



CONCEPTS AND TOOLS TO HELP YOU
TACKLE THE STRESS MANAGEMENT
PUZZLE

original by Lisa McKay
edited by Lisa Finlay
www.headington-institute.org



Headington Institute

402 South Marengo Ave.
Pasadena, CA 91101
USA

626.229.9336
www.headington-institute.org

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PREPARE FOR IT

The best way to deal with stress is to prepare to beat it before it begins to beat you.

Stress happens. Every day. All the time. To everyone. Some stress is a good thing. It keeps us on our toes and busy pursuing goals and dreams. But along with annoying traffic jams, telemarketers, and too much work, your life will sometimes hit more than just a bump in the road. You may be dealing with witnessing traumatic events every day, illness, a new baby, the death of someone close to you, problems in your marriage...and your body knows it.

The best way to deal with stress is to prepare to beat it before it begins to beat you. This series is designed to remind you to develop healthy habits around spending time with loved ones, getting perspective on life, eating healthy, getting enough sleep and exercise, and maintaining boundaries around work. Laying solid foundations will make you happier, healthier and more balanced. It will also pay off if an unexpected crisis catches you off guard.

So where are you in life today? Are you comfortable and coping well? Or comfortably miserable? Are issues of perfectionism, procrastination, disorganization, an unfulfilling job, illness, unresolved conflict, traffic, fatigue, finances, or innumerable other areas causing you undue stress? Do you want some things about your life to change, and are you willing to work at it? For many, the answers to those last two questions are “yes” and “no.” Instead of facing up to issues of responsibility, choice and action, people often look for different magic wands to fix their lives. They believe that the right medicine, words, or person will make things all better. The bad news is that this sort of magic is hard to find. The good news is that we can create our own magic by assessing the situation, determining what we control, and taking action. Sure, this does take some effort and work on our part, especially at first. The choice is yours about whether a higher quality of life is worth investing in.

Today, why not...

- Start a small notebook that you can refer to every time you get one of these reminders. Write down answers to the following questions: Where are your pressure points? What issues or situations consistently make you feel tense or irritable? Are there areas of your life where you are comfortably miserable?

This month, why not...

- Make it a goal to pay attention to how you feel, and make a note of things that push your buttons. Write these situations and issues down. Begin to brainstorm ways to take action to control them...



UNDERSTAND MY REACTIONS

“If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.”

- Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (121 AD - 180 AD) -

Life often appears to have two steps. Step One is Life Acts. Something happens. You might get stuck in traffic, get fired, get married, or break a leg... Step Two is You React. Reactions usually include at least two components. You feel something – frustration, anger, sadness, happiness. You also do something. You might swear, yell, laugh, or cry. It often seems that external events, or acts, cause our reactions and responses.

Actually, life has three steps. Step One, Life Acts. You get stuck in traffic. Step Two, You Think. You sit there and think about how much you hate spending an hour sitting on the freeway, how bored you are, what a waste of time it is, and how much trouble you’re going to be in with your boss for being late again. Step Three, You React. Your emotional response is frustration and anger. You tailgate the incompetent driver who just cut in front of you. You snap at whoever answers the phone when you call to let the office know you’ll be late.

You have just created your own negative reaction through what you’ve been telling yourself. True, being stuck in traffic is rarely fun. But you do have other choices. You could think of the time as an hour of peace during which you could listen to books on tape, plan out your day, or brainstorm into a portable tape recorder for your latest project. You could view the unusual traffic jam as an opportunity to be thankful that it doesn’t happen every day, or that you are wealthy enough to own a car! The point is, that voice in your head is simply you telling yourself about life. It can talk you into a lot of trouble and stress, or it can talk you into a more positive outlook that transforms your experience. Learn to pay attention to what you’re telling yourself and you will gradually learn to control your reactions by monitoring your thinking. Learn to think about life realistically, without exaggeration or undue negativity.

Today, why not...

