

GOODBYE  
HELLO **stress**  
LIFE!

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B.Ed., B.PhEd.

Goodbye Stress, Hello Life!  
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*For Tanya—my wife and best friend.  
Thank you for always believing in me,  
and for showing me what it really means to live.*



## Author's Note

*It is inevitable that we will experience stress in life. The difference is that some people sit in the middle of their stress with little motivation to change, and others search for tools to assist in their ability to change. My hope is that this book can provide you with a set of tools that will allow you to enjoy your journey.*

*I encourage you to reflect on your own experiences, and think about what you want in life. You are the only one who has the power to create your own reality. It is my hope that chapters 1 and 2 will help you to understand the way stress works, while the remaining chapters will provide you with tools to manage your stressors, guide you through change, and empower you to live opposed to merely exist.*

*While I do provide some basic information on stress, the thoughts expressed in this book are based on my own personal and professional experiences. Names and stories have been changed to protect the confidentiality of those involved.*



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## Introduction

Imagine that you frequently experience stomach pain. If you repeatedly reach for an aspirin in an attempt to alleviate your pain, you are only masking the root cause. Would it not be more effective to take a step back and think about what is causing the stomach pain in the first place? The solution might require nothing more than a change in diet. In the same way, you may experience stress but struggle to identify, or hesitate to change, what is causing your stress in the first place.

I frequently meet people who dread going to their workplace, and yet they continue entering the same doors. Others are unhappy with their relationships, and yet they remain. Why would someone stay in a position or situation that causes them immense stress and fails to bring them happiness?

When I ask my clients this question, I hear two common responses. One, they have become complacent and believe they will never find anything better. Two, they believe they are not worthy of anything better, or do not deserve a life of happiness.

For years, I struggled to believe that I was worthy of a life of happiness, and failed to accept that life was something that could be enjoyed. Thankfully, I have finally come to understand that *I am* worthy, and have arrived at a point where I can say it is good to be alive.

The key was that I had to create this reality.

Take a moment to sit back and reflect on your surroundings. From your material possessions to your relationships, you have created it all. You are the creator of your own reality and your own happiness. If you are not content with your life, you are the only one who is in a position of power to create a different outcome.

What do you want in life? It is yours to create.

This is *your* journey.

*“It’s not the load that breaks you down.  
It’s the way you carry it.”*

— Lou Holtz

# 1

## UNDERSTANDING STRESS

### The Stress Response

Stress is a normal part of life. In fact, your very birth into this world likely occurred in a complete state of stress! Stress is simply the body’s response to any physical or emotional demand, whether real or imagined.

Although stress is usually perceived in a negative light, there are actually some positives that can come from it. In the right dosage, stress can be just what the body needs to get blood flowing and to create the feeling of being alive.

When your body’s stress response is working properly, it helps you to stay focused, alert, and energetic. It allows you to stay motivated and meet whatever challenges the day may bring.

In moments of crisis or unexpected threats, it is your body’s response to stress that can actually save your life. For example, there are stories of people who have found the superman-like strength needed to lift a car in an effort to save another person.

Thankfully, your body is designed to experience stress and react to it accordingly. When you sense danger, your body automatically activates a process known as the “fight-or-flight” reaction, also known as the stress response. This is a survival mechanism and helps prepare us

for life-threatening situations. The human body views stress as a threat to its survival, and the brain responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline, to prepare the body for a potential emergency.

Unfortunately, the body can also overreact and activate this same response to non-life-threatening events such as trying to meet deadlines at work or preparing for that big exam.

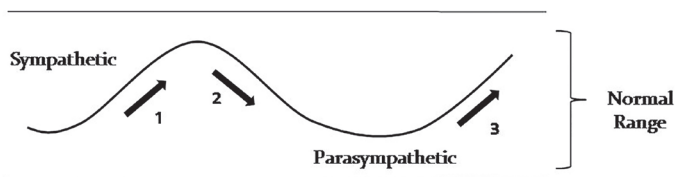
## The Systems at Work

The body's autonomic nervous system controls involuntary functions such as breathing, blood pressure, and heartbeat. This system has two components: sympathetic and parasympathetic.

The sympathetic system acts like a gas pedal. During a stressful event, it is activated to increase an individual's chance of survival. One instinct may be to run (i.e. flight). Another may be to face the stressor directly (i.e. fight). The third instinct is to do nothing (i.e. freeze).

In contrast, the parasympathetic system acts like a brake. When it is activated, the body enters a state of gradual relaxation. This is what allows the body to calm down once it is convinced that the threat has passed.

The image below demonstrates a healthy nervous system and is based on the work of Dr. Peter Levine, author of *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*.



Consider the example of driving your car only to be suddenly cut off by another vehicle. The first arrow indicates that the sympathetic system has become activated in the face of a potential threat. This threat will immediately cause your blood pressure and heart rate to increase,

and may also sharpen your focus. If you have had a similar experience, think about how your body reacted.

Let's say that you manage to avoid the collision after a close call, and your body recognizes that the threat is over. The second arrow indicates the parasympathetic system kicking in, bringing your body back to a state of balance. The third arrow demonstrates how the cycle is again repeated with each new threat, once again activating the sympathetic system.

This is how a healthy nervous system functions. When your system is in balance, you have choices and options. After the sympathetic system is activated, the body has the tools to self-regulate, which allow the parasympathetic system to kick in to return you to your initial state of balance.

Unfortunately, the systems of individuals who have experienced significant trauma do not regulate in this manner. Trauma may come in many forms, such as involvement in war, a car accident, a major surgery, or an abusive or violent home environment. These traumatic life events can prevent an individual from coping effectively with other stressful life circumstances.

