

The *Stress-Free* Stress Management Plan



A Step-By-Step Plan To **Breaking Free From Stress** and Becoming a Better You

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Introduction



For many of us, stress is the single biggest blight on what would otherwise be a happy lifestyle. Stress has a host of negative effects not only on our bodies but on our minds – and it’s something almost *all* of us experience too much of.

Look at yourself right now and answer honestly: do you feel stressed?

Do you feel as though there isn’t enough time in the day to do all the things you want to do? Do you feel constantly as though you’re just about managing to stay afloat? Are there deadlines and events looming on the horizon for you like black clouds? Do you feel as though it could all come crashing down at any moment?

Perhaps you also feel as though your heartrate is higher than it should be. Maybe you're not getting the quality of sleep you need because you're lying awake listening to it thud and thump?

If this is the case then your lifestyle is compromised. If you have constant chronic stress, then you will also find that your immune system is suppressed, that your blood pressure is high, that you aren't sleeping properly and that you're more likely to become distracted and/or have an accident. Even your digestion will be negatively affected by your stress resulting in symptoms of malnutrition potentially.

This is what it means to be living constantly with stress and this is what many of us now consider to be 'normal'.

So how do you break the cycle and get your life back on track? This e-book is going to provide you with a complete blueprint for stopping stress in its tracks and escaping it once and for all.

What You Will Learn

Specifically, here's what you will learn throughout the course of this book:

- What stress is, what causes it and how you can prevent it
- Why it's so important that you break the cycle
- Why you might be *addicted* to stress
- How to manage your workload to decrease stress
- Tricks to improve productivity *while* working less
- Habits that are damaging your happiness and stress levels

- Habits you can introduce to fix your emotional wellbeing and workload
- Techniques such as the pomodoro technique
- Tools such as cognitive behavioral therapy
- How to use meditation to reduce stress reactions
- How to set your priorities and fix your routine

A Little Bit About Stress

Before we dive right in, let's first look at what stress actually *is*, who it affects and how widespread it is.

Biologically, stress is actually a healthy and normal response to any 'stressor' (defined as a trigger that causes stress, so that's a bit of a circular explanation). The purpose of stress is to prime our body for action in the face of a physical threat. In other words, this is a kind of 'action mode' that our body kicks into and in the wild stressors would have been things like predators, fires or aggressive members of our own species.

What happens to us physically then is that our sympathetic nervous system kicks in and triggers the pituitary glands to release a number of hormones and neurotransmitters such as adrenaline, norepinephrine, dopamine and cortisol. These chemicals in turn trigger our bodies to direct blood away from less immediately necessary functions (such as our immune system and our digestive system) and *to* our brains and muscles. Meanwhile, they increase focus, awareness and bring on feelings of anxiety and danger. Our heart rates also increase and ultimately we end up far more on-edge and 'wired'. Even our feeling of pain is reduced and our blood thickens to

encourage clotting in case of injury. This is what is known as the 'fight or flight' response.

Today, these things are still stressors and getting into an argument with a friend will still trigger that stress response. At the same time though, we now face many more 'stressors' that are things we perceive as threats. These stressors include angry bosses, empty bank accounts, upset partners, deadlines and public speaking.

And this is where the problem comes in. Acute stress in the wild would have been useful because it would have allowed us to run faster, to spot danger more efficiently and even to punch harder. Once we got away, our parasympathetic nervous system would kick in putting us into the 'rest and digest' state and our body would recover.

But when your stressor is something abstract like debt that doesn't just go away, it means you're *constantly* in an aroused state. It means your immune system is constantly suppressed and it means your digestion is constantly impaired. It also means your brain is constantly producing stress hormones which can risk leading to depression and potentially adrenal fatigue.

In short, stress makes you unhappy, it prevents you from resting and sleeping properly, it causes poor digestion and it leaves you susceptible to illness. This is no joke – stress is *killing* people and ruining lives.

Stress Statistics

But just how widespread is this problem?

Well, to highlight the severity of stress, it's worth noting that work-related stress causes 10% of strokes (via raised blood pressure). 3 out of 4 doctors' visits are related to stress and stress can raise your risk of heart disease by 40%.

Stress is also ruining our diets. We eat for comfort but also when our body uses up blood sugar (which it does when we're stressed). Cortisol makes us store more fat and as such, 40% of stressed people will overeat or eat unhealthily. Another 44% of people lose sleep due to stress.

And if you thought stress was making you more productive think again: stress blunts creativity and even *physically shrinks the brain*. It's thought

66% of all doctor visits are for stress related symptoms

50% categorize their stress as moderate to high

24% categorize their stress as severe

Credit: <https://www.mequilibrium.com>

that stress related problems cost the US a whopping \$300 billion every year. That's \$100 billion more than obesity.

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44% of Americans say they are feeling more stressed year on year and 1 in 5 say they experience 'extreme stress'.

So where is all this stress coming from? The top causes according to Statistic Brain Research Institute are:

- Job pressure
- Money
- Health
- Relationships
- Poor nutrition
- Media overload
- Sleep deprivation

And it's easy to see how work might be causing all these problems. Research shows that there has been a 50% increase in productivity over the last twenty years while wages have remained the same. The average American will work an extra 6 hours every week for *no* pay.

In other words? We're literally working ourselves to death. And ironically, it's only *increasing* our workload.

Chapter 1: Could You be Addicted to Stress?



The first thing to acknowledge before we start trying to fix your stress, is that you may well be *addicted* to it. This might seem rather counterintuitive seeing as most of us *hate* feeling stressed – but the sad reality is that our modern lifestyles are designed in such a way as to make stress almost a requirement.

As we have already seen, the average American is happy to work for the equivalent of six extra hours without pay. Why would we willingly subject ourselves to this?

The answer is that we are very much rewarded for behaviors that lead to stress. We are rewarded when we take on extra work, when we beat the deadline and when we don't complain about our workload. This could even lead to a pay rise!

What's more, *some* elements of stress can actually feel quite good. When we are stressed it can make us feel more focused, it can make time seem to pass more quickly (which is handy seeing as most of us find our jobs boring) and it can help us to feel a sense of accomplishment.

