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Breaking Free From Toxic Work Stress

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Occasional work stress is normal and will not harm your health. You experience a workplace challenge that requires you to put in extra hours and work at a high level while juggling multiple priorities in order to meet an important deadline. After you meet the deadline or deal with the crisis, things get back to normal and the workload returns to a more reasonable level. You may even receive some sort of recognition or reward for successfully handling the challenge.

However, in toxic work environments, the work load is constantly excessive and a crisis becomes an everyday occurrence. You are constantly behind schedule with little hope of things improving. You begin to feel burned out because the time pressure and stress is relentless. You constantly feel tense and your attitude and mood become more and more negative.

If you are reading this report, you are probably dealing with toxic work stress on a daily basis. You may be struggling with unrealistic work deadlines, long work hours, unsupportive supervisors and/or difficult co-workers. I've experienced all of these, and I know how frustrating and miserable it can make you feel.

If you're going through this, you most likely feel like a hamster on an exercise wheel. You go faster and faster, rushing from one activity to another, but you don't seem to make any headway. Stress is coming at you from all sides. At times, the pressure may feel like you are being pushed to the breaking point.

How do you know if toxic work stress is becoming a problem? The first thing you will probably notice is long stretches of low mood while at work. You find yourself rarely laughing or smiling while on the job. The atmosphere at work is all so serious and grim.

Unrelenting stress and pressure darkens your mood and negatively affects your ability to think clearly or creatively. Not only does it attack your peace of mind, toxic work stress can harm your body. Researchers have shown that stress contributes to everything from heart disease to depression and even premature aging.

The better you get at recognizing your stress symptoms, the sooner you can appropriately respond. In this report, you will learn proven and do-able strategies that can protect your emotional and physical health from the ravages of toxic work stress. These stress

management strategies have worked in my own life and the lives of others. I encourage you to take these practical tips and begin adopting them into your daily routine.

The most common sources of toxic work stress are:

- (1) Excessive work hours and job demands,
- (2) Conflicts with toxic coworkers and supervisors and
- (3) Not enough evening and weekend "down time" or vacations.

1.) Excessive Work Hours and Job Demands

In 1986, The Bangles had a hit song entitled, "It's Just Another Manic Monday." If you experience a lot of work stress, then you too have had your share of "manic Mondays." A recent study of over 1,000 workers, conducted by the Families And Work Institute, revealed how common work stress has become. The study found that one in three employees report that they are chronically overworked. The study also found that, at some point in the last month, 54% of employees were overwhelmed by how much work they had to complete.

The Hidden Danger of Working Excessive Hours

If you are working longer hours, you are not alone. According to the Families And Work Institute, on average, men work 48.2 hours per week. Women (including the 24 percent who work part-time) average 41.4 hours per week. However, 38 percent of Americans work more than 50 hours per week.

Unfortunately, excessive work hours can harm your health. Tim Kasser, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, conducted a study that revealed that as people's work hours continue to increase, their feelings of life satisfaction and vitality plummet. At the same time, they experience a dramatic increase in health problems and negative emotions.

Excessive work hours may be something that has seemingly been forced upon you. However, in reality, you always have at least some choice in the matter. Working a huge number of hours may also be something that you willingly choose to do for a time, in order to get a promotion or a raise.

However, you need to stop and consider the consequences. Is it worth the price you pay to your physical and emotional health? Is it worth the price of deteriorating relationships? Is it worth not getting the special times you could have had bonding with your children and helping them grow in wisdom and maturity?

Don't discover too late that the ladder of success you've been climbing is leaning against the wrong wall. Remember, you are a person of value, apart from what you do. Just say "no" to overwork! Regardless of what you accomplish, cherish each day as a gift from God. Today is a gift, that is why it is called the "present." When we give our children a gift, we want them to enjoy it. Certainly God wants us to enjoy our daily lives, not just our weekends and vacations.