- Look at the list you’ve created during the last month about your biggest and most frequent stress areas and events. Think back to one of the events that upset you. How did you react? What were you telling yourself about the event? Was there another, more positive point of view? Would it have changed your reaction?

This month, why not...

- Make it your goal to pay attention to your thinking when confronted with situations that push your buttons. Make notes and practice brainstorming alternative things you could tell yourself.



SET GOALS

“Thoughts lead on to purposes; purposes go forth in action; actions form habits; habits decide character; and character fixes our destiny.”

- Tyron Edwards -

Most problems we face in life have fairly simple solutions. Think about it. When you see a problem area in your life you usually already know how to deal with it, or could easily find out. You don't need a complex answer. Losing weight for example, is simple. Almost everyone knows the formula. Eat less and exercise more. But if you've ever tried this you'll know it's not easy. Simple and easy are not the same thing. Simple means easily understood, not easily done. Because waiting to act until inspiration and motivation strikes rarely works the truly important question becomes, how do we help ourselves do what we know would be good for us?

Knowing what the problem is and what you want to change, is an important first step. The second piece of the puzzle is to develop a plan that will motivate you towards action by outlining achievable goals and identifying rewards for meeting those goals. Inspirational speaker Jamie Lee Valentine insists that goal-setting is the single most important action that a person can take toward the attainment of their aspirations and dreams. A well-planned series of goals will give focus and order to your endeavors. They will help you attain greater discipline in managing areas of life that cause you stress. This, in turn, builds your resilience in a problem area and inspires you on to take further positive action.

Look back at the lists you started at the beginning of this series. What are some of the major underlying factors feeding into the frustration and stress around your personal pressure points? Is spending long hours commuting driving you to distraction? Is not getting enough sleep making you irritable? Does procrastination mean you're always rushing to get work done before deadlines? Do you feel stuck in a dead-end job? Pick one important area and decide what you want. Your overall goal might be to not be as tired. Then, decide upon a plan of action and set mini-goals, such as making sure you get to bed by 11pm four nights a week. Don't set goals you know won't work for you. But feel free to experiment a little with your normal routines. You might surprise yourself, and you have little to lose.

Today, why not...

- Pick one situation you've identified as a consistent stressor in your life over the last two months and look at the suggestions that you have been generating about how to help change that situation, or change your reaction to it. Set some goals in this area to accomplish during this month. Identify ways that you will reward yourself for the completion of those goals.

This month, why not...

- Monitor your progress in meeting your goals in this area. If you veer off track simply bring yourself back to your targets and keep going. As you get more comfortable with new routines in this area begin to think about one issue or situation you'd like to tackle next month.



NURTURE IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS

“Friendship makes prosperity more shining and lessens adversity by dividing and sharing it”

- Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 AD - 43 AD) -

Think back on your most cherished memories – the ones that make you smile and leave you feeling warm. I’ll bet most of them involve people important to you. Human beings just aren’t designed to conquer life on their own. Recent research on effective stress management strategies suggests that it is our relationships with others that help us even more than our personal coping knowledge and skills. Several studies have demonstrated a connection between perceived social support and mental health among emergency responders (see Prati & Pietrantonio, 2010). Above all other factors we seem to be dependent upon the strength and nature of our social and spiritual relationships.

An effective social support network is not simply made up of a huge number of acquaintances. It must involve people that you know well, and that you remain in regular communication with. It is even better if the people in your social support network *also* know each other well. Those closest to us are not only there to share the good times. Cicero was right. Trouble shared may not be trouble halved, but it does help! Having a heart to heart talk with a friend gives you chance to vent frustrations, disappointments and pent up emotions. Explaining your problems out loud helps sort out the trivial from the traumatic. It can also help you organize and prioritize problems in your own mind, see possible solutions, and motivate you to take action. Hearing someone else say “that must be tough” is a good reminder that you don’t have to feel guilty about being stressed when life is difficult. It’s also reassuring to know you’re not alone in what you’re facing.

