



Keep Track of Your Stress

Bruce Taylor

I know that you've seen them: the magazines are full of questionnaires that claim to measure your stress level. Some of them are useful because they make you think about your stress, but most of them seem sort of silly. First of all, they don't tell you how much you're stressed, and they don't give you any clue what to do about it.

But here's a different approach: I've shown below a very short stress test that you can take in three minutes or less. Take the test right now and write your scores down somewhere - call it a "stress journal." For each of the statements below, score it from 1 to 5 depending on how much it describes you right at this moment. A score of 1 means "I don't feel this way at all." and a score of 5 means "This is just the way I feel." In this test, high scores are good and indicate a generally low stress level.

1. "I feel healthy."
2. "I feel well rested."
3. "I usually get my work done on time."
4. "I feel in control of my life."
5. "I have a set of good friends who support me."

Then take the test again next week, and the week after and the week after that; make it part of your daily routine to check in on your own stress level. After a while your stress journal might look something like this:

Date	Health	Rest	Work	Control	Friends	Total
12/01/05	3	3	2	4	5	17
12/07/05	4	2	1	4	4	15
12/14/05	3	1	1	4	5	14
12/21/05	4	1	1	3	4	13

As you look at this journal, what do you notice? Well, the first thing is that your overall stress is getting worse (remember that high scores are good). Over the month your stress level has been steadily rising. What else do you see? It looks

like your health, decisions, and friends scores are pretty constant, although health and friends waver a little. But the real problem comes from your rest and your workload: they weren't great to begin with, but have been getting worse until they've hit the lowest possible level. So, if you wanted to improve your overall stress level, where would you start? Right, you'd look into why you are feeling so tired and why work is overloading you. It seems a reasonable guess that you're feeling tired because you can't get all your work done and it's eating into the rest of your life, so start asking some questions: What part of the work has expanded? Is it a temporary situation that will go away on its own? What can you do to lighten your load?

Now you have to get out and make some changes to get the scores back up again. If you're overloaded at work, maybe you can delegate some of the work to someone else, or maybe you can negotiate an extension on a deadline. Just taking control of the situation and making a few changes is likely to send those numbers up and your stress down. You'll have to look at your own circumstances to make a plan, but here are some suggestions:

Health: If you're not feeling healthy, try the obvious: if you haven't seen a doctor in a while, go get a real physical checkup: infections and chronic disease contribute to stress. Start getting enough exercise to tire you out at least twice a week. (You'll have to decide how much this is.) Review your eating habits: do you get at least one relaxed, nutritious meal a day, or do you eat every meal on the run or at your desk?

Rest: If you have to drag yourself out of bed, find yourself falling asleep during the day, and collapse onto the sofa when you get home, start by reviewing your sleep habits. Are you sleeping on a regular schedule? Do you get enough sleep for your own needs? (Some people need more than eight hours.) Exercising until you're tired, getting on a regular schedule, and avoiding caffeine and alcohol will help you fall asleep and stay asleep.

Work: If you find yourself regularly working late at the office or bringing work home for the evening or the weekend, don't think that you can fix things with a little more overtime, because that will just make the problem worse. If there's really more work than you can handle you have to find a way to reduce your work load. I know that this is hard to do, but try to learn to say "no" to assignments at work, and avoid taking on jobs just because "they've got to get done and there's no one else to do them."

Control: It's terrible when you feel like someone else is running your life; that's enough to increase your stress all by itself. If you're feeling driven, rather than being behind the wheel, try to narrow down where the feeling comes from. Have you taken on more extracurricular activities than you can reasonably handle? Are you overcommitted at work? Are debts and money issues driving your decisions? And above all, what can you do to get back in control? Reclaiming your life might mean cutting back on your commitments and regaining some time for yourself. If you're having financial difficulties, just one visit to a financial counselor can help a lot. But most of all, doing something to get back in control will help raise this number.

Friends: There are a ton of studies showing that having a "social support network" lowers your stress and makes you more resilient and resistant to stress. A social support network is just academic talk for a circle of friends and acquaintances who will listen to you vent and help you think about strategies for getting things back under control. They don't have to be best friends: workout buddies, job colleagues, and sewing circle friends all make good network members. So if you find yourself scoring low on the "friends" scale, try opening up your social life and making more contacts and acquaintances.

So there you have it: a real program to get your stress under control. This program works for three reasons. First, you're going to look at your stress over a long period of time rather than looking at a brief snapshot of it. Second, it helps you figure out where the stress is coming from, so you know what to work on. And finally it helps you see your progress, so you can see when things are getting better.

About Bruce Taylor



Bruce Taylor is the principal of CoachingProgrammers.com, an executive coaching firm located near Boston, Massachusetts. Bruce helps software organizations of all sizes to create low-stress, supportive, adaptable working environments, so that the engineers, leaders, and managers can work as effectively as possible. He provides executive coaching for senior managers who are creating superior organizations, management coaching for technical leaders who are adapting to new agile practices, and individual coaching for engineers who are upgrading their skills. Bruce has a Masters in Computer Science from Duke University, a Masters in Community Psychology, and a Certificate in Job Stress and Healthy Workplace Design, both from the University of Massachusetts.