

The American Institute of Stress

# CONTENTMENT

Your source for science-based stress management information

Volume 10 Number 2

Summer 2021

## Capturing the Wisdom of a Stressful Year

*Inside: The Constellation Effect – Moving Forward When What May Be Wrong Is a Mystery, By Jeff Jernigan*

- *How to Know Your Signs of Stress, By James C. Petersen*
- *Contentment Connection: Easy Ways to Nourish Your Vagus Nerve to Become More Content, By Sharon Montes*
- *Boosting Resilience to Buffer Against Burnout in the Workplace, By Jacinta M. Jiménez*
- *Opening Your Office Post - Pandemic: Handling the Stress of Change, By Jen Butler*
- *The Older Are Wiser About COVID and More Resiliency In The Elderly, By Ron Rubenzer*



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**AIS provides a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters intellectual discovery, creates and transmits innovative knowledge, improves human health, and provides leadership to the world on stress related topics.**

Your source for science-based stress management information

# CONTENTMENT

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*Contentment* is a quarterly magazine published in Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter with news and advertising designed with the general public in mind. It appeals to all those interested in the myriad and complex interrelationships between stress and health because technical jargon is avoided and it is easy to understand. *Contentment* magazine is indexed by EBSCO and archived online at [stress.org](http://stress.org). Information in this publication is carefully compiled to ensure accuracy.

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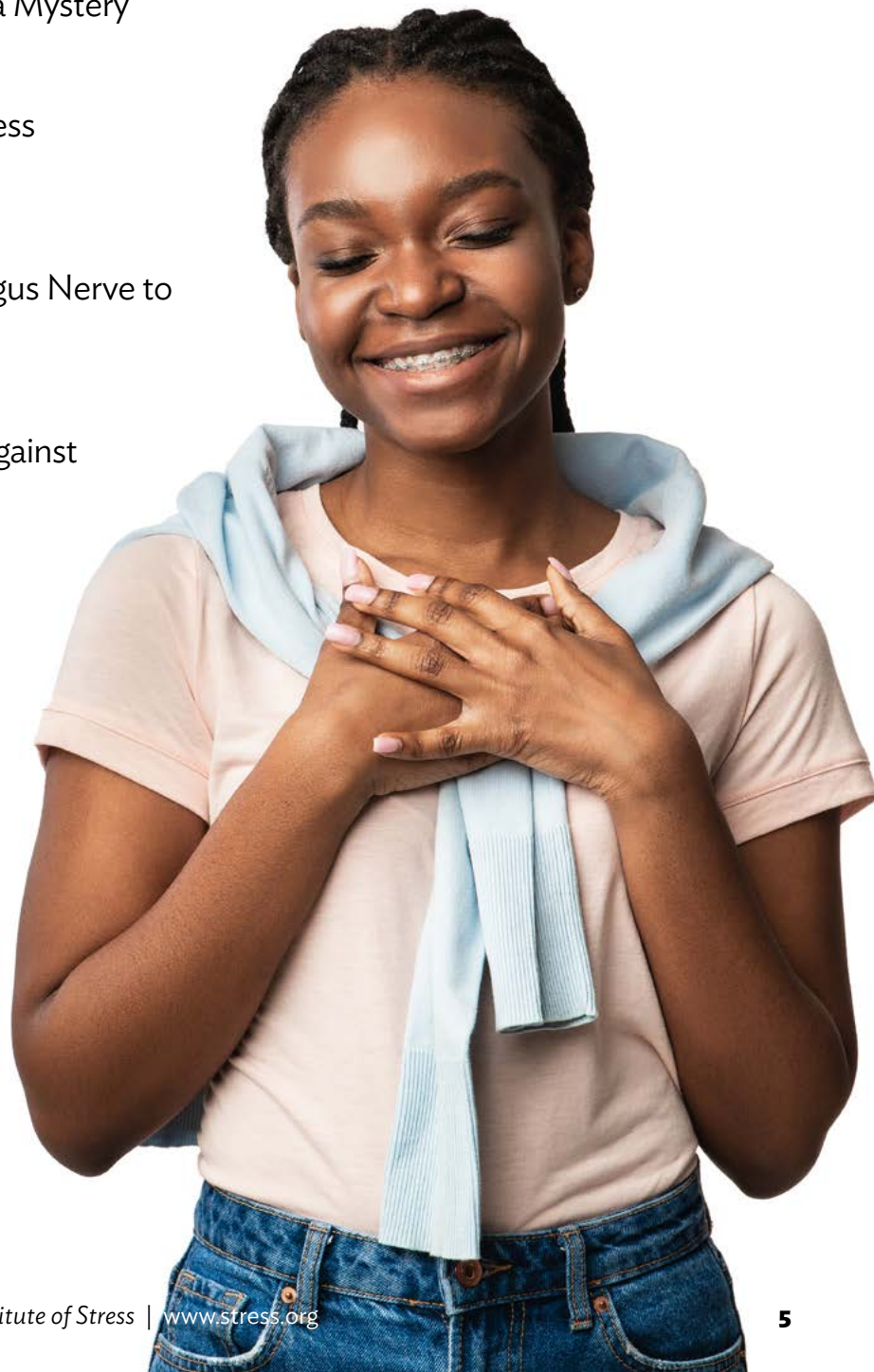
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# Editor's Message

Cynthia Ackrill, MD, PCC, FAIS  
Editor



**A**s summer 2021 unfolds we find ourselves still quite unsettled. While, gratefully, Covid cases and deaths are on the decline in many parts of the world, there are still major hurdles for full recovery. Globally we are still witnessing huge challenges and disparities, and we are still left with so many questions and a lot of emotions to process. This whole pandemic experience has tested each of us in different ways, traumatizing many, and making healing, gaining strength, and growth not a one-size-fits-all process.

What is clear is that in the face of uncertainty, constant change, and life disruption, we can find strength in humanity and strength within. Our personal relationship with stress and the challenges of life matters to our immunity, our resilience, and our physical and mental wellbeing... our contentment.

So many important lessons have emerged, and it will take some time to capture their wisdom in ways that serve us going forward. This learning process requires attention and intention. As you read through these articles, reflect on what has served you, what you learned about your strengths this last 18 months, what you have found matters most in your life, and what you would like to explore with curiosity as you emerge back into the world.

**Jeff Jernigan, PhD, BCPPC, FAIS** delivers another thoughtful piece looking at what he terms, “The Constellation Effect.” How do we move forward when what may be wrong is still a mystery? Our brains love

certainty, cause and effect simplicity, but the complexities of human experience rarely line up so neatly. The perfect storm of this pandemic illustrates the interconnect- edness of systems, from political/economic/ healthcare complexities to the interplay of physical/mental/emotional/spiritual contributions to our health. Dr. Jernigan uses a case study to illustrate the process of teasing apart the constellation to design your strategy for healing.

While the wiring for the stress reaction is universal, the expression of distress takes many forms and can be difficult to measure, making it hard to know where to start to make a change. **James Petersen, PhD, FAIS** has developed a standardized and validated psychometric assessment based in the science of stress and with an impressive database. His Stress Mastery Questionnaire helps identify 7 different warning signs of stress, 2 scales of stressors, and 2 scales of stress effects. Dr. Petersen generously shares the scales he has found useful, allowing you to reflect on the roles stress is playing in your life, and what you might want to adjust to feel more contentment.

We welcome a new contributor, **Sharon Montes, MD, FAIS**, and her very practical advice on how to increase your vagal tone. Everyone knows the power of the sympathetic (flight, fight, freeze) system to rev you up in response to stress, but too little has been taught about invoking the power of the parasympathetic (rest and digest) system to calm and rebalance your physiology. Dr. Montes distills her wealth of



integrative medicine wisdom into specific techniques you can do right now to increase your calm by activating your vagus nerve at the heart of the parasympathetic nervous system.

**Jacinta M. Jiménez, PsyD, BCC, FAIS**, is also a new contributor and an expert in burnout. One positive note from this past year is that as the stress and burnout rates have escalated, they have finally become safer topics to examine and discuss, even in the workplace. Learning how to recognize burnout and create tools to buffer against it will be critical as we move forward. Dr. Jiménez presents 3 steps to better recognize burnout, respond to it with practical steps, and build a pro-resilience toolkit to ensure you replenish yourself for your future. Arm yourself with a clear understanding of burnout and the choices that will buffer you and yours against it.

**Jen Butler, MEd, BCC, DAIS** takes a look at the complex and stress-ridden challenges of reopening offices. Leaders need to navigate change management while dealing with large loads of residual stress as well as the new stressors encountered in the opening process. She offers practical tips to clearly understand the sources of stress, define strategies to lead the changes, and enlist the art of persuasion, while complying with regulations. This is timely for many!

And lastly, **Ron Rubenzer, EdD, MA, MPH, MSE, FAIS**, thoughtfully examines the wisdom and resilience of aging. While the above 65 crowd (as he calls it, “The Rest of Us”) was statistically far more vulnerable to physical ravages of the pandemic, several

studies picked up on their relative mental resilience. He discusses 6 benefits of the golden years and offers tips to handle some common challenges, such as memory loss.