Unfortunately, one of the characteristics of a toxic work place is that they will not allow you to reduce your overtime hours. Yet, even while working long hours, you can do things that will help sustain your emotional and physical health. One of the keys to staying healthy is to learn practical ways to de-stress, especially in the midst of a demanding work day.

How To Quickly Reduce Your Stress While At Work

Do you find it almost impossible to relax at work, even for a few minutes? When you're stressed-out at work, you need to calm down and relax immediately. It is not good for your health to stew in a boiling cauldron of stress for hour after hour. Fortunately there are stress management tools that you can easily use right in the midst of a hectic, frustrating work day.

Relaxation is simply the practice of letting go of tension, relaxing your body and quieting your mind. If you get yourself physically relaxed, your mind will then become more calm and tranquil.

One way to relax at work is to take a brisk walk. Even a five minute walk can be very helpful for reducing stress. If you don't have time to take a walk, sometimes the simple act of stepping outside and breathing fresh air for just a minute or two can be enough of a break to help you refocus and gain a fresh perspective.

If time constraints or bad weather prevent you from getting out for a walk during work hours, the practice of deep breathing can be extremely helpful. Deep breathing seems like it would be too simple to work but it is surprisingly effective.

Researchers have found that most people's breathing becomes shallower when they are under stress. You breathe less deeply and only circulate a limited amount of oxygen in your body. This signals your body to increase the stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, because shallower breathing signals danger. Your adrenal glands release cortisol into your bloodstream whenever you face a real or perceived threat.

When you're under stress, your heart rate and blood pressure increases, causing blood to flow more rapidly from your brain to your arms and legs. With less oxygen to your brain, you don't think as objectively. This is the classic fight-or-flight stress response that instantly mobilizes your body to enable it to respond to any perceived threats or danger.

Fortunately, there is a simple way to undo the stress reaction. Slow, deep breathing will help reverse your body's fight-or-flight response. When you take slow, deep breaths, you decrease the accumulation of carbon dioxide in your body, thereby increasing oxygen to your brain. This enables you to think more clearly and regain control of your thought processes.

Whenever you take deep breaths, oxygen begins to saturate the alveoli, the lungs innermost air sacs. This stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system to release feel-good neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin. This makes you feel calm almost immediately.

It sounds almost too good to be true: simply breathing deeply can make you happier and more relaxed? But it's been proven scientifically. The May 2011 issue of the *International Journal of Psychophysiology* featured a study conducted by researchers at Toho University of Medicine in Japan. The researchers taught healthy men and women to breathe deeply into their abdomen for twenty minutes.

Immediately after their deep breathing session, the subjects were tested. It was found that they had more of the mood-boosting neurotransmitter serotonin in their bloodstream. This would explain why they reported fewer negative feelings. They also had more oxygenated hemoglobin in their prefrontal cortex. This area of the brain is associated with attention and high-level processing. Simply by breathing deeply for twenty minutes, they were able to concentrate better and think more creatively.

Deep breathing is an easy stress reduction strategy that can be practiced anywhere and anytime. Breathe deeply, fully and slowly for about 30 seconds. This signals your body that “the coast is clear,” the danger has passed and you can relax.

I encourage you to practice doing this right now: With your hand on your belly, take a deep long breath in; let the air fill your belly and push it out slightly. You will see your hand rise up as you breathe in. Then watch your hand lower back down as you exhale, letting the air out of your belly.

If you do this for just 30 seconds you will begin to feel more relaxed. So, remember, every time you start feeling overwhelmed with your to-do list, when you feel angry, when you are starting to worry about your business or career success, start breathing deeply. This even works when you’re stuck in traffic while late for work. Take a few deep, calm, slow breaths and feel peace re-enter your life!

The Jacobson Progressive Relaxation Technique

Another helpful tool when you are feeling stressed-out is the Jacobson Progressive Relaxation procedure. This relaxation technique involves tensing each of the major muscle groups of your body (foot and lower leg on each side, upper leg and hip, abdomen, etc.). Like deep breathing, this stress reduction method can be practiced anywhere, including in a crowded meeting room where tempers are beginning to flare. All you have to do is tense each muscle group for about five seconds, and then release and let them relax.