Actually, being stressed produces the reward hormone 'dopamine'. This is the same hormone that makes things like eating and even taking drugs addictive. And it's released in even *greater* quantities when we complete a task on time or tick something off that to-do list.

Another problem is that stress tends to creep up in small increments. We start off with a reasonable workload and over time we become desensitized to that amount of work. We become more efficient at completing those tasks too and eventually this puts us in a position where we feel able to take on more and more. Going backwards suddenly feels too easy and the only real option we have is to keep adding more and more to our pile.

The result is that you become actually *addicted* to your work load and unable to switch off.

Society also places a ton of pressure on us to work harder. We celebrate people who work harder for the 'common good' and we punish people who are perceived as lazy. Being called 'work shy' is one of the worst things that anyone can call us and generally we're made to feel awful if we don't keep taking on bigger and bigger responsibilities.

In reality, this is something we should look at critically. Are the heroes really those people who are willing to work longer hours without pay? Is it really such an amazing feat to spend more time filing papers? Is it really so bad to want to spend your life doing things that you *enjoy*?

A culture of working harder, longer and faster has emerged because it's good for the country as a whole. But it is *not* good for the individual. And it is not 'wrong' to put your health, your happiness and your family ahead of corporate objectives.

Next time someone calls you work shy? Say 'Hell yeah!'

And finally, technology is somewhat to blame for our current state of hyper-arousal and stress. The role of technology is to make life easier for us. In other words, it's supposed to be a 'force multiplier' meaning that theoretically it should allow us to accomplish more with less work.

So you would *think* that this would mean we could go home earlier. Only there's a problem: the competition *also* has that same technology. And as such, you now need to put out even more.

Technology has allowed us to do more in less time but in doing so it means we're now required to do much *more* in total. Throw in the fact that we're now constantly connected and always reachable by our bosses, clients and colleagues and you have a recipe for *serious* work-related stress.

Signs You May be Addicted to Stress

So let's say for a minute that you *are* addicted to stress... How would you even know if that was the case?

Here are a few signs that stress addiction might be a problem for you:

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- You feel as though you thrive under pressure
- You are constantly checking your phone or computer for updates/e-mails
- You often leave work late
- You can't 'switch off'
- You struggle to relax and don't know what to do with your spare time
- You enjoy spending all your time on your business

Chapter 2: Consequences for Failing to Break Your Stress Addiction



Stress addiction isn't something that *everyone* reading this will be familiar with but it's certainly something a great deal of people struggle with. The reason that we raised this issue right at the start of this book though is that it can *seriously* hold you back from recovery. Being *aware* of your stress addiction is the first step to overcoming it – without meaning to sound too much like a cliché.

Stress addiction you see will make many of the things we describe seem rather unappealing. If you have a true stress addiction, then you might find yourself being resistant to many of the ideas we'll discuss and put forward. What's important is to recognize that this in itself is a symptom. You need to rise above that desire to do more and more if you want to stand a chance at overcoming stress once and for all.

The Consequences of Ignoring a Stress Addiction

Perhaps the easiest way to put you in the right mindset here then is to break down the risks and the dangers associated with allowing this behavior to continue.

First of all then, recognize that stress addiction is ultimately *bad* for productivity. While you might think otherwise, the reality is that you'll get more done in the long-run if you take time off in the short-term.

Remember how we pointed out that the US is losing 300 billion a year to stress? That's a serious amount of money lost unnecessarily and the same also applies on an individual basis. That's because we *need* to find opportunities to rest and recover. The body works in cycles and in 'seasons' and if we don't acknowledge that then we will eventually burn out. Remember adrenal fatigue? Remember that your immune system is compromised when you don't give yourself a break? If you *keep going* at 100% then eventually you will collapse and in doing so you will lose days, weeks or even months of productivity.

A good analogy for this is working out. While exercising regularly is great for your health, your confidence and your happiness – working out *too* much without adequate rest will eventually lead to 'overtraining'. This is again caused partly by adrenal fatigue as well as other factors and results in a person becoming weaker, tired and unable to workout at all. Alternatively it can leave them very susceptible to illness.

Either way, the smart bodybuilder or athlete knows the importance of ‘back off weeks’ where they give themselves a chance to recover. If you want to get the most out of yourself, then you need to be methodical.

There is a great Chinese saying which is ‘walk or run, don’t wobble’. What this means is that the most efficient way to travel the furthest distance is to walk until you run out of energy, rest and then go again. It’s a mistake to ‘wobble’ push yourself to the brink as ultimately you won’t be travelling very fast *or* giving yourself a chance to recover.

And even if you *didn’t* eventually collapse from the strain of a stress addiction, you would find that you weren’t able to do your best work anyway. When you’re stressed, you become tired, you become more likely to make mistakes and you lose your passion for what you’re doing. What’s more, stress prevents creativity and countless studies have shown that when we’re ‘too’ motivated, we gain a kind of tunnel vision that prevents us from coming to creative solutions to problems.

A great example of this can be seen with something called the ‘candle problem’. Here you’re given a candle and a box of tacks and asked to attach that candle to the wall so that it can burn there and be used as a lamp.

If you motivate one group to find the answer *quickly* (applying a kind of stress) then they will spend longer attempting the ‘obvious’ solution of trying to attach the candle to the wall using the tacks. This is actually the incorrect solution however and the *right* approach is instead to attach the box itself to the wall and stand the candle in it. The solution requires the subject to overcome a ‘cognitive bias’ called ‘functional fixedness’ and the

only way they can do this is by relaxing and taking their time to think about all the options.

So in other words, *even if* you could carry on working full steam ahead indefinitely, it still wouldn't be the best overall choice for your business. It just *seems* that way now.

The Consequences of Working Too Hard

It goes deeper than that though too. Because even if you *could* work your best without breaking and without consequence... you really shouldn't.

For starters, keeping your immune system suppressed this long and your heartrate elevated that long can very easily lead you to an early grave. And when you're lying in hospital, how will you feel knowing that you're leaving your family behind and missing out on your twilight years all because you had a big contract that month?