May this edition help you capture some of your hard-earned wisdom and clarify how you can build more contentment into your future! Take care of YOU and each other...

*Cindi*

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# **The Constellation Effect**

Moving forward when what  
may be wrong is a mystery



By Jeff Jernigan, PhD, BCPPC, FAIS

**O**n April 22, 2021 the keynote speaker at a major global summit unpacked a recent U.S. Department of Commerce projection that globalization will continue to disrupt economies around the world for the next seven years and perhaps longer due to COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> “No country will be out of the woods until the world is out of the woods.”<sup>2</sup> For employers right down to employees, this means living with uncertainty, varying degrees of health risk, and prolonged stress that will still be with us for some time yet. During this recovery, how do we know if what we are feeling and experiencing is due to the pandemic, or something else? How do we move forward during this confusing time of a literal global transformation?

**S**ometimes our psychological challenges can become medical conditions through somatization.

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### Unpacking the Mystery

**M**ary (not her real name) is a 26-year-old working single mother in a residential rehabilitation program for substance use disorder following the death of her husband in an automobile accident in the preceding year. The attending Nurse Practitioner became concerned after a good number of weeks had passed and not all of her physical and psychological symptoms were clearing up. Conditions usually improve when medical and behavioral masking symptoms resolve with growing sobriety.



In this case there was continuing depression, panic attacks, excessive fear, angry outbursts, weight loss, recurring intrusive thoughts, incontinence, neuropathy, unresolved rash over most of her body, and migraine headaches. Was it PTSD, an anxiety disorder, depression, profound grief, or the results of a medical condition? I was asked to review the case. My answer was yes, probably part of all of the above.

Sometimes our psychological challenges can become medical conditions through somatization.<sup>3</sup> At the same time there may be existing

health problems underlying more than one of the symptoms making diagnosis difficult even for healthcare professionals. Many of the conditions Mary was experiencing, including depression, anxiety, anger, mood changes and intrusive thoughts can be symptoms of everything listed in her health record. When there is a veritable constellation of symptoms, especially if some of them are long-term results of a temporary condition, it is very difficult to sort things out. Right now, this is even more difficult due to the stress and isolation associated with COVID-19. Prolonged





stress and uncertainty can produce all of these symptoms or none of them.

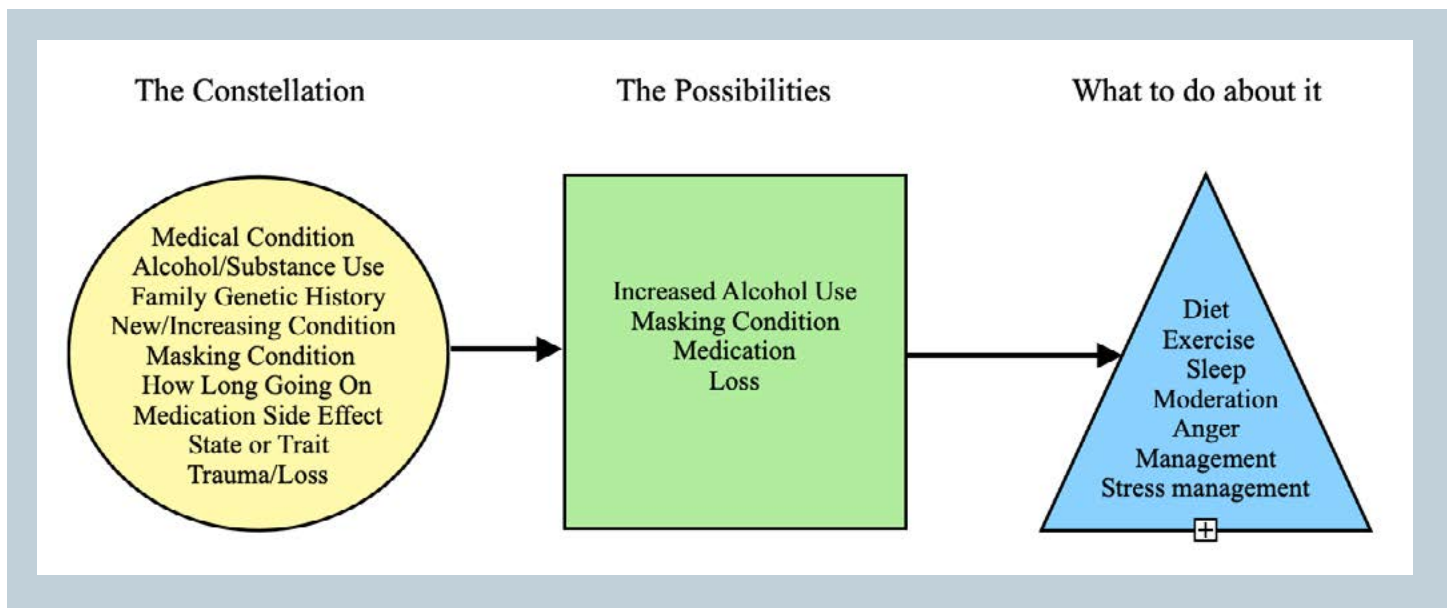
What makes discerning the cause of our distress is all of the possibilities the pandemic has brought upon us. We live in a very complex time with healthcare risks at an all-time high surrounding us like stars in the sky at night: a constellation of risks to consider. Before we get to some good news answers, let's get a grasp on just how complex the matter is truly.

## Too Many Possibilities

**33%** of patients hospitalized with COVID-19 receive a neurological or psychiatric diagnosis within six months of recovery.<sup>4</sup> For those patients additionally admitted to an Intensive Care Unit, this jumps to 46%.<sup>5</sup> For those of us fortunate enough to have not been infected, the impact of 18 to 24 months of prolonged stress and isolation begins

anxiety and depression by 31%, Substance Use Disorder up by 13%, and suicides 11% more frequently.<sup>9</sup> Mental health difficulties are on the rise in general across the country: 21% of adults experience increased levels of psychological distress.<sup>10</sup> 34% of these are the result of financial difficulties, and 28% are due to personal health issues.<sup>11</sup>

For the average person, this news makes it very difficult to know what is behind what we are experiencing. If we are unable to identify a cause, we are also probably unable to do anything about it before we become just another statistic. How do we unravel the complexity and solve the mystery? First, by ruling out what we know are not the problems. In other words, figure out what the cause of our difficulties might be by first eliminating what we know cannot be the cause. Let's apply this concept to Mary's situation.



to show up as medical and mental health disorders.<sup>6</sup> Loss of concentration, focus, memory, decision making ability and ability to learn from mistakes begins to degrade.<sup>7</sup> Headaches, stomach problems, depression and anxiety can increase as well.<sup>8</sup> Already we are seeing stress disorders in the U.S. increasing by 26%,

## Things to Rule Out

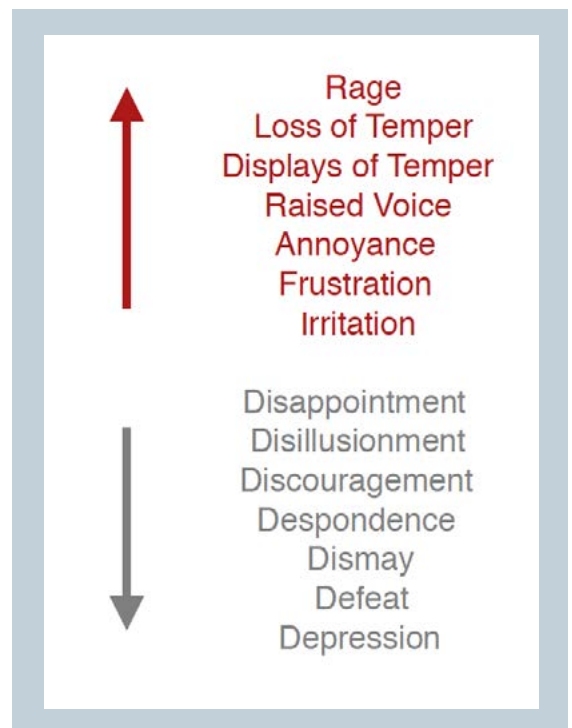
The illustration above includes a number of things to rule out under “Constellation,” some things which, in Mary’s case, cannot be ruled out as “Possibilities,” and some actions Mary may want to consider under “What To

Do About It.” Let’s define what we can rule out first. Remember, this is just an example. We are not diagnosing Mary.

- **Medical condition:** if you have been diagnosed with a medical condition it is best to talk with your doctor concerning other potentially related conditions due to the stress, uncertainty, and isolation of the pandemic.
- **Increased or excessive alcohol or controlled substance use:** moderation is key. Too much alcohol leads to depression, heightened anxiety, and too much sugar which can trigger excess production of cortisol compromising your immune system.<sup>12</sup> The same goes for self-medicating by binge eating or too much junk food. Abusing prescription drugs or other controlled substances is never a good idea. Use medications as prescribed and don’t use prescription medications belonging to someone else.
- **Family genetic history:** generational trauma can cause changes in the brain including irrational fears, anxiety and worries that can be inherited from your parents or other relatives.<sup>13</sup> For example, children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors have a higher risk of anxiety disorders and PTSD, as do children of 9/11 survivors, as well as children of parents today who are survivors of military combat action in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Our own research in Rwanda followed depression, anxiety, and PTSD from the genocide of 1994 into the third generation.<sup>14</sup>
- **New or increasing symptoms:** you may have experienced depression or anxiety in the past. However, at present these may be increasing in intensity and frequency. Though you may not know why this is happening, the fact that it is changing is important

enough that you cannot rule out anxiety, depression or other past symptoms as commonplace. Any significant change is worth noting.