Clenching your fists or tightening your stomach might seem like it would make stress feel worse. However, in a study conducted by Laura Pawlow, Ph.D., women who practiced this technique felt less anxiety and tension. When they did this exercise on a regular basis, they were even able to fall asleep faster at night.

This relaxation technique is best done while sitting in a chair, with your feet flat on the floor. All you need to do is tense and hold each set of muscles for a count of five, and then relax the set of muscles for a count of five seconds. When you release the hold, be as relaxed as possible. Begin by tensing both of your feet for about five seconds. Then relax for a count of five seconds. Next tense your calf muscles, then progress to your thighs, abdominals, arms, etc. Don’t forget to relax each muscle group for five seconds.

If performed regularly, this exercise will help you recognize tension in your body. You will be able to relax specific muscles at any time rather than performing the entire exercise. Pinpoint your own areas of tension then tense and relax these areas in the same way.

2.) Conflicts with Toxic Coworkers or Supervisors

Some work environments have a more reasonable work load, but you are required to constantly interact with hostile people, such as coworkers, supervisors or customers. This is the second most common cause of toxic work stress.

Are there any people where you work who are toxic stress carriers? These are people who are not just stressed-out themselves; they seem to have a life mission to spread stress to others. Toxic stress carriers remind me of Mary Mallon, who was also known as "Typhoid Mary."

Starting in 1900, Typhoid Mary began infecting dozens of people with typhoid fever. She worked as a cook and the families she prepared food for became very ill with typhoid.

Although she had to change jobs frequently, due to each family becoming ill, she was convinced that she was not the cause. When an investigator confronted Mary with the facts, she grabbed a meat cleaver and chased the man out of her kitchen. Like most toxic stress carriers, Mary was convinced that she was not the problem and that people were just persecuting her.

Eventually, the authorities arrested Mary. She went to jail, kicking, screaming and cursing. She continued to deny that she was a carrier of typhus, even after it was proven with blood and stool samples. In fact, the authorities were never able to convince her she was a carrier of this dreaded disease.

At the insistence of the New York Health Department, Mary was quarantined. The authorities required her to live in isolation for several years and even provided her with a home. They finally allowed Mary to rejoin society in 1910, after she promised to never work as a cook again.

However, Mary quickly broke her promise. She secretly changed her name to Mary Brown and began working once again as a cook. She

frequently changed cooking jobs. Over the next 5 years, she infected dozens of people, several of whom died painful deaths.

Like Typhoid Mary, toxic stress carriers are usually impossible to reason with. They spread their stress and negativity throughout the workplace like a contagious virus. As a coworker, you've probably had to interact with toxic stress carriers on a regular basis.

Toxic stress carriers go by various names, frantically spreading stress and anxiety. Wanda Worrier is always scattering negative gossip concerning the latest rumors of layoffs. Angry Al is always complaining about how he and everyone in the department are being treated unfairly by the manager. Bitter Bob is always complaining about how certain coworkers took credit for his ideas and are not doing their fair share of work.

Toxic work stress carriers are very challenging to deal with. In my experience, it is almost impossible to change these people. I recommend that you avoid these coworkers as much as possible. Do not talk to them unless it is absolutely necessary. Do not sit near them in the break room. Instead, socialize with your co-workers who are supportive and encouraging.

If none of your coworkers are supportive, take a walk by yourself to get some fresh air and exercise. If the weather is bad, walk up and down the stairs or sit in your car and relax. Avoid toxic stress carriers like the plague. By avoiding these toxic co-workers (as much as possible), you will have a happier and healthier life.

In my research, and also based on my personal experience I have found that most toxic work environments are unlikely to change. If your work situation is this way, the best solution could be to search for new opportunities, either within your current place of employment, or elsewhere. Sometimes the healthiest choice is to start fresh with a different employer.

