

How to turn everyday stress into ‘optimal stress’

Managed well, stress can be an ally rather than an enemy. Here’s how to use it to your advantage.

by Jan Ascher and Fleur Tonies

Peter is stressed out. He’d hoped a vacation would be the reset he needed, giving him a productive head of steam to fight through the growing sense of frustration, anxiety, and restlessness he’d been feeling as the pandemic wore on. But it isn’t working out that way.

Prior to COVID-19, Peter was to all appearances a successful bank executive, a self-professed “numbers guy” who coped well with stress and tackled setbacks with a “see it, solve it” attitude. But now, he can hardly get a night’s sleep. He’s exercising less and gaining weight, and sometimes his heart races for no obvious reason. He’s having trouble staying on task, gets irritable with colleagues, and finds himself working longer hours despite a commute that’s just a dozen steps to the dining room. Quicker to anger with his spouse, he’s struggling to juggle the needs of their careers with the care of their young daughter, who still hasn’t adjusted to kindergarten on a laptop screen. While these might also be symptoms of depression and anxiety, Peter’s doctor informs him that he’s most likely experiencing burnout.

Peter is a composite of several executives we know,¹ but he stands out in that he’s seeking help. Many of us are experiencing levels of stress that are overwhelming the coping strategies that worked in the past, but not fully recognizing it. By losing our ability to manage stress, not knowing when to seek help—or both—we’re putting our health, personal relationships, and professional success at risk.

At the core of this challenge for many people is a misguided view of stress itself, which contributes to our inability to recognize and manage it. Many executives view stress as an unalloyed negative, something to fight through or minimize.² As a result, they may manage it ineffectively.

¹ Some of the things Peter is experiencing could be signs or symptoms of a behavioral-health condition, which can sometimes be brought on and exacerbated by chronic stress. In a situation like this one, Peter might benefit from clinical advice that is beyond the scope of this article. While the approaches and tips in this article are proven useful to help manage stress, they should never be considered substitutes for professional medical care and attention.

² See Modupe Akinola, Alia J. Crum, and Jeremy P. Jamieson, “Optimizing stress: An integrated Intervention for Regulating Stress Responses,” *Emotion*, February 2020, Volume 20, Number 1, pp. 120–25, psycnet.apa.org.

In fact, stress serves a natural, physiological purpose that can help us solve important problems and learn and grow from our experiences. Instead of trying to eliminate or tamp down stress, we should try to understand it and optimize it, minimizing the downsides while capturing the upsides.³ No meaningful life is stress-free. But, managed correctly, stress can be an engine of personal growth and peak performance.⁴ In this article, we'll help you better understand stress and reframe how you manage it for yourself and the colleagues you lead and work with.

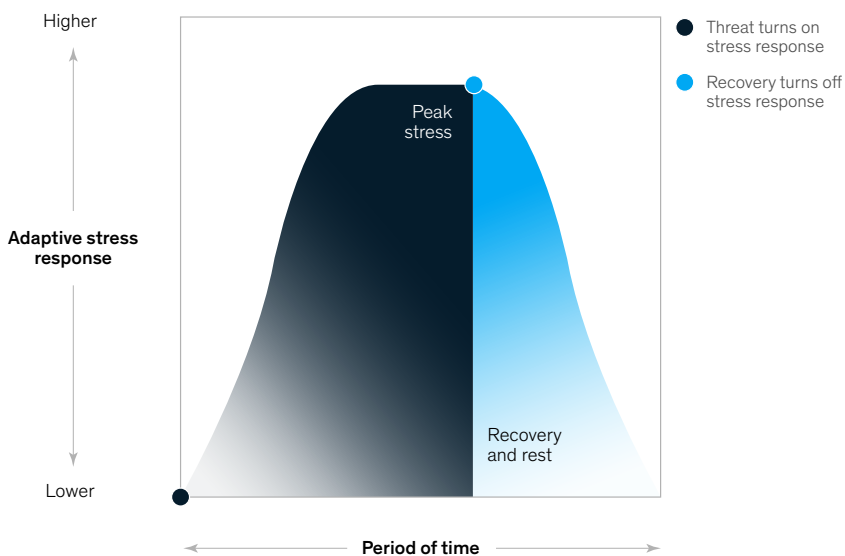
Understanding stress

Here's a medical fact: there is nothing inherently negative about the physiological side of stress. It is a hormonal jolt of adrenaline and cortisol brought on by our sympathetic nervous system that gives us a boost of physical energy and mental focus to confront an actual or perceived threat. In a normal stress response, when the threat passes, the heightened state is followed by calming effects of our parasympathetic nervous system, a natural brake returning us to a state of recovery and rest. Our body and mind calm, we restore our resources, and we prepare for the next challenge (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1

In a normal stress response, the heightened state is followed by calming effects, returning us to a state of recovery and rest.

