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**Tame Your Stress In Seven Days Or Less**  
**Del Hickson**

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## Introduction

In his book, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Max Lucado tells a true story about a parakeet named Chippie, who loved to sing. One afternoon, Chippie was sitting peacefully on his perch, when his owner decided to use the vacuum cleaner attachment to remove the seeds and seed shells that had fallen to the floor of Chippie's cage.

Her plan was working well, until the telephone rang and she reached over to answer it. To her shock, she heard the unmistakable sound of Chippie being sucked into the vacuum cleaner. She quickly dropped the phone, opened up the vacuum cleaner and removed Chippie from inside the bag.

Chippie was alive but stunned and covered with dirt and dust. She quickly picked him up and held him under running water from the bathroom sink. After she rinsed him off, she noticed that he was cold and shivering. So she grabbed the hairdryer and blasted him with hot air. Then she carefully placed Chippie back in his cage. The whole day he sat on his swing, but he was very quiet. A few days later, someone asked her how Chippie was doing. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore. He just sits and stares."

All of us have felt like Chippie, at one time or another. We were in the middle of an ordinary day, when suddenly we were sucked in, washed out and blasted by the harsh winds of stress. Your stress may have begun in the morning with a long, frustrating commute. It may have started when you arrived at your desk and encountered a major set-back on a project. Your stress may have continued to build as you dealt with an irate customer.

Perhaps you had a good day at work, but then you began to feel stress while driving home. As you fought the traffic, your mood turned grim. As you began to think about all of the activities and chores you had to complete, your stress level increased. You may have said to yourself, "This is impossible! How am I going to get groceries, drive the kids to all their activities, make dinner and still have time to pay the bills, all before bedtime?"

Stress is the way your body and mind reacts to something which upsets or interferes with your normal balance in life. Stress is a negative or upsetting emotion such as frustration, anger or worry that is brought on by trying circumstance or situations. If you are like most people, you deal with stress on a daily basis. Work deadlines,

financial pressure, and relationship problems can make it seem like stress is coming at you from all sides.

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, chronic stress can harm your body. Researchers have shown that stress contributes to everything from heart disease to depression. Even more alarming, chronic stress could shorten your life span by a decade or more, according to researchers at the University of California, San Francisco.

With work hours increasing and leisure time becoming scarce, it is no wonder that chronic stress is becoming more common. In fact, a poll commissioned by the American Psychological Association found that 75 percent of Americans experienced moderate or severe stress levels in 2009. A Time/CNN poll revealed that 42 percent of Americans describe themselves as "always rushed."

The good news is that you don't have to live this way. In only 7 days you can learn practical techniques that will reduce your stress and revitalize your life. By making small lifestyle changes, you can go from frazzled and stressed to feeling calm and contented. Here are just some of the helpful things you will learn in this report:

Seven simple, yet powerful action steps that will reduce your stress, so you can enjoy a more balanced & fulfilling life.

How to eliminate nagging worries and live more confidently.

How a few small, simple changes in your daily habits can transform your health and increase your energy and vitality.

How to use the power of humor to stop stress in its tracks.

How to say "no" to the good, (without feeling guilty), so you'll have plenty of time to say "yes" to the great things in life.

## **Monday: Work Stress**

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 it is for Americans to experience job stress. 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.

Tim Kasser, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, conducted a study to determine how people are affected when they work longer hours. Dr. Kasser's study revealed that as people's work hours go up, their feelings of life satisfaction and vitality plummet. At the same time, they experience a dramatic increase in health problems and negative emotions.

There is a limit to how much work even the most dedicated employee can accomplish. In my research and also based on my personal experience, I have found that some work environments are toxic and 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.

Of course, it can take months to find a new job—especially if you need to take some classes to update your skills or train for a different career. Meanwhile, your bills need to be paid. Until your circumstances change, how do you cope in the midst of a very stressful working environment?

Unfortunately, many people have experienced the stress of a toxic work environment. It is important that you do not blame yourself for how your employer is treating you. You did not cause the toxic and stressful work environment. It probably existed before you even started working there and it will continue to be chronically stressful, long after you are gone.