My experience with toxic work stress began almost ten years ago. I kept hoping that the environment would improve. I worked longer and longer hours in an attempt to meet the unrealistic expectations placed upon me. However, my work situation continued to deteriorate month after month. The stress began to take a toll on my health. When I would turn in for the night, I would not be able to fall asleep. For the first time in my life, I developed a serious case of insomnia,

which I am convinced was caused by the chronic stress I was experiencing.

As I lay in bed, trying to fall asleep, I would relive negative incidents that had occurred during the previous days. I would replay upsetting conversations in my mind. As I thought about how unfairly I was being treated, I became more agitated and anxious. I wanted to fall asleep. I knew I needed to sleep, but I simply could not fall asleep. If you have ever experienced insomnia, you know how frustrating it can be.

When I finally dozed off, I would wake up too early and not be able to fall back asleep. When the morning finally came, I would feel so tired that I would drink a lot of tea throughout the day in order to function. I was cranky and irritable. Unfortunately, I did not consult my family doctor about my sleep problems. Like a lot of people, I viewed going to the doctor as a last resort.

I endured this stress for almost three years. I finally realized that things were not going to improve and that I needed to move on. Fortunately, I was able to find a new job. With the love of my family and the power of prayer, I was able to get through this very stressful experience. At the time, we were living in California, so it was necessary for us to travel cross country to our new home in Connecticut.

As you can imagine, it was not easy for me to tell our children that we would have to move. However, looking back, I can clearly see God's hand guiding us. My family and I love living in Connecticut and I am very happy serving as the pastor of my current church.

I share this personal story to reassure you that you do not have to remain in a toxic work environment. Always remember that God loves you and will help you in the midst of your difficult situation. In Jeremiah 29:11, God gives us these encouraging words: "For I know the plans I have you," declares the Lord, "plans to help you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Do you remember the old saying when you were a kid – "I'm rubber and you're glue. Whatever you say bounces off me, and goes back on you?" If you've never heard this, it is something that kids would often say to each other (probably with coaching from their parents!) when somebody was saying mean or hurtful things to them.

Sometimes just allowing this phrase to go through your mind when you're encountering a toxic stress carrier is enough to make you smile and let some of the negativity bounce off of you. ☺

My point is, if you recognize this person for what they are, it makes it easier to let some of their negativity roll off of you.

3.) Not Enough Weekend "Down Time" or Vacations

The third most common cause of toxic work stress is not having enough evening and weekend "downtime" and/or vacations. By this I mean that you balance your intense work schedule with fun, relaxing times where you completely disengage from work. You're not checking work-related e-mail or even thinking about work.

Are you able to relax on the weekends? Your health and happiness could depend upon it. A research study, reported in the May 2006 issue of *Psychosomatic Medicine*, found that people who are unable to relax and recuperate during weekends off from work had an increased long-term risk of cardiac death than those who felt renewed after two days off.

For most employees, the separation between work and home continues to blur. With e-mail, cell phones, Blackberries and iPads, it is becoming more difficult to get away from work. According to a recent survey, half of the American workforce checks business e-mail on weekends, 46 percent on sick days, and 34 percent while on vacation. Many of those surveyed reported that it adds stress and new demands to their lives.

This is why it is very important that you do not allow work problems, projects and phone calls to follow you home and erode your "down time." As much as possible, you need to make your home a place for rest and relaxation. You need to avoid taking home a briefcase full of work. You also need to stop checking business e-mail during the weekends.

While you might leave work at 5:30 p.m., your "down time" will be seriously hindered if you bring work home or answer work related e-mails and phone calls in the evening. A briefcase full of work (even if you don't actually get to it) will make it hard for you to relax and recuperate. Over time, this could have serious consequences to your health.