What stress and recovery should look like



Source: Bruce S. McEwen, "Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators," *New England Journal of Medicine*, January 15, 1998, Volume 338, Number 3, pp. 171–79

³The study of stress owes a debt to the late Bruce McEwen, a neuroscientist at Rockefeller University. McEwen coined the concepts of "optimal stress" and its antecedent, "allostatic load," which refers to "the wear and tear on the body" that accumulates if individuals are exposed to repeated or chronic stress. See, for example, Bruce S. McEwen, "Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators," *New England Journal of Medicine*, January 15, 1998, Volume 338, Number 3, pp. 171–79, nejm.org.

⁴See Shawn Achor, Alia J. Crum, and Peter Salovey, "Rethinking stress: The role of mindsets in determining the stress response," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, April 2013, Volume 104, Number 4, pp. 716–33, psycnet.apa.org.

Too often, however, we don't calm down but continue to experience stressors without the restorative effects of a normal stress response. This can lead to chronic stress, which is associated with mood swings, reduced empathy and impulse control, and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, and other ailments (Exhibit 2).

Chronic stress also opens the door to burnout at work⁵—a toxic mix of exhaustion, reduced professional efficacy, and increased cynicism about work that research from Gallup suggests affects about two-thirds of full-time workers at any given time.⁶ The pandemic has only increased the likelihood of burnout, along with a number of other concerning challenges to our behavioral health such as depression, anxiety, and substance use.





When managed well, however, stress can be a path to personal growth. To turn stress into an opportunity for growth is to find your optimal stress point. The key is *understanding* our own stress so that we can better harness our body's normal stress response, rather than only being subservient to it. Through practice, we can learn to move deliberately between an *engaged state*, where we're energized, focused, creative, and productive, and a *recovery state*, where our brain processes events, learns, and recuperates.

The process is analogous to the concept of supercompensation in physical training.⁷ When we exercise, we break down muscle tissue and add strain on the body. Muscle strengthening happens later, during recovery. By moving progressively between the two states, we can reach levels of physical performance far beyond our starting point (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 2

When we don't properly recover after a stressful episode, we continue to absorb stress unconsciously, which can result in chronic stress.

Warning signs of chronic stress

			
Physical	Behavioral	Emotional	Cognitive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headache • Stomachache • Muscle tightness • Elevated heart rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bossiness/arguing • Increased alcohol/substance use • Compulsive eating/smoking • Shouting/crying/withdrawal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiousness • Boredom • Edginess • Powerlessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not thinking clearly • Forgetfulness • Indecision • Inability to focus

Note: Chronic stress can lead to burnout, which the World Health Organization classified, in 2019, as an occupational phenomenon characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy.
Source: Alexander Caillet, Jeremy Hirshberg, and Stefano Petti, "A simple way to combat chronic stress," *Harvard Business Review*, April 15, 2016, hbr.org.; World Health Organization


⁵ Burnout has organizational roots that are well worth considering. For more, see Jennifer Moss, "Beyond burned out," *Harvard Business Review*, February 10, 2021, hbr.org.

