



the supplement
FACILITATING VITALITY

JUNE 2019 KAROSHI

I recently received a *Wall Street Journal* article from a long-time friend and former public accounting colleague. The article, “The Most Anxious Generation Goes to Work,” by Sue Shellenbarger, reports that our former firm was deeply concerned about the mental health of their new hires. My friend’s annotation read “I don’t remember anyone being concerned about our mental health!” Well, neither do I. Fortunately, we both landed softly and sanely in our professions. Mental health is, however, getting a lot of media attention particularly as it relates to workplace stress and anxiety.

The article led me to various cited references including the 2018 edition of the American Psychological Association’s (APA) annual *Stress in America* survey, and several books including *Burnout*, the secret to unlocking the stress cycle, by Emily and Amelia Nagoski, *Back to Human*, by Dan Schawbel, and *Dying for a Paycheck*, by Jeffrey Pfeffer. I finished the first two. I shared the second one with everyone I thought might find it interesting. Halfway through the last two, I started to go through the five stages of grief. The good news is that each resource led me back to why I got into the wellness world in the first place. Yes, work is stressful across multiple dimensions. And taken to the nth degree it can end up in *Karoshi*-- the Japanese word for death from overwork—a condition not limited to Japan and estimated to claim the lives of 150,000 Americans annually. But workplace stress doesn’t have to lead to mental (or physical for that matter) illness. What I am not going to do is describe all of the reasons why work is stressful and can result in anxiety and depression or even death. What I am going to do is give you permission to build up your stress reserves by getting back to some basics.

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The stress response is a very primitive physical adaptation to perceived danger. The triggering circumstance can be different for everyone, but the body responds with a hormonal cascade that is invariant in each of us. Whether we perceive our situation to be stressful or not is determined by our “milieu interieur” or internal state. Maintaining a stress-resilient internal state requires intentional vigilance to some very basic and too often overlooked behaviors such as breathing, moving, eating and sleeping.



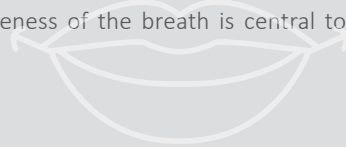


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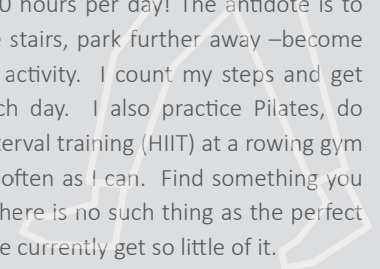
BREATHING

When the stress response is triggered, breathing becomes more shallow and rapid. The body is moving as much oxygen as possible out of the lungs and into the arms and legs to fuel the flight from or wage the fight against the perceived danger. The antidote is to take a deep breath – take several and build them into your daily routine. I take three deep breaths whenever I am at a stop light. If you would like a more formal practice, try a mindfulness/meditation app such as Headspace or sign up for a yoga class. Awareness of the breath is central to each practice.



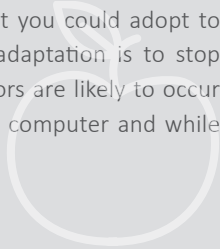
MOVING

For years, the stress response was called the “fight or flight” response. The response readied the body for activity by rushing blood out to the arms and legs to fuel it. As we have increasingly automated the work world, we have engineered physical movement out of our day-to-day lives. By some counts Americans sit on average 10 hours per day! The antidote is to move – take the stairs, park further away –become intentional with activity. I count my steps and get over 10,000 each day. I also practice Pilates, do high intensity interval training (HIIT) at a rowing gym and play golf as often as I can. Find something you like and do it. There is no such thing as the perfect exercise when we currently get so little of it.



EATING

One of the easiest ways to change your internal state is to eat something—particularly something sweet. It sends a rush of dopamine (reward) to the alarmed brain. With most of the blood out in the arms and legs, the digestive system has been shunted to the back burner. Whatever you eat under stress has little opportunity to provide energy or nourishment. The number one practice that you could adopt to combat this stew-and-chew adaptation is to stop eating in places where stressors are likely to occur – in front of the television or computer and while driving a car.



SLEEPING

Ariana Huffington, a self-proclaimed sleep evangelist, learned the importance of sleep the hard way-by not getting enough. Insomnia can be a sign or a cause of stress. Think about the quality of your decisions when you are ragged from a lack of sleep. Do you make sensible food choices? Do you hit the gym? How is your mood? Are you particularly patient? No one knows why sleep is so important, but 7-8 hours over a 24-hour cycle appears to be the sweet spot. Protect your sleep for stress resilience.



So yes, the workplace is a hotbed of stressors. And yes, unrelenting stress can lead to mental and physical illness and even death. What are you willing to do to create or maintain a stress-resilient “milieu interieur”? I am going to take a nap.



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Patricia M. Fuller has dedicated the last 20 years to designing and delivering wellness programs. Her events earn consistently excellent ratings for her holistic approach and her real world application.

Prior to concentrating in wellness, Pat taught accounting and auditing as an adjunct professor at the University of Tampa. She earned her CPA designation in 1992 as a senior associate for Coopers & Lybrand. She has a Masters in Business Administration from the University of Utah.

Pat has a PhD in holistic nutrition. In 2010, she was board certified by the Holistic Nutrition Credentialing Board. Her areas of research include stress management and eating habits. She is a Certified Wellcoach and a member of the Institute of Coaching. She is an annual attendee to The Harvard Medical School Conference, Coaching In Leadership & Healthcare.

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