The first three installments of this series have focused on our own reactions to circumstances, and on developing a personal coping plan for dealing with some of life’s pressures. However, in our eagerness to set goals and “control” our stress it can be easy to view time spent with others as unproductive. But it’s clear that when it comes to lightening that stress load, and increasing our personal resilience and joy, time invested in family and friends is far from wasted!

Today, why not...

- Draw a diagram representing your social network and answer these questions. Who do you know well and remain in close contact with? Do they know one another? Do you both give and receive support in this network? Do any of the members of this group know what you are facing right now at work? Who can you count on make you feel more relaxed and/or distract you when you are under stress?

This month, why not...

- Set some goals around strengthening or maintaining a good social support network that involves both give and take. Pick up the phone, write an email, or visit someone. Let someone important to you know how you are, and that you care for them.



COUNT MY BLESSINGS

“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

- Albert Einstein -

A child living in a small village in an African country wrote a letter to his American sponsor describing how his home had been flooded during recent storms. “The good news,” he wrote, “is that at least now we have fish!” There is good to be found in even the most stressful situations. Work that can be draining and overwhelming means that you have a real chance to make a difference in other people’s lives. A mess after a party means that you have been surrounded by friends. Taxes to pay mean that you are employed. Lawns that need mowing, windows that need cleaning, and gutters to fix mean that you have a home.

Recognizing the good is more than just an anecdotal piece of advice. Research on contentment and wellbeing has demonstrated that the things individuals predict will make them happier (*e.g.*, more money, getting married, a new car) do not in fact lead to greater happiness when studied longitudinally. That is, when you look at the same person over time, their rating of life satisfaction tends to go up when they initially achieve something they wanted, like a pay raise, but then their level of happiness returns to where it was prior to the raise (Myers, 2015). The reason for this is that people tend to adapt to what they have—no matter how much you want something prior to having it, once you have it, you take it for granted! One thing that has been found to help counteract this is something called “gratitude practice.” In studies where people are asked to talk or write about the small things they are grateful for on a daily basis, their well-being actually increases (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

So take some time to notice your blessings and savor them. Too often we naturally focus on the negative, and the negative can overwhelm our sense of inner contentment. Rehearsing the positive aspects of your life helps maintain emotional balance in the face of stress and disappointment. When things are grim but you take your eyes off your problems, even for a moment, you can often find something glorious in your path that will lift your spirits.

Today, why not...

- Make a list of big and small things you are thankful for today. Make an effort to notice small blessings – a hot cup of coffee, laughter, a jacaranda tree in bloom, a meaningful job, the feel of the breeze on your cheek.

This month, why not...

- Practice counting your blessings every morning. What better way is there to start the day? Add one thing you’re grateful for to your list every day this month.



REFUSE TO WORRY

“I've known many troubles big and small, but most of them never happened at all.”

- Mark Twain -

Are you stressed today because you're worried about what's coming tomorrow? Maybe it's a dental appointment, fear of a relationship ending, or the knowledge that funding for your department is at an all-time low. It could even be something more positive, like preparing for a vacation! Most of the time worrying is worse than useless. If it was just useless it might not be that bad but worrying hurts us. It saps us of joy and pushes aside the good things in life. Obviously, it's not possible to stop all worrying. If a loved one is in a car accident it would be very strange if you were worry-free while en-route to the hospital. The type of worrying we should work to control is needless worrying – anxiety over possible future events that we cannot change, or that we have no strong evidence will ever occur.