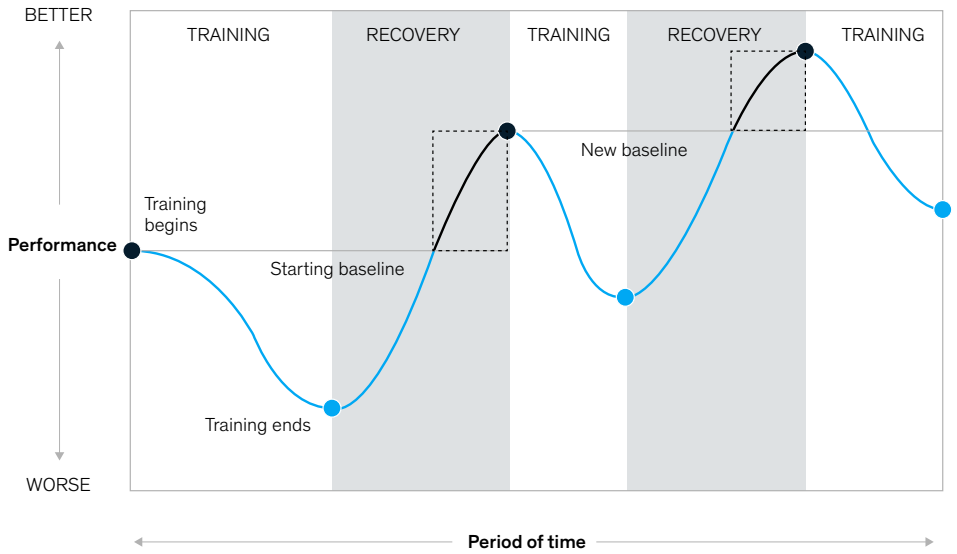
⁶ Sangeeta Agrawal and Ben Wigert, "Employee burnout, part 1: The 5 main causes," Gallup, July 12, 2018, gallup.com.

⁷ Supercompensation was first identified (1949–59) by the Russian scientist Nikolai N. Yakovlev, who is considered among the founders of contemporary exercise biochemistry. For more, see Atko Viru, "Early contributions of Russian stress and exercise physiologists," *Journal of Applied Physiology*, April 2002, Volume 92, Number 4, pp. 1378–82, journals.physiology.org.

Supercompensation in sports can be a useful analogy for stress and performance recovery.

How supercompensation works

 Supercompensation



Source: Adapted from Nikolai N. Yakovlev, *Sports biochemistry*, Leipzig: Deutsche Hochschule für Körperkultur (German Institute for Physical Culture), 1967

Start managing your stress effectively

The analogy between sports and stress helps illuminate a big challenge in managing stress: poor self-awareness. At the gym, for example, we're acutely aware of when we're straining muscles or resting them (the two phases of supercompensation). And when we consciously add new, varied exercises (behaviors) to our workout, we become stronger and more flexible over time.

The same should be true for managing stress. Yet at any given time, we're unaware of which stress state we're in (engagement or recovery), let alone consciously seeking behavior changes that would improve the efficacy of either state. Managing stress, therefore, starts with self-awareness.⁸

Locate and describe your stress

People share a common physiological response to stress, but the stress you experience is also uniquely yours. What triggers a stress response in one person may hardly register with another. Some people feel stressed and become aggressive, while others withdraw. Likewise, our methods of recovery are also unique—riding a bike, for instance, versus reading a book.

⁸ Executives can also benefit from learning “deliberate calm,” or the ability to detach from a fraught situation and think clearly about how to navigate it. For more, see Jacqueline Brassey and Michiel Kruyt, “How to demonstrate calm and optimism in a crisis,” April 2020, McKinsey.com; and *McKinsey Organization Blog*, “Zoning in and out of stress,” blog entry by Jacqueline Brassey, Aaron De Smet, and Michiel Kruyt, November 30, 2020, McKinsey.com.

Executives, however, aren't usually aware of their stress-related patterns and idiosyncrasies and often don't realize the extent of the stress burden they are already carrying. Leadership stereotypes don't help with this. It's no surprise that we can't articulate how stress affects us when we equate success with pushing boundaries to excess, fighting through problems, and never admitting weakness. Many people we know can speak in detail about a favorite vacation but get tongue-tied when asked what interactions consistently trigger stress for them, or what time of day they feel most energized.

To reach optimal stress, we need to be conscious of our stress; in neurological terms, it's the first step toward lasting behavior change. As the psychiatrist and author Daniel Siegel writes, "Where attention goes, neural firing flows and neural connection grows."⁹ And it is these newly grown neurological pathways that define our behavior and result in new habits.

But what does it mean to be aware of your own stress? The following questions are replete with details that a stress-aware executive can speak to. How well can you?