Seven years ago, I went through a very stressful time at work. The situation went on for about a year. Instead of improving, my work situation continued to deteriorate. 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.

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."

Until your employment situation improves, 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 recovery. However, with e-mail, cell phones and Blackberries, it is becoming more difficult to get away from work. According to a 2008 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 these tools have added stress and new demands to their lives.

If you regularly take home a briefcase full of work, it could harm your health. A 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.

If you are going to successfully manage your work stress, it is essential that you make time for rest and recreation. It is also important that you enjoy quality time with your family and friends. 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. For more information, see "Saturday," where I discuss this topic in more detail.

### **Tuesday: The Power of Gratitude**

One of the most powerful habits for reducing stress is practicing gratitude on a daily basis. Dr. Hans Selye, the famous stress researcher, found that among all the emotions, the feeling of gratitude contributes most to our peace of mind and to our feelings of security and fulfillment. He also discovered that the emotion of gratitude, more than any other emotion, accounts for the absence of stress in human relations.

Gratitude is simply the feeling of being grateful or thankful for a positive outcome. It is a pleasant emotion that is often linked with contentment and happiness. Practicing gratitude does not mean that we ignore or deny unpleasant circumstances. Gratitude is all about focusing on and celebrating the many small blessings that we experience on a regular basis.

Researchers have found that people who are consistently grateful are happier, more energetic, and more hopeful than their less grateful peers. Feeling grateful causes our brain to increase the production of serotonin which elevates our mood. Not only do we feel better emotionally, but we also benefit because the increase in serotonin counteracts our body's fight-or-flight stress response.

A recent study appearing in the *American Journal of Cardiology* found that positive emotions are beneficial for controlling high blood

pressure, and may reduce the likelihood of a heart attack among those who have heart disease. The most beneficial state of mind according to the researchers was “deep, sincere appreciation,” in other words, gratitude. They found that this state of mind is so beneficial that it leads to a healthier heart, increased creativity, mental clarity, and efficiency.

If you’re like me, you are not naturally grateful. According to researchers at Essex University in England, the human brain seems to be naturally “wired” to take positive or neutral events in stride. We hardly even notice when positive things happen to us. Yet we overly focus on negative events and daily hassles that we experience. This pattern fit me perfectly. I would ignore (or quickly forget) the five things that went well, yet brood over the one thing that went wrong in my day. Fortunately, I realized that this attitude was not healthy and with a little effort and practice, I became a more grateful person.

According to research conducted by psychologist Robert Emmons, Ph.D., one of the most effective ways to manage stress is to use a “gratitude journal.” Dr. Emmons randomly assigned people to keep a daily diary for several weeks. One group was instructed to write down things that they were grateful for. Another group was instructed to record daily hassles and the third group simply wrote about “neutral” life events.

Dr. Emmons discovered that the gratitude group, who wrote down three things that went well in their day, reported being much happier than when they first began the study. They also felt less stressed and even exercised more often. Researchers were amazed that such a simple activity could be so life changing.

I have been keeping a gratitude journal for several years and it has made a positive difference in my life. Keeping a gratitude journal has taught me to regularly be on the “look out” for anything that goes well or makes me smile. In a recent entry, I wrote about a pleasant walk with my dog and how I enjoyed seeing the leaves that are changing color. When I recognize and celebrate my blessings, both large and small, I feel happier and bounce back more quickly from disappointments. If you’ve never kept a gratitude journal, I encourage you to give it a try. Not only will it help you manage stress, you may find yourself smiling more often.

### **Wednesday: Laughter Really is the Best Medicine**

A marine biologist was telling his friends about some of his most recent research findings. "Some whales can communicate at a distance of 300 miles," he said. "What the heck would one whale say to another 300 miles away?" asked his sarcastic friend. "I'm not absolutely sure," the expert said, "but it sounds something like 'Can you hear me now?'"

If you laughed at the above joke, a number of positive and healthy things happened. Any tension that you were feeling was decreased. You relaxed your muscles and your mood improved. Even more important for your long term health, your stress level decreased.

