles.

For large, powerful movements it's a strong rhythm, with beats spaced seconds apart. Sailors sang as they hauled up the sails; on the beat they pulled the rope, then relaxed and took another grip. African Americans sang as they worked in fields, on steamboats, in railway gangs.

Typists on manual typewriters had rhythms within rhythms – the rapid clack of the keys; the powerful movement of the carriage at the end of each line; rolling the finished page out of the typewriter; then silence, while checking the finished document.

Today, those jobs have been mechanised, and it's harder to hear the music. But if you listen carefully, it might still be there.

Later in this book we'll learn how to subdivide long tasks, to introduce rhythm into tasks which have no music of their own.

## **Master your relationships**

Every job involves interacting with fellow workers, suppliers, customers. Are your customers or suppliers "unreasonable"? If it happens a lot, it might be an indication that you haven't mastered the art of working with people.

Work brings us into contact with people we would normally avoid. It provides a great opportunity for us to learn about ourselves, through noticing our reactions and through listening to other points of view.

More about relationships later in the book.

## **The ideal job**

There are as many ideal jobs as there are people, but let's use as an analogy a commissioned work of art.

Just as you wouldn't tell the artist how to hold their brush, the boss shouldn't over-instruct her staff.

She should tell her staff what she wants them to achieve, and why it's important, but in most cases she shouldn't say too much about how to achieve it<sup>8</sup>.

Think of yourself as one of her workers. You get more out of the job than just money. You feel that your job matters. You feel valued.

You're probably happy. You created that happiness yourself, but the workplace provided the conditions in which your creation, your happiness, could take shape.

## **How managers can make room for mastery**

Let's say you've hired a carpenter to build your new house. What performance can you expect if you watch him make every saw cut, and tell him he's being wasteful every time a nail bends?

I know a woman who did just that. She spent hours each day "supervising" the tradesmen building her new house, measuring the walls to make sure they were straight, insisting they knock down and redo any work that wasn't "perfect", whether or not it the fault could be seen once the house was finished.

All that she accomplished was to extend construction time by months, cause massive cost over-runs, and destroy morale on the building site. Finally the tradesmen went on strike, and said they would only come back if she promised to visit the site no more than once a week!

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<sup>8</sup> There are exceptions to this. In some jobs, precise descriptions of work methods are needed for safety reasons, or to ensure consistency of product.

It's the same in a restaurant. If you keep telling the chef how to cook, he won't stay around long; or if he does, he will be in a miserable mood.

So the restaurant owner has to find a more respectful way of working with the chef. Instead of saying "your food is awful", why not say "I heard that we had a complaint last night about the Caribbean Prawns, can you tell me about it?"

In office jobs it's not as clear-cut, because there are no universally accepted certifications that tell you about a person's skills. So a manager can't immediately tell whether a staff member is at the level of master, tradesman, or apprentice. Resumes, after all, are simply opportunities for creative exaggeration.

You (you're the manager here) don't want to leave the apprentice floundering out of his depth, nor do you want to insult the master by telling her how to do her work.

Why not ask? If they are new to the organisation (or you are), explain the outcome you're seeking, and ask them how close they can come to reaching that goal or that standard. Ask them what role they want you to play, then negotiate about that until you've got a working arrangement that meets everyone's needs as much as possible.

That's the method I use, and it works well. It's based on respect for the person's abilities. People really do feel empowered when you treat them like that!

## **Why job rotation isn't always a good idea**

If someone has mastered their job and enjoys doing it, managers should be cautious about forcing a job rotation schedule or multi-skilling program onto that person.

You might think that you're doing them a favour, but in fact you might be taking away the one thing that they're really good at.

We introduced job rotation at a hotel, thinking it was a great idea. I'll tell you about my mistake.

I had noticed a class structure in the hotel that I thought was unhealthy, with restaurant staff thinking that they were superior to cleaning staff. Indeed, cleaning staff had always been paid less, so management had effectively been supporting this class system.



So the first thing we did was to equalise pays. Then, we made it possible for staff to do both bar and restaurant work. It was not entirely magnanimous - we thought it would make rostering easier, but we also thought it would make things fairer.

