

Eleanor K. Williams

Mrs. Karen L. Jones

English 10

10 May 2019

Slaying Stress: Three Ways to Tackle Work-Related Stress

In last year of high school, senior Jane Carter stopped by a favorite teacher's room to vent about how burned out she felt. "Just look at this!" she said, and motioned helplessly to her work. "I'm going to fail! Stupid research paper...plus I owe like seven more gym classes... and I have to fix my art portfolio...and...You know what? Just forget it! I'm not going to college!" (Blake). The teacher comforted her student, but the stress level Carter experienced took a long time to calm. Fortunately, they figured out a way through the mess, and Carter went on to excel at school and beyond. Unfortunately, this kind of work-induced stress is not uncommon. Many people are dangerously stressed by the unrelenting demands of work and school. Psychologists at the Mayo Clinic explain that "stress that's left unchecked can contribute to many serious health problems" ("Stress Management" 1). Clearly, it is a problem we need to address. In fact, there are many ways we can address and alleviate work-related stress: one, we can change our mindset; two, we can manage our time; and three, we can make healthier choices.

Let us examine the first way to decrease stress, changing our mindset. Another expression for this is called practicing mindfulness. *Psychology Today* explains the technique as "keeping your attention alive in the present moment. It's a kind of counterbalance to the automatic pilot default that inhabits our mind...and an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance" (Niemiec 1). To alleviate stress in a mindful way, we need to objectively study areas where we ourselves worsen our own stress. Some may balk at this task. If our workload is the problem, they reason, and someone else assigned the work, then how can we be the ones at fault? But if we curiously and honestly examine how we utilize our time in just one day, then we are likely to find many hours wasted. Take a typical homework session: during that independent work time, how often do we give ourselves multiple breaks on our electronic devices? How often, in the space between writing sentences or reading paragraphs in a book, do we glance at a message or jump back into a game? How often do we reply to a text or comment on a post? Organizational psychologist and Wharton Business College Professor Adam Grant explains that critiquing our own work habits is an extremely important first step in taking control and

lessening our stress. He argues that eliminating these self-imposed distractions is necessary because such distractions are the biggest culprit when it comes to lost time. We need to acknowledge “not just the interruptions from other people, but also the times we interrupt ourselves” (“Productivity Is About Attention Management” 4). By being mindful of our bad habits, we can lessen the stress in our lives.

The Wharton Business School Professor is not alone in voicing this concern. Many scientists and educators are sounding similar alarms, saying that such browsing habits make our deadlines more difficult to achieve. A professor from Santa Clara University in California argued that constantly surfing online is tied to learners’ growing difficulty with focus: “My experience has been that no matter how invested a student may be, if something on their desk or pocket dings, rings, or vibrates, then they will lose focus” (Kamenetz 2). A teacher from Kansas concurred, saying that our constant browsing is akin eating a diet of nothing but junk food -- “halloween candy and christmas cookies all the time”--instead of a healthier diet (Kamenetz 3). What all of these experts are collectively saying is that being mindful is necessary. If we refuse to acknowledge our own culpability and destructive habits, then we will can’t fix the problem.

Changing our mindset is also about changing our way of seeing things. Behavioral Psychologist Allen Mendler calls this “re-framing” which he describes as “a very powerful way of regaining a sense of personal control so that we can go back to the drawing board and begin to rethink of ways of best reaching our most challenging goals” (32). One thing many people need to reframe and re-think is how much of themselves they sacrifice for others at their own expense. Giving is noble and admirable. But some people volunteer so much, they end up burning the candle at both ends, heightening their stress to unhealthy levels. Certainly, being altruistic shows good morals and strong character; we admire those who take on leadership positions and share their time and resources. But expert Adam Grant cautions, “putting other people first [too often] means givers run out of time and energy to complete their own work effectively” (“Givers and Takers: Who Are the Best Performers in the Workplace?” 3). This act of offering too much of ourselves absolutely contributes to higher stress. If, however, people reframe their giving, asking themselves, How can I help without sacrificing so much? Then they will be more equipped to alleviate the burden they carry.