- In a typical week, how often do you feel well rested? How often during the workday do you seek moments of recovery versus "powering through"?
- In a typical week, how often do you feel fully engrossed in your work or in a state of "flow"?¹⁰ How long do these periods last? What time of day or night do they occur?
- Think of a recent time when you were surprised by something stressful at work. How did you react? In what ways did you focus on resources to help manage the stress? In what ways did you struggle? What would you do differently next time?
- What are the biggest sources of stress in your life? In what circumstances does stress from one aspect of your life surface in another?
- How do you cope with stress? Do your coping mechanisms deplete your energy or restore it? Do they help build awareness around your stress or reduce it?
- How often do you recognize your stress in the moment versus afterward, or in the reactions of others?
- How many warning signs of chronic stress have you experienced this week? (Refer back to Exhibit 2.)

These are questions you can revisit periodically as you build self-awareness. Locating and describing your stress is a process of discovery, and the more you learn the better you will harness your own stress response. Journaling can also help you gain insights into how your body reacts to different activities—with a stress response or a recovery response—as can periodically measuring your heart-rate variability.¹¹

⁹ For more, see Daniel J. Siegel, *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.

¹⁰ For more, see Susie Cranston and Scott Keller, "Increasing the 'meaning quotient' of work," *McKinsey Quarterly*, January 2013, McKinsey.com.

¹¹ For example, see Marcelo Campos, "Heart rate variability: A new way to track well-being," Harvard Health Publishing, November 22, 2017, health.harvard.edu. To learn more about the link between low heart-rate variability and burnout, see Magdalena K. Wekenborg et al., "The longitudinal association of reduced vagal tone with burnout," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, November/December 2019, Volume 81, Number 9, pp. 791–98, journals.lww.com.

Additional tactics can help improve your engagement and recovery, as well as your ability to switch between these states more deliberately. Let's look at each in turn.

Create space for engagement and focus

Many of us are overworked, overstressed, and exhausted—making focus hard to maintain. And with the switch to remote working for many employers because of the pandemic, the resulting work-from-home arrangements aren't helping: slumped over the kitchen table from morning to evening, toggling from one videoconference to the next, distracted by emails and direct messaging, working with one eye and, in some cases, watching the kids or helping out spouses with the other. We think we are “multitasking,” but instead we're creating perfect conditions for cognitive overload.

Forming new habits can help turn the tables on stress. Consider the following tips, drawn from our experience working with senior executives and teams. All of them are equally effective whether you're working from home or in the office.

- ***Block time for deep work.*** Reserve one to three hours in your calendar each day for focused time. Turn off emails and chats and put your phone in a drawer so that you can hunker down to work in peace. Google CEO Sundar Pichai schedules time in his calendar to read, think, and create space for himself.¹²
- ***Reduce distractions.*** Turn off the mail notifications on your phone, set time restrictions for selected apps, and try switching your phone's screen to a black-and-white background to reduce on-screen stimuli—and temptation.
- ***Take a break from video.*** Videoconferences have many advantages, but they can be distracting and draining. The need to pick up on nonverbal cues, prolonged eye contact, and multiperson gallery views can feel like constant multitasking. Mix up your formats to learn your preferences: try shutting off your own video from time to time so that you can focus only on the spoken words.

Create conditions for rest and recovery

During a focused state of stress, you should be anticipating your recovery, the second mental state to master. Many people may have taken recovery for granted before the pandemic. Why? Think of all the built-in pauses we had: our commute, the wait in the elevator, the brief chat at the coffee machine, even the check-in process at the airport. All of these offered breaks for cognitive recovery. Now, we must consciously replace the old pauses while paying attention to sleep, exercise, diet, and other perennial—but vital—restoration pathways. Try these:

- ***Add microbreaks to your routine.*** Reserving five minutes between back-to-back meetings offers a precious reset. Even a 30-second break can reduce stress: stare at a plant, look at an old photograph, talk to your dog—see what works best for you and make it a habit. But be purposeful about how you spend this time. Don't default

¹² See Tom Huddleston Jr., “Why Google's CEO misses his commute (plus the new hobby he learned on YouTube),” CNBC Make It, May 19, 2020, [cnbc.com](https://www.cnbc.com).

to making this a social-media break, and above all, don't make it a smartphone break: a 2019 study found that in terms of cognitive depletion, browsing your smartphone during a break is the same as not taking a break at all.¹³