But after a while it became clear that there were very few people who were really good at both cleaning and at bar.

Cleaning needs meticulous attention to detail, it needs uninterrupted concentration and single-minded focus until the room is done; because if a guest finds even one hair in the sink, or a previous guest's sock abandoned under the bed, they feel violated (depending on the guest's personality, of course), and it sometimes takes an enormous effort to overcome the distress that they feel.

Whereas restaurant and bar work is multi-tasking, looking after many people at once, remembering their orders, keeping track of who has been served and who has not. If you're a bit late with a meal or even if you bring out the wrong meal, people might grumble, but a pleasant smile and quick apology will usually fix it.

There are other signs that I missed; cleaners work alone, whereas bar staff are always surrounded by customers. It should have been obvious, I guess, that the two jobs required two different personalities.

So it just wasn't realistic to recruit people who were good at both jobs<sup>9</sup>. (More about personality later in the book.)

Perhaps job rotation is needed in your workplace. Perhaps there's too much muscular discomfort among your staff, and rotation is part of the answer.

Just don't take a mindless, dogma-driven approach to job rotation and multi-skilling! Talk to staff, and listen carefully; after all, they've had experience, and you probably haven't!

And remember, job rotation is no substitute for getting the job design right. See your local ergonomist for more details.

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9 The "bar person" can do cleaning, the "cleaning person" can do bar, but they might not like it much or not be very good at it. It's shades of grey, not black and white.

## If you feel that your job restricts you

Perhaps you are supervised more closely than you would like. (I'm assuming that you are a responsible person, more than capable of doing a great job!)

Perhaps you feel that you aren't respected, or you feel that you're being treated like a child. Or, the job doesn't really use your talents.

There are still things you can do.

- Find some aspect of the job at which you can excel, do it really well, and identify it in some way as your work. For instance, if you prepare documents for someone else, attach your personalised "With compliments from David" slip.
- Reduce your error rate to zero<sup>10</sup>.
- Become so organised that people can rely on your turnaround time.
- Study the task, and find ways to improve it or eliminate it.

Once you've got something to show your supervisor, you might ask for something in return (often in life if you don't ask, you don't get!)

## If you're not yet a masterful worker

Most of the time, you and I don't sing as we work. We don't work with rhythm, or in a positive mood.

Instead, we're constantly tense as we work. Sometimes we even do the work grudgingly, resenting the work that we're doing, or the people we're working with.

Before we can become the master of our work, we need to remove these obstacles.

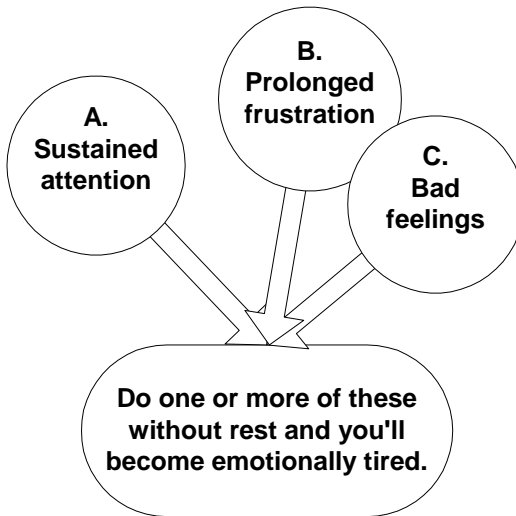
So let's begin our search; and in this search we'll use the idea of time, or rhythm, again and again.

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<sup>10</sup> Motorola invented "Six Sigma" in the 1980s, aiming to reduce errors to less than 3.4 defects per million. They report savings of US\$15 billion so far; for details, see <http://mu.motorola.com/sixsigma.shtml>

# Why you get emotionally tired

The diagram below explains three<sup>11</sup> of the main reasons for emotional drain, or fatigue – sustained attention, frustration, and bad feelings.



**Figure 1. Three causes of emotional fatigue**

Let's start from the right hand side.