In my senior year of high school, one of my friends, Krista, was selected to be the Colorguard Manager of the Medina Marching Band. While it was an honor to be chosen, it was

also a huge responsibility: she was in charge of the care and transportation of every banner, rifle, saber, and backdrop the band used for every practice and performance; at the time, there were 65 guard members, and that meant a lot of equipment. Field band practices were held twice weekly, from 7-9 pm. Yet Krista's parents were astonished and dismayed that, even well into October, their daughter (unlike all the other kids) was arriving home by 11 pm, sometimes even later. This wasn't because she was being irresponsible, it was because she devoted too much of herself in this volunteer leadership role. Long after others were gone, there she sat, faithfully doing everyone else's work, meticulously folding every flag, stacking all props, and properly storing all the rifles and sabers in their respective brackets. In her quest to give, to contribute to a valued organization, she was regularly sacrificing far too much of her own time and energy for them.

This example, again, is not unusual. People in all walks of life take on more than they should, and often they are coming from a well-intentioned, altruistic place. But if it leads to harmful levels of stress, we need to re-examine how much to give. Mindfulness means asking, How can I help in a way that doesn't harm to myself? Experts suggest that we don't have to give up on service work and altruism. We just need to need to "look for ways of helping others that don't mean "sacrificing ourselves...to the point of burning out" ("Givers and Takers..." 3). Krista figured this out midway through the band season. "The biggest reason [Mr. McKain] gave me the job," she explained in an interview, "was because he knew the younger kids looked up to me. He knew if I delegated the work, they'd listen" (Riches). From then on, she ended guard practice 10 minutes early, showed them how to properly store the equipment, and had everyone chip in. By acting more like a manager and less like their maid--in other words, by reframing her giving and how to best do it-- she was able to serve without so much sacrifice (and she was able to get home at a decent time!). In the end, mindfully examining her volunteer work absolutely lessened her stress level.

The second way we can alleviate stress is by better managing our time. For instance, let's examine once more the lost time due to online distractions. If we are aware of a specific weakness--playing video games for hours on end, for instance--then what can we do to counter this and manage our time better? Well, we can plan for the weakness: in other words, we can use it as a reward for meeting a certain goal. Not only that, we can set a specific time limit for when and how long we can play. If we enjoy browsing a social network like Instagram and browse it mindlessly, every time we have a spare second, then we need to pause. Instead, mindfully and

purposefully set aside a certain time to enjoy these breaks as a reward, rather than look back and realize you accidentally gave away five hours of a whole day to a social media platform. When we police ourselves more diligently, we end up with far more time to meet our various other responsibilities. And when we set time limits on activities we enjoy, we browse or play games much more intentionally, and our experience is richer and fuller as a result.

Yet another way we can use time effectively is to look for areas where we focus the most and approach time from a different angle. Expert and motivational speaker Peter Bregman offers this:

Use your loss of patience to your advantage. Create unrealistically short deadlines. Give yourself a third of the time you think you need to accomplish something. There's nothing like a deadline to keep things moving. And when things are moving fast, we can't help but focus on them. How many people run a race while texting? Interestingly, [this method of] single-tasking to meet a tight deadline will actually reduce your stress. In other words, giving yourself less time to do things could make you more productive and relaxed.

What this means is that when it comes to using time management to lessen our stress, there is more than one solution. It isn't always about making more time to get work done. Sometimes, setting shorter, tighter deadlines will be more useful in motivating us to complete a task, especially for people who work well under pressure.

Finally, when it comes to reducing stress via time management, we can more effectively work through our to-do list when we prioritize the list and when we find the intrinsic value in our work. To best prioritize, we should ask ourselves, which tasks are important? Which tasks are urgent? What value can I find in this work that goes beyond doing it because I was told to do it? Since "the most productive people gravitate towards projects that are personally interesting and socially meaningful" it is important to identify the deeper benefit our work provides ("Productivity..." 2). Asking ourselves how something will help us in the long run, not just in terms of the grade or the paycheck, forces us to see our work as more personally rewarding; so can asking ourselves how our work can contribute to another person or group and their goals. "If you pay attention to *why* you're excited about a project, and who will benefit from it, you'll naturally be pulled into it by intrinsic motivation," say expert time management planners.

(“Productivity” 2). Finding intrinsic value in our work means we’re beyond just crossing things off a to-do list; we’re also finding more meaning and fulfillment in what we do.

