



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ani is an Executive Coach and International Speaker, specializing in the neuroscience behind stress and burnout in high performing managers.

She is passionate about giving the gift of knowledge to those who are struggling under the pressures of expectation and limited resources and believes that leaders who achieve by habit should not be told to slow down. In fact, the opposite is true.

Ani's mission is to promote awareness of the structure, function and power of the brain's natural tendencies to fight mental fatigue to promote optimal performance.

Stress is not our natural state; it is a learned state, and can be unlearned using naturally powerful techniques that Ani shares in her "Avoiding Leadership Burnout" speeches, books, workshops and VIP coaching.

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## ARE YOU ADDICTED TO STRESS?

### THE LIGHT BULB MOMENT

I've become very accustomed to holding a few silent seconds after stating; "I'm a Stress Mastery Coach" to any stranger at an event. As the words lock in to the other persons' consciousness, their expression changes to show a level of astonishment and sometimes excitement.

"Oh, perhaps you can help *me* then!" is the most common response after I expand on exactly what my title means.

From my experience I've witnessed an almost addictive personality shining through the moment we tell others that we can relate to their world. We love sharing stories of woe when congregated around the water cooler at work; we spend hours on the phone to friends and clients telling them of our ever-growing workloads, increased frustrations and looming deadlines. And we yearn to up the anti when someone's story of stress fails in comparison to our own!

For years I was the victim of my own success.

The higher up the corporate ladder I climbed, the less I saw my family, my friends and in consequence, my own soul. With the higher pay packets came 12-hour days, which often spiked to 18 hours during work assignments that took me out of the country. I loved the 'buzz' of it all.

I loved the frequent flyer miles, the quiet time to catch up on work at the airport lounge, the diversity of working across multiple cultures and the calm of not having my own screaming babies disrupting my thoughts.

NO STRESS? HA! WHAT'S THE POINT THEN?!

If my manager asked how I was coping, I would laugh and tell them I craved the stress. "If there was no stress, you know I'd be bored!" I always delegated out any non-stressful, low risk projects and claimed the high risk, high stress ones for myself. I admit now that at that time I was indeed addicted to stress. Being addicted to stress wasn't the real problem though. I'd been addicted to stress and the adrenaline spikes it produced for most of my adult life. My addiction only became a concern when I started to realize it was impacting my personal life.

First came the increase in my tolerance to coffee downing 3 double shot lattes every day before 11am.

This was followed by an increase in pain in both my neck and shoulders that no amount of physiotherapy could ease.

I was then diagnosed with a non-treatable skin disorder called Psoriasis that was thankfully hidden under layers of long hair on my scalp, but which nonetheless embarrassed me entirely.

I was told that Psoriasis was **stress induced**, but I couldn't work out where in my life I was truly stressed! I was happy, healthy, ran every day and was engaged to a lovely man.

At 29, I suffered my first panic attack. I remember driving home in rush hour traffic, exhausted both mentally and physically, knowing that I had a long journey ahead of me. At the time my partner and I were living in a suburb on the outskirts of town, a location I disliked and was learning to resent. During the drive, I became angry with the traffic, I started to build a picture in my mind of what awaited me when I got home; the laundry, the cleaning, the dinner to make, the cat to feed, the endless tasks that had to be done before I could 'safely' retire for the night.



My mind started to send 'panic' signals to my limbic brain, and soon my heart rate had quickened, my blood pressure had sky rocketed, I started to shake, and the temperature in the car increased to at least 40 degrees Celsius (well, as far as I was concerned it did!).

By the time I arrived home that night 70 minutes later, I had wound myself in to a tight coil of pressure that could crack at any moment. And I did. Crack, that is.

The next morning I failed in my usual routine of touching my feet to the floor when the alarm went off. In fact, I lay there for 2 days bedridden, paralyzed by unrelenting but false panic and fear.

All of a sudden, I had fallen from my pedestal as a business decision maker, and crashed in to a cavern of doubt.

I left my partner and spent the next 2 weeks hiding in my childhood bedroom at my parents' house, trying to find some reprieve, some happiness and some calm.

I sought medical advice, I visited a psychologist, I took up Yoga, I tried meditation (unsuccessfully I might add), and I slept and slept and slept.