Likewise, if you're constantly stressed, you'll risk mental health problems. Depression, anxiety and even thoughts of suicide can come from chronic stress and this will prevent you from enjoying anything else in your life. If you're constantly *at* or thinking about work, you won't be there for your family and you'll damage their happiness and your relationship with them too.

Ultimately, if you're working all the time and addicted to stress then you have reached the point where you are living to work instead of working to live. What's the point in money if you never have any time to enjoy it? What's the point of *living* if your only real purpose is to ensure parcels

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arrive on time? Is that how you want to be remembered? Is that how you want to die?

Chapter 3: Analyze Where Your Stress Stems From



A lot of stress comes from your work but that's only one part of the story for many people.

Other common causes of stress include money, health, relationships and 'looming deadlines'. Stress can also be caused by even more abstract things such as feeling like you lack purpose, or feeling uncertain about whether you're doing the right thing. Stress can come from loneliness, from boredom and sometimes it can even seem to have no cause at all.

The first thing you need to do to start combating stress then is to identify *where* it is coming from. A lot of the most popular treatments for stress seem to focus on dealing with the symptoms but actually this is ignoring the bigger problem and the more straightforward answer.

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If you are stressed, then 9 times out of 10, something is causing that stress.

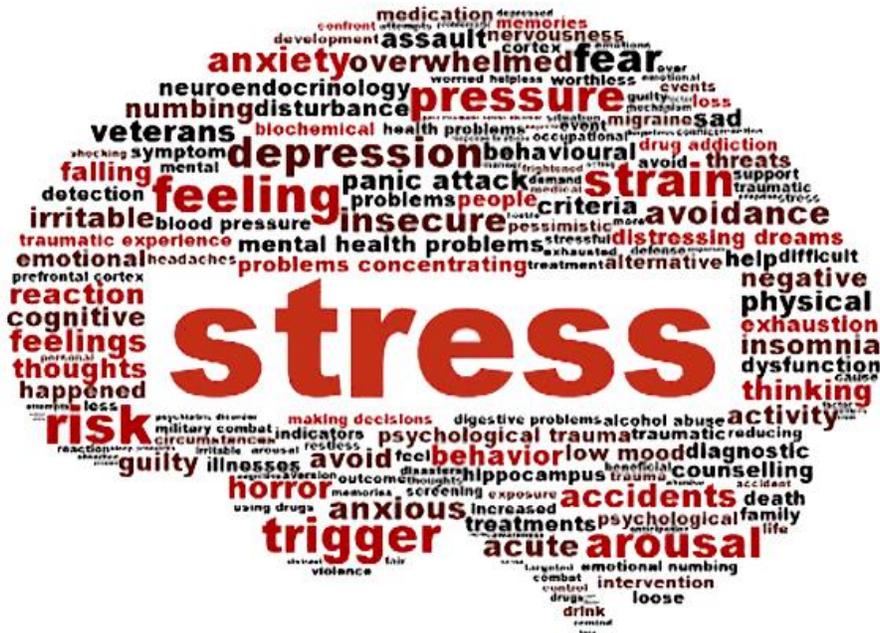
Stress is unacceptable.

You need to remove that source of stress.

It's simple math and it starts with identifying the problem.

How to Find the Cause

So how do you find the cause of your stress and identify what needs to change in your life?



Credit: http://users2.unimi.it/fens_stress/images/SI_StressBrain.png

In some cases it will be obvious. For instance, if you are stressed about work then you will likely know this. If it's your debt, then that might also be pretty obvious.

But perhaps you're overlooking some of the smaller things too? Maybe you're so focused on the stress of that wedding planning, that you've missed the fact that you're also stressed about work?

Maybe you're missing the amount of stress that is coming from other things – like your painful knee. Sometimes focusing on the small things can give us much more bandwidth for dealing with the *big* things and that can ultimately lead to us being much more able to cope and really being able to make headway.

Something to consider doing then is keeping a list. Write down everything you can think of that is causing you any amount of stress. Even if it's a small thing, add it to the list. Furthermore, make sure that you are constantly adding to the list. Keep a notepad with you to hand and every time something else comes up that you find stressful or even just that is taking up your time, note it down. Stress is very closely linked to time so listing all your jobs and things here makes sense too. Think about your routine too – is your commute causing you stress? Is the queue at Starbucks for your morning coffee causing you stress? Is talking to that awkward colleague causing you stress?

Another trick is to break down the large things that are causing you stress into multiple smaller items. So don't just write 'work' but break that down into lots of smaller things under that broad heading. Work stress might well incorporate the stress of deadlines, the stress of colleagues, the stress of your boss, the stress of your uncomfortable chair, the stress of your

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commute, the stress of your untidy desk... Even if you can't change the biggest items on that list, changing those smaller items can do you a world of good.

Chapter 4: Figure Out What You Can Quit Cold Turkey



Once you have listed your stress causes, grade them for severity and grade them for how easily fixed they are.

And then make a massive commitment to removing as many items as you can – and especially the biggest stressors.

Remember: your health and happiness are the priority here. There is no circumstance under which you should be making yourself miserable every single day.

If your job is making you that unhappy, QUIT.

That might sound overly simplistic but it really is *that simple*. Of course you might need to put some things in place first – you might need to apply to

some other jobs for instance or you might need to save some money – but ultimately this should be your goal.

And if you're quitting your job and looking for something new, then don't aim for something that's going to be equally stressful. Don't make the mistake of equating success with your career and with your responsibilities. Many people would never think of giving up a job as an accountant for a large firm or a trader in order to become a librarian or a tree surgeon... but even if it means a salary cut, what's wrong with doing a job that's peaceful and less high pressure? If you're happier, you're happier. *That's* success.

And there's no reason that you can't have multiple projects on the go. Working in a quiet grocery store? Then why not run a website in your free time? Why define your success by your career alone? Why only work on something creative when you're being told to do it by someone else?

This all requires a shift in your thinking but it's well worth doing.

