

THE  
**EXECUTIVE  
ESSENTIALS™**  
SERIES



# The Stress Solution!

The Complete Guide to Winning in Business  
Without Sacrificing in Life.

David A. Weiman, Psy.D.

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# The Stress Solution

By David A. Weiman, Psy.D.

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# The Stress Solution

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## Introduction to *The Executive Essentials™ Series*

It is one of the realities of executive life: It can be lonely at the top. I know that as a consultant to leaders of corporations, and I experienced it firsthand during the years when I was an executive.

Regardless of the size of the company, as you rise to the executive level, there are fewer and fewer people who can relate to the challenges that you face everyday. By its very nature, life as a leader is isolating. Why? There are fewer people at the top of any organization, leadership positions can be very competitive, and, not surprisingly, not everyone who gets to the top is interested in sharing the secrets of their success with others. Especially with those who might replace them.

Many executives regularly read leadership books and periodicals for advice on how to succeed. However, there are so many books and articles about leadership and management available today, that executives often say they don't have time to sort through all of what's available to find what is relevant to them. If they do find something on a subject of interest, it's often either too long or too short to be optimally useful. Perhaps you feel that way, too.

*The Executive Essentials™ Series* responds with concise, information-rich guides that address the most important issues you face. And each volume is a ready reference of effective, proven ideas that you can use today to improve your executive life.

The information is presented in a clear, easy-to-follow format that highlights the essential aspects of the core topic. Vignettes are used to illustrate common experiences, the issues are discussed in plain language, and the recommendations are common-sense solutions that are easy to execute. It may be lonely at the top, but now someone is providing targeted information that gives you exactly what you need to succeed. *The Executive Essentials™ Series*.

## Introduction to *The Stress Solution*

*The Executive Essentials™ Series* was created to address the core challenges that you face by providing thorough and practical guides. Why was *The Stress Solution* chosen as the first in the series? Numerous sources have referred to chronic overstress and burnout at the executive level as an epidemic. Reports from major health services and surveys in business publications regularly report alarming statistics about the health consequences of chronic stress, and the cost to organizations of stress-related absences, accidents, poor productivity and morale problems.

**Stress is part of life.** Due to the nature of executive life, however, it happens to be more of an issue as you gain more responsibility. For example, as the size of your staff increases, you are aware that there are more individual lives and families that depend – directly and indirectly – on your leadership and decisions. That dependence can be a stressor. Also, expectations are higher for your performance, and the consequences of not meeting goals will be greater. Not surprisingly, your ability to handle stress will impact how successful you are.

**Stress is a complex subject.** For example, there's good stress ... the kind that motivates you in a healthy way to get out of bed in the morning and go to work. And bad stress ... the kind that leaves you feeling tense and anxious, awake at night ruminating about the day or eating antacids two at a time because your stomach is upset.

In terms of sources, stress can come from external sources as well as internal ones. External sources might include deadlines, aggressive goals, a long commute to and from work or conflict with your peers.

Internal sources include how you think – what you tell yourself – when you're in a stressful situation. That's right. Your way of thinking about the people and events around you determines, in part, how stressful the situation seems.

In addition to your own typical way of thinking, your general physical health, your physiological response to stress, even your posture have implications for how well you'll meet the external stressors you face every day.

Finally, many executives experience stress regularly over such a long period of time that they may become accustomed to it. So accustomed, in fact, that it may take a serious negative life event – a failed marriage, ruined friendships, a serious alcohol or drug problem, or a heart attack – for the executive to be forced to confront the fact that he or she was overstressed for an extended period of time.

In that sense, stress is like thirst: Experts say that by the time you experience thirst, your body already needed water. By the time you feel overstressed, it's likely that you were overstressed for quite some time.

**Getting started.** The fact that you purchased this volume and that you are reading it now means that you are either concerned that you're overstressed, or you know someone who is. In this volume, I'll be discussing stress with you as if we were meeting one-on-one. It's a conversation you and I will have about stress.

- First, we'll take a look at a vignette together that illustrates some common signs of an overstressed executive.
- Then, we'll talk about what stress is and how to recognize it in yourself.
- Next, I'll give you some specific recommendations on what to do to manage stress at the executive level.
- Finally, I'll provide a list of resources that you can use to continue to learn more about how to reduce and cope with stress successfully in your life.

The first two sections include bulleted summaries entitled “Key Discussion Points.” Think of them as a post-meeting review of what we discussed ... the key

information you want to take away from that section. You might even glance at them first as a survey of what will be covered in the section.

Let's get started.

*Please note:*

*The symptoms of stress can be related to a number of factors, including various medical conditions either brought on by stress or made worse by it. If you are experiencing stress-related symptoms, or if others have indicated that you seem overstressed, see your personal physician right away. This document is not a substitute for appropriate medical or mental health care.*

## Vignette and Discussion

### Vignette

*The following vignette was written to illustrate various aspects of stress.  
All names and descriptions are fictitious.*

**Discussion Questions:** As you read through the following vignette about Jack Dunhill, Vice President of New Products for Passing Lane, Inc., look for the answers to these questions, and make notes in the space provided:

1. What are some external sources of Jack’s stress?
In your list above, put a “C” in a circle above those sources which you think are under Jack’s direct control.
2. Is Jack’s way of viewing things making them worse? If so, how?
3. What are Jack’s resources?

JACK DUNHILL has been working for Passing Lane, Inc. for the past five years. Six months ago he was promoted from Senior Product Manager to Vice President of New Products.



Jack was very goal-oriented and ambitious, and he had succeeded at Passing Lane by producing results himself, as opposed to achieving them by leading teams. The CEO liked his strong work ethic, though, and figured Jack would eventually acquire the people skills needed to motivate his staff and work collaboratively with the other VPs ... cooperative relationships that would be essential if he was to succeed in his new position.

Although he was happy about the promotion, it meant a lot more work. He wondered, “How am I going to do it?” Jack was already at his desk and working at 6 a.m. and he rarely left for home until about 7 p.m. Where would the extra time come from? Also, he enjoyed being hands-on and practical, and the new position required the kind of strategic planning that Jack never really liked.

**Money talks.** Despite the drawbacks mentioned above, the salary increase was something he needed. Jack, his wife, Jane, and their two-year old daughter, Jenny, had just moved into a larger and more expensive house that was almost an hour from the office. Also, he and his wife decided that she would give up her position as an HR executive to be a stay-at-home mom. Although this was clearly better for their daughter, they definitely missed Jane’s income, especially with the expenses of the move and the larger home.

**A new challenge.** Jack’s salary increase was accompanied by a new mandate from the CEO: Passing Lane had just been passed by its main competitor, who recently launched a very successful new product. The Board was leaning on the CEO to respond, and guess who the CEO was leaning on? Jack was assigned to research the market and make a presentation in six months to the CEO and the full executive team with recommendations for a new product to launch.

Because of the demands of the new project, Jack’s 13-hour days soon became much longer. On the one hand, Jack thought, it was an opportunity to show the CEO that she had made the right choice in promoting him. On the other

hand, he never before had full responsibility for a project this large, and – not wanting to appear as if he wasn't in control– didn't seek outside help or advice on how to move it ahead.

To save time, instead of meeting with his staff (which he didn't like to do anyway), Jack sent them e-mails when he needed to assign tasks. This led to more than a few miscommunications, and as people began to e-mail, call, or just show up in his office to get clarification, he became more and more frustrated. “If they keep this up, we're never going to make the deadline,” he said to himself.

“I can do this.” To save time, Jack began skipping breakfast at home and picking up a breakfast sandwich and coffee to eat in the car on his way into work. He also started eating lunch and dinner at his desk so that he could spend as much time as possible reviewing the marketing research that was coming back from the field. As the weeks went by, time itself seemed to be the enemy.

So he took shortcuts at work. He stopped updating his task lists as frequently, read less of the mail that came in and skipped as many meetings as possible. There were days when Jack felt like he was having one of those crazy dreams in which the faster you try to run, the slower you seem to move. But Jack kept telling himself, “I can do this,” even though the project was not moving along as quickly as he wanted it to.

As the project deadline got closer, Jack delegated less and tried to do more himself. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but Jack was running out of hours to do the work himself, and other aspects of the project that he should have been managing were getting away from him. Paradoxically, he would get involved in minute aspects of the project, like whether or not the spreadsheets he was receiving from the research department were formatted with the correct font, while failing to put the bigger pieces together.

Also, he started to get a kind of tunnel vision ... he always seemed to be thinking about the project. People at work noticed that he seemed overworked

and overstressed, but he was unapproachable. At home, Jack's wife also noticed the change in his mood, but he didn't want to discuss what was happening at work. He seemed much more tired than usual, and he was now working weekends to try and wrap up the project.

