

## **Stress Level ‘Tilt’: 5 Effective Ways to Prevent It**

by Steven Faerm



Between Donald Trump’s hysterics in the press, worry about personal finances, and the fifty texts and emails you received in the past thirty minutes, you’re likely feeling stressed out of your mind these days — and you’re not alone. It seems everyone, from designer to student, is trying to stay grounded in this hyper-accelerated world. We multitask while struggling to remain focused and present, and never get a moment to feel “unplugged.” Stress levels are reaching all-time highs in both the design room and classroom, and it’s requiring us to take a proactive approach to take steps to prevent self-implosion.

### **The Workplace Grind**

Today’s world is fragmented, filled with sound bites, texts, and tweets that bombard our limited time and attention spans. We’re left feeling like we can never “turn off” and can’t escape the “noise.” This overload of information demands our attention at nearly every waking minute and is resulting in a national epidemic of excessive stress levels and anxiety. According to a recent survey led by the American Psychological Association (APA), our stress levels rose from 4.9 in 2014 to 5.1 on a 10-point scale (Welch, 2016). What’s more, there’s been a notable increase in the number of adults who experience “extreme stress,” with 24 percent reporting they were highly stressed last year, compared with 18 percent the year before (Welch, 2016).

What are the causes of this spike? Consider just one cause in the U.S. that affects virtually everyone no matter their age, career, or location: electronic messaging. The sheer volume of emails experienced on a daily basis, coupled with text messages to mobile devices that ‘ping’ and demand our immediate attention, make us feel forever “on” and compelled to respond no matter where we are, what time of day it is, or who’s in our company. Research performed at University of California, Irvine, reveals the average worker checks their email 74 times a day (Evans, 2014). That’s nearly nine times an hour in a typical eight-hour workday. In 2012, the typical business user sent and received about 110 messages daily, and by 2018 that number is expected to increase by over twenty percent to 140 (Radicati, 2011; Radicati, 2014).

Our inability to “turn-off” run much deeper, as shown in a recent survey commissioned by Adobe Systems Inc. (Orlofsky, 2016). The online survey, comprised of 400 U.S. white-collar workers, found that:

- Nearly eighty percent of respondents said they look at emails before going into the office;
- Forty-five percent of 18-34 year olds open emails upon waking up;
- An average of 6.3 hours is spent each workday checking emails;
- Eighty-seven percent looked at business emails outside of working hours;
- Half of the respondents monitored emails during their vacations.

We’re so plugged in 24/7 that, as Kristin Naragon of Adobe Systems Inc. states, “half [of all millennials] can’t even use the bathroom without checking their email.”

One reason why we aren’t unplugging and continue to contribute to these growing statistics is because multitasking is the expected, normative behavior at both workplace and home. Most of us believe that by taking on more tasks at once, we’ll get more done, perform better, and ultimately gain more free-time.

Yet research has shown that our brains are not nearly as good at handling multitasking as we’d like to think; multitasking can actually *reduce* productivity by as much as 40 percent (Cherry, 2016). Furthermore, in one study conducted by Clifford Nass of Stanford University, it was discovered that heavy multitaskers were actually worse at sorting out relevant information from irrelevant details, and switching from one task to another was exceedingly difficult (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009). These findings confirm multitasking diminishes our abilities to stay mentally organized, focused, productive, and mindful. Inevitably, this spikes our stress levels as we try to keep up while doing more and more.

## **The University**

Since I began teaching eighteen years ago at Parsons School of Design, I’ve become increasingly concerned over my students’ rising stress levels. Typically, undergraduates undergo radical transformations within four short years. They remain connected to their parents and other supportive networks before graduating as fully independent (and hopefully financially autonomous) adults. The transition can be volatile and filled with uncertainty as young adults grapple with emotional and physical maturation, increasing independence and self-reliance, and the formation of their own identities.

The stress experienced during this routine development is exponentially compounded by factors that seem unimaginable to people who graduated over a decade ago. Today’s undergraduates are forced to operate in a world that is infinitely more complex, competitive, and arduous than it was ten years ago. For example, tuition costs alone have risen over 1,200 percent in just thirty-eight years (Jamrisko & Kolet, 2014). To pay such exorbitant fees, student loan debt has reached an all-time high, with the average undergrad owing \$35,000 U.S. dollars upon graduation, thus contributing to the \$1.3 billion U.S. dollars in national student loan debt (Sparshott, 2015; Kane, 2016). Among my own students, I’ve witnessed an increasing amount who are required to work longer hours at their part-time job, and even some who work full-time while *enrolled* full-time.

Rising stress levels—and the subsequent impact on mental health—are alarming many universities. For example, research performed at the University of California, Los Angeles revealed the emotional health of the incoming students was at its lowest point in 30 years (Eagan et al., 2014). At Boston University, the number of students seeking services for stress related issues increased sharply by 40 percent from 647 in the 2014-2015 academic year to 906 last year (Brown, 2016).

It isn't just mental health that's affected by excessive stress. Stress can cause physical symptoms such as frequent sickness, increased blood pressure, irregular shaking or twitching, muscle aches, nausea, headaches, and chest pain. Cognitive symptoms include reduced concentration, memory loss, impaired judgement and speech, chronic worrying, anxiety, and even depression. Behavioral symptoms such as poor work performance, changes in eating habits, irregular sleep patterns, abnormal failures or delays in responsibilities, and argumentative behavior can also occur due to excessive stress.