- **Masking condition:** often one condition can produce another, more visible and predominate condition. One hides the other from view. For example, someone experiencing a significant loss (loss of innocence due to trauma, loss of moral compass, loss of life, loss of relationship, etcetera) can appear to be depressed or anxious, or simply just angry. The anger may be all we see, and it is masking grief and the symptoms associated with grief. Below is an illustration of anger turned inward and turned outward. Notice that it is a spectrum in either direction with different manifestations. We will get back to this point in a moment.



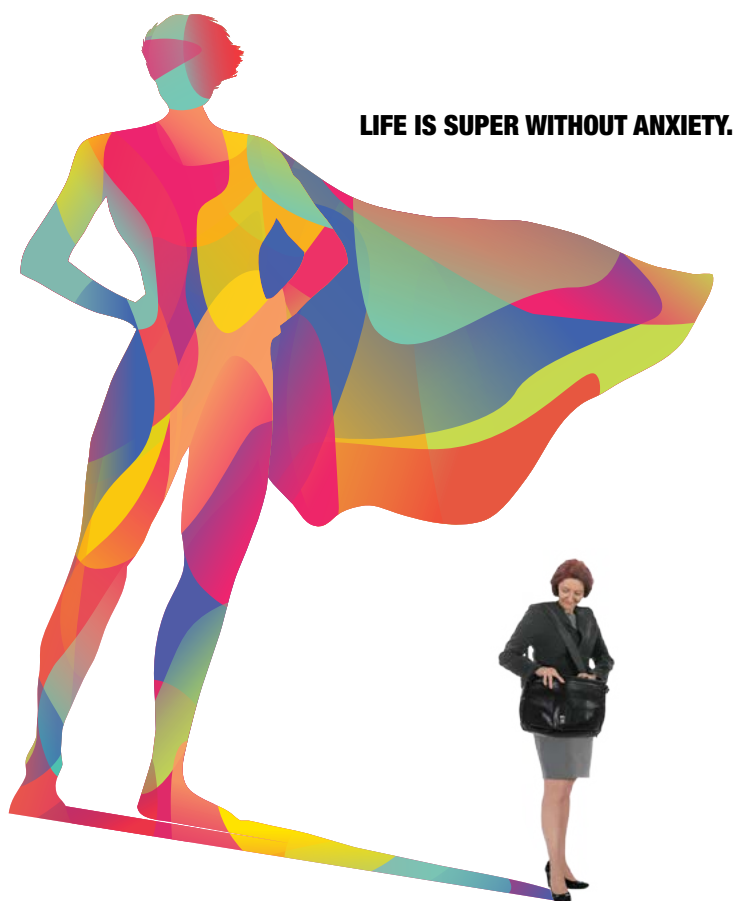
- **How long has this been going on?** This refers to the length of time you have been experiencing your symptoms. The focus here is the length of time which may be out of proportion to

how long you normally experience these symptoms. Stress is cumulative, and if you have not been practicing good stress management it can be suppressed until it shows up physically and psychologically. It never goes away by ignoring it. If you have not been practicing basic stress management, you cannot rule out stress fatigue and related conditions.

- **Medications:** check the potential side effects of any medications you are taking. If you are taking more than one medication, including over-the-counter remedies, check with your doctor or pharmacist for any interactions that might explain your symptoms.
- **State or trait:** sometimes what we may experience occasionally, even though it repeats itself, may just be a temporary condition. This condition has a measurable beginning and end

to it. It is a state that goes away on its own. Headaches are a good example. My allergies give me sinus headaches, but they constitute a state that goes away on its own or with the help of an antihistamine. A trait, on the other hand, is something that comes upon you and doesn't remit easily. It hangs around for a lot longer, waxing and waning and rarely going away on its own. It is a trait. An example would be people living in parts of the world where the skies are always dreary and gray. Some people thrive in that environment, others struggle with varying degrees of depression until the sun shines again. Yes, it is true, rainy days can really get some of us down as an environmentally induced form of depression.

- **Trauma and loss:** whether an incident, cluster of incidents, or a constant lower



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grade of stress over a prolonged period of time, trauma and loss can get us down as well. During the pandemic, it is almost certain we all will experience this to some extent. It can exacerbate other sources of stress and it can mask other underlying health conditions.

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## Two Things You Can Never Rule Out

In Mary's case a number of things can be ruled out. Mary was self-medicating with alcohol. The amount was not significant, but the conditions of her residential treatment program prohibited the consumption of any alcohol, and she felt embarrassed and ashamed. This only added to her difficulties responding to the tragic loss of her husband and her inability to struggle well with the grief naturally involved.

Anger is a large part of grief and provided the first clue that it may be masking something else. Because grief is normally expected following trauma and loss, no one looked further. However, grief prolonged can make the heart sick. Mary was experiencing what is called Profound Grief or Complicated Grief Disorder.<sup>15</sup> Mary was also taking antidepressant and anti-anxiety medication. Sometimes this pairing, depending on the specific medications, can create a dangerous cycle. She took an antidepressant in the morning. By late afternoon she began to experience some anxiety, a side effect of some antidepressants. So, she took her anti-anxiety medication which, you guessed it, produced a slight sense of depression by morning. Her medication needed to be adjusted to eliminate this addictive cycle and eliminate the side effects.

Once her medication was adjusted, she began to get help for managing her grief,

and committed herself to abstaining from alcohol. Things improved tremendously. But even with attention given to nutrition, exercise, and sleep along with some stress management skill development, she was still an angry person. This is because anger, in its various forms, is a part of our daily lives even if we are not aware of it.

Most of us do not have the life complications Mary is struggling with in this illustration. Her experience is a good example of how complicated and confusing things can become. Most of what she is experiencing is highly situational. However, there are two things she is experiencing that we all experience as well, things which do not ever go away and therefore cannot be ruled out. However, they certainly can be managed well: anger and stress.

Anger is a healthy emotion, but if not tamed can be very destructive physiologically and psychologically for you and for others around you. Anger is both a feeling and a choice; emotion and volition. Even though the choice may have been automatic and unnoticed, neurologically it happened. That means we can choose not to be angry as well. Anger turned inward is usually the result of feeling impotent, powerless, even hopeless with no one to blame, no one to hold responsible, and no one to remove the sense of fear and vulnerability it creates. The result can be a spectrum of emotions from disappointment to depression. Anger expressed outwardly can range from irritation to rage in response to alienation of real or perceived rights, injustice suffered, or outrage over betrayed values. In either case, the foundation of anger is found in disappointed expectations, frustrated desires, and blocked goals.

**A**nger turned inward is usually the result of feeling impotent, powerless, even hopeless with no one to blame, no one to hold responsible, and no one to remove the sense of fear and vulnerability it creates.



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## Finding Helpful Answers

Solving the mystery of our experience during trying times (and these are trying times) is a process not an event. Begin with a strategic perspective: how am I doing managing stress in my life? Am I balancing stretching experiences with nourishing ones; in control of my diet, exercise, and sleep; investing in a few close relationships; taking regular breaks instead of plowing through things? Am I an angry person? Are there disappointed expectations, frustrated desires, or blocked goals I am holding onto? Do I find myself sensitive, easily provoked, irritated more than usual? Am I able to identify these things to the point I can respond constructively, or therapeutically release them? Now we can get tactical, looking for more specific things to rule out.

Do what you can to resolve or manage what is left. Just being able to label these things will bring its own relief. Our tomorrows will be what we make them.

“Yesterday, when it was tomorrow, it was too much day for me,” Winnie the Pooh.<sup>16</sup>

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A lifetime focus on humanitarian service is reflected in Jeff's role as the Chief Executive Officer and co-founder, with his wife Nancy, for the Hidden Value Group, an organization bringing healing, health, and hope to the world in the wake of mass disaster and violence through healthcare, education, and leadership development. They have completed more than 300 projects in 25 countries over the last 27 years. Jeff currently serves as a Subject Matter Expert, Master Teacher, Research Mentor, or Fellow in the following professional organizations: American Association of Suicidology, National Association for Addiction Professionals, The American Institute of Stress, International Association for Continuing Education and Training, American College of Healthcare Executives and the Wellness Council of America.



***“To know thyself is the  
beginning of wisdom.”***

– Socrates

***“He who knows others is wise;  
he who knows himself is enlightened.”***

– Lao Tzu



# How to Know Your Signs of Stress

## “The 7 Warning Signs of Stress”

By James C. Petersen, PhD

**W**hen we don't feel well, we go through a battery of medical tests to determine what is wrong, and then the doctor prescribes treatment for us. When our car does not start, the mechanic plugs the car's “brain” into their computer and runs some diagnostic tests so he can tell us what is wrong. When we know the problem, we get it fixed. A financial planner first evaluates our wealth, desires, and risk tolerance, and then provides a financial plan for investing. However, in the world of understanding stress, assessing one's stress is a lot different from fixing a car or going to the doctor.