Think about a child raised in a violent home environment. Children are not in a position of power or control, and are at the mercy of the adults in the home. If a young girl is confronted and abused by someone bigger and stronger, the options of fight or flight are not available to her. Her only remaining option is to freeze.

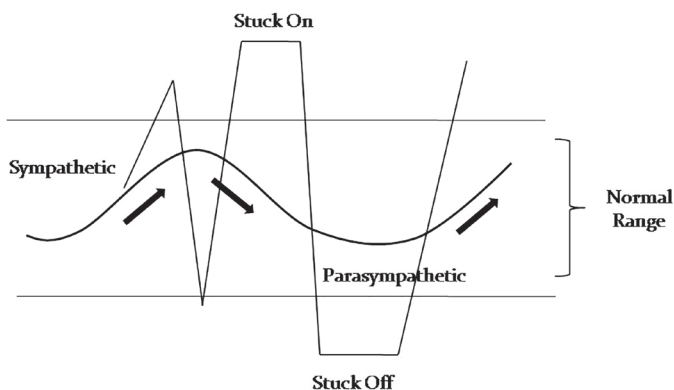
Sadly, no nurturing adult is there to teach this young child how to calm down. No one is there to comfort her and make her feel safe enough to allow the negative feelings stored after the trauma to be released.

Uncertain whether this event will happen again, her body remains on high alert. Her parasympathetic system does not have a chance to kick in, and she can become "stuck on," as though her foot constantly pushes down on a gas pedal. When this occurs, she may experience anxiety, an inability to relax, difficulty sleeping, or trouble focusing.

For some individuals, it is also possible for the other extreme to occur, and the parasympathetic system takes over. This causes the individual

to become “stuck off.” In this case, they experience minimal emotional response, lethargy, chronic fatigue, or depression.

The graphic below is modified from the works of Dr. Peter Levine and indicates how an unhealthy nervous system responds to stress:



If the system is unable to provide the individual with a sense of balance, the person has to find their own ways to self-regulate. If their system is “stuck on,” they need to find something to bring them back down. Alcohol, which is a central nervous system depressant, can serve as a quick fix. Others find themselves impulsively engaging in self-harming behaviours, such as cutting, as a coping mechanism to provide an emotional release.

On the other hand, if the system is “stuck off,” substances like cocaine or amphetamines, which are central nervous system stimulants, can bring them back up. Individuals may also engage in other activities that provide an immediate rush or sense of pleasure through activities such as gambling, sex, or excessive food consumption. Over time, this internal need to self-regulate has the potential to lead to an addiction.

## Signs of Stress

Life can be very demanding, and in this fast-paced world sometimes it is hard to stop and take time to listen to what your mind and body are telling you. It can often be easier for you to identify stress in others than in yourself. Stress symptoms may also be difficult to recognize because



they have now become “normal” for you. As a result, you may not even be aware that you are under any stress in the first place. The following chart reflects some signs of stress in three key areas:

Physical	Psychological	Behavioural
Headaches	Irritable	Isolation
Clenched jaw	Anxiety	Over- or under-eating
Muscle tightness	Mood swings	Impatience
Shortness of breath	Decreased motivation	Fidgeting
Fatigue or insomnia	Distracted	Substance abuse

## Effects of Stress

Stress is subjective in nature. What one individual might perceive as a small stressor may be perceived by another as insurmountable.

Have you ever found that it is difficult to think clearly when you are under a significant amount of stress? Psychologically, many individuals under high levels of stress find themselves struggling to concentrate and accomplish tasks that used to be done with ease. Too much stress affects the normal functioning of your prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain where thoughts are processed and behaviours are regulated. This is why it may become difficult to process information and maintain normal functioning. This can also cause you to make decisions that you might later regret.

A friend of mine, Jason, was the principal of an elementary school in a small town. The school year was nearing its end and he was feeling overloaded with responsibilities. One day, a Grade 2 student decided to test his authority. While students were filing onto the buses in front of the school, this seven-year old stood defiantly in front of Jason with a soccer ball in his hands. Both Jason and the boy were well aware of the rule that all balls were to remain in the school following the last bell of the day.

This daring young boy tauntingly tossed the soccer ball up and down in front of Jason’s face. Using a stern voice, Jason asked the boy to return

the ball to the school. The boy shook his head “no” with a devious grin. Jason lowered his chin, pointed toward the school doors, and loudly demanded that he take the ball back into the school immediately.

By this time, some students had begun to take note of the altercation. Feeding off this attention, the boy smiled, spun around, and proceeded to kick the soccer ball into the air in the direction of the school. The ball landed on the roof, their eyes met, and the young boy took off running as though his life depended on it. In a state of absolute fury, Jason chased after him.

The boy hopped onto his bike and began rapidly peddling past the school buses full of curious eyes observing the drama unfold in front of them. Without thinking, Jason selected the closest kid’s bike, and peddled furiously after the boy, knees ramming against the handlebars. The students watched in anticipation from the sidewalks and bus windows as their principal chased their fellow student down the town’s main street.

As Jason told me this story, he said that halfway down the street, a hint of sanity returned, and he reached a critical point where he had to ask himself what he was going to do if he caught the child.

Jason never did catch the young boy on his bike that day. However, the story shows how high levels of stress can impair our judgment and inhibit our ability to make good decisions, both in our personal and professional lives.

*Stress does not come from the situations we experience, but rather from our emotional reaction to the situation.*

It is significant to note that stress does not come from the situations we experience but rather from our emotional reaction to the situation. Feelings such as anger, sadness, or fear immediately activate the body’s stress response. Stress only becomes negative when

an individual endures constant challenges without moments of relief. Taking on extra tasks, working late, and having increased responsibilities can push you toward distress. When stress is prolonged, it can lead to burnout. Many people are not even aware that this is taking place, and they continue to push themselves. They ignore the physical signs

of stress, such as body aches and pains, until it manifests as something more serious.