- **Get serious about sleep.** In a rare bit of pandemic-related *good news*, evidence from Fitbit¹⁴ suggests that some people have traded their commute for better sleep habits during the pandemic. Yet sleep remains challenging for many people.¹⁵ Aim for a reliable seven to nine hours with a consistent bedtime. Alcohol, heavy meals, electronic screens, and caffeine before bed are obvious no-nos. The neuroscientist Matthew Walker notes that caffeine has a half-life of up to six hours in the body, meaning that one-quarter of the caffeine from your 2:00 p.m. latte could still be in your system at midnight.¹⁶ Finally, don't play "catch up" on sleep over the weekends; it only pushes your body into jetlag.
- **Exercise regularly.** Without the regular transitions and walking around the office, many of us have seen our step count plummet during the pandemic. Regular exercise boosts mood, reduces inflammation, and helps regulate our emotions. Schedule short ten- to 15-minute bouts of physical training, including brisk walking. Even regular, low-intensity exercise boosts our energy and reduces fatigue.¹⁷ Start the week by noting which meetings you could take while walking instead of sitting in front of your laptop.
- **Eat better and hydrate.** Curbside pickup and online ordering offer new chances to pay closer attention to what we're buying and eating—so keep track. Good nutrition is a vital part of managing stress; poor eating habits are linked to numerous ailments, as well as to workplace presenteeism.¹⁸ Start with awareness and go from there. Hydration is important, too. Consider making hydration a microbreak: aim to finish your desk-side glass of water by meeting's end, and use the time between meetings to walk to the kitchen and refill it.
- **Just breathe.** When in doubt, deep breathing can help. Even a minute of practicing deep, slow breathing reactivates our parasympathetic nervous system and helps break the vicious cycle of stress. Set your phone alarm to remind you to take a breathing break.

Learn to alternate between engagement and recovery

As you work on focus and recovery, you also need to learn to move between these two states more deliberately. Creating transitions helps keep them separate and distinct in our brain, increasing their effectiveness and further helping us influence them. Your goal is to learn how to make focus and recovery something you can call on when you need it—a tangible, built-in part of your day.

¹³ Sanghoon Kang and Terri R. Kurtzberg, "Reach for your cell phone at your own risk: The cognitive costs of media choice for breaks," *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, September 2019, Volume 8, Number 3, pp. 395–403, akjournals.com.

¹⁴ Mark Sullivan, "Fitbit data shows we're sleeping better during the COVID-19 lockdown," *Fast Company*, May 1, 2020, fastcompany.com.

¹⁵ A wealth of useful research and thinking about sleep has come to light in recent years, including about the relationship between sleep and effective leadership. For more, see Nick van Dam and Els van der Helm, "The organizational cost of insufficient sleep," *McKinsey Quarterly*, February 2016, McKinsey.com.

¹⁶ Matt Walker, "How caffeine and alcohol affect your sleep," TED Talks, *Sleeping with Science*, July 2020, ted.com.

¹⁷ Tara Parker-Pope, "The cure for exhaustion? More exercise," *New York Times*, February 29, 2008, well.blogs.nytimes.com.

¹⁸ Todd Hollingshead, "Poor employee health means slacking on the job, business losses," *BYU, University Communications*, August 19, 2012, news.byu.edu.

Until then, the natural transitions after stress passes are a time to reflect on and learn from your stress. Let's revisit Peter, who has an important deadline forcing him to work into the evening. His daughter is fussing in the next room, unwilling to take a bath and starting to argue loudly with Peter's spouse. Peter feels a rush of stress hormones, and before he knows it, he's risen from his chair and snapped at them.

Later, as his body calms (and after he's apologized), it becomes obvious to Peter that he was reacting to his deadline, not his daughter. He imagines what he could have done differently: pause for a couple of deep, focused breaths as he looks at a favorite painting on the wall nearby and gathers himself, recognizing that taking a short break from work now would help him focus later and also give his spouse timely backup. He'll try that next time.