Likewise, you can also pick and choose other elements of your lifestyle to remove or add to change your stress levels. Are you constantly having arguments with your partner? Then consider taking a break, seeing a counsellor or breaking up. Are you stressed because you have no money? Then try moving into a smaller house. Or even moving back in with your parents if you're single! Stressed about the commute? Move nearer to work.

Find the things that are causing you stress and then remove them.

Once you've ticked off all the 'big things' you can tick off, you can also look at the smaller things. Let's say your job is stressful but you can't or won't

give it up cold turkey. That's fine. Just use the advice from before to break your workflow down into all the individual elements that are causing you stress and *then* focus on dealing with those things.

So for instance, you might find that you're stressed because you have that commute. Well would life be better if you cycled instead? Or how about moving your working day an hour forward or back if your boss will allow? Maybe you could look into a lift share. Maybe you could even work from home a couple of days!

Stressed about a particular colleague? Speak with your manager about being moved. Stressed about your workload? Then ask for help and let someone take some of that work off of your hands. Stressed because you hate the chair you sit in? Talk to HR.

By attacking these smaller things, you can make your life considerably less stressful via incremental improvements – and that will leave you with more mental energy to tackle the much bigger problems.

The same goes for other causes of stress too if you're able to break them down. Look at the tiny reasons you're getting more stressed and wasting time. Do you hate vacuuming? Get a robotic vacuum cleaner! You just removed one little stressor and made others easier to cope with. Hate ironing? Get a steamer!

Scaling Back Stress for the Self-Employed

If you run your own business then you will belong in a very separate bracket when it comes to workplace stress. For you, stress is much more

within your control and that's both a very good thing and a very stressful thing in its own right.

Unfortunately, self-employment happens to appeal to a very particular stress-addicted type of personality. If you are self-employed or if you run your own business, then you are probably the sort of person who is highly focused on success and who is willing to do almost anything to get there. That's great for your bank balance – not so great for your heart!

When you run your own business you can set your own working hours. That means you can have time off whenever you want it but it also means you can *always* be earning more money if you keep working. The buck stops with you and there may even be other people depending on your ability to run your business and earn money.

The point is, this can be a very highly-strung situation to be in.

But this isn't how you should view being self-employed if at all possible. Instead, you should try and take the view of the 'lifestyle design' crowd.

Lifestyle design is basically all about thinking about the lifestyle you want first and then changing the way you work to suit that. What is your end goal and what's the fastest way of getting there? Too many people will work insanely hard now thinking that this will allow them to 'someday' earn enough to live a life of luxury.

But what if you could instead optimize your workflow so effectively that you would be able to earn a living in a few hours a day? You might not be changing the world but now you'd have *so much more free time* to do what

you want. And if you run your own business then this dream is eminently within your grasp, especially if you work online.

Scaling Back, Automation, Efficiency

The first way you can start to avoid stress in your workplace is to scale back.

One way to do this is to look at the 80/20 principle, also called 'Pareto's Law'. The idea here is that in most businesses, 80% of the profit and the work comes from 20% of the clients. So if you have 10 clients, probably two of them are your 'big clients' who provide you with steady work (this isn't an exact science but is often true).



Credit: <http://www.nuwavetech.com>

So how can you make your life a little easier and a little less stressful? Simple: stop working for the other 8 clients. Now you have fewer e-mails to answer, fewer complaints to deal with, fewer workloads to juggle... you instead have just a couple of great colleagues you can work for who

provide lots of steady work. How good would it be to start your working days with a to-do list of two big items instead of 100 smaller ones?

Another tip is to scale back in terms of your operation. If you have 20 websites, lots of members of staff and lots of expensive overheads like premium software that you don't *really need*, then try just cutting back on it.

You can even make your business more streamlined by focusing more precisely on providing specific services. So for example if you're currently a 'writer' how about you instead become a 'technology writer'. Instead of being a web designer, how about being a 'logo designer'. All this will give you a greatly simplified business model and workflow with far less expense and far less to think about.

Outsourcing and Automating

Likewise, you should also think about outsourcing your work and automating it as much as possible.

Outsourcing simply means getting other people to do your work. Outsourcing is great though because you aren't actually hiring new members of staff and giving yourself more to juggle that way. Instead, all you're doing is asking a third party to complete a part of your work that you perhaps don't enjoy as much as the rest.

A great way to do this is by using a VAS. VAS stands for 'Virtual Assistant Service' and is a very popular tool used by a number of online entrepreneurs. The general idea here is that these services can take on a range of tasks online, as long as they don't require them to be physically present. So they can arrange meetings, make bookings, order products and send e-mails. They can also handle research on your behalf, create spreadsheets and much more. And best of all? Most VAS companies are based abroad and charge a very small amount – as little as \$3 for an hour's work in some cases. Their English might suffer as a result though, so do keep this in mind when assigning tasks.



Credit: <http://virtual-pa-uk.com/>

The problem with many entrepreneurs is that they carry a belief that they can and *should* do everything themselves. In case you hadn't already guessed, this isn't a healthy attitude and isn't terribly accurate either. Avoid this mistake by outsourcing the parts of your job you don't like – you'll get

more done and at the same time, you'll have a more pleasant average working day.

The next tool we mentioned was automation and this is equally just as valuable and just as key. Automation basically means using systems, software and other things to complete tasks without any input.

An example of automation would be a using an assembly line to create cars. Once upon a time, all cars were constructed by hand individually but now they're put together by robots on an assembly line. You can do the same thing with all kinds of other businesses and smaller aspects of your business.

For instance, if you currently handle your own social media, this is something that can take a great deal of time. A good solution is to use a tool like IFTTT which, for example, can link your Facebook and Twitter accounts so that a post to one is reflected on the other. This way you have automated a big aspect of your workflow thus drastically reducing your daily load and your stress. Similarly, you might be able to find software that can handle other parts of your job.

While they are no longer in use, a good example of this is an 'article spinner'. Article spinners allowed writers to create multiple versions of the same article, so that they could publish it multiple times online. The idea was flawed as the end product was very low quality and there were copyright issues as many users abused the software. *However*, in principle this type of automation could help to save countless hours and a lot of stress.