### **Relief in Sight**

As we struggle to manage our increasing (and seemingly unavoidable) stress levels, a proactive approach to reducing them is more critical than ever before. Fortunately, there are techniques recently developed in education that can help. Leading institutions, from the University of Michigan to Bryn Mawr College, are adopting pedagogy that targets students' rising stress levels and inability to focus. Dubbed "Contemplative Pedagogy," these simple yet highly effective methods strengthen learning by increasing "mindfulness," and equip students with a greater ability to be present within the classroom and beyond.

Although these techniques have been developed for the college classroom, they can be easily adopted at the workplace for improving general work performance and to reduce stress. Use them before important presentations or meetings, throughout the work-week grind, in preparation for important interviews, or whenever you need to refocus and feel centered. They include:

- **Journaling**

The moment you arrive into work, sit down and take a series of slow, deep breaths for 3 minutes. Allow your body to relax, close your eyes, and feel the gentle pull of gravity on your body. This process will help center you. Once you're centered, spend five minutes jotting down whatever is on your mind. What happened during your commute? What was said last night between you and your partner? How are you feeling about your upcoming meeting? The goal is to empty your mind of these stressors by releasing them onto paper. By emptying your mind of these worries and *seeing* your stress on paper, you'll more fully understand what really matters and where you are emotionally. Most importantly, journaling visualizes your stress rather than keeping it as an abstract, fearful concept. This can greatly diminish stress' hold on you. After all, a mind full of abstract ideas wastes emotional energy trying to organize them throughout the day, and this creates unnecessary distraction, confusion, and...stress.

- **The Rules of Email**

Perhaps the single most practical and effective way to reduce stress, remain focused, and optimize your workday is to set guidelines on when you address emails. During the workday, many experts recommend checking emails just three times: once when you arrive at work, another

during mid-day, and a final check before leaving for the day. Similarly, turn off all email notifications when you leave the office and throughout the weekend, unless it's absolutely critical. Setting strict guidelines for personal time is essential for "recharging" and for fully connecting with those around you—and with life itself.

- **5-Minute Power-Lunch Meditation**

Though seemingly outlandish, this exercise is one of the most effective to develop a more focused, mindful, and less stressed self. In a quiet space, silently contemplate a single raisin (or other fruit) for a full five minutes. Hold one in your hand and look at it. What do you notice? Then, take a closer look to see, touch, and smell the unique form, texture, and aroma. Form your ideas slowly and gradually. Finally, taste, chew, and swallow the raisin. Focus on this one simple act, moment-by-moment. The greater attention you give, the more your focus will strengthen over time for a deeper self-awareness and improved work performance. This exercise, when performed with regularity, allows you to become more accustomed to slowing down and focusing on details, thereby elevating your quality of life while decreasing your stress.

- **Stronger Focus Through "Beholding"**

Stand in front of an artwork, an office plant, or anything else that is visually calming and appealing for you. Look at it directly, confront it "face-to-face," if possible, hold it in your hand and try to really gauge and feel its grand scale or be drawn into the intimacy of its smallness. Pay attention to every detail and let your eyes "caress" the shape and surface. What do you notice as you linger with the object? What moves you? Beholding works in direct contrast to our usual two-second walk-by experience that characterizes our days. Beholding asks you to dissect and analyze what you're seeing. It creates a deeper form of encounter while teaching the skills of mindfulness and focus in our multi-tasking, distracted, stressed-out world.

Another form of this exercise asks you to look at a familiar place or person as if it were the very first time. Mindfully note every detail you see so that your consciousness, attention span, and ability to focus on one element strengthens. Paired with journaling, this can be an intense and powerful exercise.

- **Silent Sittings Before and After Work**

Gurleen Grenwal, professor of women's studies and teacher of mindfulness in the University of South Florida describes this practice well. She states:

"In each class we have silent sittings, quieting the mind via the breath, with basic instructions to observe the flow of thoughts/reactions from a nonjudgmental space - a practice crucial in developing acceptance, tolerance, and compassion for oneself and others. I like to begin class with five to ten minutes of mindfulness that very gradually increases as the semester proceeds" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

To perform this meditation, simply sit in your chair with your spine erect and your body relaxed. Close your eyes. Using a gong or similar sound – which can easily be found through various phone apps – follow the ebbing of the sound as it dies out into a

prolonged silence. As you rest in that silence, thoughts may enter your mind. Simply observe them, along with any bodily sensations that occur. If your mind returns to distracting thoughts, deliberately and mindfully focus on your breath and let go of the thoughts, as if they were clouds floating by on a sunny day. Your slow, deep breathing is your anchor during the period of silent rest. The meditation ends when your breathing and heart rate are decreased, and your body feels fully relaxed. Once you reach that state, open your eyes slowly, and take one final deep inhale and exhale.

## **Proven Benefits, Better Living**

Whether it's in the workplace or classroom, meditation focuses attention, diminishes stress and anxiety, improves mental and physical health, strengthens memory, increases creativity, and elevates one's quality of life. These, in turn, can help elevate the quality of your work. As Haynes (2005) notes, when people perform such exercises, "...they develop new techniques of awareness; they learn to refine their perceptual and observational skills; and they are encouraged to take chances and to foster attitudes such as curiosity and wonder rather than cynicism about the world in which we live" (p. 2).

In our hyper-accelerated and all-consuming world of endless multitasking, fragmented attention, and inability to "turn-off" (even while on vacation), we must relearn *how* to slow down and become more present. In doing so, we'll each have a significantly better quality of life, feel more connected with those around us, and gain a deeper understanding for what truly matters most in our lives.

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