One study revealed that 75 to 90 per cent of all doctors' office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints (Goldberg, 2007). Symptoms include high blood-pressure, headaches, indigestion, ulcers, fatigue, and physical weakness.

Chronic stress occurs when your body is in a constant state of stress. Many professionals believe that this causes changes in the immune system, and may contribute to diseases such as cancer, diabetes, stroke, and heart disease.

Heart disease continues to be a leading killer in our society. While stress does not directly cause heart disease, the ways that we manage stress certainly play a role. People may choose to consume alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or eat unhealthy foods in an effort to combat stress. These coping methods may lead to high blood pressure and damage the artery walls, putting the individual at risk for heart disease.

Everyone responds to stress differently, and your ability to tolerate stress depends on many factors, including everything from genetics and environment to your overall view of life. Once an individual is able to recognize that stress is having a negative impact on their life, they are in a position to change their behaviours.

Stress will always be a part of our lives to some degree. However, we determine how we manage the stressors around us.

*“Working hard for something we don’t care about is called stress.  
Working hard for something we love is called passion.”*

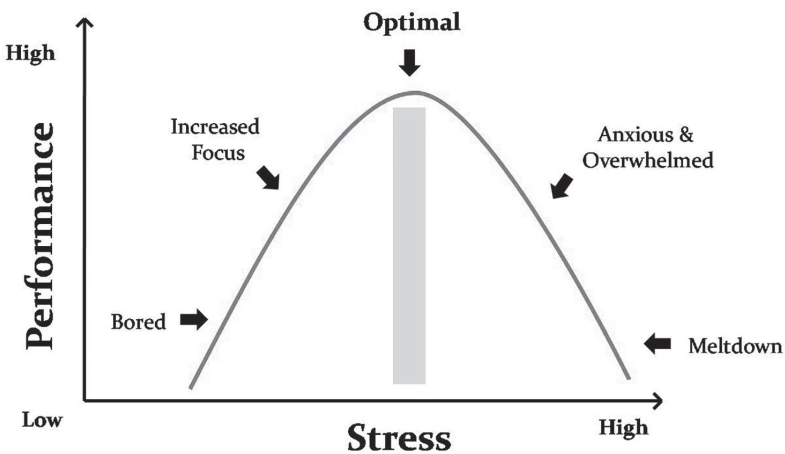
— SIMON SINEK

# 2

## ADDRESSING STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

### Stress vs. Performance

The Yerkes-Dodson Law states that we all require some level of stress to motivate us to perform well in our day-to-day lives, but too much stress will impair our ability to perform at all. This law is demonstrated in the chart below.



As stress increases, performance will also increase, and we will eventually reach our optimal stress level. It is important to note that this optimal point is different for everyone. Performance actually peaks under moderate levels of stress, and as long as stress is not prolonged, it is harmless. This moderate level of stress keeps the brain alert while enhancing concentration and focus. This is where people often feel as though they are “in the zone.”

However, if stress levels continue to increase, performance will then decrease. Once performance begins to decline, an individual typically tries harder, which only increases their stress level and causes performance to decrease even further. This can create feelings of anxiety, frustration, and anger. In this time of distress, an individual’s IQ is also significantly impaired.

Thompson (2007) studied the effects of stress on people in leadership roles and discovered that too much stress results in a drop in cognitive ability, including IQ and Emotional Intelligence (i.e. a person’s ability to successfully perceive and manage their emotions). Combine this with a heightened emotional state, and it is easy to see how one can be incapable of making appropriate leadership decisions while under a great deal of stress.

## **A Stressful Environment**

The workplace has the potential to create significant challenges, and one of these begins even before entering the employer’s doors. In 2010, the General Social Survey, which collects data on the living conditions and well-being of Canadians, revealed that it takes Canadian workers an average of 26 minutes to get to work on a typical day. Many individuals find commuting to be a source of extreme stress and frustration, and they bring this negative energy with them into the workplace.

Other key factors that create stress in the workplace include lack of resources or training, long work hours, job security, and excessive workloads. Any one of these challenges can transform the workplace into a highly stressful environment.

Work-related stress is the response that people may have when pre-

sented with work demands and pressures that do not match their knowledge and abilities, and that challenge their ability to cope.

According to the 2010 General Social Survey, 27 per cent of Canadian workers described their day-to-day lives as being highly stressful. In other words, nearly four million adult workers experience a high level of stress on a daily basis. Interestingly, the majority of these workers identified work as being the main source of their stress.

Employers are becoming painfully aware that they are losing productivity as a direct result of employee stress in the forms of absenteeism, reduced work output, and increased disability claims.

These issues are not unique to Canada and can be found in workplaces across the world. Some employers recognize work stress as a health and safety hazard, and take a proactive approach to these issues. For example, Sweden has legislation that requires work conditions to be adapted to an individual worker's physical and psychological circumstances. Workers also have the opportunity to participate in planning their work (UFCW Canada, 2015).

Although there is no legislation that acknowledges work stress as a health and safety hazard in Canada, employers are realizing that work-life balance and a rewarding career for employees are key ingredients to operating a successful business. Thankfully, employers are starting to proactively address the issue of stress in their companies.

### **3 Tools to Manage Stress in the Workplace**

When employees are given the proper tools to manage workplace stress, employers will see the benefits in their workplaces. It is fair to assume that every workplace comes with its own unique set of challenges. If we can agree that experiencing some form of stress is inevitable, then it is essential to plan accordingly and proactively.

While the tools presented below could certainly apply to all areas where stress is present, the following techniques may be used specifically in the workplace.