The breakfast sandwiches and take-out for lunch and dinner were convenient, but Jack was gaining weight, and he stopped going to the gym "temporarily" while he worked on the project. He started feeling sluggish every afternoon around 2:00, so he started drinking Diet Cokes during the day to keep his energy level up. The caffeine gave him a reliable boost, but it didn't agree with his stomach, so he ate a few antacid tablets every day around three o'clock as a "snack."

By the time his presentation to the CEO and the other members of the executive team rolled around, Jack was worn out, 12 pounds heavier and miserable. He wasn't the only one who was upset: His staff was frustrated by his insistence on doing so many things himself ... by the end of the project they were disengaged and angry. His wife felt shut out of his work life and resented how much time he dedicated to his new job, which seemed to be a priority over his family.

The presentation itself was more of a relief to Jack than an accomplishment. The critique from the rest of the executive team seemed aggressive to Jack and covered everything from his research methodology and conclusions to his financial projections and recommendations. After the meeting he walked back to his office, sat down in his chair, let out a huge sigh and asked himself, "What was I thinking when I took this job?"

## Discussion

Fill out your responses to the questions I posed at the beginning of this section and then let's take a look at your answers. I'll provide my own responses below, and I'll use each one as an opportunity to discuss some of the issues related to managing stress.

1. **What are the external sources of Jack's stress? Is he in control of those stressors?**
  - The promotion. Taking on a new job even in the best of circumstances is a stressor. This is something I would say is within Jack's control. If he felt that the job involved more responsibility than he was ready for, he could have passed on the opportunity or asked that it be deferred until he had sufficient leadership training to handle it effectively.
  - The move. It seems like a bigger house was needed, but moving is one of the greatest stressors most people experience. This is within Jack's control, although the timing wasn't ideal. It doesn't seem like he could have foreseen a promotion to a new job so close after the move.
  - Finances. Finances are definitely part of the stress picture for Jack. One of the things he likes about the promotion is that it is accompanied by a raise. Because his financial stressors are due mainly to the move and the couple's decision for Jane to stay at home, it's difficult to say that these things aren't within his control.
  - The commute. A long commute each way to work is a significant stressor. Driving, all by itself, places a person in a potentially stressful situation. Also, it leaves Jack less time to do other things, which presumably makes other areas of life more stressful, too.
  - The deadline. Some people work better under tight deadlines, and some don't. This deadline seems too tight for Jack, and he doesn't

handle it well. It seems like something that isn't under his control, but he could put it within his control by asking for an extension.

- The resources. Although Jack decided to go it alone, he didn't have to. While it seems as though things are falling mainly on his shoulders, he doesn't reach out to others for help initially, and he has difficulty delegating to his own staff because he's used to doing things himself. Jack has control over resources that he chooses not to use.

With regard to the external stressors, it seems as though they are mainly within Jack's control. Some decisions that he made outside of work clearly impacted his work life.

## 2. Is Jack's way of viewing things making them worse? If so, how?

- Jack's way of viewing things is definitely contributing to the stress.
- He's used to functioning independently, so he doesn't seek help, which makes matters worse.
- The worse things get, the more he becomes determined that he can do it alone.
- When he becomes stressed, he tends to focus just on the problem at hand. Also, he can become sidetracked by little things instead of dealing with the main problem. He probably gets some stress relief from accomplishing minor tasks, but achievement of the larger goal is sacrificed.
- He believes if he works harder and longer, things will get easier, but this doesn't work. In fact, it backfires, as he begins to gain weight and lose energy. He becomes much less patient and it becomes almost impossible to manage his time effectively.

Jack's self-reliance was successful when he was more of an individual contributor (before the promotion), but going it alone fails when he has to marshal and deploy resources, or gain help from others in a collaborative way. It

becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as ultimately his staff pulls away from him.

### 3. What are Jack's resources?

- The vignette begins with the story of Jack's promotion by a CEO who clearly likes and believes in him. The CEO is a resource that Jack doesn't tap in the vignette. Executives often don't go to their direct supervisor when there's a problem, because they fear appearing incompetent. All too often, though, the decision to keep things to themselves results in becoming overstressed.
- Jack could have consulted other superiors within the same company who might have provided him with mentoring or other guidance free of judgment.
- He could have consulted with professional organizations or colleagues outside of his office who have likely completed projects like his before.
- He may also have had online resources at his disposal. Two other often-forgotten resources are libraries and bookstores, where he could have obtained practical professional advice through periodicals and books.
- As VP of a division, Jack has access to the resources of his direct reports, but due to his independent style, he doesn't make use of them. Rather than delegate, he takes more and more on himself. The failure to delegate well is often a key issue affecting overstressed executives.
- Jack's peers on the executive team are a resource that he doesn't tap.
- Jack's wife could be a source of support, but he chooses not to talk with her about what's going on at work. Family is a key part of an effective support system.

- Although not mentioned in the vignette, one wonders if Jack has friends in whom he confides. Friendships are an essential source of support, and often provide an opportunity to share concerns with people who care about you, yet are not directly impacted by the situation.

Read the “Key Discussion Points” section below, which summarizes the issues presented in this section. We’ll revisit and expand on those issues again in the next two sections: *Recognizing Stress* and *Managing Stress*.

#### Key Discussion Points:

- **The first step in addressing stressors is to identify them as specifically as possible.** It’s common, when you’re overstressed, to feel as if everything is going wrong, or as if it’s always going to be that way. Identifying stressors as specifically as possible is an essential first step.
- **Break stressors out into two categories:** *External* – those which originate outside of you, and *Internal* – stress that is created or made worse by how you think about the situation.
- **Within the list of External stressors, make sure you identify those over which you have some control.** Deciding which ones you can do something about is essential to creating an effective action plan.
- **Internal stressors relate to your customary way of thinking.** Learning about your own typical way of viewing external events is critical to managing stress from the inside.
- **Catalog your resources.** Getting a sense of all the resources at your disposal is essential. For many overstressed executives,

there's a tendency to get so absorbed in overcoming the stressors themselves that they neglect to take stock of all of the resources at their disposal, or they fail to effectively use the resources that they have identified.

What's Next:

- In the next section, we'll take a look at some basic issues in stress that are relevant for executives, and discuss how to recognize when you're becoming overstressed.



## Recognizing Stress

Trying to define “stress” is like trying to define “love.” If you ask 10 people, you’ll probably get 10 different responses.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this volume, there are two types of stress. “Good” stress is the kind that motivates you. Without some level of that good stress, you wouldn’t be motivated to get out of bed in the morning to earn a living. It keeps you sharp, moving forward and performing at your best.

Then there’s the other kind. “Bad” stress. That’s the kind that we’re discussing together in this section. For the purposes of this guide, I’m defining bad stress very narrowly as the *perception* of a threat or highly demanding situation. The reason why the word “perception” is emphasized is that the way you view a situation determines, in part, how your body responds to it.

The stress response is a human being’s physiological and behavioral responses to an acute stressor. It’s a self-protective response that has two phases. You can think of the first phase as the “emergency response” phase. Your body makes rapid changes to adapt and deal with the threat. It starts to mobilize all of its resources to fight off the stressor or get away from it. In your high school or college psychology class they called this the “fight or flight” response.

Here’s what happens:

- Hormones pour into your bloodstream to help your body make the most use of its available energy.
- Your heart beats faster.
- Your lungs take in more oxygen to fuel your muscles for activity.
- Your muscles tense.
- Your pupils dilate and you might experience a sense of “tunnel vision” as you prepare to narrow your field of vision and focus on the threat.
- Your digestion slows down.

- You begin to perspire more to cool your body down.

The stress response is efficient, effective, and it is your body's way of defeating a short-term event. Think about Fred Flintstone running away from a saber-tooth cat. It only lasts for a few seconds and then Fred goes home to Wilma.

Once the situation is over, your body goes into the second phase of the stress response. In this "recovery" phase, your body begins to repair any damage that was done during the first, emergency response phase. If the situation is truly resolved, the stress symptoms vanish.

But what if the stressful situation continues over a long period of time ... maybe a few days, or even months? Or what if the situation itself is resolved but you continue to *perceive* that there's a threat?

**Perceived threats.** Being chased around by a saber-tooth cat is something truly life-threatening. But because the stress response is self-protective, it kicks in to some degree whether the threat is real or just perceived as real. In other words, for the system to function effectively, it has to err on the side that a threat is real so that you aren't harmed by something you misperceive as non-threatening.