While you should always use the time immediately after stress passes to reflect and consider new behaviors, purposeful transitions between work and rest will help you switch more easily between productive focus and productive recovery. For example, try the following exercises:

- **Walk to work.** One surprising aspect of the pandemic for many people working from home is just how much they miss their morning commute and the chance it gave them to reflect and mentally prepare for work.¹⁹ Consider simulating your morning commute with a short walk to exercise your body *and* prepare your mind. Walk around the block, pick up a to-go drink, get some fresh fruits from your local grocer, or just see where 2,000 steps on your fitness device take you.
- **Stick to a predefined work schedule.** Even if you can stretch your working hours, don't make that the rule. Setting an alarm can help, or consider buddying up with a friend for a scheduled after-work chat each day to mark the workday's end. The additional connectedness will benefit you both.
- **Implement an end-of-day ritual.** If you have a home office, leave it and close the door when you're done working for the day. Draw a clear line between working and not working. If you're space constrained, pack away your workstation and equipment and convert your temporary office back into your regular home space so that you're less reminded of work in the evening—and less tempted to return to it. Make this ritual your own. Additionally, consider taking another walk to simulate your commute, just as you did at the day's outset.

Helping others manage stress

The safety warning on airplanes about putting on your own oxygen mask before helping others is also true for stress. That's in part because your own stress stresses out your team. In a study at the Max Planck Institute for Cognitive Brain Sciences, participants observed strangers struggling with difficult mental arithmetic problems. Even in this impersonal setup, more than one-quarter of the observers had elevated cortisol levels from empathetic stress.²⁰ But, provided you're not making things worse, you can do a lot

¹⁹ Jennifer Levitz, "Welcome to the fake office commute (turns out people miss the routine)," *Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2021, [wsj.com](https://www.wsj.com).

²⁰ See Sigal S. Barsade, "The ripple effect: Emotional contagion and its influence on group behavior," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, December 2002, Volume 47, Number 4, pp. 644–75, journals.sagepub.com; and Monique Valcour, "The ripple effects you create as a manager," *Harvard Business Review*, May 7, 2013, hbr.org.

of good by seeking to create positive conditions for your team and to monitor their own stress with a healthy dose of empathy.

Create conditions for focus and recovery

Start by looking at the norms you've established—or unthinkingly uphold—for work and nonwork time. Meetings are ripe for optimizing. What meetings do you have, at what time of day, and for what reason? Can any be shortened, combined, scrapped, or otherwise rejiggered to allow more time for engagement and rest? Consider also when your own energy is at its best for highly empathetic engagement and social interaction with colleagues.

Get your team's views. Agree on meeting terms that seek to help everyone be most at ease and contributive. For example, can some meetings have nonstandard formats that encourage focus or recovery? Status meetings where no one needs to present can be held as walking meetings, for instance. Occasional group telephone calls can help prevent videoconference fatigue.

Be clear about work times and expectations, while respecting those of others. We found the following email signature to be both encouraging and empowering: “I am sending this email at a time that suits my work schedule; please do not feel obliged to reply outside of your working hours.” Similarly, establishing a meeting-free day of the week can help your colleagues find focus and better manage their stress. And stick to it: sending mixed signals adds to the burden of unhealthy stress your team may already be carrying.

Of course, not all workdays are created equal. Some periods require more focus and longer hours. As a leader, you must recognize that this is simply not sustainable in the long term. No one can be in “crisis mode” every day. Be clear with your team about what phase you're in, adapt your team's habits to the intensity of work, and then proactively steer the team back into recovery after intense periods.

Be observant, vigilant, and caring

As we have fewer chances to see one another in person these days, it's harder to notice signs of burnout in our teams. Be watchful for cynicism, lack of energy, or other problems that weren't there before.

Arrange agenda-free, one-on-one catch-ups with people to stay tuned in. Watch your high performers closely, as they may add on more work yet fail to speak up when they're feeling underwater. Balance team workloads so that you don't make things worse.

When you see problems, take action *too lightly rather than too late*. Make suggestions and help to your level of ability, but remember that your role is to provide supportive, compassionate leadership. Consider arranging for external support for your team in the form of a psychologist or a coach—some topics are more easily addressed with an outsider.

Stress gives us the physical energy and mental focus we need to respond to important situations. Stress in itself isn't bad, but when we manage it badly, fail to seek help—or both—we suffer in wide-ranging ways. By reframing how we think about stress, and by striving to optimize rather than minimize it, we can convert stress into learning, growth, and better performance. Q

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Thank you for reading. If you are feeling overwhelmed by chronic stress or burnout, or feelings of anxiety or depression, please contact a crisis hotline in your country. If you are a leader who is concerned about mental-health challenges in your organization, please refer to resources from the World Health Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control. There are many excellent actions that employers can take, including examples from City Mental Health Alliance, One Mind at Work, and Shatterproof.

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