Knowing what to change is the first step to mastering stress. Yet, determining what to change to master stress is difficult. In effect, it requires making an objective judgment about oneself, the cause of our stress, and what to change to make things better. People are not objective beings; we are highly subjective and often cannot discern what to change, let alone how.

The fact is, most of us know when we

are stressed. We might complain about how stressful our life is or notice that our body, through aches and pains, is telegraphing that something is not right, or that we are sleeping poorly and waking up feeling unrested. But knowing why our stress is occurring and what to change is not the same as feeling and experiencing stress.

When stressed, our behaviors, attitudes, and inner thoughts change dramatically. Stress warning signs vary widely from person to person. Some people express stress outwardly through anger, irritation, impatience, and hostility. In contrast, others turn inward and become self-critical with thoughts of disappointment, feeling burned-out, or being physically and emotionally tense. No one reacts precisely the same way when confronted by life's stressors and problems. This makes identifying our stress warning signs all the more difficult.

One of the main challenges in identifying stress warning signs is that we are very adaptable and can live and work under enormous stress. Because we unconsciously adapt to high levels of stress, we tune it out, ignore it and even accept it as part of our life and work. Psychologists call

**O**ne of the most effective ways to recognize our personal stress warning signs is to take a structured stress assessment, carefully researched and validated to measure critical aspects of stress.

this the Adaptation-level Principle,<sup>1</sup> which means that people tend to adapt to higher and higher levels of stress until that level becomes the “new normal.” Once that level is accepted, then a new level is needed, and another “new normal” is established.

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## Assess Before Change

**O**ne of the most effective ways to recognize our personal stress warning signs is to take a structured stress assessment, carefully researched and validated to measure critical aspects of stress. One such tool is the Stress Mastery Questionnaire (SMQ). I created the SMQ to help clients in my Biofeedback and Stress Management Clinic become more aware of their stress warning signs. This enables them to begin the process of learning the causes of their stress and what to do about it. Over the past 30 years, over 600,000 people have taken the SMQ, intending to understand themselves and their stress better.

The SMQ was created using standard psychometric test development techniques and has been validated through a research grant from the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (CDC/NIOSH). It is a norm-based assessment, so scores are compared to the norm group to provide a frame of reference. The SMQ is Certified by the American Institute of Stress (AIS).

The SMQ is grounded on the pioneering work of stress research pioneers like Hans Selye,<sup>2</sup> Herbert Benson,<sup>3</sup> Freidman and Rosenman<sup>4</sup> (Type-A Personality), and many others. The SMQ is not a quiz, nor is it a psychological test; it is a self-report inventory based on how an individual answered 87 scientifically developed questions relating to stress. After completing the SMQ, each person receives a detailed Stress Mastery

Report showing his or her “risk” scores on each scale. The SMQ is designed to focus on three essential stress areas:

- Stress Warning Signs (7 scales)
- Stressors (2 scales)
- Stress Effects (2 scales)

In all, 11 separate scales provide a view into the behaviors, attitudes, and physical issues related to stress. Armed with this information, one can begin to focus on specific areas to change so that stress can be managed and mastered. The next step is to...

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## Know What to Change 7 SMQ Stress Warning Signs

**W**hen reviewing each scale, take a moment to think about how you might score on that scale. Ask, does this stress warning sign have meaning for me? If so, what can I do to change my thinking, behaviors, or attitudes to reduce and prevent stress from impacting me? If it resonates with you, take action.

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## Anger

**T**he first SMQ warning sign is anger. Anger is the outward expression of inner stress and is potentially one of the most damaging emotions. People show anger in many ways, from yelling, screaming, and verbal abuse to rejection, physical harm, and even death. The SMQ Anger scale provides information about how frequently anger is expressed when expectations and hopes are not being met. Core components of anger are irritability, frustration, impatience, and dissatisfaction with others or events. Fear of loss of control drives people to use anger to get what they want and expect. Focus on changing expectations, setting realistic expectations, and learning to “let go” when things do not go as hoped for help reduce the amount of anger and stress experienced.





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## Perfectionism

**P**erfectionism is a traditional Type A concept and can be described as the need to think and behave in exacting and demanding ways toward self or others. Perfectionists are often intolerant of anyone not meeting their high standards, and they become irritated and upset when people make mistakes and fail to live up to their expectations. Perfectionism is not the same as the quest for excellence, which is a positive and constructive approach to life and work. Individuals exhibiting a high degree of perfectionism often have chronic health, physical and emotional problems. Driven by the fear of failure, perfectionists need to ensure that no errors and mistakes are made; they are hard on themselves and often work long hours to get the job done correctly. To conquer perfectionism, learn to recognize when perfectionism is counter-productive and take steps to focus more

on doing a good job rather than insisting on a perfect one. Because perfectionism is hidden under the mantle of hard work and perseverance, it is essential to recognize this behavioral trait and modify it.

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## Time-Urgency

**T**ime-Urgency is also a Type-A trait which the SMQ measures. The Time-Urgency Scale is referred to as the “hurry sickness.” It can be best described as a pervasive sense of time urgency, even if there is no need to function that way at all. Driven by the fear of rejection, these individuals always want to be seen as the “best” and show they can do anything faster and better than others. The Time-Urgency Scale provides feedback on the need to rush, move faster, work harder, and do more in less time. Generally, a time-urgent person eats without really tasting their food, moves and walks rapidly, and always seems to be in a hurry. They

tend to talk fast and hurry the speech of others. The inability to slow down is a hallmark of those individuals who believe that life is to be lived in the “fast lane.” Unfortunately, these hyperactive individuals adapt to high levels of action, generating even more stress. As a result, they manifest many physical, emotional, and social problems in their lives. Learning to live in the moment or “in the now” is essential to conquering this trait. Practice slowing down and being more focused on the task in a calm and relaxed manner.

---

### **Disappointment Scale**

**P**eople who score high on the Disappointment Scale are generally

feeling discouraged by the behavior of others who fail to meet their expectations, hopes, and desires. Being disappointed can be seen when someone frequently talks about getting out of one’s job, talks about how they feel unappreciated for their work or effort, and dwell on those who have disappointed them. People who score high on this scale have difficulty setting realistic expectations for others and typically resist changing to being more in line with reality. To master disappointment and change course, start by evaluating what is expected from family, friends, coworkers, and others. Determine if these expectations are realistic and achievable. If not, practice redirecting thinking to more realistic thoughts.

*Practice slowing down and being more focused on the task in a calm and relaxed manner.*



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## Burnout Scale

**B**urnout is a strong indicator of stress and is even recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>6</sup> as a valid health syndrome. While typically burnout occurs in the workplace, it can happen to anyone at any time or place. High scorers on this SMQ scale feel depleted, sad, or unhappy with their work and life in general. These individuals have difficulty laughing at themselves when a joke is made about them and are unenthusiastic and pessimistic about their life, work or relationships. Experiencing burnout for long periods can allow stress to affect one's health, sense of wellbeing, and

quality of life. The key to turning burnout into joy starts with accepting the current condition, people, or events as they are right now and, then, making the mental shift in viewing life's stressors in new and more positive ways. Redirecting negative, self-defeating thoughts to more accurate and healthy ones will help move one out from under the veil of burnout.

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## Under-Achievement Scale

**T**hose who score high on the Under-Achievement Scale believe that they are not achieving very much in their work and life; they tend to think of themselves as an underachiever, even when there is evidence that they are, in fact achieving





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much in their lives. These individuals frequently perceive themselves as unproductive and, even, worthless. Thinking that one is an underachiever is often the result of faulty self-perceptions learned early in life. This can happen when one has been told repeatedly that he or she is not amounting to much, lazy and unmotivated. Those words became integrated into the mind and accepted as fact. Learning to have a more rational and realistic perspective of one's life and personal productivity will help conquer under-achievement. Taking time to reflect on and acknowledge actual accomplishments made in one's life will create a more realistic and optimistic perspective that will reduce stress.

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## Tension Scale

**B**eing frequently tense, both internally and externally, is a clear indication of stress. The Tension Scale assesses the degree to which someone can relax, take time for themselves and let go. When stressed, most people show a high level of physical and emotional tension in their bodies and actions, they rarely take time to relax or do something fun and enjoyable for themselves. Many feel guilty when they do take time for themselves, as they may have been taught that idleness is wrong and only work is valued. Lunch and rest breaks either don't happen or are short and rushed. High scorers on this scale push hard, are always on the

go, stay at a task for a long time, and work late. The remedy to reducing tension is to make a conscious decision to build in time for "self," such as exercise, yoga, meditation, listening to music in a relaxed state of mind, taking long and slow walks, and creating more "me-time."