For example, have you ever noticed how people react when they're watching a scary movie? As the villain slowly enters the kitchen out of sight of the victim (who is usually basting a chicken), people watching the movie tense up in their seats. They cringe, ball up their fists, their heart races, they take a deep breath and generally act as if they were the ones about to be attacked. The same things happen to moviegoers watching car crashes, plane crashes and other violent scenes.

The visual imagery is so compelling that our bodies react as if we were actually being threatened. But what's really going on? You're all in comfortable seats, surrounded by other people, in a darkened room, watching images being

projected onto a wall. I can't think of anything that better illustrates how a person's perception of what's happening around them can kick off the stress response, even when they're under no real threat.

Even when people aren't watching something violent or scary, they still may perceive that there's some threat to their wellbeing. Feeling overwhelmed by work, sensing that your job might be threatened, or not having enough money to sustain your house or family are examples of stressors that threaten your sense of wellbeing. Those are situations that might rationally upset anyone, and they are unlikely to be resolved quickly.

On the other hand, there are people whose very way of viewing the world makes even minor situations seem like catastrophes. Consider this example: Two drivers are caught in the same traffic jam, and both of them are late for important meetings that have started without them. One is furious, pounding on the steering wheel, yelling at the line of cars ahead of him. He criticizes himself for not listening to the traffic report before starting out. He pictures the day ahead and predicts that nothing will go right. He's clearly stressed.

The second driver is calm. He tells himself it's not his fault that he's stuck on the highway. He listens to a traffic report on the radio and expects that the accident ahead will be cleared shortly. He uses his time to call his office, reschedule appointments, return messages, and adjust his schedule accordingly. He even looks forward to dinner plans that he has that evening. He's taking things in stride, and handling the situation much more effectively than the first driver.

In the example above, two people in the exact same circumstance responded in entirely different ways. What was the difference? What they each told themselves about the situation.

**An ancient concept.** The idea that the way in which you think affects how you interpret events – and what you plan to do about them – can be found as far back as the writings of the Stoic philosophers. One of the more prolific of those philosophers, Epictetus, wrote in *The Enchiridion*: “Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them.”

**Long-term effects.** Whether you’re constantly surrounded by upsetting situations or just perceive that you are, that’s enough to either repeatedly activate the stress response, or to keep it activated at a very low level over a long period of time. Instead of the body returning to its normal resting state, in other words, it’s on low level alert almost all the time. And the repeated or long-term activation of the stress response changes from a self-protective response to a maladaptive one, wearing your body down and contributing to (or making worse) a number of problems, like:

- Bowel and stomach problems
- Neck and back pain
- High blood pressure
- Cardiovascular disease
- Weakened resistance to illnesses
- Anxiety
- Insomnia and other sleep problems
- Arthritis and other inflammatory diseases
- Depression
- Anger control problems

This list represents a range of physical, behavioral and emotional problems. The kinds of things from which you’d want relief as soon as possible. Why do so many executives who are experiencing some of these problems continue to suffer with chronic stress? It’s most likely because executives are accustomed to tolerating or even ignoring physical or emotional discomfort to get

the job done. In fact, your seeming ability to tolerate or endure stress (as opposed to avoiding it or coping with it effectively) may have led to promotions to more stressful positions of leadership.

So, you may, over longer periods of time than the average person, either ignore symptoms of chronic stress or have become so accustomed to them that you don't notice them any more. You don't notice them, that is, until an acute illness, such as a heart attack, forces you to confront the issue of stress in your life.

**Recognizing when you're overstressed.** The fact that you purchased this guide means that you either recognize that stress is impacting your life or you know someone who seems overstressed. The first step in managing stress is making sure you've identified as accurately as possible where it's coming from, and how you typically react or respond to it. As you now know, the experience of stress is multi-determined, so we're going to use several different methods of assessing it.

**Stressors.** First, let's try to identify the stressors that you face as an executive. I'm going to list some general categories of stressors in the first column on page 22, with a few sample items next to each in the second column, and a spot in the third column for you to check, yes or no, whether or not the stressor is something over which you have direct control.

By that I mean that it is within your power and authority to change it or recommend that it be changed. So, for example, if your office is at the noisy end of the hall, and if that excessive noise is stressful to you, I'd view that as something under your control because you could ask people to be quiet, shut your door, move your office, or take some other action that would deal head-on with the problem.

An example of a stressor over which you have no control would be something like economic conditions that negatively impact your business, huge layoffs at your company, or changes in your industry.

You can check off the ones that apply to you, but I'd also like you to fill in specifics from your own work situation. Each stressor should be identified as specifically as possible. For example, if you agreed to complete a project for which you now realize you have insufficient resources, list the specific project and why you don't have the resources you need to complete it.

As you know from the previous section, the more specific you can be, the easier it will be to form an action plan. And, in the next section, *Managing Stress*, we're going to use your responses on page 22 to start putting together a stress-coping action plan.

**External Stressors**

Category	Specific Stressor(s)	Controllable?
Goals	Sample: <i>The sales quota I was assigned is too ambitious given current market conditions. I won't be able to meet this quota.</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	1.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	2.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Roles	Sample: <i>I was asked to serve on a special committee but I don't have the time to do it. I agreed anyway.</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	1.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	2.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Responsibilities	Sample: <i>I'm supposed to identify and roll out a new product in 6 months but they cut the research budget I was promised.</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	1.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	2.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Relationships with Superiors	Sample: <i>My supervisor likes to motivate by fear, so she keeps telling me that I'll lose my job if performance doesn't improve.</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	1.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	2.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Relationships with Peers	Sample: <i>A manager I work with never responds when I ask for information she has. She says it's not her job.</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	1.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	2.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Relationships with Direct Reports	Sample: <i>My best manager is coming to meet with me about a raise next week and there's no more money in the budget.</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	1.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	2.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Office Environment	Sample: <i>We have an "open door" policy, but I'm interrupted so much every day I can't seem to get anything done.</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	1.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	2.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Other	1.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	2.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

**It's nothing personal.** The chart above captured a lot of important information about your work-related stress. But, as you know, your personal life can be the source of stress, as well. Unfortunately, trying to figure out the degree to which work stress is impacting your personal life, or vice versa, is like trying to un-bake a cake. The ingredients interact, and it can be difficult to detect where it all started.

This volume is focused only on recognizing and managing work-related stressors. If you feel that ongoing personal issues (e.g., longtime relationship problems), or specific events (e.g., the death of a loved one), are impacting your performance on the job, seek the advice of a licensed mental health professional in your area.

If you like to read, an excellent book on handling the curveballs that life can throw at you is *The Feeling Good Handbook*, by David Burns, MD. A full citation to the book is contained in the *Resources* section of this guide.

**It's not all in your head, but some of it is.** Using the chart above, you identified your external sources of stress, and that's one important part of the picture. As you know, the other important part is your reaction to it. There are three components to that reaction:

- **The physical component.** This is your body's internal reaction to a stressor.
- **The behavioral component.** This is your observable response to the stressor ... the things you notice yourself doing, or that others could easily see.
- **The cognitive or emotional component.** This comprises the thoughts and feelings you have about the stressor.



### Assessing the Physical Component

The most effective thing you can do to monitor your body's response to stress is to get regular, annual physical exams from your primary care physician. If you haven't had a physical exam in a while, or if you have symptoms of any kind, make the appointment now.

Why? Although many people wait until they are symptomatic before they see a physician, being proactive is essential when dealing with chronic stress, because the harm can occur at a level you can't detect yourself, and well before you experience obvious symptoms. By then, it may be too late. Most executives would be furious with a direct report who let things get to a crisis stage before managing the situation, but many deal with their own stress that way. A few things to consider:

- I am recommending a full physical exam, as opposed to a brief checkup. Your physician should know that you work under stressful circumstances and that you want to avoid stress-related illnesses in the future.
- Your physician will need to have a good understanding of your working conditions, your diet and your level of exercise. Make sure you discuss those topics so that he or she has a complete picture.
- Try to see the same physician each year. The continuity in care will be important.

### Understanding the Behavioral Component

In terms of the behavioral aspects of stress, I'm thinking of those things that you do, as opposed to internal physiological processes or the thoughts that you have about stress. Behavioral issues are things other people can easily observe about you, even, sometimes, things you don't notice about yourself.

Here's a list of common behavioral responses of overstressed executives. Experiencing any one or more of these doesn't mean you're overstressed. If you're wearing out a pencil checking these off, though, it's a sign that stress isn't just knocking on the door; it's banging:

- You eat at your desk so you can work through meals to save time.
- You overeat, or you skip meals entirely.
- You bring work home because there's not enough time to do it at the office.
- You isolate yourself in your office to get things done instead of getting help from others.
- You don't take all of your allotted vacation time because you have "too much to do" at the office.
- You do very little in the form of advanced or strategic planning because you're always working on urgent projects.
- There are times when you find yourself side-tracked by little tasks, like answering e-mail or voicemail messages, because they're easy to accomplish, even though they prevent you from working on the important goal.
- You can't figure out what to delegate and what to do yourself because everything seems urgent and important.
- Others, including peers, superiors, direct reports, family and friends, tell you that you seem overstressed, but you disagree.
- You worry about things more than half the day.
- You find it difficult to get to sleep because you're thinking about problems at work.
- You're out of time, so you no longer participate in hobbies or activities that you once found pleasurable.