Certainly, there will be those who argue that all this mindfulness and searching for meaning in our work is great, but unnecessary. Work-related stress is powerful; it drives competition, innovation, and success. Such proponents also claim that they thrive on stress, and when they multitask, they get more accomplished. Actually, experts wholeheartedly disagree. In fact, the more people multitask, scientists have found, the *worse* they are at it: “Research shows that heavy multitaskers are less competent at doing several things at once than light multitaskers” and further, that their “productivity goes down as much as 40%” (Bregman). Many will disagree; they’ll say that they need every single minute to accomplish everything on their list. Many assume that because “our minds move considerably faster than the outside world; [and] we have so much to do, why waste any time? So while we’re on the phone with someone, why not use that extra brain power to book a trip at the same time?” (Bregman 3).

In faculty meetings, teachers are often texting while their boss is talking. In classrooms, students are often texting while their teacher is lecturing. They both defend their behavior, admitting that sure, they’re texting, browsing, but it’s work! I’m answering an email! It’s my mom on the phone! But I’m listening, too! I can do both! The sad truth is, we don’t actually have extra brain power. What we are doing is sapping our brain power from the task at hand and diluting it. Neither the teachers at the meeting nor the students in the classroom should be on their phone. First, it’s rude; second, because everyone should be “using that brain power to pick up nuance, think about what they’re hearing, access their creativity, and stay connected to what’s happening around them” (Bregman 3). Experts even argue that there’s no such thing as actual multitasking; what we are doing is switching rapidly back and forth between various things, losing focus, interrupting ourselves constantly, and letting the smallest things distract us. One study showed that “people distracted by incoming email and phone calls saw a 10-point fall in their IQs. The impact of this drop is the same as losing a night of sleep, and more than twice the effect of smoking marijuana” (Bregman 1). Clearly, multitasking has serious ramifications.

There are also those who will argue that there is far too much hype in the world today about the health perils of stress. They argue that such mindsets teach youth a kind of learned helplessness, a growing problem in society. Stress is part of life! Toughen up! they say. When a University recently offered freshmen students a course in stress management, television

personality Mike Rowe mocked the class: “Whether you call them millennials or snowflakes, we build the safe space. We’re rolling out the anti-stress programs. We’re the ones who are indulging talk of trauma for everyday situations...I think we [adults are] the clouds from which the snowflakes fell. And at some point, we have to say...’What have we done here? Seriously,’” he complained. (“Mike Rowe Takes on College Kids’ Stress” 2). He has a point, certainly: if people believe everything stress-related is someone else’s fault, then Rowe’s got a point. Maybe such programs do unwittingly leave some students with unrealistic expectations or a blame-others mentality. But Rowe and others who dismiss the seriousness of stress miss the point of stress reducing classes: teaching people how to effectively manage their stress isn’t a blame game or a “Help me! I’ll melt!” snowflake-type weakness. It’s strength. Learning how to conquer stress be proactive is called independence, not helplessness.

My third point revolves around exactly that: the healthier the choices we make, the more positive the outcomes we will experience. Less stress is just one of the rewards. Take, for instance, the choices we make in friends. If they are the type who often take the easy way out, then they will probably encourage us to come along for the ride. But taking the easy way out is what leads us astray, diverts us from our long term goals, and distorts our values. Such friends might believe, for instance, that mind-altering substances help us, that they will alleviate our stress faster than anything else. Certainly, experts agree, “self-medicating with alcohol or cigarettes or drugs may provide an easy escape from stress...but such relief is only temporary” and therefore, “rather than avoiding the issue, we are better served in the long run if we learn how to deal with problems head on and with a clear mind” they conclude (Robinson, Smith, Segal 11). It is much easier to deal with problems head on if the friends we have are willing to deal with problems in an open and honest way.

Another healthy choice we can make to de-escalate our stress is to choose to go outside more often, and to find ways to interact with nature as often as possible. The benefits are remarkable. Researchers from Aarhus University in Denmark did a study involving one million people which lasted from 1985-2013; in it, they found that the more children were in nature, the happier they were as adults. Being raised in a setting where children were surrounded by nature “meant a 55% lower incidence of developing mental health issues as adults” (Housman 1-2). The researchers thought that perhaps, as children, the participants’ shared green space meant they “were more likely to be outside, getting exercise, perhaps in groups and forming strong social

bonds” and that “spending time in nature taught self-reliance, resilience, patience” (Housman 3). It just makes sense to make time to be outside connecting to the natural world as often as we can.