## **1. Identify the Stressor**

Situations that cause you to experience stress are referred to as stressors. As a counsellor and teacher, I am often told by others that they are stressed. Yet, when I ask them what exactly is causing them to experience stress, they have a difficult time identifying their stressor. Until you know the answer to this question, it is going to be difficult to move forward.

In order to manage your stressors, you must first identify the cause of your stress—and your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to it. Once you do this, you will be in a better position to manage your stress.

Take time to reflect on the following six questions:

1. What situations cause you to experience the most stress?
2. Who was present?
3. How did you feel?
4. How did you react?
5. What could you have done differently?
6. What level of control did you have over the situation?

Many areas of life are beyond our control, especially the behaviour of the people around us. Rather than exerting energy on what is around you, direct your attention back to yourself. How much control do you actually have over the current situation?

It is well known that it is not stress itself that causes problems, but rather your reaction to it. If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. To move forward, identify what you can do so the problem doesn't present itself again in the future. Often this involves changing the way you communicate with others.

## **2. Manage Your Time**

When I ask people to identify one thing they need more of, most people will respond with "time." If you are unable to manage your time, it is difficult to manage anything else.

Poor time management can certainly lead to an increase in stress. When you have too much on your plate and are running behind, it is difficult to remain calm and focused. If you take the time to create a plan, you are in a better position to manage your stress.

Below are four suggestions to make the most of your time:

1. Set realistic goals and deadlines.
2. Learn how to say “no.”
3. Only work on one project at a time.
4. Protect your time.

If you are anything like me, you may find it difficult to focus on the task at hand for any length of time. Research has revealed that modern workers are interrupted seven times per hour, and distracted up to 2.1 hours per day (Goudreau, 2013). Disruptions may include everything from a phone call or text message to an unexpected visitor.

To enhance your production and increase your chances of success, think about what you can do to control your environment. For example, you could close the door, turn off the phones, take a deep breath, and begin with your first priority.

You should be aware of what you can and cannot do with the time that you have. Avoid setting yourself up for disappointment by demanding perfection or filling your plate with more than you can manage. Act as your own advocate, and establish your boundaries so that you can best manage your time. If you have a deadline in one hour, communicate to those around you up front that you have a deadline and that you would appreciate not being disturbed for that time period. When you explain your situation in advance to those around you, most of the time your coworkers will respect your needs and save their comments or questions for when you're finished.

### *3. Just Relax*

When was the last time you allowed yourself a vacation? CBC News (2013) revealed that Canada ranks third last among economically ad-



vanced countries in the amount of paid vacation time it guarantees its workers. For the most part, Canada mandates 10 days of paid vacation for its workers per year of employment. France has the highest levels of paid vacation with 30 days. Meanwhile, the United States—where workers are not guaranteed any paid vacation time by law—came in last place.

BBC News (2015) discovered that 40 per cent of workers in the United States who *were* entitled to vacation days did not take all of these days. They said they were afraid they would not have a job to return to if they took time off.

It is essential to step back at some point and take time to recharge. If you regularly take the time to relax, you will be in a much better position to handle life's stressors when they appear.

For some individuals, the idea of relaxing means lying on the couch to watch TV or going for a drive. While these are possible ways to relax at home, these activities typically cannot be performed in the workplace. Additionally, these behaviours do very little to directly reduce any negative effects of stress.

Below are two simple and effective tools that can allow you to relax when under stress in the workplace:

1. Progressive muscle relaxation
2. Mindful breathing

Before initiating these activities in the workplace, do your best to minimize your distractions. This might mean closing your door or turning off any electronics that would interfere with your ability to focus. Loosen any clothing, kick off your shoes, and allow yourself to simply relax.

### Progressive Muscle Relaxation

In times of stress, our muscles become tense because the body is always on guard, ready to fight off any potential threat. Muscle tension can be associated with jaw pain, headaches, and various other aches and pains.

Progressive muscle relaxation involves both the tensing and relaxing of successive muscle groups.

Before engaging in this particular exercise, it is recommended that you consult with your doctor to ensure that you do not have a history of any injuries that could be aggravated by tensing muscles.

Below is a possible sequence of muscle groups:

- |                |               |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1. Right foot  | 7. Buttocks   |
| 2. Left foot   | 8. Abdomen    |
| 3. Right calf  | 9. Right hand |
| 4. Left calf   | 10. Left hand |
| 5. Right thigh | 11. Shoulders |
| 6. Left thigh  | 12. Face      |

Starting with number 1, contract the muscles in your right foot and hold for 7 to 10 seconds. Then, release and direct your attention to the sensation of your muscle as it relaxes. Next, bring your focus to the left foot, and repeat the same sequence. You can select whichever muscle groups you feel are most beneficial. People typically progress from the bottom of the body to the top.

When repeated over time, you will become familiar with what tension and relaxation feel like in different parts of your body. This awareness allows you to identify the first signs of stress, and respond proactively and accordingly. Once the body relaxes, the mind will soon follow.

### Mindful Breathing

When we are under stress, we often experience shortness of breath. This is one of the body's reactions to a perceived threat. Taking the time to "just breathe" will help minimize your body's fight or flight response, and bring you back into a state of balance. The act of breathing will physically force your body to slow down.

Mind-body practices like yoga, meditation, and deep breathing exercises can put the body into a physiological state of deep relaxation that alters the way it reacts to stress. This state can actually counter the nega-

tive effects of stress for people with health conditions such as anxiety or hypertension (Gregoire, 2013).

The way that people view meditation has changed over the years. It does not have to mean chanting a series of *oms* for 45 minutes. Rather, meditation is now seen as a way to center yourself while focusing on your breath.

Breathing is the number one way to reduce stress. In the workplace, you can simply take a step back from the task at hand, and breathe. Taking three deep breaths into the depths of your belly will help reduce your response to stress.