- You're engaging in self-destructive behavior (or more of it than usual), like drinking or smoking, to help cope with the stress you're dealing with.
- You have less patience than you used to ... things that may have not bothered you much at all in the past are now very irritating, like getting stuck in traffic, or being served the wrong order in a restaurant.
- When you do have time, you find it difficult to relax.

Reading through this checklist and deciding whether or not you engage in any of these behaviors is one way of assessing your own behavioral responses to stress. For another point of view, the people with whom you work can be a wonderful source of feedback about how you handle stress. They can see the effects in how you behave: The expression on your face, how you walk, how you respond to questions. Ask up to three people with whom you feel comfortable discussing this topic – from your work and personal life – if they've noticed that you've seemed stressed to them lately, or at any time over the past six months.

If you're looking for a specific question to ask, say "I want your honest feedback about something that's important to me. Have I seemed stressed to you lately? Or maybe over the past six months? If so, let me know, as specifically as possible, what I did, what I said or how I appeared that made you think I was overstressed."

The chart below can help you track their responses. After you've completed this exercise, read through their responses and try to identify the themes they notice in your behavior. If there's something similar about what they've observed, just make a note of it in the space provided. Your increased self-awareness can help you proactively monitor your level of stress in the future.

**Stress Observations by Others**

Who you talked with.	Do they think you're stressed?	What made them think that?
Sample: I talked with my administrative assistant.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	<i>I get absent-minded. She also said she can hear me slamming down the phone in my office.</i>
1. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
2. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
3. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

The themes. If you've reached the executive level, you probably don't need a degree in psychology to look at data and see trends. Go through the information from the chart above and see if there are any themes in the observations of others. Try to identify up to three themes and write them in the space provided below. We'll use this information in the next section, *Managing Stress*, as we identify effective coping strategies. Two examples are provided:

<b>Sample Theme #1:</b> When I'm stressed out at work, I lose patience easily and raise my voice.
<b>Sample Theme #2:</b> At home, I "space out" in front of the TV ... it's hard to get me to do anything.
Theme 1:
Theme 2:
Theme 3:

### Recognizing the Cognitive Component

The connection between your mind and your body can be surprising, profound, and (most importantly) real. For example, studies have shown that hospital patients who have an optimistic attitude about their surgeries have better post-operative outcomes and recoveries than patients who are pessimistic. Also, there is research suggesting that people who effectively cope with stress are less likely to catch the common cold. Other studies have demonstrated how guided imagery and self-hypnosis can be used to alleviate pain, heal injuries more quickly and protect the body against disease.

There also is ample evidence that the opposite occurs: The way you think can be extremely harmful. The person who has a slight headache but believes, because her mother died of brain cancer, that her headache is actually a sign that she, too, has cancer, can go into a physical and emotional tailspin that will be difficult to recover from. And because the body reacts based in large part on what your mind tells it, if you think in catastrophic terms, your body will respond as if a catastrophe is actually happening. That can do significant damage.

For example, Rachel stepped off the curb and felt a sharp pain in her right foot. She was convinced that she had broken her foot, and with her wedding coming up in just four weeks, she began to think the worst: She'd look foolish wearing a cast at the wedding, she'd have to stay off her feet most of the time, and, worst of all, she wouldn't be able to dance with her father ... something they had talked about together and looked forward to since she was a little girl.

As upset as she was, Rachel was embarrassed about going to an emergency room ... after all, she wasn't bleeding to death or in agonizing pain. So, she waited over the weekend to see her family doctor on Monday. She spent the weekend in a panic. She called friends to tell them about her disastrous injury, repeating the story over and over again. She blamed herself for not being more careful, and she imagined how horrible her wedding would be with her in a cast.

By the time she saw the doctor on Monday she was tired because she hadn't slept, she hadn't eaten well, her eyes were red and sore from crying so much and she had a major headache in addition to the pain in her foot. The result of the doctor's examination? She had slightly bruised the ball of her foot when she stepped off the curb. Nothing broken or even moderately injured. She had worried herself into a state of despair all weekend for nothing. In the absence of any real information, she had imagined the worst and paid the price for it. It was all unnecessary.

In life, all kinds of things happen. Some of them are negative, some are positive, and some are neutral. As you know, what you tell yourself about those events has implications for how you will feel and what you will do next. Think about the example of the two drivers again. They are both in the same circumstance, but one is stressed to the breaking point and the other calmly goes about his business. What happens between the event and their actual reactions to it is how they think about it.

Every human being has a characteristic set of responses to the events that occur around them. Some of those characteristic responses make good or neutral situations seem bad, and bad situations seem worse.

Take this example: You're called to a meeting and on the way in, the CEO (your boss) says "There's something I want to talk to you about after the meeting." A rational response might be "I wonder what she wants to talk about ... I guess I'll find out at the end of the meeting."

An irrational (or maladaptive) response might be, "I wonder what I did wrong? I bet this is about that e-mail I sent her about my year-end bonus. I was only kidding around, but I bet she's mad about that." The reason that response is maladaptive is that there's no evidence from what the CEO said that the meeting is about something negative.

Based just on what the CEO said, there's no reason to form any kind of initial impression about what the meeting is about. All she said was that she'd like to meet. It's certainly human to fill in gaps with our fears, which leads to stress, but quite a bit of the time those fears are not based on evidence from the actual situation. It comes, instead, from a pattern of negative thoughts about reality.

A persistent pattern of irrationally negative thoughts may trigger a chronic stress response even if the actual events are neutral or positive. The way you talk to yourself is extremely powerful in affecting how you prepare to deal with the situation at hand. A simple example: Someone who is hungry and says to herself, "I'm really starving right now," may be more likely to overeat than someone who says "I'm a little hungry right now" because the message that she's "starving" is so alarming. Why not eat as much as you can if you're starving?

Most of the time, the things we tell ourselves all day long occur automatically, without much conscious analysis. It's just a running conversation that we have with ourselves without really attending to the actual words we're using.

Here are some things that overstressed executives typically say to themselves. Not all of these would be irrational, as it might depend on the situation, but all of them are very intense, alarming statements:

- "I'm never going to get this done."
- "They're going to kill me when I give them this bad news."
- "They really beat me up in that meeting."
- "This is a disaster."
- "They're going to discover I'm a fraud."
- "This is all my fault."
- "I can't figure this out."
- "This is never going to change."

- “I’m going to be fired over this.”
- “No one understands what I’m going through.”
- “I’m ruined.”

As with the behavioral list, having some of the thoughts above from time to time isn’t a serious problem. It’s telling yourself things like this over and over again, day after day, week after week and month after month that can create a chronic perception of being overwhelmed by stressors.

So, how do you know if you’ve established a pattern of talking to yourself in a negative way about the events around you? Keeping a log of thoughts is one way. I’ve created a sample log below that you can use to monitor your thoughts about the stressors in your work life. In the first column, you’ll list the stressor. In the next column, you’ll list your initial thought about it ... the very first thing that popped into your head when it happened. The third column is where you can write what you felt or did about it.

The last two columns are not labeled, because we’re going to use them in the next section, *Managing Stress*. For now, you can either fill out the form based on recent events, or keep it at your desk and fill it out immediately after something happens. An example is included:



**Event/Thought Monitoring Form**

Event	Your immediate thoughts.	What you felt or did.		
<i>I was given a new project to work on.</i>	<i>I thought, "There's no way I can do this."</i>	<i>I felt overwhelmed. Called a friend who works at another company and complained.</i>		

Take the opportunity to fill in as many specific events as you can before going onto the next section. We'll use the data from this table to work on more effective ways of handling your stressors.

This completes the section *Recognizing Stress*. The "Key Discussion Points" are summarized below.

Key Discussion Points:

- Stress is the perception of a threat or highly demanding situation.
- Some external events are truly threatening, and some simply *seem* that way because of the way you typically view the world. We discussed how to identify the external sources of stress in your life as a first step toward coping with them.

- Human beings have an internal stress response mechanism that helps the person defeat or avoid the stressor.
- This response is intended to be short-term. If activated over and over again, or activated at a low level over a long period of time, it becomes maladaptive, and chronic stress can compromise your physical health and emotional wellbeing.
- The response involves physical, behavioral and cognitive elements. We discussed how to recognize the signs of stress in those three areas.