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## Take Action

**T**he SMQ is just the starting point for personal growth and stress mastery. Stress mastery is a journey that begins by recognizing signs or indicators of stress in behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. Choose one of the stress warning signs that best fits you and your needs, then make a plan to change how you perceive and react to people who disappoint or to events that cannot be controlled. You can take the SMQ on the AIS website. After completing the SMQ, you will receive a 19-page Stress Mastery Report and a copy of the Stress Mastery Guide and Workbook that describes each scale in detail, explains the meaning of high scores and evidence-based tools and ways to reduce and master stress.

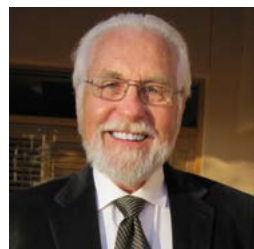
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**James Petersen, PhD** is a pioneering stress researcher, clinician and therapist. He is the founder of Stressmaster International, a worldwide stress assessment, training and coaching company, and is the author of the *Stress Mastery Questionnaire (SMQ)* with over 600,000 people globally having benefited from taking the SMQ and discovering the source of their stress. Dr. Petersen is a leading stress mastery expert, trainer and stress coach and is a professional speaker and management consultant. He can be reached at [jpetersen@stressmaster.com](mailto:jpetersen@stressmaster.com) or [www.stressmaster.com](http://www.stressmaster.com).





**Contentment Connection:**  
*Easy Ways to Nourish Your Vagus  
Nerve to Become More Content*



By Sharon Montes, MD,  
Living Well Health Group

**Y**ou can recover from past accumulation of stress, be more content, and improve resiliency for future challenges by strengthening your vagal tone. Incorporating simple practices into your daily routine will enable your vagus nerve to operate optimally for greater enjoyment of present moments.

Our nervous system exists to help us survive – quickly scanning our environment to determine if we are safe or if we need to defend ourselves. Our nervous system is a combination of fibers, chemicals and electrical signals that process up to 11 million bits of information a second.<sup>1</sup> We are constantly receiving, integrating, and responding to information through this neural wi-fi (aka neuroception from the work of Stephen Porges, PhD). Our body's interpretation of whether we are safe or not, is filtered by our past experience.

Through hacking our nervous system with physical and mental choices we can help our nervous system send the message to our cells that we are safe. The main nerve that really needs to be nourished to send those signals of safety is the vagus nerve. Our vagus nerve is an information network that spreads from head to pelvis, carrying information from our body to brain and from brain to body. The vagus nerve makes up 75% of the fibers in the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), the part of our autonomic nervous system

that allows us to have better sleep, mental calm, and tranquility. When we nourish and improve the "tone" of our vagus nerve we enjoy greater contentment and ability to connect, less pain and anxiety, and improved sleep patterns.<sup>2</sup>

As a holistic physician with a decades-long history of meditation, I noticed that I had upped my stress management game to deal with our current environment. How can I adapt to



**T**he vagus nerve is the longest cranial nerve and one of the most important nerves in the body.

this new normal and how do I help my family, patients and community adapt? With the increased stress (demands greater than resources to meet them) I had to significantly improve my stress management practices – eliminate or reduce what didn't work or was actually depleting resources, build on what was good, and be open to learning new strategies while in the midst of juggling everything else.

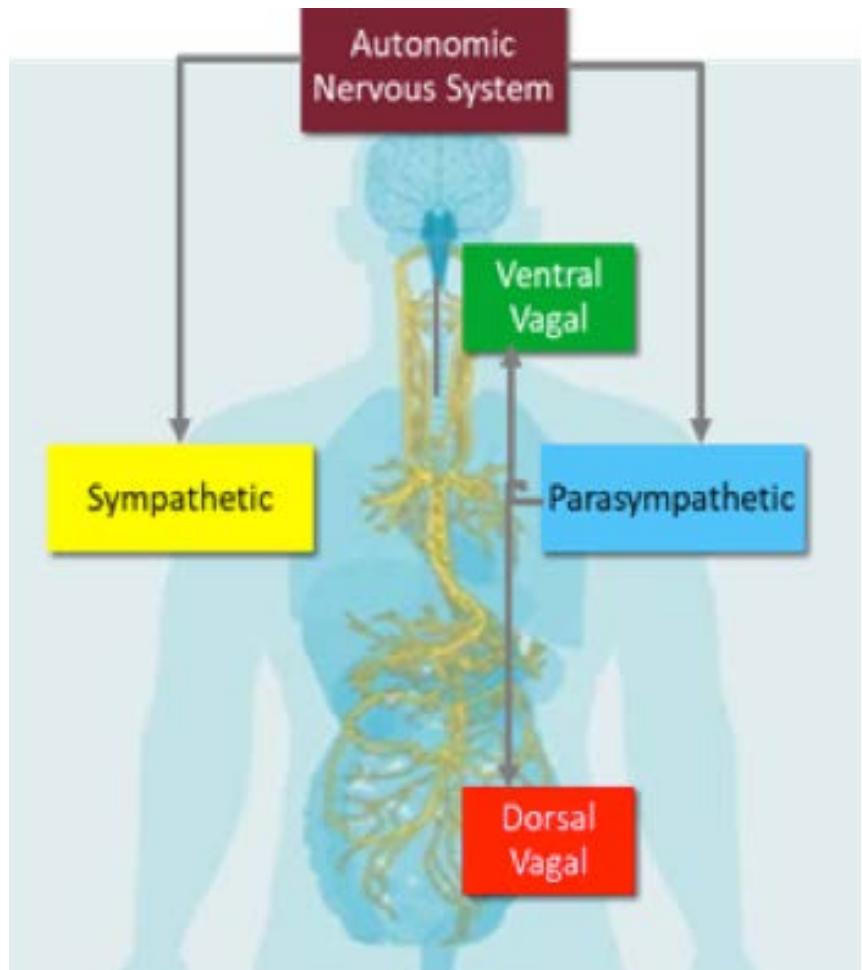
A couple of the upgrades to my nervous system included greater connection with community and learning some new ways to hack my vagus nerve. Connecting by Zoom with my former QiGong instructor and his class, offered a chance to do restorative exercise and to fast in a community setting.

---

### **Brief Map of Our Nervous System**

**T**he vagus nerve is the longest cranial nerve and one of the most important nerves in the body. It helps to regulate internal organ functions from head to belly such as: sensation in our ears, speaking, swallowing, lowering our heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, and digestion (stomach acid and moving food through our intestines).

A higher vagal tone indicates that the body returns to a state of relaxation more quickly after experiencing stress. As the



difference increases between faster heart rates breathing in and slower rates while exhaling, so too our vagal tone improves and produces positive emotions.

Even in the midst of, or recovery from, a worldwide pandemic, we can nourish and increase our vagal nerve tone. Because these practices make us feel good, we are motivated to repeat them often.

---

### **Here Are Some Tips to Help Improve Your Vagal Tone:**

**Sound:** Sing loudly, hum, speak, gargle, yawn, or chant to activate the vagus nerve and stimulate organ function. Also, delivery of filtered music tickles a muscle in the middle ear to gently stimulate the vagus nerve. This “passive” activation of the vagus nerve when combined with other modalities helps the nervous system relearn and send the “we are safe” message to our cells.



One form of therapeutic use of music is the Safe and Sound Protocol developed by Dr Porges. With over 20 years of research by Dr Porges and team, a playlist of five hours of music combined with other therapies has been proven to help people regulate their nervous system.<sup>3</sup>

**Cold:** Stimulating the vagus nerve may be as simple as drinking ice water, taking a cold shower, or splashing cold water on your face.

**Meditation and Prayer:** Meditation and prayer helps to create good feelings overall while at the same time improving vagal tone.

**Massage:** Stimulate the vagus nerve by massaging your ears and scalp or give yourself a foot massage.

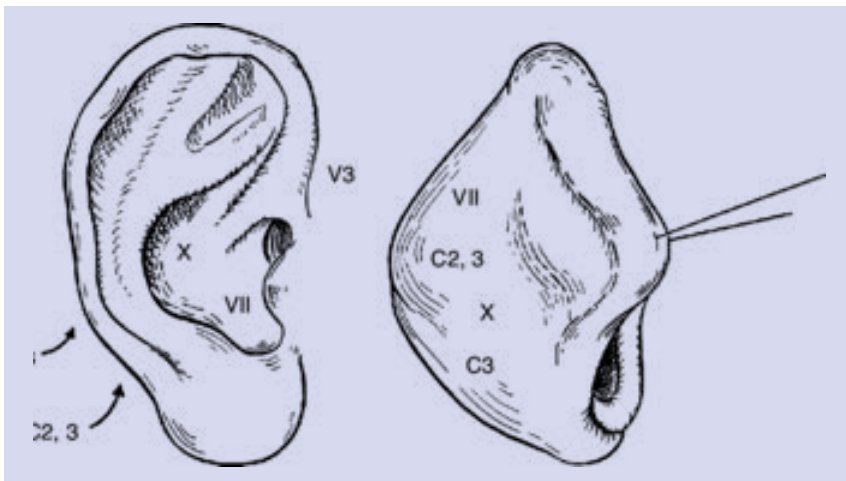
4. now focus on massaging front side of ear top to bottom around the outside, moving to center
5. gently massage the external ear canal
6. Finish by putting gentle pressure down on the skin flap that covers the ear canal - gentle popping motion pushing that skin flap (tragus) to cover the ear canal.