Don't have any options for automating your business? Then think about how aspects of your workflow *could* be automated and then consider hiring a software company to create a custom program for you.

Note as well that automation is once again something that can help you in other areas of your life. The example we used earlier of the robotic vacuum cleaner for example? That's very much automation at its most basic!

Living the Dream: Passive Income

Lifestyle design is a big topic among online entrepreneurs now and for good reason. But while stripping your business back and automating/outsourcing your workload is one way to achieve the kind of stress-busting results you're looking for, an even *better* scenario is that you have your own 'passive income' model. And even if you're not self-employed this can still very much apply to you as a way to remove some of the stress that comes from money problems or worrying about work.

So what is a passive income? Simply put, it's an income that you generate passively – i.e. *without work*. So passive income means that you're earning a profit even when you're sleeping or when you're on holiday. It means that your *entire business* is automated and you don't need to do anything to make that money.

Does this sound too good to be true? Sure it does, but that doesn't mean that it's *not* true.

And in fact, hundreds of thousands of people online are earning passive income right now. Income that either supplements the income they're

getting from their jobs, or that are using as their main source and their 'career'.

So what might a passive business model look like?

A very simple example would be the following:

- Find an affiliate product. This is a product you promote online using a special unique link. Then, all sales that come through your link, earn you a commission. This can very often be as much as 60% of the full amount.
- Create a very simple webpage promoting the product, or create an online shop using a program like Shopify. You'll need to pay a little to keep this online but it won't be lots.
- Set up advertising through Google AdWords or Facebook. These ads will only cost you money when someone clicks on them and you'll only pay out a few cents each time they do.
- Go to sleep!

So why does this business model work? Simple: you now have a store selling a product that earns you anything from \$30-\$500. You're only paying for advertising when someone clicks and in all likelihood a fair percentage of people who click will earn you money. That then means you'll earn more than the cost of hosting your website and as such, you're turning a profit. As you gain more capital you can invest more into ads and earn even more.

This business will now *completely run itself* and you are now earning money while you sleep. This is a completely stress free way to earn money

and it's only one of *many* examples of passive income models. Uploading an app is another example. So is uploading a Kindle book.

Chapter 5: Lifestyle Changes for Less Stress



If you have taken all the advice in the above chapter to heart, you should now be living with a lot less stress – or at least you should be *on your way* to living less stressfully.

Basically you now have an idea of all the things both big and small that are causing you stress and you've started to remove those stressors from your daily routine. While there will likely still be *some* causes of stress in your life, even knocking just a few off the list with automation and outsourcing will make life that much more enjoyable and that much more bearable.

But this is only one piece of the puzzle. Equally important for instance is the way you look after yourself and your health. If you have bad health then not only is this a source of stress in itself but it also makes you much more

likely to experience stress as your body will be less capable of dealing with problems. When you have tons of energy, a healthy body and a well-rested mind, then life becomes much easier.

In this chapter then, we will look at some of the things you can start doing to significantly improve the stress in your life.

Cutting Out Caffeine

The first thing you're going to do to start experiencing less stress is to cut out caffeine. This is something that won't sit easily with a lot of people reading this but it's actually one of the biggest and easiest things you can do to drastically improve your stress levels.

Why? Well the first thing to recognize is that caffeine is essentially stress in a mug. This is what it is *designed* to do.

That's because caffeine increases many of the same neurotransmitters as stress. When you drink coffee, the caffeine will block the adenosine receptors in your brain. Adenosine is responsible for making us sleepy and as such, this simple change will make you feel much more awake and alert – which is why so many of us rely on coffee to start our day.

But what not everyone knows is that this then leads to a chain reaction where your brain realizes it's now more wide awake and assumes that something very important must be happening. As a result, you begin to produce more dopamine, more cortisol and more norepinephrine. In other words, your brain floods itself with stress hormones and this is why caffeine increases your heartrate, makes you feel jittery and can bring on anxiety.



Credit: stressanddrugs.wordpress.com

So if you're heading to work and you're stressed about work already, drinking a cup of very strong coffee is like adding fuel to the flame.

And what's more, caffeine can prevent you from sleeping properly and it's addictive in nature. Many of us will experience withdrawal symptoms, even if we go through the night without getting more coffee. This is one of the reasons you wake up feeling groggy and maybe with a headache. So if you want to start feeling less stressed and more energetic, one of the first things to do is to cut back on caffeine or even kick that habit completely!

Sleeping to Combat Stress

Another thing you can do to combat stress highly effectively is to improve the quality and quantity of sleep you're getting. The more you sleep, the more refreshed you'll feel in the morning, the more you will have dispensed with stress hormones and the easier everything is going to seem.

Of course this is something of a catch 22 however, seeing as it's hard to sleep if you're already stressed.

The first thing to do then is to try and make the environment you're sleeping in more conducive to a good night's rest. One way to do this is to make the room darker. Another trick is to make the room quieter. Try to keep your bedroom tidier too and reserve it only for sleeping and for sex – so that when you head to bed your brain will associate the space and that action with going to sleep. This will also help you to keep your room less cluttered and the less cluttered it is, the less 'busy' your mind will feel when you try and nod off.

Another tip for ensuring your sleeping environment is right is to try and keep it a little cooler. Leave your window ajar and this will help your body to better regulate its temperature while you sleep. Remember, in the wild where we evolved we would have slept outdoors. A hot shower can also help you to regulate your temperature and has the added benefit of releasing more melatonin and relaxing your muscles.

But most important of all is to take half an hour before bed to decompress. Of all the actionable tips for combating stress in this book, consider this to be one of the most valuable. If you head to bed right after watching TV,

tidying, washing up, arguing with your partner... then you are still going to be stressed and this will greatly impact on how well rested you feel in the morning.

Instead then, make a concerted effort to ensure that you get proper recovery by just sitting in bed for half an hour reading. This also means you won't be looking at any kind of screen, which can be responsible for upsetting your body clock and stimulating the production of cortisol.