Slowly, I once again found my 'quiet', and my energy. At that time I resolved to never let overwhelm take control of my life again. I had learnt so much about myself during that fortnight; I was certain I had command of my future and would lead a balanced life from that point forward.

NO STRESS? HA! WHAT'S THE POINT THEN?!

Needless to say, for the purposes of this story, that outcome was obviously not a true projection of what eventuated. Not only did I suffer another Chronic Burnout at 34, I was then diagnosed with stress induced Cancer at 35 and again at 38. Throughout that time I continued to challenge people at parties or work events as to their own levels of stress, but always 'sweetly' from a "try to beat *my* stress" perspective. I heard the doctors tell me about the impacts that Stress was having on my health, but where once I didn't believe them, I soon became so covered in the layers of overwhelm that I couldn't find an acceptable way out.

I went from sleeping a good 8 hours a night, to waking at least 5x during that sleep. I increased my dependency on coffee just to cope with the brain fog that invaded every day at 3pm. I started to resent the father of my children for 'making' me a mother - a life I claimed I never chose. I started to resent the hours spent at home because I knew the increasing housework tasks would exacerbate my overwhelm.



I craved travel so I could gain some level of peace and quiet, but predominantly so that my partner would be 'forced' to clean up (an expectation that never failed to disappoint whenever I arrived home to a bomb site of course!)

I started to 'snap' at my children, even going so far as to reach over and threaten to hit them if they didn't stop crying. (Thank God I still knew right from wrong during this stage!!)

I lost my ability to laugh, even when those around me were in fits of laughter.

My libido was nonexistent, and I started inwardly blaming my partner for all the cracks in my life.

Work was my bastion. I let out an almost audible sigh of relief every time I arrived in the parking building at the start of each working day. "Thank goodness for the office" I would exclaim, thinking I was leaving behind the stressors of the world every time I stepped in to that elevator.

I know now that when the world is seemingly attacking you from all sides, that's the moment we need to stop, reflect and realize that only we hold the power to make a change. I was blaming everyone and every thing outside my inner world for the utter chaos that surrounded me.

Much like an addict (as that is exactly what we all are) I was in constant denial.

I had forgotten what it was like to be 'normal', to be optimal. As humans, we are meant to sleep peacefully.

We are built to be in perfect physical health with an inner pharmacy like no other.

We are supposed to be able to laugh effortlessly with masses of oxytocin flooding through our blood.

When in balance, the human potential is astounding.  
When stressed, we are literally running through thick mud,  
meaning all our efforts are magnified, with our goals feeling  
further away than necessary.

I needed to wake up.  
I needed to be honest and realize that it was I who was at fault;  
that I had created my environment, my circumstances, my  
workload and even the frequency of my children's cries.

I hope you can relate to my story of honesty above, as I see a  
mirror image of this version of myself everywhere I go.

Have you ever watched an ad come up on the TV telling a story of  
a parent waving goodbye to their teenager at college and found  
tears of sadness well up in your eyes for seemingly no reason?  
Emotionally you're right on the cusp of breakdown, with  
hormonal imbalances that will power you over the edge when  
you let your guard down.  
The nervousness has seemingly come from nowhere, but deep  
down you know that's not the truth of the matter at all. You've  
spent years getting to this point, and perhaps you're finally at  
breaking point.



## ADDICTION

There are three very distinct and different categories of stress.  
Whenever we read articles or headlines about stress we  
immediately assume (correctly) that the stress being discussed is  
of the 'bad' kind.  
We've labeled all stress within one bucket based on the biasness  
of the deluge of publicity that Chronic Stress gets. Chronic stress  
is the ongoing onslaught of daily stressors that we feel are  
intrusive, harmful or divergent to our own value system.  
Chronic Stress is a very real epidemic in today's culture in the  
West, one that is killing more humans each year than any other  
outside element.

BUT, stress in itself is not harmful.  
All mammals were created with stress hormones and a stress  
response for a reason. If we didn't have bouts of Acute Stress,  
being the sudden 'fright' reflex we have when someone jumps out  
from behind a bush to scare us, we'd have no sense of adventure.  
The world wouldn't know what an extreme sportsman was, and  
there would be no thrill seekers looking for their next adrenaline  
rush. Acute stress is a fabulous thing in my opinion.