**'C. Bad feelings'** – is easy to understand. Everyone knows that being angry even for half an hour is really tiring.

The same with **'B. Prolonged frustration'**. You know from experience that frustration can leave you with a pounding headache, and if it goes on for long enough, you feel drained.

Frustration and bad feelings are so similar, I've drawn the circles overlapping. So B and C are easy to understand.

What about **'A. Sustained attention'**?

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<sup>11</sup> There is another cause – fear and trauma – see [www.pocket-stress.com](http://www.pocket-stress.com) for details.

## Attention is a feeling!

Our feelings are active when we're doing the most mundane thing, like writing a business letter; and they're also active when we're just **ready** to do something.

You don't recognise this form of attention as a feeling, but it is. Let's try to understand more about it.

## Sustained Attention

There are two main kinds of attention – **'being' attention** and **'doing' attention** – and only one of them is tiring.

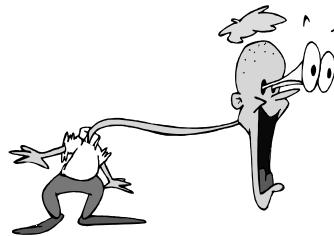
An example. You can sit on the beach all day and watch the waves, noticing every surfer and every bird, without getting tired; in fact it's refreshing and relaxing.

That's 'being' attention, or interest. You're just taking it all in and you don't usually intend to do anything immediately about what you see. In fact the less urgently you want to change things, the more relaxing it is.

For a healthy life, you need to sit on the beach and do nothing from time to time. Or an equivalent that works for you.

Now think of yourself as a parent at the same beach.

An entirely different story!  
You're scanning the beach, examining each wave to keep track of your children, ready to jump in at any moment to rescue them.



That's 'doing' attention. You're primed for action. You hold your attention tight, and it quickly gets tired, just as your muscles get tired if you hold them tight.



**It's the intention to do something quickly about what you see that tires you.**

## How to reduce attention fatigue

There are five basic strategies:

1. Make the job clearer;
2. Allow more time to respond;
3. Prevent errors, or make them less expensive;
4. Finish the task, so you can relax;
5. If all else fails, take a break even if you haven't finished.

The fifth is the least satisfactory, but sometimes it's all you have!

### 1. Make the job clearer

To understand why this helps, let's go back to the beach.

The harder it is to see the children in the surf, the more alert you have to be, and the more quickly you'll become tired.

In fact you'll probably tell them to come out of the surf before they want to, because you just can't stand the tension any more!

This principle also applies in the office. New staff members are known to develop more 'dry eye' than their experienced colleagues – simply because they don't blink as much!

They are 'ready to act', eyes wide open, trying to figure out what to do – and that's what leads to dry eye.



**Quick Fix:** Ask the boss, "What does a finished job look like?" He might say something unexpected – such as "Bound, in hard cover, with green tape down the side!"

## 2. Allow more time to respond

On the beach, if your child can run, you need to be much more alert than if they can only crawl, because you have to respond more quickly to stop them reaching the water.

If your umbrella is close to the water, you'll need to respond even faster again.



**The more quickly your response is needed, the more 'doing attention' you'll use, and the sooner you'll feel emotionally drained.**

The ideal answer isn't acceptable any more – tie your child to the beach umbrella!

But you can move the umbrella further away from the water. That gives you more time to notice the problem, and to respond to it.

Similarly, in everyday life and at work, there are simple things you can do, things like:



**Quick Fix:** *If you're taking phone calls and the firm wants you to answer within three rings, use a telephone headset so you've got more of those three rings to get ready. (More comfortable for your neck, too.)*



**Quick Fix:** *If you're driving on a wet night, slow down. When someone cuts in front, reduce speed until there's stopping room again. Then you won't have to drive with one foot hovering over the brake pedal. It's much more relaxing!*

## ***'Trying to relax' is not the answer***

Notice that I haven't yet suggested that you **'try to relax'**. The reason is simple – relaxation doesn't work unless you know **when** to relax.

Lots of books have been sold about how to relax, feel calm, and meditate. The ideas in those books are comforting, even uplifting.