One of my favorite sources for wholesome humor is Reader's Digest. I found the following joke in a recent issue:

On his way to perform at a graveside service, the bagpiper gets lost. After many wrong turns, he finally arrives, but the minister and mourners have already gone. Only the grave diggers remain, and they're eating lunch. Not knowing what else to do, the bagpiper begins to play.

The workers put down their lunches and weep as the man plays "Amazing Grace." When he finishes, he packs up his bagpipes and heads for his car. As he opens the door, he hears one of the workers say, "I've never seen anything like that before, and I've been putting in septic tanks for 20 years."

Humor provides remarkable physiological and psychological benefits. It is also a powerful tool for reducing stress. Wise King Solomon was certainly correct when he observed that, "A merry heart does good, like medicine" (Proverbs 17:22). Modern science confirms what Solomon discovered. Steven M. Sultanoff, Ph.D., is a California psychologist who often lectures on the benefits of humor. According to Dr. Sultanoff, humor reduces stress hormones, dulls physical pain and promotes social bonding.

Laughter is indeed a great stress reliever. According to researchers at Loma Linda University, just the anticipation of laughing decreases the stress hormones dopac by 38 percent, cortisol by 39 percent and epinephrine by 70 percent. These findings provide clinical proof of laughter's ability to reduce stress hormones that can damage

the body and even negatively affect the brain, ultimately causing memory loss.

Chronic stress causes your cortisol levels to become elevated, which can damage your health. Higher cortisol levels have been shown to weaken your immune system, making it more difficult for your body to ward off disease. Cortisol is an extremely potent stress hormone with a long half-life in the bloodstream. Once your cortisol level rises, it can remain elevated for close to 13 hours at the cellular level. Fortunately, laughter is a natural and effective method for quickly lowering elevated cortisol.

In light of these findings, it is not surprising that adults with an active sense of humor tend to outlive their more somber peers, according to a study reported in the International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine.

According to researchers, pre-school children laugh about 300 times per day. No wonder they have so much energy and joy! In contrast, the average adult laughs approximately seven to sixteen times per day. Fortunately, there are simple steps that you can take to add more laughter and humor in your life.

Perhaps the most effective way to laugh more is to spend time with upbeat, positive people who are able to look at the humorous side of life. Laughter is contagious. People are much more likely to laugh when they are with others than when they are alone. In fact, laughter happens thirty times more often in social than in solitary situations. Make it a habit to spend time with friends who encourage you to be spontaneous and have fun.

Other ways to add more laughter to your life include reading the comics or watching a comedy on television. If you don't have the time to watch an entire movie, visit Youtube.com and see some of their funny video clips, which are usually only takes a couple of minutes.

### **Thursday: Stop Worrying and Start Living**

Worry and stress are closely related. Worry is a type of stress and stress often results in more worry. Webster's dictionary defines worry as being distracted or pre-occupied by something unpleasant that could happen in the future. Worry comes from the Old German word "Wurgen" which means to choke or to strangle. Worry can choke

or strangle the joy and enthusiasm from your life. Medical research has found abundant evidence that chronic worry is physically harmful to the human body.

Worry is different from problem-solving. When you worry, nothing actually gets resolved. Decisions aren't made. Plans aren't formulated. Worry is like being in an endless loop of troubling "what ifs." Your mind keeps coming back to the same place. Worry is like sitting in a rocking chair. A lot of energy is expended, but you don't go anywhere. Worry robs you of precious time - time you could have spent problem solving, researching or consulting with wise counselors.

To break out of the unproductive worry cycle, interpret your worry as a signal to begin taking constructive action. When you start to worry, switch to asking yourself problem solving questions. Simply ask, "What is the likelihood that what I am worrying about will come true?" Assuming that what I've been worry about did come to pass, how would I be affected? What if my worst-case scenario were to arise? What steps would I take to deal with it? The key is to form a plan and begin taking action.