Make Time for Rest and Recreation

In order to successfully manage your work stress, it is essential that you make time for rest and recreation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines recreation as the action of re-creating oneself by some pleasant pastime or amusement. Many studies have shown that engaging in recreational activities increases your life satisfaction and well-being. Relaxation is not just a luxury to be put off for “some day.” Rest and recreation are essential keys for a healthy and productive life

It is also important that you enjoy quality time with your family and friends. Take time to slow down and enjoy life. As Eddie Cantor observed, “It’s not only scenery you miss by going too fast—you also miss the sense of where you are going and why.”

Make it a Priority to Spend Time with Friends and Family

For nine years I lived in San Jose, California, the heart of Silicon Valley. I met a lot of people who were overly focused on acquiring money and possessions. They worked so much that they had little time left over for family and friends. They mistakenly believed that this would make them happy, however, many of them ended up feeling lonely and disappointed. Many of them also ended up in poor health due to wear and tear caused by years of chronic stress.

Fortunately, I also met some people in San Jose who were effective stress managers. Their jobs were just as stressful, but they were effective at leaving their work stress at the office. They made their friends and family a top priority. They did fun things with their friends and family and they enjoyed spending time together. They had discovered what Benjamin Franklin observed long ago, “Joy is not in things; joy is in us.” Spending time with friends is not only fun, it is great way to reduce your stress.

Whenever you have pleasant interactions with friends and family, your brain releases dopamine, serotonin, and other powerful feel-good chemicals. This makes you happier and lowers your stress, both of which have been shown to improve your health. In the last week, how much time did you spend with your friends and family?

Healthy Ways To Deal With Toxic Work Stress

Ignoring the symptoms of too much stress can be dangerous to your health. Many years ago, Walt Disney paid a heavy price for

ignoring his stress symptoms. In 1931, he was plagued by severe cost overruns and other problems at his studio. He was experiencing exhaustion, burnout and bouts of depression due to chronic stress and overwork. Speaking about the incident 25 years later, he said:

“I had a nervous breakdown. I went all to pieces. I kept expecting more from the artists and when they let me down and things. I just got very irritable. I worried and worried. I got to the point that I couldn’t talk on the telephone. I’d begin to cry.” (The Animated Man, page 84)

Walt Disney’s doctors recommended that he take a vacation. In October of 1931 he took a month long cross-country trip with his wife Lillian. Speaking about the trip, he said, “I was a new man... I had the time of my life. It was actually the first time we had ever been away since were married.” (page 85)

As helpful as the vacation had been to Walt, he needed to incorporate healthy habits into his daily routine, if he was to avoid another breakdown. Walt Disney’s doctors recommended that he start regularly exercising and find a relaxing hobby.

Walt knew that he had to start taking better care of himself. He began going to the athletic club two or three times per week. He tried his hand at calisthenics, wrestling and boxing, none of which he really enjoyed. Fortunately, he started playing polo, which he really liked doing. He also began playing five holes of golf very early in the morning. He would eat breakfast at the clubhouse and “go to the studio all full of pep.” (page 85)

Walt also realized that he needed to get more rest. Since he began his work day so early, he started taking a nap each afternoon. His secretary would hold his calls and he would lie down on the couch in his office and sleep for thirty minutes.

Walt also began building model trains in his free time. This enabled him to get his mind off work and relax during his evenings and weekends. All of these healthy habits enabled Walt to manage his stress and maintain his peace of mind. He did not work as many hours as before, but he found himself being more productive and creative.

You may not be interested in playing polo, but is there an enjoyable activity you could do that would enable you to get some

exercise and fresh air? Do you have any relaxing hobbies such as coin collecting or gardening that you could do for 20 or 30 minutes per day? You may not be able to take a nap in your office as Walt Disney did, but could you occasionally take a 20 minute nap in your car during your lunch break?

The Importance of Regular Vacations

Walt Disney's cross-country trip with his wife was the first vacation he had taken in six years. Their previous vacation had been in 1925, when they went on their honeymoon. Walt had been so busy in the previous six years that he had forgotten how fun and relaxing vacations can be. From that time, Walt made it a practice to take regular vacations.