**What's Next:**

- In the next section, *Managing Stress*, we'll use your assessment in the areas above to begin building a stress management action plan.

## Managing Stress

By this point, you've learned the essentials about stress in the executive situation. You have also done a lot of work to gather data about the sources of stress in your work life, and how you customarily deal with it. Now comes the time to create an effective action plan for doing something about it.

As we previously discussed, stress has multiple determinants, and each human being has characteristic ways of reacting to it. You're going to build your action plan based on each of those areas. The full Stress Management Action Plan is outlined on page 54. You can fill it out as we complete each section. When necessary, I may ask you to go back a few pages to look at the information you filled out in the previous section.

### Managing the External Sources of Stress

As we discussed, there are two kinds of external stressors. The kind you can do something about, and the kind you can't. How do you recognize the stressors you can't do anything about? Those are the ones where there really is absolutely nothing you can do – like standing outside in a rainstorm and demanding sunshine.

Dealing with those things over which you have no control is simple: Put them on the shelf. Play past them. Spend your time focusing on solvable problems. Why? Because trying to solve the unsolvable is a waste of time and energy. It keeps you on the side of the road when you should be cruising along. Let's focus on changing things you can really change.

Here's something amazing: The more you focus on solving real problems using practical solutions, the more headway you make in solving them. As you resolve more and more sources of stress, you will feel a sense of accomplishment. And with that sense of accomplishment will come a growing sense that you really can handle the things you face everyday at work. And you'll be spending so much

time engaged in the really effective management of the stress in your life, that the stuff you can't do anything about won't seem to matter much anymore. Really. So let's get started.

The key to managing external sources of stress is to identify those you can do something about, prioritize them, and use a step by step process to resolve them. The most useful tool I've ever come across for figuring out how to deal with an external source of stress is a simple process of alternative solutions thinking.

If you're not already familiar with it, alternative solutions thinking is a structured method of solving a problem. The evidence has long shown that many people who don't make good decisions tend to be impulsive, doing the first thing they think of, instead of considering alternatives, weighing the pros and cons of those alternatives and then enacting the best solution.

Others may consider alternatives, but don't think about the pros and cons of each choice. And others, still, may go through that whole process, but get stalled (paralysis due to over-analysis) and never take any action at all.

Go through the list of external stressors that you created on page 22. As you're reading through them, ask yourself, "Among all of these stressors, which are the ones that, if I were to resolve them, would make the most significant impact in reducing my overall level of stress on the job?" Prioritize them by numbering them from 1, being the most important to resolve first, to the end of the list.

One of the keys to effective problem solving is not taking on more than you can reasonably handle, so I'm going to suggest that you do the following process one at a time. Take the first, most important stressor on that list, and work through the following exercise. There's nothing fancy about what we're going to do. All you need is a pad and a pen or pencil.

All set? Good. Now take that first stressor, and write it out at the top of the sheet of paper. I'll use one of the examples I provided above to work through the process:

*Problem: We have an "open door" policy, but I'm interrupted so much every day I can't seem to get anything done. Most of the time it's for non-urgent things.*

Next, write down how you currently react to that stressor. Here's what it looks like on my sheet:

*My current reaction: I interrupt what I'm doing and deal with the person who walked in. It breaks my concentration, which makes me angry and frustrated.*

Next, list as many solutions to the problem as you can. Do not judge each one. Don't edit yourself. In fact, even if there's a crazy solution that pops into your head, write it down. Sometimes those crazy ideas lead to other more rational ones that will actually work.

Here's how it looks on my own sheet of paper:

1. *Keep the door shut.*
2. *Send out a memo explaining that I'm not following the policy anymore. People who need to see me should schedule an appointment.*
3. *When people come in, put them on a schedule when I have time to see them.*
4. *Hire a guard dog.*

Next, write out the pros and cons to each alternative you've listed. You don't need to exhaustively catalog all of the pros and cons ... use brief notes to identify what the costs and benefits will be for each one. Here's what it looks like on my sheet:

**Problem Solving Worksheet for External Stressors**

<b>Solutions</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
1. Keep the door shut.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People won't be able to walk right in.</li> <li>• People will see it's shut and go away.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Might give the appearance that I'm unapproachable.</li> <li>• I might miss something that's urgent if someone thinks I don't want to hear it.</li> </ul>
2. Send out a memo explaining that I'm not following the policy anymore. People who need to see me should schedule an appointment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone will know in advance that I don't have an open door policy.</li> <li>• I can put people on my schedule.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher ups might not like that I'm not abiding by the company value.</li> <li>• There may be times when I do want to keep the door open to others, but then I'd have to send out a new memo.</li> </ul>
3. When people come in, put them on a schedule when I have time to see them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It shows I'm open to whatever people came in to discuss.</li> <li>• It lets me prioritize my own schedule.</li> <li>• I can get a sense of who walks in with things that really aren't urgent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People will still be able to walk in unannounced.</li> </ul>
4. Hire a guard dog.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dog will scare people away.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dog will scare people away.</li> </ul>

Let's take a look at what we've done so far. We've taken a problem that we characteristically handle just by getting angry and frustrated, and, by thinking through it rationally, we've identified four different ideas and the pros and cons of each. If you've made it to the executive level, you don't need me to teach you how to analyze your options and choose those that are viable. I will, for illustration purposes, explain to you my own thinking.

I decided to rule out using a guard dog. Then I decided on the following policy, which I sent out in a memo: I value the company's open door policy, and have a few suggestions that will help me manage my own time more efficiently while still being accessible to the staff. If you can, to save us both time, call before you come to my office so we can arrange a time to meet. If you do walk in without calling first, I'll listen to what your concern is and if I can't handle it at that time,

we'll arrange a mutually convenient time to discuss it. If my door is shut, it means I'm unavailable, but you can interrupt if the issue is urgent (i.e., needs my immediate approval). Here's what my sheet looked like when I was finished:

**Problem Solving Worksheet for External Stressors**

<b>Problem:</b> We have an "open door" policy, but I'm interrupted so much every day I can't seem to get anything done. Most of the time it's for non-urgent things.		
<b>My current reaction:</b> I interrupt what I'm doing and deal with the person who walked in. It breaks my concentration, which makes me angry and frustrated.		
<b>Solutions</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
1. Keep the door shut.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People won't be able to walk right in.</li> <li>• People will see it's shut and go away.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Might give the appearance that I'm unapproachable.</li> <li>• I might miss something that's urgent if someone thinks I don't want to hear it.</li> </ul>
2. Send out a memo explaining that I'm not following the policy anymore. People who need to see me should schedule an appointment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone will know in advance that I don't have an open door policy.</li> <li>• I can put people on my schedule.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher ups might not like that I'm not abiding by the company value.</li> <li>• There may be times when I do want to keep the door open to others, but then I'd have to send out a new memo.</li> </ul>
3. When people come in, put them on a schedule when I have time to see them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It shows I'm open to whatever people came in to discuss.</li> <li>• It lets me prioritize my own schedule.</li> <li>• I can get a sense of who walks in with things that really aren't urgent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People will still be able to walk in unannounced.</li> </ul>
<del>4. Hire a guard dog.</del>	<del>• The dog will scare people away.</del>	<del>• The dog will scare people away.</del>
<b>Solution(s):</b> Combine 1 and 3 and send it out in a memo (solution 2) next Monday. Mention it in advance at the weekly staff meeting and mention it again after the memo is distributed. Monitor progress.		

**Discussion.** The process of alternative solutions thinking for external sources of stress is effective for a few reasons:

- It's an organized and thorough approach.

- It engages you in a constructive process for coping with the stressor by focusing on real solutions, instead of just worrying about the problem, or immediately reacting to it.
- You have the opportunity to experience how effective you can be at developing solutions to stress-related problems. By the end you see how many options you really have. Instead of relying on a potentially ineffective initial reaction, you see that you really do have choices. And some of those options can be combined, as shown in the example.
- The process reinforces how important it is to stop and think when you're trying to deal with a stressor.

Keep in mind that it's all just an intellectual exercise in problem solving unless you enact the solutions that you developed. After you've enacted your chosen solution, monitor the results and confirm that it's reduced the impact of that stressor.

Although this process is simple enough to write out on a sheet of paper, I've put a blank version of the chart above on page 56 of the *Resources* section at the back of this guide so that you can copy it and use it as needed.

### Managing the Physical Components of Stress

In the previous section, *Recognizing Stress*, we discussed the fact that the stress response is a physiological response to a real or perceived threat. The implications are that an essential key to coping with stress is making sure that you are as physically healthy as you can be. As already mentioned, you should have an annual physical exam.