Breathe in through the nose while envisioning the air as white light entering your lungs and expanding throughout your entire body. Exhale through your mouth, and envision blowing out thick, black, toxic smoke. Try to imagine that this black smoke is all the stress leaving your body.

Breathing should be performed in a slow and controlled manner. It may feel unnatural to begin with, but with practice it will become easier and more natural. Inhale slowly for four seconds, hold for two seconds, then exhale slowly for another four seconds. Wait a few seconds before repeating the process. Ideally you should aim for six to eight cycles per minute, although this will depend on what you find to be the most comfortable.

Many people struggle to get the breath past the chest and into the abdomen. This is especially true for individuals who have endured various forms of trauma. For the best results, place one hand on your stomach, and take a deep breath, making sure that your hand rises with each one.

Again, the key is to breathe deeply into the abdomen. This will ensure that you get as much oxygen as possible. With the increase in oxygen, tension will dissipate and anxiety will decrease.

By taking the time to engage in breathing exercises, you can improve cognitive functioning, enhance creative thinking, and also increase productivity.

## How Do You Respond to A Colleague in Distress?

How do you respond when you observe someone who appears to be experiencing a significant amount of stress or pain?

My mental health issues began at the age of 17. My academic grades quickly slid downhill while I began to deviate from leadership roles. I went from taking immense pride in my physical and mental well-being, to being wildly intrigued by alcohol and cigarettes.

*What message do we get when nobody approaches us when we are in pain?*

Teachers observed these changes in me. They expressed their concerns to my parents, but not one teacher approached me. What is the message we get when nobody approaches us when we are in pain? That nobody cares. It can be difficult to care about ourselves if we feel that no one else cares about us. Did my teachers care? Yes! I know they did. But they did not know how to approach me.

### Scenario:

You have worked with Kim for years. Recently, she has been displaying some behaviours that are concerning to you. She will often arrive late, leave early, and take extended breaks. While she used to be well groomed, she now appears dishevelled and unkempt. Her moods are also unpredictable. One moment she is outgoing and friendly, while the next she is short-tempered and isolates herself.

It is evident that Kim's mind does not seem to be on her work. She makes mistakes while doing tasks she has performed for years. As a result, you are starting to feel unsafe around her. How do you respond?

If you do nothing, the following six outcomes can occur:

1. Kim's condition will worsen.
2. You and your co-workers will be forced to pick up the slack.
3. Team morale will decrease.
4. Productivity will decrease.
5. Company costs will increase.
6. Both your safety and the safety of others will be at stake.

When faced with the pain of others, people struggle with how to respond. The majority of us care, but many of us have no idea how to express our concern. As a result, we may sit idly by and never address the situation in a proactive way.

Silence speaks loudly, and these situations require a response. The reality is that there *is* no perfect response, and rarely can a response actually make the situation better. Nevertheless, sometimes just listening and sharing your appreciation that they took the time to talk with you is enough to validate their pain.

## **Big Ears**

I recall going through one particularly challenging time in my life. Realizing I could no longer manage the fight on my own, I found the courage to reach out to a good friend. I gave him a glimpse of my painful reality and then waited for his response. His eyes darted back and forth, he patted me on the shoulder three times, and then quickly said, “You are a good guy, Al, you will figure it out.” Then he ran like the wind, as though he couldn’t wait to escape his discomfort.

Clearly my pain made him uncomfortable and he was not sure how to respond. I firmly believe that nobody needs to be fixed, but the value of been seen and heard is immeasurable. Men in particular often have a desire to fix things when they believe that something requires attention. Personally, I don’t measure up to this stereotype. I know that cars have four tires and that is about the extent of my knowledge. However, I do still feel that innate need to fix situations around me. My good wife will often tell me, “Al, I don’t need you to fix me, I just need you to listen.”

When we see someone in pain, we can simply approach them and say something like, “I’m not trying to be nosy, but I just wanted to let you know that I’m concerned. If you ever need to talk, I’m here to listen.”

We all want to be seen and we all want to be heard. The simple statement above says, “I see you and I acknowledge your pain.” And your invitation to listen provides them with the potential to feel heard.

The individual may not accept your invitation immediately, but they may walk through your door days or even months later. If they do take

this step, it is essential that you drop what you are doing and actively listen. Recognize that this person just took a courageous step forward, and failure to acknowledge their courage could cause them to take two steps backwards.

I am convinced that everyone wants to express their pain, but many simply do not know how to do so. In an effort to keep their wall of defenses up, I have heard clients say, “You can’t possibly understand what I have gone through!”

If we respond with, “Oh yes, I can. I went through abuse, mental illness, divorce, etc.,” we are moving in the wrong direction. It is not about us, it is about *them*. Their last piece of the wall falls when we respond with four simple words: “Help me to understand.”

Just like that, you will see the person let their guard down, and the words will spill out. The moment they are able to release some of their darkness, healing will begin. From that point forward, all you need to do is listen.

The problem is that the act of listening is often easier said than done. Countless individuals lack the skill to listen. I mean really listen. As a child, I sat in countless classrooms and studied subjects such as math, science and history. But schools never offered a class on listening.

Our biggest challenge is that we often do not listen to understand, but rather to respond. For example, perhaps someone just shared with you the news that their loved one was recently diagnosed with cancer. Rather than listening, you begin to tell them that your mom also had cancer. While your intentions might be great, again remember that it is not about you, but rather them.

Think about some of your recent conversations. How much time did you spend talking? How much time did you spend listening?

*There is a distinct difference between listening and hearing.*

There is a distinct difference between *listening* and *hearing*. Listening takes energy. It requires actively paying attention to each word that the other person says while trying to understand the feelings that exist behind the words. Listening demonstrates that you are trying to understand the other’s experiences.