One of the most powerful ways to reduce your worry habit is to spend time in prayer. "Cast all your anxiety on God, for He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7) Many people who struggle with worry have been helped by praying the "Serenity Prayer" that was written by Rev. Reinhold Neibuhr many years ago:

God, grant me the serenity to  
accept the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.

I personally find this prayer so helpful that I have a copy of it on the wall of my office. The prayer reminds me that some things are out of my control. Rather than worry about "the things that can't be changed," I can "let go and let God" and focus on changing the things that are in my circle of influence.

### **Friday: "No!" A Powerful Word for Reducing Stress**

Do you often feel pressured to do things because you think you have to, not because you want to? Do you often say "yes" to others' requests and then end up regretting it? All too often, it's difficult for

many people to just say "no." Not saying that one little word can pile up expectations and obligations that can increase your stress level.

Constantly trying to please other people is emotionally and physically draining. Not surprisingly, many people pleasers report feeling stressed, drained, and tired much of the time. Fortunately it's possible to change this pattern, feel better about yourself and live a more balanced life.

Breaking out of the people pleasing cycle is easier than you think. First, always bear in mind that for every request that you say "yes" to, you are saying "no" to something else. Remember that it is okay for you to say "no" so that you will have sufficient time each week to relax, exercise, have fun, spend time on a hobby or just have some time to yourself.

Remember that you are not required to give a reason for saying "no" to people's requests. However, at times you may want to soften your "no" with a very brief, yet somewhat vague explanation. For example, you might say, "I have to say 'no' because my other commitments won't allow me help at this time."

It can also be helpful to soften your "no" with a compliment. "I'm sorry, but I don't have time to serve on your committee this year. I do admire what you're doing and I wish you well." Another example is "For family reasons, I'm not able to take on any more commitments at this time. You're organization is doing a great job and I thank you for thinking of me."

Get in the habit of pausing or taking a breath before responding to someone's request. You may want to answer requests with, "I need to think about it first, I'll get back to you." Another helpful response is "Let me check my schedule and call you back in ten minutes." Use any phrase that you feel comfortable with that gives you time to consider your alternatives.

At times, we also need to say "no" to the unrealistic expectations that we have of ourselves. Do you have an "inner critic" that drives you to constantly do more and achieve more, so that you can feel good about yourself? Always remember that you are a person of value and worth for who you are, rather than for what you do. In God's eyes, you are unique and priceless. As you treat yourself with love and compassion, you will be well on your way to living a more balanced and enjoyable life.

## **Saturday: Relaxation and Recreation**

Many people are consumed by ever increasing work demands. They are rarely able to relax (even at home) because they are busy cleaning, cooking or doing other chores. They believe that they do not have time for recreational pursuits such as sports or hobbies. This is unfortunate because they are depriving themselves of enjoyable activities that promote emotional and physical health.

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, self-confidence and well-being.

Recreational activities that include your friends can be even more enjoyable. In several studies of people who experience high levels of well-being, the number one strategy used to improve their mood was spending time with other people. Psychologists agree that people feel happier when they spend time with others.

If you have gotten out of the habit of recreation, the following are some great ways to relax and have fun, while also reducing your stress:

### **Enjoying the Great Outdoors:**

According to Japanese researchers, a stroll through a forest or a park can lower your level of the stress hormone cortisol better than an urban outing. Communing with nature not only relaxes your mind, it also strengthens your body. In a separate study, conducted at Japan's Nippon Medical School, the number of cancer-fighting blood proteins rose among adults who wandered through a forest. Remarkably, the high levels lasted at least a week. Even if you don't live near a forest, you can relax and enjoy spending time at a lake, river or a beach.

### **Hobbies:**

I used to think that hobbies were just a pleasant, relaxing way to pass the time. Now I realize that they are also powerful tools for lowering your stress. If you don't have a hobby, I encourage you to try one. Hobbies like knitting, crocheting, scrap booking and coin collecting are highly recommended.

Many people have found that crocheting is a stress reliever and scientists now know why. Researchers at the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital have discovered that the repetition and rhythm of knitting or crocheting helps elicit your body's relaxation response.