### **But how on earth can you suddenly relax or suddenly become calm in the middle of any job at any time?**

There are deadlines to meet, an angry boss at your office door and the kids to pick up after school. I can't relax under those circumstances, and I bet you can't either.

Why not? Because we're not built that way!

Let me show you how it works.



You're waiting to pick up your baggage from the airport carousel.

You're in a hurry, so you stand right up near the opening where the bags come out.

You notice that you're feeling tense. You've studied relaxation, so you imagine a pleasant scene, breathe deeply...

There goes your bag, you just missed it!



**If you try to relax in the middle of a task, you'll sabotage yourself.**

Just look at all the other tense people near the front of the carousel. They aren't choosing to be tense. They're naturally tense **because of the position they placed themselves in.**

So if you're too tense for comfort, if the job is making you too tired, you'll have to change the job, because:



**Plastering relaxation or calm on top of the task doesn't work.**

Don't 'try to relax'. (It's a contradiction in terms anyway.)

Instead, walk far enough away from the opening of the baggage carousel so you can recognise your bag at least three seconds before it reaches you.

You'll find that you relax spontaneously, rather than having to make a deliberate effort to do so; and it feels natural.

**You changed your approach to the task, and relaxation came by itself.** You didn't have to coach yourself to relax, because:



**Your body will automatically choose the right amount of 'doing attention' for the task.**

Look at the other people who have stood well back from the carousel; they're talking and relaxing, they're not keeping themselves ready to snatch their bag off the belt. Their brain has calculated (in the background, without their knowledge) precisely how much attention is needed, realised that there is plenty of time to get ready to pick up the bag, and their readiness has been turned right down.

***Summary so far***

Your body is intelligent, calculating how much *doing attention* is needed for the task. So if you want to reduce fatigue, change the task so that it demands less attention from you. The same principle is used in the next strategy:



### 3. Prevent errors, or make them less expensive

If making a mistake is expensive (in money, injury, or just in critical remarks from the boss), you will be more alert and get more tired than if mistakes don't really matter.

Think about the most alert people on the road – motorcycle and push bike riders – who risk serious injury from even a small mistake. It keeps them wide awake!

A short bike ride is exhilarating, but you can't stay that alert all day, it's too tiring. Similarly, if making an error in the workplace causes serious problems, you'll need to be highly alert there too, so that's tiring as well.

Data entry work is a good example. In the 80's, data entry operators had to be extremely accurate. But we all make mistakes! They tried hard, but still there were endless anguished scenes between supervisors and staff.

The solution was automatic error-checking at the moment of data entry<sup>12</sup>. Instead of waiting until you'd finished hours of work, finding out that something didn't add up, and then having to comb through thousands of data entries to find the mistake, the computer was programmed to recognise mistakes while you key. That reduced the time taken to correct an error from hours (or days) down to seconds!

So correcting a mistake was no longer a crisis involving a supervisor, in fact the supervisor didn't even need to know – because fixing an error had become as simple and quick as spell checking.

Not only is error prevention less stressful, it's much cheaper. It costs far more to correct an error than to prevent it.

Unfortunately, there are many organisations who haven't yet taken these simple steps of error prevention. If you haven't yet, get onto it!

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<sup>12</sup> Error checking becomes very important when data is collected by people who are not skilled data entry operators. Automated error checking includes keystroke checking, eg "keystrokes for this field must be letters not numbers", and field-level checking, eg "check that postcode entered exists in Post Office list". The final layer of error checking is called "business rules", eg "you must not overbook the hotel during Christmas week because those guests don't cancel".

#### 4. Now finish, and you can relax!

At my stress workshops I ask participants a question that at first seems impossible to answer:

- “Show me how it feels to finish something.”

After some puzzled looks, someone takes a deep breath, and loudly sighs it out again.

A sigh of contentment and satisfaction. A look of pleasure on their face. They know, at a body level and entirely without words, what it feels like to finish. And everyone else in the workshop then nods in agreement!