Unfortunately, most people in the United States do not take all of their vacation days. For example, in 2007, Americans failed to take 438 million vacation days, according to Harris Interactive Research Group. The median American worker took just one week off in 2008. Perhaps this is why so many workers are feeling burned out.

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American works one month (160 hours) more today than in 1976. Because people are working more hours, vacations have become even more necessary to maintain physical and emotional health. Vacations give people the time to relax, reconnect with loved ones and enjoy time outdoors. Unfortunately, 43 percent of American women don't take a yearly vacation.

In 2005, Catherine McCarty, Ph.D., director of the Center for Human Genetics at the Marshfield Clinic Research Foundation in Marshfield, Wisconsin conducted a study that showed how important vacations are for emotional and physical health. The study of 1,500 women between the ages of 25 and 75 compared the health of those who rarely take vacations (every six years or less often) with those who regularly take vacations.

The study found that those who rarely take vacations are almost twice as likely to report high levels of stress and depression as those who get away twice a year or more. Dr. McCarty reported that non-vacationers were also more likely to develop high cholesterol and blood pressure, and less likely to say that they were satisfied in their marriages. If you feel guilty or uncomfortable taking days off and

vacations, remember that rest, relaxation and leisure time is essential for you to function most effectively.

Are You Ignoring The Symptoms of Toxic Work Stress?

As you deal with toxic stress week after week, it will begin to affect you physically and emotionally. Some of the most common symptoms include headaches, neck and back pain, shoulder pain, irritability and difficulty concentrating. When you experience these symptoms, your body is trying to tell you something.

Do you ignore these stress symptoms? I've certainly been guilty of this. I would say to myself, "I can't take a break; I have a deadline to meet." I'd take some Motrin and keep working. I would often skip lunch or just eat a sandwich while working at my desk. I worked late so often that I was on a first name basis with the custodian, who arrived at the office when everyone else had already gone home.

What do you do when the "check engine light" comes on in your car? Do you ignore it? Do you cover up the warning light with a piece of duct tape and keep driving? Do you crank-up the music so you don't have to hear the rattling and clanking sounds that are trying to tell you that your car needs urgent attention? Most likely, you would immediately take your car to a mechanic. Yes, it's a hassle, but if you ignored the "service engine" light or the clanking noise, you know that you could end up stranded on the side of the road, sitting in a broken-down car.

I used to take better care of my car than I did my body. I would have the oil changed every 3000 miles. I would make sure the tires were rotated and that I was following the manufacturer's recommendations for maintenance. However, at work, I pushed myself unrelentingly. My neck often hurt from staring at the computer screen for hours.

Eventually the symptoms became too loud to ignore. Neck and shoulder pain, stomach pain, irritability and difficulty sleeping were becoming more and more common for me. Are you having similar symptoms? What are these symptoms trying to tell you? Are they warning you that you need to take a break? Are they telling you to take a walk and enjoy the sunshine? Perhaps your headache is telling you to delegate or eliminate non-essential tasks. Even your irritability may be asking you to spend some time having fun with friends and family.

Remember, self-care is not selfish. Just as your car needs fuel, regular maintenance, repairs, and cleaning, you need to nurture your physical, emotional and spiritual health. You only have one body. Unlike your car, you can't trade it in for a new model. By taking care of your self you will be happier, healthier and have more energy to help others.

Conclusion

This report features excerpts from my book, "Tame Your Stress In 21 Days Or Less." It will be available for purchase at Amazon.com in February of 2012. I hope that you will purchase a copy and continue learning about how to tame your stress.

If you have any questions, please visit my website, www.TheLifeCoach.com I encourage you to submit your questions to the "Contact" page and I will try to answer them in future blog posts.

I would love to hear how the insights in this report have helped you. I would also like to know the one or two changes you will be making in you life as a result of what you've learned.