Here are five simple things you can do to reduce the stress worrying causes:

1. **Identify exactly what you're worried about:** Face it, describe it, clarify it. Writing or thinking out loud about your worry as if it's a problem you plan to solve will give you a clear picture of that problem, and give you a certain sense of control that will help reduce your distress.
2. **Make two lists:** First, list all of the things related to your worry which you can do something about. Then, list all the things which are completely out of your control. If it's a fear of public speaking your first list might include preparing well ahead of time. The second list might include whether the audience is well-rested enough to stay awake and alert.
3. **Brainstorm, research and learn:** Are their big gaps in your knowledge about the problem? Are their question marks on your lists? Ask others for advice, link in with a support group, and use the internet to research. Many of the problems in life have been solved by others. You name it, there's information out there somewhere.
4. **Do something:** This is key. Begin to follow through on ideas you came up with in steps two and three. You might or thoroughly prepare and practice your speech, or seek out opportunities to practice public speaking in settings you find less intimidating.
5. **Stop thinking of things that are out of your control:** This is the hard one! If you're busy problem-solving and doing what you can to prevent the worst from happening, then the energy you spend worrying further is worse than useless.

Today, why not...

- Think of one or two issues you're currently worried about, or things you often worry about, and write out answers to steps 1 and 2 above.

This month, why not...

- Be aware of whether you are spending a lot of energy on unproductive worry. Follow through on the worry issues you have identified. If you're still having a lot of trouble with step 5, then brainstorm, research, and learn.



GET SOME EXERCISE

“True enjoyment comes from activity of the mind and exercise of the body; the two are ever united.”

- Wilhelm von Humboldt -

When we're stressed our first response is often to put on sweatpants, head for the couch, and salve our stress by applying generous amounts of ice cream – not go to the gym. So is exercise really such a big deal if it's just one more technique we could use to manage our stress?

Yes, it is. When you feel stressed mentally, it's a sure thing that your body is feeling stressed physically as well. Perceiving a threat or a challenge sets off a number of chemical chain reactions in our body. These result in the well-known fight or flight response. Stress chemicals that end up in our bloodstream cause a variety of reactions. These include a higher than normal blood-clotting potential (to slow blood loss in case we get physically injured), slower digestion (because blood is being diverted away from the stomach and towards the muscles and brain to prepare us for action), and higher levels of adrenaline and cortisol (among other things, adrenaline increases cholesterol production and cortisol impairs white blood cell functioning). It's not hard to see the link between high blood-clotting potential and increased risk of stroke, between increased acid production in the stomach and ulcers, between cholesterol and heart attacks, and between poor white blood cell functioning and the risk of developing infections.

Exercise has both immediate and long-term benefits when it comes to relieving and controlling stress. Put simply, an exercise session at least 20 minutes long is a great way to use up those stress chemicals and restore our body's natural balance. Because our bodies also release “feel good” hormones called endorphins when we exercise, you will feel noticeably more relaxed for at least an hour and a half after an exercise session. When you build up your physical fitness through regular exercise, you are also building up a degree of “immunity” to stress. People in better physical shape can generally handle more stress with less burnout. They tend to be harderier, live longer, sleep and concentrate better, and be less physically sick, anxious and depressed.

Today, why not...

- Think about how much exercise you get in a normal week. Be creative. Include things like walking to work, and doing housework energetically! Brainstorm a number of different ways you enjoy exercising (e.g., swimming, boxing, playing catch with kids...)

This month, why not...

- If exercise is not a regular part of your schedule make it a goal to exercise for about 30 minutes at least twice a week for the first two weeks this month. After that, aim for a gradual and steady improvement until you are doing some form of exercise at least every second day. Don't overdo it. Choose exercise that you enjoy, is varied, that you can realistically fit into your schedule, and that isn't so competitive that it will increase your stress levels!



FUEL UP—THE RIGHT WAY

“There’s a great metaphor that one of my doctors uses: If a fish is swimming in a dirty tank and it gets sick, do you take it to the vet and amputate the fin? No, you clean the water. So, I cleaned up my system.”