The act of listening is one of the greatest skills we can possess. When we listen, we are telling the other person that what they are saying is important. Feeling heard can actually enhance our overall sense of self-worth.

Listening is a skill, and when there is motivation to listen, it can certainly be taught. In the workplace, small gestures have the ability to influence the overall environment. More importantly, you have the ability to change someone's life.

## **The Value of Feeling Valued**

This desire to be valued is one of our basic needs, and the need to be valued guides our behaviours from an early age. Kids find out quickly what they have to do to feel valued. Perhaps that means receiving straight A's at school, excelling in extracurricular activities, or being an active member of the community.

I always enjoy the opportunity to hear my friend and respected leader, Val Desjarlais, share her wisdom. During one particular community event on her reserve, Val announced that in the past year she had placed star blankets on eight different coffins.

In Val's culture, a star blanket is presented to demonstrate great respect, honour, and admiration for that person. The presentation of a blanket is like wrapping the respect and admiration of everyone in the community around the person, both physically and spiritually.

Standing in front of her people, Val stated that she never wanted to see another star blanket on a coffin. She asked a very simple question, "Why would we not honour individuals while they are still alive?"

Too often, our society only recognizes people after they die. How often do you acknowledge the people around you? When was the last time you expressed your appreciation for someone, or thanked an individual for a job well done?

Think about how you feel when someone takes the time to send a compliment your way. When recognized for a task well done, we are empowered and motivated to do more.

In the workplace, if an employee feels valued, three outcomes will naturally occur:

1. The individual will feel empowered to work harder.
2. Team morale will be heightened.
3. There will be an overall increase in productivity.

When we have the power to make someone feel good about themselves and motivate them to perform to the best of their ability, why would we not take a few moments out of our day to do just that?

## **If You Don't Enjoy Your Job, Start Looking**

A significant amount of our lives is spent working. If your work is causing you so much stress that it takes away from your ability to enjoy life, then it might be a good idea to seek new employment.

I listened to one man struggle to find the words to express how much he dreaded walking through the doors of his workplace. After one particularly long day at the office, he walked out to the parking lot but could not find his car. He sat down in the middle of the parking lot, cried, and experienced his first meltdown. Thankfully, this served as the catalyst for him to seek alternate employment. Within a few weeks he began a new job filled with both passion and excitement.

Not everyone has the courage or ability to walk away from their job, even if it is a major source of stress. People can feel stuck and may not believe they can find happiness elsewhere. Financial reasons or fear of change may also play into their decision to remain.

My friend's sister, Laura, was approaching her 70th birthday, and was counting down her remaining days of work. Laura had less than two years before she could retire in order to receive a pension. She did not enjoy her job and experienced many moments of high stress. However, she took comfort knowing that she would be able to enjoy life and take time for herself in the near future.

One morning, while at work, Laura experienced chest pain. Concerned, she went to the hospital for further examination. The doctors



found some complications, and, sadly, two weeks later she passed away due to heart failure. Life is interesting—you just never know what tomorrow will bring. Sometimes the only way your body can make you slow down is to shut down.

I recall one occasion when I was driving home after a memorable speaking engagement. As I navigated my way through the beautiful prairie landscape, I listened to Dr. Wayne Dyer's audio book, *10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace*. One of his phrases stood out like black on white, and demanded my full attention.

Dyer said, "Whatever your passion is, I promise you can make a living doing it." It was in that moment that I decided I would make speaking the focus of my career. With four kids, a wife, a cat, two dogs, and a few tanks of fish, I could not jump in with both feet. However, with the support of my wife, I began to dedicate more time and effort on making this passion of mine a reality.

If you are passionate about your work, it does not seem like work. Dyer sold me on that simple but profound idea.

*“When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down ‘happy.’ They told me I didn’t understand the assignment, and I told them they didn’t understand life.”*

— JOHN LENNON

# 3

## ARE YOU HAPPY?

### Life Is Hard

I was speaking with a young man who shared with me that he had recently begun using illicit drugs. I asked him what he gained through this behaviour, and he told me that he found life to be incredibly challenging and that drugs allowed him to get through each day. After asking him what part of life he found challenging, he replied with three words: “All of it.”

I certainly do not dispute the fact that life is hard. While life’s challenges provide us with the opportunity to grow, many of us feel like we are being stretched too thin. Countless people are in pain, and many are uncertain how to manage it. Nonetheless, my personal and professional experiences have demonstrated that healing will never take place through the use of substances or self-injurious behaviours.

When faced with a particular challenge, it is easy to grow impatient. We often want what we want *now*. If we begin a project that is challenging in nature, we often wish that it were simply done already. When we are in pain, we often wish for the pain to pass. In the same way, while we are always ready for the reward, we are not always ready for the work.

*Lucky* is a documentary about the American lottery, and it follows some of the industry’s biggest winners. Not surprisingly, the majority

of the lottery winners drastically changed their lifestyles following their sudden financial wealth. While some bought private jets and fast cars, others bought mansions and large estates.

Meanwhile, one middle-aged man went against the grain. Six months after winning the lottery he made two purchases: diamond earrings for his wife and a modest Volvo. When questioned about his actions, he explained that when you are not wealthy, you can afford all these fantasies about what you would do if you won the lottery. However, after winning, he found that the desire for all of those things quickly disappeared. He no longer wanted a Lamborghini. This man realized very quickly that he enjoyed the possessions that he worked for the most. Not only did he work to own his house, but he also had no desire to move from the place where his kids had grown up.

Possessions handed to us on a platter do not hold the same value as something obtained through blood, sweat, and tears. Think about your first job. Remember when you received your first paycheck and you had the freedom to spend it as you saw fit? Perhaps you even put some of the money away into savings for a future purchase.