**Yoga and QiGong:** Increase thalamic GABA levels (associated with improved mood and calmness) and vagus nerve activity with the practice of yoga or QiGong and gentle movements.

**Breathing:** Incorporate conscious intentional breathing, with exhaling being longer than inhaling, and a duration of about 10 to 12 seconds for each per breath. My favorite pattern is inhale 3 heart beats – hold 3

heart beats and exhale 6 heart beats (or inhale 3 second hold 2 seconds and exhale 6 seconds).

In addition, laughter and smiling, taking supplements such as probiotics and Omega-3 essential oils, combined with



One general way of massaging the ear, most efficient to do both sides at once.

1. Place your index finger behind the bottom back of your ear. Your fingertips will land in the valley behind your ear where it attaches to your skull and in front of a round bone (mastoid process).
2. massage from bottom to top around the curve of your ear where the ear attaches to your head.
3. repeat massage bottom to top around curve using fingertips on back of ear and thumbs in front to massage rest of back of ear

intermittent fasting, are all ways the vagus nerve is positively impacted. I have found that blending these vagal nerve nourishment practices gives better overall results.

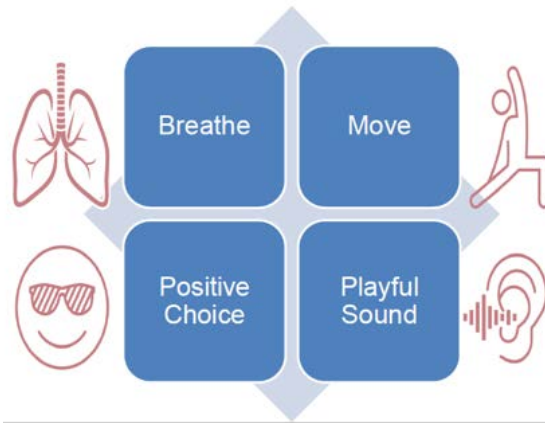
After teaching laughter wellness for six years, I now prescribe resilience recipes that combine: Breathe, Movement, Positive Choice and Playful Sound.

## Resilience Recipes

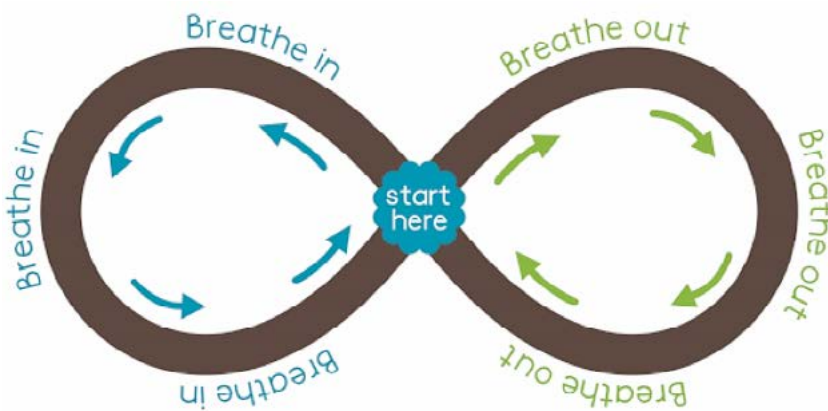
### 1. YES! YES! YES!

**Yes:** (1) Put one arm up in the air (2) Pull back your fist(s) quickly downward as you say a loud “YES!” (3) repeat with other arm (4) repeat with both arms.

## Resilience Recipe Ingredients



**2. Infinity breath:** Synchronize your breath, smile, and movement as you draw a  $\infty$  sign (it looks like a horizontal or sleeping 8) in the air. Stretch your arms out in front of you. Clasp hands together with thumbs pointing up. Look at your thumbs as you trace the infinity sign, then look beyond your hands and sway your body as you trace the infinity. Breathing up with the upstroke and down with the down stroke.



**3. 3 Level Smile:** Inhale as you put on a fake smile. Exhale as you relax. Then

smile with cheek muscles. Exhale as you relax. Then smile with lips cheeks and eyes. Exhale as you relax.

**4. 10 Finger-Tip-Touch and Sing:** One finger at a time, tap each finger to its corresponding finger on the other hand. With each note, sing the words of la, la, la to the tune of Row, Row, Row Your Boat.

The vagus nerve receives and sends information from head to belly and back again. This information highway sends signals stretching from the brain, connecting to all the organs, wrapping around the digestive system and then returning to the brain. From having an impact on depression and anxiety, to improving digestion and blood pressure, to breaking down fat, stimulating the vagus nerve is a great antidote to system imbalances.<sup>4</sup> And by incorporating some of these simple practices into our daily routine, we are helping ourselves toward greater contentment!

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**Sharon Montes, MD** is a pioneer in holistic medicine. She served as both medical and education director at the University of Maryland Center for Integrative Medicine and has practiced and taught integrative medicine for over 30 years. Co-Founder of the thriving integrative practice, Living Well Health Group, based in Loveland Colorado; Dr Montes works with game changers of all ages to help them develop greater resilience. If you would like to receive a free e-book or get information about other programs, including the Heart-Centered Stress Management Program, visit [www.livingwellhealthgroup.com](http://www.livingwellhealthgroup.com).





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# Boosting Resilience to Buffer Against Burnout in the Workplace





By Jacinta M. Jiménez, PsyD, BCC

**A**s a psychologist and executive leadership coach, my life's work has been dedicated to helping people use psychological science to create a fulfilling work and personal life. Over the past several years however, I started to notice an alarming trend regarding today's workforce: while the world of work is changing rapidly, we humans are not productively adapting alongside it. Changes such as hyper-connectivity and globalization have created an always-on-and-always-connected culture that has fundamentally altered how we live and work, but unfortunately, most of us (and the organizations in which we work) are still clinging to outdated formulas and ideas of what it takes to be and remain successful in work and life.

Long before the onslaught of COVID-19, burnout was a rapidly progressing global epidemic of its own. In 2015, Stanford University researchers estimated that job burnout has cost the U.S. economy up to \$190 billion each year.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, a Deloitte workplace burnout survey found that 77 percent of respondents have experienced burnout in their current job.<sup>2</sup> In 2019, the World Health Organization included burnout in its International Classification of Diseases as an occupational phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

Living through 2020 and witnessing the massive levels of disruption that happened in its wake has made this

pressing issue even more alarming. In fact, the International Committee of the Red Cross found in a global survey that 51% of adults perceive that COVID-19 negatively affected their mental health.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the silver lining that may be found in this epidemic is that people are finally demanding more from their work: One of every two employees wants to see a greater focus on well-being at their company.<sup>5</sup> As well, leaders are beginning to realize that employee well-being is no longer a nice-to-have, rather, it's a strategic imperative tied to real business outcomes. A 2021 Fortune/Deloitte CEO Survey has found that an overwhelming majority of CEOs (98%) agreed that employee mental health and well-being will continue to be a priority even after the pandemic is resolved.<sup>6</sup>

One way we can begin to take measures to address this alarming burnout epidemic and the corresponding desires of employees, leaders, and organizations to enhance well-being is through what I refer to as the 3 R's: Recognize, Respond, and Replenish.

---

### **Recognize: Know when you, your team, or your people are showing signs of burnout.**

**Y**ou cannot detect something if you're not actively monitoring for it. Thanks to pioneering research by Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter,<sup>7</sup> we know that burnout consists of three interrelated components:

- **Exhaustion:** Immense emotional, physical, and/or cognitive fatigue.
- **Cynicism:** Low levels of job engagement.

**L**ong before the onslaught of COVID-19, burnout was a rapidly progressing global epidemic of its own.

- **Inefficacy:** A lack of productivity and feelings of incompetence.

When these three components come together, burnout happens. It is important that both people, leaders and employees actively monitor for burnout. The sooner you can detect burnout, the more opportunity you have to course-correct early on.

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**Respond: Understand the six causes of burnout in order to effectively address it.**

You may be surprised to learn that burnout isn't simply a consequence of overworking to the point of exhaustion. For better or worse, too often burnout has been unnecessarily simplified in the mainstream. While overwork and exhaustion are part of what can happen with burnout, it is not the whole picture. Research<sup>8</sup> has found that burnout comes from six distinct mismatches between people and their job:

- **Work overload:** The presence of high job demands and inadequate resources to complete the job.
- **Perceived lack of control:** Not being given the appropriate level of responsibility or not having access to the tools needed to do our jobs well.
- **Insufficient reward:** The lack of regular acknowledgment and/or financial, social, or intrinsic rewards for work efforts.
- **Breakdown in community:** High levels of workplace conflict and low levels of interpersonal trust.
- **Lack of fairness:** Unfairness in areas such as inequities in workload or pay, inappropriate handling of promotions or evaluations, and poor dispute-resolution practices.
- **Values misalignment:** Personal values and goals aren't in alignment with those of the organization.