- Kris Carr -

You would never consciously put the wrong fuel in your car, and you wouldn’t expect it to run well on poor quality fuel or no fuel at all. So why do we expect our bodies and brains to run well on poor quality fuel? As your digestive system slows down and more acid is produced in your stomach when you’re under stress it’s even more important than usual to be careful about what you eat and when. Your body will be better prepared to fight stress when it is fueled up the right way. Consider the following suggestions:

- **Breakfast** is probably the easiest meal of the day to make consistently healthy. Try high fiber cereals, low fat milk or yogurt, whole grain muffins and breads, fruit and fruit juices.
- **Plan ahead.** This will increase your chances of eating healthy. Food selection tends not to be at its best when we’re stressed. We tend to choose comfort foods – those easily obtained and usually sweet. They give us a quick but temporary lift but are rarely the most nutritious.
- **Don’t eat on the run.** Savor what you do eat. Eating one cookie slowly is more satisfying than downing five without noticing what they taste like.
- **Snacking** is often when we eat the least healthy foods. Have healthy snack food handy. Practice reaching for dried fruit or nuts rather than chocolate or potato chips.
- Consider incorporating **quality protein, vitamin, and anti-oxidant supplements** in your diet. If prolonged stress is affecting your digestion, even the best food choices may not ensure that adequate nutrition is reaching important parts of your body, like your brain. This obviously makes it more difficult to use your other stress management tools.
- **Drink water.** Often, a drop in energy is also a sign that you are dehydrated. By the time you feel thirsty you’ve already lost 2-3% of your body fluid. This lowers your blood volume, making your heart work harder to pump blood to your brain.
- **Drink coffee in moderation.** Drinking 2 to 3 cups of coffee can double your body’s production of cortisol, a stress hormone. If you’re a die-hard coffee addict compromise – counter each cup of caffeinated beverage with the same amount of water. It’s a healthy habit that will help you cut back on caffeine while keeping you hydrated.

Today, why not...

- Spend some time thinking about your eating habits. Do you have a variety of healthy breakfast and snack food in your house? Do you have the ingredients for several healthy meals? What’s for lunch and dinner today? If this is a problem area for you, spend some time planning ahead and making a grocery list.

This month, why not...

- Make a goal that you will eat at least two healthy meals a day.



NOURISH MY SOUL

What is the meaning of life...your life? I admit, it's not a light-hearted lead-in. You might be thinking, "I thought this was supposed to be about stress management, not awakening the existential angst within!" But stress management and spirituality are related! Spirituality is a core component of human nature. It includes a sense of meaning and purpose, hope, and faith. Whether due to an explicit belief in God, a more diffuse sense of connectedness with nature or a life force, or a belief in human nature and solidarity, most people believe that to be fully human involves more than simply the physical dimensions of existence. Therefore, if we want to get the most out of life we have to pay attention to more than the physical dimensions. We must feed our souls.

Research indicates that those who are actively spiritual are more able to cope effectively with stressful events. Active spirituality means engaging with spiritual issues, grappling with questions of meaning and purpose, being open to beauty and other things that inspire us. It means understanding how our spirituality provides the central basis for our important values, the values that inform our ideas and actions regarding morality, personal growth, and service to others. Active spirituality, nourishing our souls, helps us deal with the stress of the present and strengthens our capacity to deal with future stress.

So how can we nourish our souls? One way is by seeking out things that make us feel whole, alive, joyful, and connected with something beyond ourselves. Some common sources of "soul food" are prayer, reading scriptural texts, meditation, yoga, deep relationships, nature, art and music. These soul foods tend to shift the way we view our life and the life around us. They connect with us in a way that moves us beyond simple appreciation of the action or object.

Another very important way of nourishing our souls is to seek a clearer understanding of what we value in life and why. Facing issues of poverty, violence, and suffering is demanding. Profound challenges to spirituality and worldview are some of the most significant stressors that emergency responders face during their careers. Especially when you think longterm, it makes sense that the work will have an impact on the way you view others, the world, God (if you believe in God). It's a good idea to rely on a spiritual or faith community during what some call a "dark night of the soul." Don't let doubts or questions stop you from connecting with spiritual leaders or mentors that have been important to you.