Envision a teenager who balances school with his first part-time job at a fast food restaurant. After more than two years, he is finally able to save enough money to purchase his first vehicle. Sure, the vehicle is pushing 20 years old and is peppered with noticeable rust spots. However, it is his first car, and he loves it. Why? Because he earned it, and he knew exactly what it took to get that car.

Now imagine a teenager who has just received the keys to a brand new car from his parents. This adolescent never had to flip a burger, mop any floors, or lift a finger to receive the car. The internal value of this vehicle simply cannot be compared to that of the other teenager who saved up his hard-earned cash from his first job.

In January 2016, a Powerball lottery jackpot reached a record 1.6 billion dollars. Millions of people purchased tickets in the hopes of winning big. One in five Americans believes that their best chance of getting rich is by winning the lottery, not through hard work. The actual odds

of winning that Powerball lottery were one in 292.2 million. The odds of being struck by lightning are one in 1.19 million. You do the math.

## Where Are You Going?

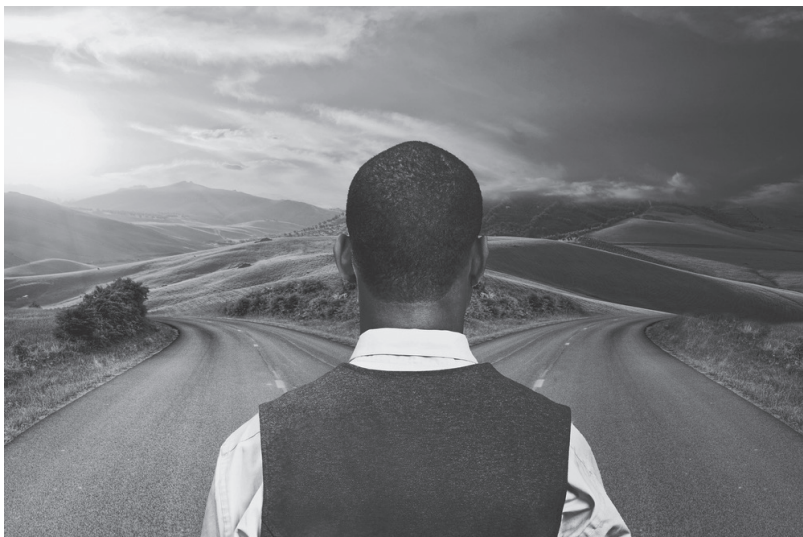
What do you want out of life?

If you don't know where you are going, how will you ever arrive at your destination? Without this insight, you can only accidentally stumble upon any successes.

If you find yourself lacking motivation, it has nothing to do with laziness. Rather, what you lack is a specific focus. The clearer you are about what you want, the more your brain knows exactly how to get there.

As a counsellor, I am well aware of the fact that I cannot force my clients to change unless they themselves have an internal desire to change. Sometimes all it takes to inspire and motivate yourself to want something better is to take a good look at where you are.

Look at the image below and put yourself in the shoes of the person standing at a fork in the road:



Now, without thinking, answer a simple *yes* or *no* to the following two questions:

1. Are you happy?
2. Are your behaviours getting you what you want out of life?

If you answered “yes” to both questions, you are on the correct path that will lead to a fulfilling and prosperous life. If your answer to either of these questions was “no,” then something has to change to reach your desired outcome.

In the same way that death is inevitable, so is change. We often fear change because of the way it makes us feel. While change causes us discomfort, it also provides the opportunity to grow.

Let’s suppose you responded “no” to one of the questions. The path to the right represents the current path you are on at this moment. If you change nothing, you will experience a level of comfort on this familiar path, but it will not provide you with true happiness.

Meanwhile, the path to the left represents the journey that awaits you following change. Making a conscious decision to change will force you to leave familiar patterns. Will you stumble? Will you fall? Yes. But you will also *grow*. More importantly, you will be closer to becoming the person you were meant to be.

## **Moving Through Change**

In the early stages of change, there will likely be moments when you have to “fake it until you make it.” To fight old behaviours you will need to rewire your brain, and the only way to create new connections is through real experience.

Imagine that a blizzard has left more than two feet of snow on the ground. Standing at the front door, you stare at your car parked on the street. You step outside, and as you walk toward your car, you create a path. Where do you think you will walk the next time you leave home?

The more you walk up and down that path, the more trampled it becomes, and the harder it will be to leave it. Should you ever decide to take a different path, it will require great effort to break through the snow and create a new one. And yet, the more you walk in this new direction, the more a new pathway will form.

For change to take place, you must first believe that change is possible. You must not only want to change, you must also be ready for it.

In the face of change, our minds can sometimes create a fear that is worse than reality. To combat this fear, ask yourself, “What is the worst thing that can happen?” Imagine it—walk through the middle of these fears. For example, if you have to give a speech, your greatest fear might be that your nerves will cause your knees to buckle, and you will end up rolling right off the stage. Whatever the case may be, ask yourself if you are able to deal with it. The majority of the time, you will discover that you have the strength to persevere through your worst-case scenario.

On the other hand, challenge your brain to think about the complete opposite outcome. Ask yourself, “What is the best thing that could happen?” You might be pleasantly surprised at how it unfolds. While giving that speech, your words might resonate with someone and restore some light to their time of darkness. That person might approach you later and applaud the courage it took for you to deliver your message.

And be realistic. Ask yourself, “What is most likely to happen?”

These three questions will allow you to regain control over the situation, and provide you with the strength to face the challenge in front of you head-on.

## **Changing from Within**

We all want to feel like we have the freedom to choose. In addition, we all need to experience a level of control.

I spent many years working at an in-patient treatment centre for people who were struggling with addictions. On several occasions, an adolescent expressed frustration and anger over the fact that their parents made them come to treatment.