Other hobbies that are great for reducing stress include playing a musical instrument, dancing, painting, woodworking, or anything creative. Engaging in creative activities such as scrap booking or knitting can immediately lift your mood. Remarkably, the good feelings can last hours longer, according to a study reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

### **Sports:**

Playing sports, such as basketball, soccer, or tennis is a great way to exercise, relax and have fun. Team sports combine the benefits of socialization with the positive peer-pressure to participate, even when initially you might not have been in the mood to play.

### **Games:**

Researchers at the University Hospital in Newark, New Jersey have found that playing strategy-driven games, such as Monopoly, Scrabble or Solitaire, spurs the brain to release dopamine, the "feel-good" hormone, linked to motivation and pleasure. These stress reduction benefits help explain why board games continue to be popular, decade after decade.

### **Gardening:**

Tending plants, fruits, vegetables, flowers and watching them grow, bloom, or yield food is satisfying. Avid gardeners say working in their garden is a great way to control stress. Researchers at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom have discovered one of the reasons why gardening is so relaxing. According to a 2008 study published in the journal *Neuroscience*, digging in the dirt provides exposure to helpful bacteria commonly found in soil. Sniffing *Mycobacterium Vaccae* causes your brain to increase production of serotonin, a mood-enhancing chemical that lowers your stress.

### **Sunday: The Power of Faith**

Our spiritual side is very personal and individual. While not important to everyone, religious and spiritual activities can greatly enhance a person's life satisfaction. Nurturing your relationship with God can also be a powerful way to reduce stress and decrease worry.

More and more scientific studies show that praying and going to church can make a person healthier and happier. Harold G. Koenig, M.D., a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University Medical Center, conducted a groundbreaking study in 1998. He found that people who pray daily or read the Bible and who also attend religious services weekly are 40 percent less likely to have high blood pressure.

Prayer also lowers your stress level. Scientists have observed that prayer calms the amygdala, the brain's stress-serenity center. This causes the adrenal glands to release 20 to 40 percent less cortisol. This is a powerful indicator of feeling less stressed.

Many studies have shown that praying has a positive impact on a person's sense of well-being and life satisfaction. Neil Krause, Ph.D., at the University of Michigan conducted a survey of more than 1000 older adults to study the effects of praying for others. Those who participated in the study were questioned about their health, finances and the nature of their prayers. Dr. Krause found that people who prayed for others experienced significant improvements in their own health and well-being.

Another fascinating study, conducted by researchers at Florida State University found that people who pray for their spouse's well-being feel closer to their partners. Those who prayed for their partners were also more willing to overlook their spouse's flaws. They had fewer vengeful thoughts and were more likely to forgive.

Faith can also be extremely helpful during difficult times. According to Dr. Koenig's research, religious belief can be a very powerful way of coping with adversity and stress. As a Christian, I have found a lot of joy, comfort and strength from my relationship with God. As a pastor, I have interacted with hundreds of people who have found inspiration and meaning from their faith. They have told me that being part of a nurturing community of faith has made a positive difference in their life.

It can be very meaningful to gather together with other people for prayer and worship. Dr. Susan Lutgendorf, a psychologist at the University of Iowa, found in her 2004 study that people who worship once per week have better-functioning immune systems. Faith encourages optimism which also helps people live longer and happier lives. The Alameda longitudinal study of nearly 7000 people showed that those who participated in regular church-sponsored activities are markedly less stressed over finances, health, and other daily concerns than those who did not attend church.

### **Conclusion: Continuing Your Stress Taming Journey**

This report features excerpts from my book, *Tame Your Stress in 21 Days or Less*. It will be available for purchase on Amazon.com in February of 2011. I hope that you will purchase a copy and continue learning more about how to tame your stress.

As you continue to learn more effective ways to manage stress, I encourage you to share your discoveries with me. You can visit my website at [www.TheLifeCoach.com](http://www.TheLifeCoach.com) and leave a comment on my blog. I would love to hear how the *Tame Your Stress* program has helped you.