And finally, knowing that you have half an hour to decompress at the end of the day is also incredibly beneficial. It means that no matter how busy and how hectic life gets, you will have at least half an hour in order to relax and let your stress subside.

How to Drift Off When You're Stressed

If your mind is racing with all the stresses of the day though, then you might find that it's difficult to switch off and fall asleep. As mentioned, this creates something of a catch 22.

The thing to remember here then, is not to try and force it.

What happens for too many people is that they try and fall asleep only to feel their mind racing and then they get frustrated. They're tired, they're low on energy and they *need* to get to sleep. Thus they start trying to force themselves to drift off which actually only ends up making them upset and raising their heartrate further. The more you try and force yourself to fall asleep, the more stressed you become and the harder it is to *actually* sleep.

Instead, if you allow yourself to just enjoy lying there – which is still highly beneficial – and if you focus on how comfortable it is and how nice it is not to have to do anything; that's when you'll find you drift off.

Getting Rid of Alarm Clocks

One more tip for the bedroom is to get rid of your traditional alarm clock. If you're currently being woken out of deep sleep by a blaring alarm then this is about the worst thing you can be doing for your overall stress levels.

Why? Because you're going from being deeply asleep to being startled awake.

When we sleep, our body and mind are getting restored. We are then designed to wake up only once we have fully recovered from all the trials of the previous day and only once we have gradually come around.

However, our brain is smart and leaves some of our senses untouched. The reason for this is that in theory it allows us to stay aware of threats and dangers. In the wild, this would mean that you wouldn't sleep straight through an attack by a predator.

Our brain ignores sounds we're used to for the most part, which is why the traffic outside doesn't wake you up. But an unusual and unexpected sound – such as an alarm which would never have been heard in a natural setting – is enough to jolt us awake.

Thus you wake up, thinking on a primal level that you are being attacked. And again, this leads to the sudden flood of stress hormones. You are *startled* awake and for the whole rest of the day you'll be stressed.

Replace this instead with a daylight alarm such as one of the Lumie devices. These are designed to wake you up with a light that gradually gets brighter and that has the same wavelength as the sun. In other words, your brain thinks it's waking up naturally because the sun is rising and this gradually brings you out of the deepest levels of sleep ready to be nudged into wakefulness. This is a *much* less stressful way to start the day.

Diet and Exercise

Finally, you should also make sure that you are eating a good diet and getting plenty of exercise.



Credit: <http://northsydney-personaltrainer.com.au/>

Exercise happens to be one of the best natural treatments for stress, depression and low mood there is. When we work out, this triggers the

release of serotonin and other endorphins, putting us in a good mood and helping us to feel generally much better.

What's more, exercise in the long run has positive effects on brain structure, it provides us with more mental and physical energy and it helps us sleep better. Exercise can also combat some of the other causes of stress indirectly. For instance, it makes us much more confident which can make social stressors seemingly less serious and easier to cope with.

Diet wise, the objective is to lighten the load on your systems and to provide more energy. Avoiding sugary foods can help for starters as these only cause a sudden spike in blood sugar, followed by a sudden insulin response, followed by a slump as we feel low in energy. Sugar also causes inflammation in the body and can lead to various health problems.

Meanwhile, you should try and make sure your diet contains lots of nutrients and is high in vitamins and minerals. These can have all kinds of positive effects on your overall health. For instance, getting more tryptophan from food sources such as poultry can improve your mood as this is the precursor to serotonin – in other words, it's the raw ingredient that the brain uses to create the 'happiness hormone'.

Meanwhile, there is some evidence that a zinc deficiency can lead to cognitive problems, while not getting enough energy from food can also cause depression. Omega 3 fatty acid may improve mood by helping neurons to communicate with one another through the process of increasing cell membrane permeability.

You could go into the science of improving energy through diet in a lot of detail – and there'd be enough there to fill a whole book. But really the key

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is just to focus on eating nutrient dense foods while trying to avoid processed sugars. You know this really – but eating a healthy diet that is comprised of freshly cooked ingredients will ensure you're getting everything you need and not placing a strain on your body unnecessarily.

Chapter 6: Replace Bad Stress Habits with Good Ones



What's also important to consider is the way that you manage your stress and the way that you manage stressful tasks.

In other words, if you have a large list of things to do: how do you go about tackling them? What are your stress habits?

Closing Open Loops

One example of a bad stress habit is leaving 'open loops'. This essentially amounts to the tendency for someone to put off doing the things they find stressful.

Let's say for instance that you're someone's best man. It's now your job to organize the weekend of a lifetime for them and for all their friends who you don't know. This is of course an inherently stressful job and something that you might be dreading doing.

So what do you do?

The tendency a lot of people would have is simply to *put it off* for a long time until they eventually *have* to do it.

Another example would be calling someone you're stressed about calling. Say you've been invited out by friends and you don't want to go or can't go. Turning down invitations can be a stressful experience, so you might be tempted to put off that conversation for as long as possible. Again, you'd eventually have to contact them and at this point it would be much more stressful – as you'd now also be guilty of having ignore them for so long making you feel extra awkward.