Finally, we can make the choice to take better care of our physical bodies. We can take care of what we choose to eat, as so much of what we eat can impact mood; we can take the time to learn proper stress-relieving and meditative breathing techniques that promote tranquility, training our minds to better deal with all the stressors outside of our control. We can exercise more, because the better we feel physically, the better we will feel mentally. Combining deep breathing techniques with movement such as that taught in yoga or tai chi is a way to simultaneously reap the benefits and lessen our stress. When we are stressed, we can make choices to listen to calm-inducing, stress-relieving music. In a 2006 study, Stanford University learned that what music we choose to listen to is very important. Choosing music with a tempo of “60 beats per minute can cause the brain to synchronize with the beat, causing alpha brain waves...which are what occur when we are relaxed and conscious” (“Releasing Stress Through the Power of Music” 1). Knowledge is indeed power: knowing the effect of tempo, we can be more selective of our music choices. All of these things can together empower us and help feel less burdened by stress.

There are so many ways we can adjust our mindset, manage our time, and make healthy choices in order to alleviate overwhelming and unhealthy stress. The writer and philosopher Thoreau once said, “The price of anything is the amount of life you exchange for it” (Glazer 2), and he is not wrong. So often, the burden of work-related stress comes down to just that: stress takes away actual time in our life, not just measured in minutes, but also in how deeply and meaningfully we experience it. As Ferris Bueller once said, Life moves fast. If devoting a little time to adjusting our way of thinking, of more carefully organizing our time, and of making healthier choices can not only alleviate stress, it can make our lives better, then such techniques are ones that all of us should try. As contemporary philosopher Ferris Bueller explained, “Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.” Indeed.

Works Cited

- Blake, Nancy. Personal Interview. 12 April 2019
- Bregman, Peter. "How (And Why) To Stop Multitasking." *Harvard Business Review*. 20 May 2010. Web. Accessed 1 April 2019 hbr.org
- Glazer, Robert. "When People Ask You How You Are, Stop Saying 'Busy.'" 31 Mar 2019. *Linked In*. Web. Accessed 31 Mar 2019. linkedin.com
- Grant, Adam. "Givers And Takers: Who Are The Best Performers In The Workplace?" *The Independent*. 22 May 2013. Web. Accessed 30 Mar 2019 independent.co.uk/news
- Grant, Adam. "Productivity Isn't About Time Management. It's About Attention Management." *The New York Times*. 28 Mar 2019. Web. Accessed 31 Mar 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/smarter-living>
- Housman, Justin. "Study: Kids Who Spend Time In Nature Become Happier Adults." *Adventure Journal*. 27 February 2019. Online. Accessed 27 February 2019. Adventurejournal.com
- Kamenetz, Anya. "Laptops and Phones in the Classroom: Yea, Nay, Or a Third Way?" *National Public Radio Online*. 24 Jan 2018. Web. Accessed 31 Mar 2019. Npr.org
- Mendler, Allen N. *Power Struggles: Successful Techniques for Educators*. Rochester: Discipline Associates, 1997. Print.
- Niemiec, Ryan. "Three Definitions of Mindfulness That Might Surprise You." *Psychology Today*. 1 Nov 2017. Web. Accessed 15 April 2019. Psychologytoday.com
- "Releasing Stress Through the Power of Music." *Counseling Department of the University of Nevada*. 2019. Web. Accessed 14 April 2019. unr.edu/counseling
- Riches, Krista. Personal Interview. 13 April 2019
- Robinson, Lawrence, Melinda Smith, and Robert Segal. "Stress Management." *Help Guide*. January 2019. Web. Accessed 14 April 2019. Helpguide.org
- Rowe, Mike. "We Are the Clouds From Which the Snowflakes Fell." *Fox News Insider*. 29 Aug 2018. Web. Accessed 14 April 2019. Foxnews.com
- "Stress Management." *The Mayo Clinic*. 4 April 2019. Accessed 14 April 2019. mayoclinic.org