When we feel acute stress certain hormones and chemicals are produced en-mass by your brain. Epinephrine (adrenaline) courses through your circulatory system, binding to proteins on the sides of cells throughout your body. When it binds to the wall of the liver, it sends neural intent to cells inside the liver to convert Glycogen to Glucose, which is instantly released in to the blood stream - effectively giving you a sugar rush!

**This is the same neural cocktail produced when an addict get's his/her fix.**

Without realizing it, through years of overachieving and trying to be the best at what we do, to reduce our fear of being alone or letting others down, we've created human brains that are addicted to this "Stress Cocktail".

Without the flood of endorphins, we can feel flat, tired and listless.

The negative side effect to acute stress is that we often quickly revert to shallow breathing. Take that shallow breathing and magnify it 100 fold, and before long it's a natural state of breathing that invariably impacts our long term ability to remain calm.

What sets professional adrenaline seekers (think Red Bull Adventurers) aside from the average person standing on a cliff top about to jump? Our ability to belly breathe / consciously breathe / or breath manipulation.

When we skip or shallow breathe we inadvertently tell our brain that we're in panic mode, causing it to go in to 'flight or fight' mode. Many of us stay in this mode from the moment we wake up to the time we fall asleep at night. It's not our natural state to be on alert all the time. Spikes are good, constant elevation is not.

Learning the art of conscious deep breathing is a good start to lowering our count of stress hormone production and setting us on a road to recovery.

I mentioned above that I firmly believe we're a generation of stress addicts and here is why.

An addict is someone who starts to make excuses or inject positive connotations around their misgivings.

- I can't live without stress
- I'd be bored without stressful deadlines
- I've never been a good sleeper anyway
- Stress and I go hand in hand
- Life is just one, big chaotic mess, but I wouldn't have it any other way.
- Don't talk to me about stress! My stress will beat yours hands down.
- I'm more productive when I'm stressed.

But with the good, comes the bad.

It takes you three days to relax when you go on holiday, because you've genuinely forgotten how.

You're always the first to catch the cold that is always present on those long haul homebound flights. This is due to your immune system being radically suppressed by the constant stress. The only reason you didn't attract the flu earlier, was due to your stress hormones telling your brain that you didn't have time to be sick! The moment you relax - Boom! Your natural immunity kicks in, but fails, miserably.





You start to shallow breathe, or skip breathe, meaning fresh oxygen fails to be supplied in full to the brain. The brain requires 20% of all O<sub>2</sub> inhaled in order to remain in optimal function.

To make matters worse, when the stress cycle impairs our hormonal and chemical processes, our limbic resonance with others (that's our heart to heart compassion and empathy) fades meaning we no longer inspire others to think creatively on our behalf!



Our Hippocampus activity is impaired (brain cells die) causing forgetfulness and inhibits the learning of new cognitive skills

- Your sleep patterns have changed. Although you feel tired at night, you fail to fall asleep before 10pm, so have given up trying, opting instead to stay up late, watching TV or catching up on emails.
- You wake sporadically throughout the night, and wake in the morning feeling like you've not slept at all.
- Any dreams you remember are of work tasks or deliverables as these are the habitual thought imprints that consume your mind during your waking moments.
- You find it hard to disconnect from the chatter and thoughts that are constantly running through your mind.
- You feel impatient if someone talks slowly or doesn't get straight to the point of their story.
- If someone were to insist you take a week off work, you'd fret about all the lost hours, and the increase of workload that would pile up in your absence, meaning you'd rather NOT have that idyllic holiday when offered to you!

If you can relate to any of these statements, then be bold, be brave and admit that perhaps you too are...

**ADDICTED TO STRESS!**



## Now what?

There's a reason why the count of terminal illness around the western world is on the rise. In 1952 it was estimated that 17% of the western population would have Cancer at some time over their lives. In 2012, that statistic had risen to 78%.

We now know scientifically that over 90% of all illness and disease in our lives is due to our thoughts and feelings.