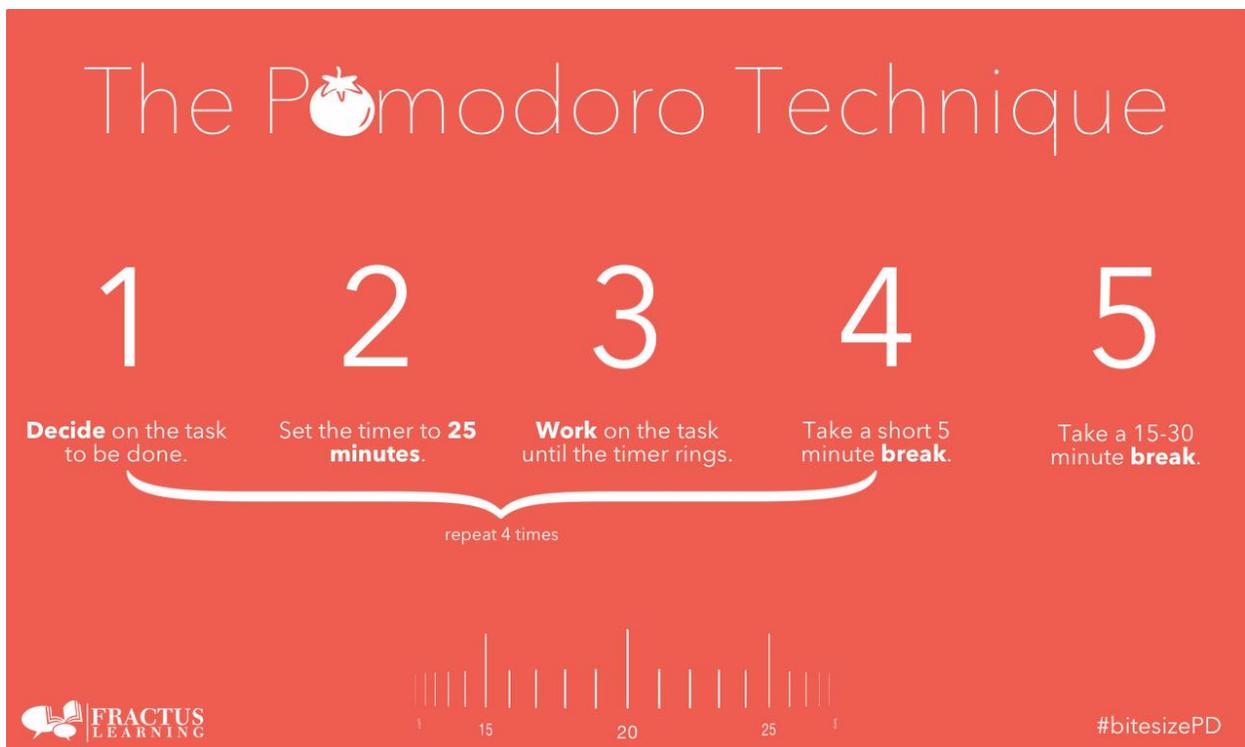
What's more, leaving open loops in this way will mean you now have an additional stressor in the back of your mind. These things will now be hovering over you as you go through all your other activities. When you're stressed at work, you'll *also* be stressed about the fact you have that call to make. When you're stressed about your relationship, you'll be aware that you also have to plan a stag.

In other words, it makes *much* more sense to close these 'open loops' as soon as possible. If you have niggling tasks that are causing stress, then do them at the first opportunity. This way you'll have less burden going forward.

The Pomodoro Technique

What's also important is the way that you're working through your to-do list. Here the big problem a lot of us have is not knowing when to switch off and of working solidly until we eventually collapse.

Or worse, until we start slowing down to the point where it becomes a waste of time.



Credit: <http://www.fractuslearning.com/>

In other words, we work until we end up procrastinating for hours. You've probably been there – when you have to work on a project, or you have to tidy your house. You don't have the energy to work, you find you keep getting distracted but you *have to*. So you persevere. And what you end up doing is watching YouTube for ages.

This is that thing of ‘walk or sit, don’t wobble’ again. You’re watching YouTube but feeling stressed about it. You’re half working. You’re not being fully productive but nor are you getting the benefits of rest either.

One way to solve this problem is with the ‘pomodoro’ technique. Here, you simply segregate the time you have into short bursts of productivity and then short bursts of rest. Normally you do this using a timer.

So for instance, if you had 10 hours to complete a project, you might break this down into 25 minute working periods with 10 minute rests. This way, you accept that there are going to be points when you stop working but instead of fighting them and becoming exhausted, you *embrace* them and use them to properly recover. This is a much more efficient use of your time and while it can feel odd peeling yourself away it’s also very good training. Over time you need to teach yourself that sometimes taking a step back is okay – it’s the only way to get over an addiction to stress.

Rewards Systems

The Pomodoro technique is very popular and a lot of people swear by it. However it’s not suitable for every type of work. For instance, if you’re a writer or programmer then you might need to get into a ‘flow state’ in order to get your best work done. This means being completely focused on the work you’re doing and when you reach that point you will find you even end up putting off toilet trips.

Flow states are you at your most productive but once they’re interrupted they’re incredibly hard to get back into. So if you’re in that kind of job, the Pomodoro technique may not be a good fit.

Instead, break your work up into tasks that you can complete. For instance, you might say that one 'chunk' of work is to complete 1,000 words. After that, you then give yourself a 'reward' in the form of a cup of tea, or ten minutes to sit and read. Whatever your reward, you will find that this not only breaks your work into periods of productivity and relaxation but also gives you more incentive to keep working and to keep being productive.

The key to getting this right though is to make *anything* that isn't work a reward. Want to make a cup of tea? Well you can't do it until you've checked your e-mail. Want to check Facebook? Not until you've finished writing that subroutine.

Where normally you might come into work, check Facebook, make a tea and have a chat before getting anything done, you'll now have completely a ton of work even *before* your first cuppa. This completely changes the feel of the day and leads to *much* more work getting done.

Chapter 7: Interrupting Your Usual Stress Reactions



Hopefully you've found that all the tips in this book so far have made a lot of sense. And hopefully you'll be confident that you can start reducing the stressors in your life and living a slightly easier routine.

But no matter how well you follow all this advice, it's not going to help if a ton of paper work suddenly lands on your desk.

Or if your boss flies off the handle at you.

Or if your partner yells at you for leaving the stove on.

These are acute causes of stress and they can all completely undermine all your good work. What you need is a strategy for dealing with acute stress.

When the fight or flight response kicks in with full force, how do you shut it back down?

CBT and Mindfulness

If you were to go and see a doctor about stress, one of the things they would recommend is CBT. CBT is 'cognitive behavioral therapy', a type of therapy that looks at breaking down our experiences, emotions and behaviors into thoughts and then reconstructing those thoughts.

In the case of stress, CBT offers two powerful tools that can have a massive impact on your ability to manage and cope.