Also, regular physical exercise, such as 30 minutes per session, three to five times a week, is an important component of any healthy lifestyle. So is eating a healthy diet. I have yet to meet someone smart enough to become a vice president who didn't already know this.



The problem is that many overstressed executives complain that they don't have the time to eat right and exercise regularly. It's a bad cycle, however. When you consider that your stress tolerance is determined in part by your level of physical fitness, but that the demands of stress result in you not taking the time to take care of yourself, you can see how illogical it is to put a healthy diet and exercise on the back burner.

Nevertheless, many of the burned out executives I've worked with have done just that. Also, don't forget that the stress response is primarily a physical response, so discharging stress through exercise is an essential part of a good overall stress management program.

Time is an issue that we'll deal with in the section on behavior, below. In the meanwhile, here are 10 tips to help you get onto a physically healthier track:

1. Put regular exercise into your schedule. Make it a priority. Many people enjoy it in the morning because it helps them "jump start" the day. Others prefer it at night because it helps them de-stress. Some even go to the gym during lunch, shower, and then return to work ready for the afternoon. Whatever the case, put it in your calendar.
2. Join a gym. Check out their exercise classes. Or hire a personal trainer. The structure they both provide can help you identify and pursue correct physical fitness goals.
3. Take martial arts classes, yoga, or other nontraditional forms of exercise. These methods often engage your mind and body in novel ways that refocus you away from the troubles of the day. In the best schools, you can take one or two classes to experience the art form and see which one is the best fit for you.
4. Subscribe to a health and fitness magazine. Some, like *Men's Health*, are focused on the issues of a specific gender. Others, like *Runner's World*, focus on a specific activity. Either way, they can inspire you to begin a

program, give you helpful tips to keep things interesting, and provide a great deal of helpful information along the way.

5. Don't combine work and exercise. If you're using a stationary bike, for example, don't try to squeeze in a little reading from work that you need to do. Don't try to read *BusinessWeek* while you're walking on the treadmill. Make sure to separate exercise from work activities.
6. Don't eat at your desk, and don't work while you're eating. Separating eating from stressful activities, such as reviewing a balance sheet, is important. Why? Because stress interferes with normal digestion.
7. Consult with a nutritionist. A competent nutritionist can help you evaluate your current diet and eating habits and make terrific, common-sense suggestions that are easy to follow. They can help you identify energy-boosting snacks as opposed to fattening ones, and clue you in as to how frequently you should eat to keep your body running at peak efficiency throughout the day.
8. Hire a personal chef. It's not as expensive as you might think, and it may be even less costly than eating out all the time. The personal chef or cook can prepare healthy, nutritious meals that you can freeze and then take out when you need them. Don't forget: Many people tend to overeat when they eat out or order in. Portion control can help you avoid excessive eating.
9. Learn diaphragmatic breathing. Diaphragmatic breathing is a method of slow, deep breathing that can, within 3-5 breaths, start calming your body down and reverse the effects of the first phase of the stress response. Check the last section of this guide, *Resources*, for information on how to learn and use deep breathing for stress relief.
10. Get a relaxation audiotape or CD. Guided relaxation can take your mind off your stressors and help you get your body back into a

healthy, calm state. You'll avoid the effects of chronic stress this way, and your body will be better prepared to fight off a stressor when it does occur. Relaxation training isn't for everyone, but if you've tried it in the past or would like to experience it again, go to your local bookseller and see what they have on audiotape or CD that might appeal to you.

After considering which of the items above you'd like to pursue, turn to the Stress Management Action Plan Outline on page 54 and write them in under the appropriate section. I haven't cornered the market on ideas for increasing physical stress-hardiness, so if you have your own preferences, write them into your plan.

### Managing the Behavioral Components of Stress

Now is a good time to review the material *Understanding the Behavioral Component* in the previous section, beginning on page 24. These are your observable responses to stressful situations. Sometimes, we enact these responses without really thinking about them, which means that we're doing quite a bit outside our conscious awareness.

If you look through the list of common behavioral signs of stress, and if you look through the themes that you saw emerging from your survey of other people in your work life, you'll notice something: They almost all are a consequence of acting as if we don't have enough time to do all the things we need to do. And many of the others are a consequence of not delegating effectively.

Not surprisingly, these two problems are linked together. That's because most executives made it to the top by working hard and achieving goals. So when it seems as though they no longer have time on their side, many will simply try harder and do more themselves. Sometimes they feel like they don't have the time

to delegate, and sometimes they believe that others won't do it as well as they can. It's a "Catch-22," just like not taking the time to exercise, which helps you cope with stress, because you're so stressed you can't take the time to do it. We know that we're telling ourselves nonsense when we think that way, but because being under stress impacts your ability to think clearly, we do what we know is wrong anyway.

I was once assigned to work on time management and delegation with an executive who was suffering from burnout and was about to hit the wall. She was the first one in the office each morning and stayed until 9:00 every night. Still, she couldn't get everything done. She had stopped making her children's lunches in the morning because it took too much time, and she stopped going to their plays and soccer games at school.

She worked through lunch and dinner and still couldn't make a real dent in her workload. Her reports and memos were filled with mistakes, projects were late, and she had a short temper with just about everyone. I had to page her two or three times to get a call back, and we finally set up a time to meet. She canceled our first two appointments. Why? She told me she didn't have the time.

Before we go any further, you have to acknowledge these critical points:

1. **Working longer doesn't reduce stress, it increases it.**
2. **It takes time to learn how to manage time.**
3. **The more time you invest in improving time management and delegation, the better you will become.**

The best system for managing time that I've seen is in Stephen Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. The essence of his model is that time management is a misnomer ... we're not really trying to manage time, we're trying to manage ourselves. And to manage ourselves more effectively we have to schedule activities that focus more on enhancing important relationships and

results, and focus less on trying to fit in all the things we think we need to do in a given day.

Covey's concept of time management is radically different than previous models that were simple – and ineffective – methods of cramming more into our schedules. After using his method of time management for 3-6 months, go back to the three people you surveyed and ask them the same questions again about whether or not you appear stressed, and, if so, what made them think so. Your results will be much different than they were the first time, as you begin to see how to effectively achieve your goals in the various roles you have at your company.

In addition to the concepts in Covey's book, I've reprinted the list of behaviors from the *Recognizing Stress* section you read earlier, with specific tips on how to counteract each of those problems. To complete the Behavioral Section of the Stress Management Action Plan Outline (page 54), first go back to the survey of other people you completed on page 27 and review the themes in what others observed in your behavior. Next, go through the list in the chart below and see which items relate to those themes. Then identify one or two behavioral responses that you'd like to change, put them on the action list and note how you want to change that behavior to a more adaptive response. (Because time management and delegation are often in need of improvement among overstressed executives, they have been included in the plan already).

You'll get some specific, practical ideas you can use below, and you can also use the Alternative Solutions Thinking Outline on page 56 to identify additional ideas.

### Common Behavioral Issues and Solutions

The Behavior	Why you do it.	Solution.
You eat at your desk so you can work through meals to save time.	You think it saves time (but it just gives you an ulcer).	Eat out. Even a brief break will help you avoid eating while stressed.
You overeat, or you skip meals entirely.	You're preoccupied with other problems.	See above.
You bring work home because there's not enough time to do it at the office.	You think that if you work longer hours you'll get more done. (It really means you've taken on more than you can actually do.)	Don't bring work home. Look for the external source of the need to take work home and deal with that source (e.g., streamline the project; request an extension).
You isolate yourself instead of getting help from others.	You think that if others leave you alone you'll get more done.	Enlarge your network of resources and delegate more to your staff.
You don't take all of your allotted vacation time because you have "too much to do" at the office.	You think that if you just work through that vacation you'll get caught up (but, of course, it doesn't seem to help).	Vacations restore your mind and body. If you're not taking them it's time to reassess your goals and make them more manageable.
You do very little advanced or strategic planning because you're always working on urgent projects.	You've fallen into the trap of thinking that you don't have time to plan for the future.	Strategic planning is a critical executive function. Delegate tactical work so you can focus on the future.
You find yourself side-tracked by little tasks, like answering e-mail or voicemail messages.	The "little victories" temporarily relieve anxiety, so you do them first instead of tackling the big project.	Move the big thing making you anxious to the top of your priority list. Break it into smaller tasks.
You can't figure out what to delegate; everything seems urgent/important.	This usually happens when you're panicked.	Good delegation takes planning. Work at improving delegation skills.
Others tell you that you seem overstressed, but you disagree.	You may have become so accustomed to being overstressed that you don't notice.	See your physician, just to be on the safe side. Consult with trusted peers. Seek outside help to assess whether your goals exceed your resources.
You worry about things more than half the day.	You think that if you keep trying to figure something out, you will.	See the section below on managing the cognitive aspects of stress.
You can't sleep because you're thinking about problems at work.	As a good problem solver, you may have trouble letting go of things at night. Trouble sleeping can also be associated with other health issues.	Keep a pad by the bed; write down thoughts for the next day. Ask your doctor or nutritionist if there may be other reasons you're up at night, such as a medical condition, or too much caffeine.
You're out of time, so you no longer participate in hobbies or activities that you once found pleasurable.	You believe, as with other behavioral issues, that if you spend more time working, you'll get out from under.	Take better care of yourself. Revive an old hobby or pastime and make time for it every week.
You're engaging in self-destructive behavior like drinking or smoking to cope with stress.	You're probably overwhelmed and these help temporarily soothe things. (At the same time they're causing damage.)	You have to deal with the source of the problem that's causing the desire to escape. See your physician or a mental health professional for treatment.
You have less patience than you used to.	You've used up your reserve of emotional resources.	Use relaxation techniques regularly and deep breathing for spot relief.
When you do have time, you find it difficult to relax.	You're preoccupied with unfinished business from work.	Reducing your external stressors will help you enjoy your leisure time.