Here’s the rule:



**Relaxation is the natural reward for finishing.  
If you don’t finish, you can’t relax.**

This also applies at home and in your personal life. For instance, if you have a personal problem and you try to relax it away, **it doesn’t work.**

There’s no point relaxing while your house burns down. You need to attend to the fire!

Oh, great! you reply. How can I feel finished when work keeps on landing on my desk?

The answer is to **have control, and to know what to do with it.**

Many stress authors talk about the importance of control in managing stress, and they suggest that having control is always good.

That’s right for most people, but not for everyone. Some people don’t want control over their work. If you try to make them take it, they will just get anxious – because they think that they will now be blamed if anything goes wrong.

No theory should be applied blindly!

## ***Control is one of the keys to finishing***

If you know you're not needed for a while (even 3 seconds might be enough), you can go off duty. You can stop. Whereas if you never know when the next piece of work is coming, or what the deadlines are, you can't finish, so you can't stop, so you can't relax.

Research<sup>13</sup> has shown that:



You're much less likely to get depressed if you feel that you're in control of your work.

If you feel that people at work care about you (i.e. you have 'support'), that also helps immunise you against stress and depression.

If you have control and support, work as hard as you like! (But don't forget lunch breaks, going home at a sensible hour, and holidays.)

But if you feel you're not in control of your work, a high-pressure job can kill you.

These findings probably explain why, even in the worst workplaces, one supportive supervisor can keep staff happy and reasonably stress-free.

Let's say you have some control over your job. Now, how can you use that control to finish seemingly endless tasks?

## ***Tasks that never end***

There are two types of never-ending tasks:

- Complex tasks, too big to finish
- Routine tasks, too small to satisfy.

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<sup>13</sup> These are my restatements of the following studies: Karasek R and Theorell T. (1990). *Healthy Work: Stress, productivity and the reconstruction of working life*. Basic Books, New York. Also the Whitehall studies: Marmot M G, Kogevinas M and Elston M A. (1987). Social/economic status and disease. *Annual Review of Public Health*. 8: 111-135, and Marmot, M.G. (1997). Contribution of job control and other risk factors to social variations in coronary heart disease. *The Lancet* 350:235-239.

## **How to finish complex tasks**



**Quick Fix:** *Divide complex tasks into chunks that you can finish in two hours or less.*

Most complex tasks are just too hard to finish if you attack them without a plan. Unless you settle on an approach, probably in writing or in a diagram, you'll keep losing track of what you're doing. So, structure your complex tasks so they can be completed in stages. Take a break when you're done. (I'll come back to this in 'Rules of complexity' on page 102.)

## **How to finish routine tasks**



**Quick Fix:** *Aggregate routine tasks by putting a stack of them into a box that you can complete in 45 minutes to 1 hour. Work through the box, and then take a break.*

If you do the same thing over and over again, it never seems to end, so you won't feel finished and you won't relax. For instance, if your job is to type reports, after a while, all the reports look the same. There is no clear beginning and no clear end to your job.

So you have to manufacture your own breaks! Find a natural break point – say, an hour's work or a meaningful quantity of work – then take a few minutes off.



**Quick Fix:** *To get the best benefit from finishing a task, make sure that you've decided on the end point before you start. Then it will be clear to you (and, surprising but true, to your body) that you've finished.*

I think that there are two quite separate “control” issues:

1. If you really do have control, you can plan and finish your work, whereas if you don't have it someone can drop extra work on your desk at any time.
2. If you feel that you have control, you're likely to feel confident and high in status. That's healthy!

## 5. If all else fails, take a break even if you haven't finished.

If you're feeling stuck, take a break – and come back with fresh energy and a new perspective!

Burning the midnight oil and still not finished? Perhaps you should go home and try again tomorrow.

### Revision

We've just discussed sustained attention, and showed five ways that you can improve your job. Now, can you think of examples?

Strategy	You give an example
1. Make the job clearer	
2. Allow more time to respond	
3. Prevent errors, or make them less expensive	
4. Finish the task, so you can relax	
5. If all else fails, take a break even if you haven't finished	

Next, **prolonged frustration.**