Today, why not...

- Think about your own spirituality. What do you put your faith in? What originally interested you in emergency responder work? Where do you find its meaning, purpose and sense of connection? What are some different types of soul food that nourish you?

This month, why not...

- Write out answers to the questions above. Pay particular attention to things that feed your soul. If you aren't doing any of the things that nourish you, plan to start prioritizing some of those things.



“WORK” TO RELAX

Your body often registers stress before your conscious mind. Remember that the symptoms of a stress reaction include tense muscles, elevated heart rate, heightened blood pressure, rapid breathing, a tight stomach, and the energizing emotions of anger or fear. These reactions are your body’s way of preparing you to deal with the stress by fighting or fleeing. However, these two strategies are of limited value when it comes to dealing with most modern stress! Instead, we need to learn some other methods of deliberately relaxing our bodies and minds, of eliciting what’s called the “relaxation response”. The relaxation response undoes the stress reaction. Not surprisingly then, the signs of the relaxation response are relaxed muscles, decreased heart rate, lower blood pressure, slower breathing, a calm stomach and a more peaceful emotional state.

As reactions in our body and mind tend to be closely linked, relaxation strategies that primarily target our bodies also tend to have a positive effect on our minds and emotions, and vice versa. There are many different ways to prompt the relaxation response. Do a little more research on some of these different techniques. Try them, and see what works best for you:

- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** Also called deep muscle relaxation, this technique prompts you to systematically and deliberately relax your different muscle groups. With practice, you learn to recognize and monitor muscle tension, and relax muscles more quickly and easily.
- **Diaphragmatic breathing:** Also called deep breathing, this is the opposite of how we breathe when we’re stressed. It increases the amount of oxygen in your blood which eases tension and improves circulation. Try the five by five technique. Breathe in deeply while slowly counting to five. Make sure you’re breathing from your stomach and not only your chest. Hold the breath for a count of five. Then breathe out while slowly counting to five. Repeat five times.
- **Visualization:** You can use your mind and imagination to tell your body to relax. One simple technique is to imagine that you are in one of your favorite, peaceful, pleasant places. Add detail to this image by imagining colors, soothing sounds, sensations and smells.
- **Meditation:** The aim of meditating is to focus your thoughts and quiet the mind. The concept is simple. Set aside 15-20 minutes, focus your mind on one thing and don’t let it wander. At first, the constant activity of the mind will mean that stray thoughts break through often and interrupt your concentration. Meditating will become easier and more beneficial with practice.

There are many other ways to prompt the relaxation response. These include: different forms of meditation, such as “mindfully” performing simple tasks like washing up; yoga and other forms of “moving meditation,” such as rhythmic repetitive exercise like walking; massage; warm baths with aromatic oils; aromatherapy; laughter; and music with a rhythm that’s slower than your heart rate – about 72 beats a minute. Classical or mellow jazz with a repetitive pattern is most calming.

Today, why not...

- Practice being aware of the tension in your body. Write down two of your favorite ways to relax. Deliberately do something to relax today.

This month, why not...

- Adopt one different relaxation strategy every week. Do a little extra research on it, and practice it regularly during that week.



UNDERSTAND TRAUMA

So far this module has presented strategies targeting the regular, everyday, cumulative stress that we all face. Sometimes, however, life hits more than just a bump in the road and you undergo an experience that goes beyond stressful, to traumatic. Common traumatic events we are all at risk for include car accidents, or the death of someone close to you. However, as most emergency responders regularly intervene in human conflict and natural disasters, they are at increased risk of experiencing additional events that involve threats to personal safety or integrity. Part of being able to deal effectively with the general stress of life is knowing what to expect and do when traumatic events like these occur.