As mentioned above, the sister to poor time management is ineffective delegation. *The 7 Habits* covers some aspects of delegation, and Kenneth Blanchard's book *The One Minute Manager* also presents a useful model for effective delegation and management (see citation in the *Resources* section on page 55). I also want to recommend the following specific techniques that I think will help you delegate more effectively:

1. Identify someone in the company who you think delegates extremely effectively, and meet with them to learn what processes they use to delegate.
2. Instead of simply assigning things to your staff without their input, involve your staff in the process of identifying what responsibilities or processes to delegate. This will engage them in the process and make it more likely that they'll be interested in their new assignments. Also, they may want to do things that you weren't aware they were interested in.
3. Treat each delegated process as if you were orienting your staff to a new job. Create an outline, with your staff's input, on how the targeted items will be delegated. Plan it over as long a time period as you can (e.g., several weeks) to ensure that the item is well learned. If the process to be delegated involves the acquisition of some specialized knowledge, make sure appropriate training is available to ensure maximum competence.
4. Delegate incrementally. Many people complain that a job, project or process was just "dumped" on them one day. Transfer items one step at a time to make sure the process is turned over in the most effective way possible.
5. Review the process at the end. Ask staff to whom the item was delegated to provide feedback on the process and to make

recommendations for the future. Ultimately, you may identify a “point person” who can be counted on to manage the actual process of transferring delegated items in the future.

### Managing the Cognitive Components of Stress

With very few exceptions, such as extreme, close danger, the way in which you cognitively process what’s happening around you will dictate how your body reacts. It truly is all in your state of mind. And that means that your thoughts are going to impact both your experience of the stress around you and your ability to cope with it. It is difficult, in an executive briefing, to cover all of the cognitive issues that relate to stress. I will cover the key issues here, and I will also recommend resources you can use to develop your coping skills in this area.

To help assess how you characteristically respond to situations around you, I asked you, in the previous section on page 32, to keep track of the thoughts, feelings and responses you have had to stressors that occur throughout the workday. I’d like you to go back to that chart now. Here’s the question I’d like you to ask yourself as you look at the second column of the chart (the column that tracks what you were thinking): “What is the evidence I have for thinking those thoughts?”

Please label column 4: “Evidence for Your Thoughts.” Then write in that column exactly what the label says: What the evidence is for those thoughts. When I use the term “evidence,” I mean factual support for that thought. And I want you to be really tough on yourself when you’re looking for evidence. Because you shouldn’t believe a thought that isn’t true, right?

Even if you had the thought in the heat of the moment, you’d want it to be accurate. Just as accurate, for example, as data that you’re using to make an important decision. And that’s because you wouldn’t make an important business decision without good data, so you shouldn’t tell *yourself* things that are



exaggerated or not true, either. But that's exactly what many overstressed executives do. Those immediate thoughts pop into your head that send your brain and body into panic mode, and you never challenge those thoughts to make sure they're accurate. Now's the time to challenge them.

So, for example, if you're convinced that you're going to be fired, and that thought is running through your head, real tangible evidence of that would be a discussion that you had with your superior in which he or she said you would be fired, or a memo that says your entire division will be laid off.

If there's no evidence for the thought you had, just write "no evidence" in the fourth column, and make a note about what the reality actually is. It is essential, if the original thought was based on an unsupported fear, to write down a more realistic appraisal of the situation.

Here's a copy of the chart from the previous section, with an example of what the "Evidence" column should look like:

#### Event/Thought Monitoring Form

Event	Your immediate thoughts/feelings.	What you did.	Evidence for your thoughts.	
<i>I was given a new project to work on.</i>	<i>I thought, "There's no way I can do this."</i>	<i>I felt overwhelmed. Called a friend and complained.</i>	No evidence. It's not that there's "no way," but it will be difficult.	

The key activity that we're engaging in now is a careful analysis of our own thoughts. If we have a good reason to have thought a certain way about something, that's important. In other words, if there's a real threat out there we want to know it. But, as mentioned above, if there's no evidence for that thought, we want to know that, too, so that we don't trick our brain into going into stress response mode for nothing.

But our work isn't done yet. After all, there's still a blank column up there. And here's what it's for: Revised thoughts. That's right. Just like editing a memo,

you can revise what you were initially thinking in light of your analysis of the evidence. And it's easy to do. Just look at the evidence that you wrote in column 4, and make a new title for column 5: "Revised current thoughts." If the evidence existed for your initial reaction, that's fine, just note that in column 5. If, after examining the evidence in column 4, you see that there *wasn't* sufficient data to warrant how you were originally thinking, then write what your current thinking is about that event. Here's how that looks in my example:

**Event/Thought Monitoring Form**

Event	Your immediate thoughts.	What you felt or did.	Evidence for your thoughts.	Revised current thoughts.
<i>I was given a new project to work on.</i>	<i>I thought "There's no way I can do this."</i>	<i>I felt overwhelmed. Called a friend and complained.</i>	No evidence. It's not that there's "no way," but it will be difficult.	It will be difficult to do this, but I can ask staff to pitch in. We'll be able to do it together.

**Discussion.** Many overstressed executives have a pattern of thinking about the events that occur around them that reflect more on their own way of viewing the world than on the actual events. For example, a pessimistic person is much more likely to blame himself for something that goes wrong, regardless of whether or not it's actually his fault. And if you have a characteristically negative view of the events that happen to you, even when those events are neutral (or perhaps even positive), it takes time to recognize that pattern and to change it. And changing it starts by processing your thoughts one at a time, as we've done in the chart above.

Here's what to do: First, go through the chart that you created on page 32 and go through the process of identifying evidence for initial thoughts outlined above. In each case, weigh the evidence, and then decide whether or not your initial thoughts were supported by the evidence or not.

If they weren't, it's important to reconsider based on what you know to be true. If you see a tendency in your thinking to overreact at first, then the chart exercise will be extremely helpful in challenging and replacing those counterproductive thoughts. A full blank chart is reproduced on page 57 in the *Resources* section. Use this to track your response to events as they are occurring and to make sure that your reactions are in line with the evidence you truly have.

Every time you replace an unsupported thought with a more realistic one, you are correcting your view to match what's actually happening around you. And with enough practice, it soon will become automatic for you to see rationally what's happening around you.

As I mentioned above, a long-established pattern of negative thinking can take a lot of practice to change. After all, it took a long time to create it. For additional help with this area, I highly recommend David Burns's book *The Feeling Good Handbook*, which is fully cited in the *Resources* section. If you'd like to go beyond just reading about it and actually work at changing persistent irrational thoughts through one-on-one counseling in this area, a cognitive-behavioral psychologist is specifically trained in helping you identify and overcome patterns of self-defeating thoughts.

### Building Overall Resources

It helps to think of good stress coping like a ledger sheet. On one side of the sheet are the stressors the person is experiencing ... all of those things that you listed among your external stressors, including stress that you experience in your personal life. Those stressors are debits against the account.

On the other side of the ledger are the resources. All the positive, health-promoting things that make you feel good. They are the credits that exist in your account. They come from having a healthy lifestyle that includes exercise and a healthy diet; a good salary that exceeds your financial needs; having a happy and

supportive family life; having friends who you enjoy and with whom you can share your thoughts; and recreational activities that take you out of your normal routine.

To cope effectively with stress, you regularly need more on the resources side of the ledger than on the stressors side. That way, in the event of an acute stressor, like the loss of your job, a salary cut or some other major problem, you will have plenty of resources to help cope with that emergency. Good stress management is no different than good business management.