Mindfulness

The first is mindfulness. This is a form of meditation, the objective of which is to learn more about your own mind and the thoughts you are having. At the same time, it teaches you to be less of a slave to your thoughts and to live more in the now.

So if you're stressed, you'll probably find that you have a lot of anxious thoughts like 'my partner is going to leave me' or 'I'm going to lose my job'. These are what are making you feel anxious and the key to recognize here is that it's not the stressor that is really responsible for your emotional state but rather your perception of that stressor.

Mindfulness means using meditation to rise above those thoughts so that you can live in the now. So that you can 'just be' instead of feeling like a slave to the whims of your mind.

So for instance, you can rise above stress by simply focusing on your breathing. When you're focusing on your breathing, you *aren't* thinking about all the bad that can happen. Likewise, focus on your body and try to feel it in space. Feel your weight on the ground and the wind against your skin. Listen to the sounds in the distance. In mindfulness practice this is called the 'body scan' and it's a great way to ensure you are living in the present and not inside your own head.

The next step in mindfulness is to expand this newfound awareness to incorporate your surroundings and then to incorporate your own thoughts. In other words, you are going to simply watch your thoughts come and go. Watch them pass 'like clouds'. Don't engage with the thoughts and don't judge them, just watch them and then focus back on your breathing.

This is useful because it helps you to stop being a slave to your thoughts. Recognizing that you're stressed and that you are likely having stressed thoughts is a very good way to stop those thoughts from having power over you. Recognize the impermanence of all mental states.

At the same time, this practice can help you to overcome some of the symptoms of stress in the short term. By using controlled breathing for instance, you can engage your parasympathetic nervous system and get your heartrate back down. By stopping ruminations and by not fearing the stress itself, you allow your body the best chance to return to normal.

This can also be used in conjunction with visualization. Imagining yourself in a happy place for instance can help you to bring your heartrate back down and to relax your muscles.

Cognitive Restructuring

The other powerful aspect of CBT for combating stress is cognitive restructuring. This is a tool that can be used to change the way you think about stressful situations and to remove the negative thoughts entirely.

For instance, if you're stressed about work, you might have specific thoughts causing that such as 'I'm going to get fired' or 'I'll never finish it all on time'. Using cognitive restructuring, you're going to *remove* these thoughts.

How? One tool is thought challenging. In other words, you're going to *challenge* these beliefs. Would you get fired for getting something wrong? Or would that be illegal? If you've had no warnings and if you're trying your best it's *incredibly* unlikely you'd be fired for making mistakes or not completing your work.

And are you really not going to finish your work? Haven't you been in this exact position countless times before? Doesn't it always work out? And if you really aren't going to finish, is it your fault? What's the worst repercussion? How could you manage that problem (telling your boss/client and asking someone for help for instance). Suddenly when you realize the worst case scenario is a) unlikely and b) not actually that bad, it robs it of its power over you.

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The other part of cognitive restructuring is hypothesis testing. Here you simply try that thing you're really afraid of. Stressed about stuttering in public? Try it. Stutter in public and you'll notice no one laughs and no one even notices. It's actually very normal. Again, that fear isn't so bad once you've looked at it objectively is it?

Conclusion & Learning to Live a Stress-Free Life



The last piece of this puzzle is then to learn how to make these changes stick and how to live a stress-free life.

The most important thing here is learning how to cope with a quieter existence. If you're someone who is used to a fast pace of living, then slowing down can actually be quite jarring and hard at first. What's more, things can easily creep back up and get on top of you again – so you need to be strict when it comes to keeping your new lifestyle the way it is.

Is Your New Lifestyle Sustainable?

One important thing to consider this point is whether your new lifestyle is going to be sustainable. In other words, there's no point in making all these

changes if you can't *stick* to them. Reducing your lifestyle to be easier to manage and to be less stressful, will only work if you *also* ensure that the changes aren't so drastic that you can't keep up with them. Make sure you aren't inadvertently *increasing* your workload and make sure that you aren't impacting negatively on other areas.

For instance, if you're taking up a new training program to try and increase your energy levels and combat stress, then you need to ensure that this new workout routine isn't going to be so tiring that it takes up all your available energy. Likewise, if you're cutting back on your clients, make sure that you aren't putting yourself at risk by having all your eggs in one basket. And ensure that you are looking at how this is going to impact on your income. In short, if the change you're making isn't realistically sustainable, then you should reconsider making it and probably forget it.

Enjoying Your Free Time

Finally, you also need to make sure that you are properly enjoying all that new free time. Overcoming your stress addiction and making lasting changes means knowing how to make the most of the time you have off. In turn, this will mean taking on new hobbies and throwing yourself into them and it should mean knowing how to completely let go and sometimes *just rest*. This is a skill in itself and if you've been working too hard for years, then it's one you will have to relearn.

Conclusion

And with that, we part ways. Using all the tips and tricks in this book you should now have the skills and the knowledge necessary to start reducing the stress in your life and to begin dealing with the stress that's left a little better.

To recap on everything we've learned and condense it into a bite-sized format, here's what you will be doing going forward:

- Assess whether you may have a stress addiction
- Create a list of all the sources of stress in your life
- Break the big causes of stress down into their small constituents. What *about* work do you find stressful?
- Find ways to tick off each of the different sources of stress where possible.
- Do this by 'quitting' if necessary.
- Otherwise, look at using automation and outsourcing
- Think about lifestyle design and the ultimate expression of this: a passive income model
- Use Pareto's law, the Pomodoro technique and rewards to better organize your remaining workload
- Eat a healthy diet, look after your sleep, get exercise
- Learn CBT and meditation and use these to reduce acute stress responses
- Learn how to switch off and enjoy your free time

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Ultimately the goal should be to look at your happiness and your peace of mind as the *key* objective for all your hard work. Remember that you work to live and not vice versa – if your job or anything else is getting in the way of that, then you *need* to look at changing it and you need to find ways to help yourself cope better.

And the reward for all your hard work and all these changes? You'll be happier, more relaxed, more productive, more creative... and even your relationships will benefit.

Remove all your stress and what's left? Relaxation, fun and happiness.

So what are you waiting for?