I would always challenge this belief, and remind them that the choice was still theirs. I informed them that they could walk out the door at any moment. Sure, there might be consequences for that action from an outside source (such as a family member), but they still possessed the freedom to choose.

Like everyone else, they just want that feeling of power, and the sense

of being in control. Some clients would exercise the right to walk out the door. More often than not, a few minutes later there would be a knock at the door and they would return.

However, what was different was that they knew they could leave, and this gave them a renewed sense of control. The fact that they then stayed for themselves had a significant impact on their ability to learn and increased their potential for change.

Change is only real when someone acts on change themselves, for themselves. Many years ago I had the privilege of volunteering at a special care home. The property was home to serene grounds that provided residents the opportunity to be surrounded by nature. In the spring, boxes of soil arrived for those who were interested in gardening. This activity was an outlet that allowed them to connect with something outside of themselves while also enhancing their overall sense of purpose.

The idea of gardening intrigued Scott, one of the men I regularly visited. Scott had two boxes designated for him, and he took his time thinking about what he wanted to plant in each. After acquiring some seeds and small plants, it was time to begin. As we approached the boxes of soil, Scott asked if I would be willing to do the planting for him. He explained that it would be challenging for him, considering that he was in a wheelchair.

Sure, I could have performed those tasks for Scott. However, this was his project. If I planted them, it would have taken away from his experience, and there would be less motivation for him to return to care for the plants daily. The act of doing it himself would create internal pride, and allow for a future sense of accomplishment. It was Scott who needed to dig the holes, plant the seeds, and water the plants. Scott was more than capable of doing these tasks. He just needed some encouragement.

Some of my clients always ask for various forms of assistance. Perhaps they need to schedule an appointment with another professional. It would be easy for me to make the call for them, but then there is no opportunity for them to take control and experience a sense of pride in their accomplishments. Doing something for someone who is capable of doing it on their own sends the message that we don't believe they are

strong enough to do it. While we can open doors for those around us, we certainly don't need to hold their hand and walk through the door with them.

In the same way, I believe that everyone possesses the ability to answer their own questions. The right questions just need to be asked. When we think for ourselves and solve our own problems, we become empowered.

*The moment you take ownership and responsibility for your life, you regain control.*

The moment you take ownership and responsibility for your own life, you regain control. This is your life, and nobody else's. There will always be people who will try to impede you on your journey, and challenge your ability to evolve and grow. Perhaps they will attempt to force their beliefs on you, believing that they know what is best for you.

On numerous occasions, I have spoken with a parent who will say something like, "My child is making all the wrong choices!" But who is to differentiate between right and wrong? The decisions that the child is making might be right for what they are supposed to learn at that very moment in their life.

Sometimes, people want to intervene on behalf of those who they believe are making poor decisions. While there is a time and place for this, I believe that each person ultimately needs to find their own way.

## **Failing to Succeed**

Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon.com, took a unique approach when he launched his delivery service, AmazonFresh. Rather than choosing people who had experienced success in a similar business, he hired individuals who had failed.

Bezos believed that these people brought something to the table that was worth much more than high grades, awards, and an impressive resumé: they brought invaluable insight gained in overcoming their recent challenges. These individuals thought outside the box and were willing to take risks without letting the fear of failure stand in their way. They never perceived failure as a negative but rather asked themselves what



they could learn from that particular experience. Bezos's approach paid off, and his business has become extremely successful in recent years.

Failure is inevitable; it is a natural part of our lives. But our perception of failure will determine the way we handle it.

Gloria, a former student, stared failure in the face more than most while she pursued her dreams of post-secondary education. Between 1980 and 2004, she enrolled and dropped out of university a staggering 15 times. It was not a lack of effort on her part, but she was simply unable to complete a program.

It was not until 2001 that an Aboriginal support worker approached Gloria to explore why she was unable to achieve academic success. After convincing her to get an assessment, it became evident that Gloria had a learning disability. While this insight provided an explanation for her challenges, she was still unable to complete a program. After 15 years of university, Gloria walked away with only two years of credits.

In 2013, Gloria entered my classroom, determined to be an addictions counsellor. She took advantage of the various resources available and fought her way through the program. At the age of 55, Gloria marched triumphantly across the stage and received her diploma. Her strong skill set immediately led to employment as a case manager. Today, she empowers others to dig deep and persevere through their own personal challenges.

Failure is subjective in nature. Only you have the power to decide whether something is viewed as a failure. While the educational institutions and instructors labelled Gloria a failure, she understood that she was anything but. She never let herself be defined by her failures and never gave up.

In Greek mythology, Achilles' mother dipped him into a magical river to make her son invincible. But because she held Achilles by the heel, it prevented the powerful water from protecting this small area, and it was the only part of his body that remained vulnerable.

As Achilles grew into adulthood, he was feared by many. He possessed skills of courage, bravery, honour, and strength. He was a skilled

fighter who became a great hero of the Trojan War. He was only killed when an arrow penetrated his heel.

Like this Greek warrior, we all possess an Achilles' heel. This is what keeps us vulnerable, humble, and essentially human. Everyone carries different fears, which often remain hidden. There are those who are challenged by greed, anxiety, or various forms of mental health problems. Diseases such as cancer can present themselves to prove that life is indeed fragile.

Our Achilles' heel can serve as a good reminder that we are vulnerable, and it is this vulnerability that helps keep us grounded. Rather than seeing it as a weakness, though, we can turn it into a strength. Once we identify our areas of vulnerability, we possess a greater awareness of ourselves.

Only a small portion of our growth comes from our successes; most of our growth stems from our failures. Instead of teaching people how to succeed, perhaps we need to do a better job of teaching people how to fail. Furthermore, we need to get rid of the word *failure* altogether, and simply call it *experience*.