As you complete the Stress Management Action Plan Outline on page 54, spend some time looking for ways that you can increase the resources you possess. If your spending exceeds your financial resources, that's an area you'll need to review so that you can get it back in balance. If you've stopped spending time with your spouse or your children, or if you regularly skip family functions because you have to finish a big project, a gut check is in order to see where your real priorities are. Your family is more important than any project. Don't wait for trouble to arise before you realize just how important they are to you.

If you can't remember the last time you went out with friends to relax and enjoy a good time, I suggest you go through your address book, pick up the phone and make a few calls to reconnect with people. They will supply you with the good feelings you need to have a happy and balanced life.

Finally, I'd like you to recall a hobby or pastime that you used to enjoy but that you stopped doing because you thought you no longer had the time. No matter how far back in your life it was. Maybe it was fishing or jogging, playing the guitar or making quilts. Now I want you to get a very clear image in your mind of yourself participating in that pastime. Think about what position your body would be in. How it would feel to be doing it. The sights and sounds that would surround you while you were doing that activity. Remember the smile on your face and the sense of pleasure you got out of it. Perhaps it was even

something that people used to associate with you. Almost like it was part of you. Do you remember all that? Good. Give all those good feelings back to yourself as a gift right now. Write that pastime down on the list of Overall Resources to be increased on the Stress Management Action Plan Outline. Plan to reintroduce that great pleasure back into your life, because it will reward you so much. It's something you can immediately do to start building credit in the account. And there's no better time to start than now.

As you've seen from all of the information and guided exercises in this book, stress is a critical issue in life, and it seems to impact executives particularly hard because of the nature of executive positions. But truly superior executives have rich, full lives, in which their role as an executive is just one of the many roles they have. And they recognize that attending to all of those roles – spouse, friend, sibling, parent, son or daughter – provides the balance, enjoyment and challenge they need to remain effective in all of those roles. They all feed one another.

I hope that you've benefited from this important resource. I wish you good luck and much success completing the Action Plan and working through it to get to a healthier, happier life.

### Stress Management Action Plan

You are now ready to complete the Stress Management Action Plan Outline below. I've filled in some basics already; blank spaces are left for your own personalized action steps. Consider recreating the outline in your favorite word processing program so that you can customize and update it as needed.

Please keep this very important thought in mind: Sometimes a person and a job just aren't a good fit. When that's true, no amount of external stress reduction or internal change will significantly impact the situation. There are all kinds of reasons why a person/job fit might be out of alignment. Here are a few common examples:

- **Your personal values conflict in some way with the values of the organization.** When this happens, you may continually find yourself at odds with senior management policies and procedures.
- **It's a poor fit in terms of your career development.** You might be ready for a change and the organization can't accommodate you. Or they may want you to change and you're happy with where or who you are.
- **The corporate culture isn't a good fit for your style.** Things are very structured where you work, but your style is more free-wheeling. Or the other way around.
- **There's been a change at the top.** Whether the change is at the Board level, the CEO level or some other executive level, leadership changes can significantly impact the direction of the organization, and you may not be willing to head in that direction.

If you find yourself in a situation where the fit is no longer good, consider a change to something that is more consistent with your own preferences. A good career consultant or management psychologist can help you identify those preferences, and establish what opportunities are the best fit for you.

**Stress Management Action Plan Outline**

<p><b>Goal #1: Reduce/Resolve External Stressors</b> <i>(See page 22 and the section <u>Managing the External Sources of Stress</u> beginning on page 34. Add any additional steps you'd like to take in the blanks provided.)</i></p>
<p><b>Steps:</b> (1) Identify and prioritize controllable stressors.</p>
<p>(2) Use Alternative Solutions Thinking Outline to develop action plan.</p>
<p>(3) Enact solution(s) and then go to next most stressful item on list.</p>
<p>(4)</p>
<p>(5)</p>
<p><b>Goal #2: Reduce Physical Vulnerability to Stress/Improve Overall Health</b> <i>(Refer to page 24 and add specific action steps from <u>Managing the Physical Components of Stress</u> beginning on page 39.)</i></p>
<p><b>Steps:</b> (1) Make appointment for annual physical exam.</p>
<p>(2) Schedule exercise into calendar 3-5 days/week.</p>
<p>(3) Improve diet/make plans to see a nutritionist.</p>
<p>(4)</p>
<p>(5)</p>
<p><b>Goal #3: Improve Behavioral Responses to Stress</b> <i>(Refer to page 27 and <u>Managing the Behavioral Components of Stress</u> on page 42. List other behaviors targeted for change in the blanks provided.)</i></p>
<p><b>Steps:</b> (1) Improve time management.</p>
<p>(2) Improve delegation.</p>
<p>(3)</p>
<p>(4)</p>
<p>(5)</p>
<p><b>Goal #4: Improve Cognitive Responses to Stress</b> <i>(See page 28 and <u>Managing the Cognitive Components of Stress</u> on page 47. List other ideas for improving your cognitive response to stress in the spaces provided.)</i></p>
<p><b>Steps:</b> (1) Learn about link between thoughts and behavior.</p>
<p>(2) Use Event/Thought Monitoring Form to identify and replace maladaptive thoughts.</p>
<p>(3)</p>
<p>(4)</p>
<p>(5)</p>
<p><b>Goal #5: Increase Overall Resources.</b> <i>(List how you would like to enhance each area in the space provided. List an additional area in the blank.)</i></p>
<p><b>Steps:</b> (1) Financial:</p>
<p>(2) Family:</p>
<p>(3) Friends:</p>
<p>(4) Pastimes:</p>
<p>(5)</p>

## Resources

The following are recommended resources to support any effective executive stress management program.

*Emotional Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman. New York: Bantam Books, 1997. (Covers the essentials of the mind-body interaction and the importance of emotional and social awareness.)

*The Feeling Good Handbook*, by David D. Burns, MD. New York: Plume Books, 1999. (An outstanding guide to identifying and changing maladaptive cognitions.)

*Learned Optimism*, by Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991. (An excellent review of optimism, and how to increase it.)

*Never Be Nervous Again*, by Dorothy Sarnoff. New York: Ivy Books, 1989. (A very good book about reducing public speaking anxiety. Discusses diaphragmatic breathing.)

*The One Minute Manager*, by Kenneth Blanchard, Ph.D. and Spencer Johnson, MD. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1983. (A terrific resource on time management and delegation.)

*The Relaxation Response*, by Herbert Benson, with Miriam Z. Klipper. New York: Avon, 1975; Revised Edition, 2000. (The original and classic text on the use of meditation to reduce the damaging effects of stress on the human being.)

*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen R. Covey. New York: Fireside Books, 1989. (Important to read for improved leadership effectiveness, time management and a balanced lifestyle.)

[www.cchs.net/health/health-info/docs/2400/2409.asp?index=9445](http://www.cchs.net/health/health-info/docs/2400/2409.asp?index=9445) The web address for Diaphragmatic Breathing instructions at the Cleveland Clinic Health System website. (This page contains excellent instructions for basic diaphragmatic breathing, also known as “deep breathing.”)

[www.rodale.com](http://www.rodale.com) The web address for Rodale Press, publishers of *Prevention*, *Men's Health* and other healthy living periodicals. (Visit to check out magazines and forums on diet, exercise and other topics related to healthy living.)



**Alternative Solutions Thinking Outline**

<b>Problem:</b>		
<b>My current reaction:</b>		
<b>Solutions</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
<b>Solution(s):</b>		

**Event/Thought Monitoring Form**

<b>Event</b>	<b>Your immediate thoughts.</b>	<b>What you felt or did.</b>	<b>Evidence for your thoughts.</b>	<b>Revised current thoughts.</b>

### About Dr. Weiman

DAVID A. WEIMAN, PSY.D. is a licensed psychologist in Wynnewood, PA, a suburb of Philadelphia. He provides consultation services to senior executives and executive teams on leadership effectiveness, and he sees private patients. As an expert on the psychological side of management issues, he has been quoted in *BusinessWeek* magazine and other periodicals.

He has consulted extensively on the issue of stress management to individuals and organizations. He has also written numerous articles about stress, and he has presented seminars about the subject of identifying and coping with stress to business and medical professionals.

Dr. Weiman earned a Bachelor's Degree in Religion from Dickinson College, a Master's Degree in Education from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Master's Degree and a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from Widener University.

Aside from his practice, Dr. Weiman is an adjunct assistant professor at the Institute for Graduate Clinical Psychology, Widener University, and he has served on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. Dr. Weiman is also a member of the medical staffs of the Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, PA.

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