Some people encounter traumatic events with minimal disruption in their daily functioning. More commonly, individuals recognize the very real danger that existed in the situation and, afterwards, experience some indications that their normal coping mechanisms are (at least temporarily) being overwhelmed. Everyone reacts somewhat differently, but common trauma reactions include difficulty sleeping, being easily startled, irritability, difficulty concentrating, anxiety at reminders of the event, numbness, and re-experiencing the event in nightmares and/or thoughts.

If you experience some of these physical and emotional reactions following a traumatic event the first important thing you should know is that you are not going crazy. These are normal reactions to an abnormal situation (*e.g.*, high danger scenario) and in most cases they will disappear within a couple of weeks. The second thing you should know is that there are things you can do to help your body, and your emotions, revert to normal.

The following are particularly helpful:

- Get some **exercise** within the first 24-48 hours after the event. This burns up some of the stress hormones in your bloodstream and helps your body re-stabilize.
- **Go easy on yourself** and allow extra time to accomplish routine tasks.
- Help your body and mind **relax** by engaging in some enjoyable activities, and get plenty of rest even if you can't sleep.
- **Talk** with your family and friends about what you experienced and how you felt.
- **Write** about what you experienced and how you felt.
- **Avoid making major decisions**, *i.e.*, things that involve major life changes like divorce, shortly after the event. Give yourself time for your perspective to adjust.
- **Seek professional help** if you feel especially overwhelmed or alone.

Today, why not...

- Consider what you know about trauma reactions. How have you reacted to traumatic events previously? What coping strategies did you find helpful? What would you like to learn more about?

This month, why not...

- Make it a goal to learn a little more about trauma, and think about what coping strategies you might find helpful.



TAKE TIME TO “SHARPEN THE SAW”

In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Steven Covey tells a story that reflects the need for rest, refreshment, renewal, and re-awakening in our lives.

Suppose you come upon a man in the woods feverishly sawing down a tree.

“You look exhausted!” you exclaim. “How long have you been at it?”

“Over five hours,” he replies, “and I’m beat. This is hard.”

“Maybe you could take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw. Then the work would go faster.”

“No time,” the man says emphatically. “I’m too busy sawing.”

Can you identify with the man in the woods? This story serves as a good reminder that it’s often hard to stop sawing even though we know that taking a break will help us come back to our tasks stronger and more focused. To take breaks from the busyness of our lives we must be proactive. No one can do it for us, or force us to make it a priority. We must put down the saw ourselves.

Some general suggestions for sharpening the saw on a day-to-day basis include:

- **Build some slack into your schedule:** Having to hurry all the time can be a serious stressor. Try scheduling 75% of your time instead of 110%. Build in some time for the unexpected.
- **Pause and reflect on what you’re doing and why:** It will help you put your life in perspective and make sure the activity is worthwhile.
- **Spend 10 minutes outside:** Exposure to natural light plays a role in regulating your moods. If you don’t get enough natural light your body tends to slip into “sleep mode.”
- **Do something enjoyable every day, and pay attention to the fact that you’re enjoying it!** It doesn’t have to be complicated or time consuming. Have lunch with a friend, go for a walk, read a chapter of your book, just do something for *you*.

We should be keeping a regular eye on how sharp our saw is by checking in with different areas of our lives and making sure we regularly refresh all the interconnected aspects of our nature. Are we nurturing our physical bodies by paying attention to exercise, nutrition and drinking enough water, getting enough sleep, and relaxing? Are we counteracting mental stress through awareness, effective goal-setting, practicing gratefulness and learning to control unproductive worry? Are our social and emotional needs to communicate with others being met? Do we pay attention to our spirituality and nourish our souls?

Today, why not...

- Take a risk. Stop sawing for a while and check to make sure your life is in balance. Do you need to pay particular attention to your physical, mental, social or spiritual needs at the moment? Write down how you’re going to do that.

This month, why not...

- Experiment with different ways of sharpening your saw. Deliberately do something you enjoy every day.



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