Acute stress is exciting. Never give up looking for it. Chronic Stress however, is your response to the relentless tasks or factors that you feel are intrusive to you or violate your personal value system.

Chronic stress however;

- Dampens your immunity,
- Lowers your libido,
- Dampens the reaction times of the Executive Functioning center of the brain (meaning critical thinking, reasoning, risk awareness, big picture thinking, all goes out the window)
- Reduces your tolerance to daily stressors and noise
- Reduces your creativity
- Increases the onset of mood imbalances
- Reduces the brains natural production of critical hormones that are required for sleep
- Increases chemicals and amino acids linked to inflammation, meaning we are more prone to body aches and pains.

And one of the worst effects of stress addiction is one that for me is now a non-negotiable requirement in my life, and should be in yours also.

- Chronic stress restricts the brains production of the chemicals and hormones that allow us to have the ability to LAUGH.

Seriously.

When you lose the ability to find humor in the simplest of comedies, it's time to act.

We all know the saying "To Live, to Laugh, to Love", these are the core requirements of our journeys within this life. Why then would we strive to continue to climb a ladder that is leaning up against the wrong wall?

# Steps to success

We owe it to ourselves to be the best person we can be, to master our thoughts and to own our happiness. To do this, all we need, is to go back to the basics and build a new foundation.

## 1. Practice Laughing



When we laugh, our brain produces a quartet of feel good neurotransmitters; Dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin and endorphins.

When Chronic Stress invades our lives and our sympathetic nervous system takes control, ramping up the stress hormones and telling the brain to reduce production of these four neurotransmitters.

This begins a chicken/egg problem.

When we feel ongoing stress, our ability to naturally find humor and laugh is reduced (sometimes completely oppressed).

However, when we laugh, our production of stress hormones (cortisol) is reduced.

The answer therefore is to find humor everywhere, and to laugh as often as you can. Your brain does not know the difference between real or fake laughter, either way it will kick start production of these chemicals, hence we need to 'fake it till we make it' naturally!



## 2. Diaphragm breathing

Practice diaphragmatic breathing; take a long, slow breath in through the nose, making sure your tummy rises and pushes out when you do

so, hold that in for a count of 5, then slowly breath our again through the nose.

There are multiple activations at work here; when you slow your breath, you are sending a signal to the brain telling it that you're safe, and therefore to stop production of the stress hormones and chemicals that shut off creative thinking.

Nasal breathing also ensures freshly cleaned oxygen (via nose) reaches the brain efficiently.

## 3. Get in to Nature

Another study performed at Stanford University also showed that the simple act of getting outside, in to nature (not walking between buildings, but through trees or at the ocean) was enough to change a students brain state instantly to Alpha relaxed state



**GO HUG SOME TREES!**

#### 4. Be Present

When stress invades, the most common outcome is that we neglect other aspects of ourselves



Such as our health, home lives and our relationships. Our family suffers, our children feel our stress, and the levels of anxiety are shared and increased.

Acknowledgment of this fact is the first step to making a difference.

The second step is to promise yourself that when you step through the door at home, you will mentally stop work and be fully engaged in the people waiting for you there.

The biggest problem with parents who feel overwhelmed within the home, is their habitual multi tasking. They become anxious if a child constantly interrupts the ironing or cleaning, letting thoughts of not being allowed to complete anything come front of mind.

To actively focus **ONLY** on the child in that moment, to drop everything and say 'yes' to playing a game wholeheartedly with them, **THAT** is the true measure of an engaged parent.

When you forgive yourself for not getting through all the household chores, and prioritize the quality of the relationships within your home above all else, stress really does start to drop away. Scheduling household chores to coincide with down time after the children are in bed, and being OK with that choice is moving you one further step toward the road of stress mastery.

## Final words

Life means to live. Many of us these days are sadly not living at all, but going through the motions in order to pay the bills. Some of the happiest people on earth have no money or material assets to name. When we realize that happiness is a state of mind that's 100% within our own control, isn't it then also in our power to recover from stress, overwhelm and frustration to live in peace?

Breathe, move, smile, laugh and be present.  
Everything else is unimportant.

*Yoda famously said,*

***You will know (the good from the bad) when  
you are calm, at peace***