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Through understanding which of the six areas is most impacting you, your people, and/or your organization, you can refine your approach to address this specific area (or areas) in order to respond most effectively. The more you are able to pinpoint the specific mismatch that is causing the most challenge, the more empowered you will be to strategically address and manage it.

## Replenish: Build out a pro-resilience toolkit.

**W**e are human beings, not machines. When we deny (or ask others to deny) our humanity for the sake of productivity, not only do we suffer, but our families, communities, and companies do, too. In order to maintain our health, vitality, and well-being in our new world of work and life, we must actively work with (instead of against) our capacities as human beings. In my opinion, this is

perhaps the most important R of the 3 R's. A new world of work necessitates new ways to approach work; we need prevention, not reaction. In the same way we workout to build muscles at the gym to stay fit or brush our teeth daily to ensure healthy hygiene, we must proactively work to foster a fixed set of core resilience capabilities to keep us stable and grounded while the world of work continues to evolve around us.

The good news is that getting started on building out your pro-resilience toolkit does not require a large overhaul in behavior change. Rather, the key is look for small, realistic, and feasible behaviors that offer replenishment and proactively intersperse them throughout your schedule for the week. These are what I refer to these as “micro” (five – fifteen minutes) efforts that help you to either psychologically detach from work, relax, or replenish you. When



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practiced on a persistent and consistent basis, these small (but much more doable) practices can add up to a lot. In addition, it is important to find the right combination of pro-resilience practices that corresponds most with your current personal and professional goals. Remember, a personalized approach to building resilience is absolutely necessary for escaping burnout. Here are 3

quick examples of pro-resilience behaviors to get you started:

**Integrate moments of calm into your day:** Frustration, anger, and anxiety aren't the only emotions that can leave you psychologically exhausted—things such as excitement, elation, and enthusiasm are also high-arousal emotions, which means that they, too, can leave you energetically





drained. That's right—regardless of whether you're amped up with excitement or pumped full of anger, both states induce high physiologic arousal, which means they activate your nervous system. Too much tax on your nervous system will leave you drained of energy.

**Spend time in nature or take a moment to view pictures of nature:**

If we take an evolution-scale perspective, we humans have spent 99.99 percent of our time in nature. We've evolved to find restoration and relaxation in the sanctuary of nature. Research has found that taking as few as twenty minutes out of your day to connect with nature is enough to significantly reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol.<sup>9</sup>

**Take a few minutes to practice coherent breathing:** The mind and body are intimately connected. It's uncommon to have a totally revved-up body and a serene mind, nor a mind running on overdrive with a body that is super relaxed. For maximizing relaxation, try calming your body through coherent breathing, which consists of slowing your breathing down to five or six full breaths per minute, with equal-length inhalations and exhalations. Studies have found that this particular method of breathing is linked to increase in cognitive performance and a decrease in stress.<sup>10</sup>

As we emerge from the aftermath of COVID-19 and eventually enter into the post-pandemic world, we need leaders,

organizations, and individuals across all industries step up to ensure that as we work to innovate, create new technologies, and address some of the world's biggest problems, that people aren't having to compromise their well-being in the process. Research shows that we can sustain our success while also doing great work in the world. In fact, when we have more resilience, we do better work. At the end of the day, vibrant workplaces require leaders to develop cultures that apply the most insightful lessons of psychological science to design an employee experience that inspires everyone to tap into their core resilience capabilities.

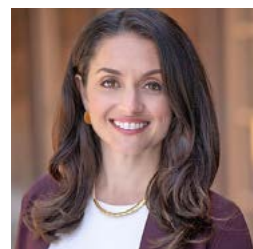
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# Opening Your Office Post-Pandemic: Handling the Stress of Change



By Jen Butler, MEd, BCC, DAIS

**A**re you ready to open up your office now that vaccines are available for COVID-19? You have probably realized by now that returning to the workplace is going to be quite different from returning to “normal.”

Most companies are anticipating that employees, customers, and vendors will have doubts about walking into a pre-pandemic crowded, mask-free workplace. In response, many offices plan to make changes that include limiting the number of employees who are onsite on any given day in order to enforce social distancing, continuing with video conferencing, and exchanging the big welcoming plate of bagels and muffins for individually wrapped servings.

According to Eagle Hill Consulting, a management research firm, 42% of employees want employers to delay opening until more adults qualify for the vaccine and 52% want the vaccine to be required.<sup>1</sup> Even after the vaccine is widely available employees are hoping the workplace will still require masks, social distancing, and protective gear. The research firm is also predicting a major spike in turnover as the job market opens.

You may want to consider the return to onsite work as a major exercise in change management and stress management. How can you prepare for it? The four most important steps you can take are to understand the source

of stress, define a change management strategy, use the art of persuasion, and act in compliance with regulations.

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## Understanding the Source of Stress

**T**he pandemic caused major changes in the lives of employees and employers alike. Change that affects a person’s sense of self—that affects the answer to the question “Who am I?”—is especially difficult. According to a study published by the National Institutes of Health, a change that affects people on a personal level (such as a bad review) is much more stressful than a change that affects them as a group (such as a change in leadership).<sup>2</sup>

The pandemic upended personal relationships, threatened personal finances, limited access to and availability of food and other resources, tightened personal space, and placed every individual’s job in jeopardy. The stress has been tremendous and has caused some people to act out in anger.

Now, on the heels of a year of isolation and uncertainty, the world people have almost become used to is being upended again as employees and employers ponder the return to work under conditions that will continue to demand change. As an employer, you can begin to help manage this stress with:

- An open acknowledgement that stress exists and is real
- A renewal and possibly a re-thinking of the company’s sense of mission and values
- Open communication about your back-to-the-workplace strategy and expectations

**You may want to consider the return to onsite work as a major exercise in change management and stress management.**



- Training in new procedures; for example, those designed to keep people safe or to allow for communication among a partially remote, partially onsite workforce
- Support from a stress management professional for those who may be overwhelmed by the pressure of yet more change.

**TIP:** *Provide your employees with information on resources they can call on as they make the transition. Those resources may include the contact information for a stress management professional, a local or national hotline, or other representative, either internal or external to your company.*

### Defining a Strategy

One of the biggest obstacles to change is a lack of strategy. A lot of the initial confusion and resistance during the early stages of the pandemic can be traced back to authorities who were scrambling for a strategy and changing direction each time new information emerged. One mark of a true crisis is the lack of time to formally strategize.

However, you have and should take the time now to consider your initial strategy in line with your company's values and goals and to prepare your employees for the changes you envisage. More importantly, you have a chance to survey your employees and perhaps your customers about their fears and expectations. Do employees agree that they are ready to return to work? How many of them would prefer to continue telecommuting? Would customers prefer to continue video conferencing? What obstacles have they confronted in reaching your staff?

Among other change management and stress management strategies you might consider organizing:

- A return-to-work task force that includes employees as well as leaders

- A permanent technology liaison to support those who continue to work remotely and to facilitate communication with customers
- A customer experience representative to make sure that your changes are acceptable, understood, and achievable
- A communications liaison who can direct people to resources they need.

**TIP:** *Make sure you yourself are invested in the strategy and prepared to lead by example.*

### Using the Art of Persuasion

When people are persuaded that change is in their best interest, they are more likely to go along with it and respect it than if change is mandated. One of the problems with ordering change—as seen, for example, with orders to wear masks—is that some people balk at any order, regardless of their own self-interest, simply because it is an order. In addition, the lack of supporting explanations allows rumors and misinformation to flourish.

According to Robert Cialdini, an expert in persuasion, you are more likely to succeed in introducing change if you:

- Create a reciprocal exchange (for example, “if you do this, I will do that”).
- Build a sense of urgency (“if we want to reopen now, we have to do this”).
- Cite experts (“the CDC says to do this”).
- Are sincerely likable (basic courtesy and an upbeat attitude are essential).
- Introduce change a little at a time in a consistent manner (for example, you have people return onsite in stages).
- Draw on the experience of others (“the other businesses in town found this works best”).<sup>3</sup>

The right metrics will help you determine if the measures you put in place are achieving what you want to achieve. In addition to degree of compliance, your metrics might include a decrease in

**When people are persuaded that change is in their best interest, they are more likely to go along with it and respect it than if change is mandated.**

turnover, higher morale, and optimism about the return to the workplace. Metrics allow you to adjust course, which is a critical component of both change management and SMaRT stress management.

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## Complying with Regulations

**Y**our employees and customers will feel a greater sense of security if the changes you propose are in compliance with regulations, as well as the recommendations of authorities and experts like the CDC. You will also have the security of knowing that you have legal backing and protection for any changes you make.

Some states have passed laws protecting companies from any liability for workplace spread of COVID-19, as long as the company has avoided reckless behavior. Many more states have been considering those laws.

OSHA is also evolving rules for keeping records about reporting employee absences and deaths related to COVID-19. Among other measures, OSHA recommends that employers:

- Assign a workplace coordinator to take up COVID-19 issues on behalf of the employees.
- Mandate masks.
- Emphasize physical distancing
- Educate their employees about these and other precautions and encourage them

to stay home if sick.

- Treat vaccinated and unvaccinated employees alike, having them follow the same rules at least until more information is available about the effectiveness of the vaccine.<sup>4</sup>

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**TIP:** *While you need a legal foundation for change, change management is easier and more successful when you genuinely ask for ideas, encourage employee participation, and keep communication open.*

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The pandemic has left everyone with a residue of stress from a year of isolation and upturned relationships, both personal and work. Therefore, the changes you propose to allow a return to the workplace have to consider both that lingering stress as well as the new stress caused by workplace adjustments, such as mask wearing and physical distancing. By joining the principles of stress management to the principles of change management, you may ease the transition for yourself, your employees, your customers, and your entire company.

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While earning two bachelor's degrees - one in Public Health Administration and the other in Educational Psychology - Jen worked in hospitals, private practices, and became a paramedic, learning first-hand the challenges and relentless stress faced by medical professionals. Building on her education and 25-years of experience in learning & development, Jen Butler has worked with entrepreneurs, small business owners, corporate leaders, and executives on how to obtain sustainable profitability with less stress and more fulfillment. Jen is also a Diplomate of The American Institute of Stress. If you would like to learn more about the great programs at JB partners just go to [jbpartners.com](http://jbpartners.com).





# The Older Are Wiser About COVID and More Resiliency In The Elderly





**...People who live better — and longer — are the ones who hold on to hope. They keep their chins up and often throw themselves into the service of others.<sup>1</sup>**

– CNN Medical consultant Dr. Sanjay Gupta

By Ron Rubenzer, EdD, MA, MPH, MSE,  
FAIS, Mayo Clinic Champion

**T**he older are wiser about COVID, even though they are hardest hit. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 93 percent of COVID-19 deaths nationwide have occurred among those ages 55 or older.<sup>2</sup> Despite this imminent threat to our older citizens, it is reported “As a group, older adults, appear to be withstanding the mental health strains of the COVID-19 pandemic better than all other age groups.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, our seniors may appear to be more resilient in bouncing back from this COVID crisis.

Our senior citizens’ motto could be, “What age dictates, we mitigate!” says senior learning consultant, Dr. Ruth Woo, of the Jacksonville’s Senior Services Department.<sup>4</sup> Additional good news is “about one-half to two-thirds of people show Post Traumatic Growth (PTG).<sup>5</sup> PTG is a type of positive change which people experience as a result of struggling with major life challenges or a traumatic event. You have the “resiliency gene” baked into your DNA.

This article will explore:

1. Six benefits of entering your golden years.
2. Tips on how to adjust to being among “The Rest of Us” (54 years+), including memory loss.
3. How to communicate meaningfully with non-boomers (or how not to over-share “baby boomer fables.”)

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## **1. Six Benefits of Entering Your Golden Years.**

**T**here are several advantages that accompany aging. Older adults:

- Are less irritated by things
- Become more reflective
- Grow wiser
- Spend less time worrying and fighting
- Improve mental performance especially in job-related and verbal skills
- Report positive life satisfaction

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## **2. Tips on How to Adjust to Being Among “The Rest of Us” Use It or Lose It — Your Memory.**

**A**s the oldest baby boomers just turned 74+<sup>6,7</sup> many worry about their memory. But mental abilities can actually increase as we age if we use our skills. Problems with memory and computation result more from lack of practice than change in our physical thinking equipment. About 89 percent of elderly DO NOT experience Alzheimer’s disease. (About 11.3 percent of those over 65 do have Alzheimers.)<sup>8</sup> “An idle mind is the devil’s playground,” and that devil is Alzheimer. But brain disease can be slowed down by using your brain in particular ways, says Dr. Sanjay Gupta in his 2021 book “Keep Sharp,” in which he offers 13 “Brain Muscle Building” exercises to help you use your brain rather than lose it.<sup>9</sup>

The best way to remember what you read or do is to concentrate on

**A**s the oldest baby boomers just turned 74+, many worry about their memory. But mental abilities can actually increase as we age if we use our skills.

what you are doing or reading. Learning to concentrate on your breathing, will improve your overall concentrating ability and therefore your memory. Also, silently repeating to yourself, what you have just done (i.e., “I turned off the stove, brought in the dog,”) will help you remember later that you did turn off the stove or brought in the dog.

A normal memory problem occurs when you can’t remember where you put your keys. A serious memory problem happens when you can’t recall what your keys are used for. In either case, you should go see your doctor.

**Simple memory (and Whole Brain) boosters include:**

- “The palest ink is better than the best memory,” so **put it in writing**. Write notes to yourself. You can use sticky notes (those small yellow notes that allow you to cover an entire desktop

or refrigerator with reminders). Leave messages to yourself on your phone. Like “location, location, location,” remember, “repetition, repetition, repetition.”

- **Play with your brain, that is, keep your brain in tune by playing games.**



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qualifies for AARP membership. There are many resources for games to play. Games, World of Puzzles magazine is great.<sup>10</sup> AARP offers a whole host of games and brain challenges, available online and on your iPhone. Put down that TV remote and find something that fits your interests.

- **Create routines.** Remember the old saying, “A place (and time) for everything and everything in its place.” It may be boring but learn to routinely put your keys (and wallet, etc.) in one place. That will be one less thing you have to remember.
- **Tell jokes** to tested audiences, like your best friends. This requires timing and remembering the punch line. If you can’t remember punch lines, write them down.
- **Communicate electronically.** If you are not computer phobic, join a group—there is one for everyone based on shared interests. Connect on the internet, make a call or write letters to your friends, using snail mail.
- **Take a course** that has nothing to do with what you have to do, but something you want to do (painting, coin collecting). You probably don’t need credits, but it will give you something to look forward to. Even your classmates can keep you young.
- Finally **ask your doctor about supplements** that may help with aging. Many are advertised but only some, such as ginkgo, have research. Supplements and herbs may interact with other medications or conditions, so please check with your doctor.
- Use the real “fountain of youth,” exercise, to add years to your life and life to your years. Following an **exercise** prescription from your doctor will retard the aging process, make you feel better and improve your stress-coping abilities.

Exercise increases your brain size according to a 2014 article from Harvard Medical School.<sup>11</sup>

- **Make Today Count.** The “Make Today Count” national organization focuses on helping mature but troubled adults cope with aspects of aging. As the name of the organization states, enjoy each day you are given by maintaining an “attitude of gratitude.” Keep a judgment-free journal of your daily gratitude.

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**Dr. William Osler (one of the world’s most famous Physicians) advised:**

*“Live neither in the past nor in the future, but let each day absorb all your interest, energy and enthusiasm.*

*The best preparation for tomorrow is to live today superbly well.”<sup>12</sup>*

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### **3. How to communicate meaningfully with the “Young.”**

**T**hanks to Covid, multiple generations have had to learn to live together under the same roof, making positive communication extremely important for emotional fitness.

Avoid the temptation of telling “When I was your age...” stories. These “Boomer fables” often elicit an “OK, Boomer”<sup>13</sup> response from the young. “OK boomer” is a catchphrase and Internet meme often used by teenagers and young adults to dismiss or mock attitudes typically associated with people born in the two decades following World War II, (aka baby boomers.).

There is almost a “knee jerk reaction” by boomers when listening to the complaints of the entitled-young. For example, in a reaction to “youngsters” complaining they don’t get “6 G”, an elder might say, “When I was YOUR age, we had to walk to school in knee-deep snow,

**T**hanks to Covid, multiple generations have had to learn to live together under the same roof, making positive communication extremely important for emotional fitness.



and it was uphill both ways.” Instead find ways to connect to their experiences; get curious; ask open-ended questions; and find shared interests.

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Some “words of wisdom”  
from an unknown author

VALUES

The best day . . .

Today

The greatest comfort . . .

Work well done

The greatest handicap . . .

Fear

The easiest thing to do . . .

Finding fault

The greatest mistake . . .

Giving up

The worst bankruptcy . . .

Loss of enthusiasm

The best gift. . .

Forgiveness

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In conclusion, the golden gift of time is Experience. Experience can be helpful

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Dr. Rubenzer worked at the Washington DC Office of Education. He has worked as a stress manager for a hospital based cardiac/stroke rehabilitation facility and their Employee Assistance Program. He also coordinated a wellness program for a large school system. He is a fellow with *The American Institute of Stress* and writes focus articles on “using stress to do one’s best” at home, work and school.

He has helped the U.S. Veteran’s Administration with COVID COACH, a free on-line resource containing of helpful tips to come through this COVID phase. He recently wrote, *Taking the Stress Out of Test-Taking*; to help educators properly identify the needs of students after the COVID Pause. He believes we will land on our feet, and maybe have our own version of the Roaring 20’s.

His books are available at <https://www.amazon.com/Dr.-Ron-Rubenzer/e/Boo4C994IO>

in adjusting to life’s occasional storms. As an “advanced scout,” as you reach your summit, you can offer the younger climber a “hand up” when necessary.

As the older-yet-wiser would say “Make today Count!” And say to yourself- “I am still standing,” even after this COVID Crisis. Get ready for your own “Roaring Twenties,” as your ancestors did after their 1918 “Pandemic Flu” was finally over.

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**A**s the older-yet-wiser would say “Make today Count!” And say to yourself- “I am still standing,” even after this COVID Crisis.

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