

GET HAPPY

How to handle your stress,
one day at a time.



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CAROLINE WORKS FOR THE PUBLIC RELATIONS DEPARTMENT of a major publishing house. Her telephone never stops ringing: authors complaining she's neglecting them; journalists furious they've not been invited to book launches. The intern has gone home without doing the photocopies for an urgent press packet. The alarm on her PalmPilot beeped; she had to go and fetch her daughter for a doctor's appointment. Caroline grits her teeth. Just two more weeks until the spa weekend she's been anticipating. At last she'll be able to unwind and get rid of all the stress.

But there's a problem with that idea: We now know that this bulimic way of handling stress—letting it build until it boils over and we're forced to stop everything for several days—doesn't work, and may even be dangerous. This chronic accumulation of stress and anxiety is bad for the body and saps our spirits. It clogs arteries, raises blood pressure, attacks neurons, weakens memory and reduces concentration. It also undermines the immune system, leaving us more vulnerable to colds and even, no doubt, to cancer. Finally, it's what makes us put on weight and gives us premature wrinkles.

What counts isn't the quantity of leisure time and vacations we can log, but how much we enjoy our daily lives.

Frances manages stress differently. She's a nurse and, like Caroline, gets bombarded by urgent requests from all sides. Nevertheless she never stops smiling. It's as though she can plunge into stressful situations for a few minutes when required, and emerge unscathed. Recent studies have shown that people who react like Frances regain their physiological and emotional equilibrium faster than others. They have a number of techniques at their command that help them

function in the heat of the action, and enable them to walk away. They're supple, like the reed in the Jean de La Fontaine fable that the wind can't break.

Here's the lesson: To manage stress, don't wait for vacation time; deal with it daily. We're starting to understand the instinctive reactions of people like Frances. They quickly identify that they've begun to tense up inside, and make immediate adjustments, as we do in yoga practise: breathing more slowly and deeply, loosening the shoulders, holding the neck straight, concentrating on that gentle feeling in the chest that comes as we breathe. To regain their equilibrium, they also tend to focus on happy memories.

And maybe that's the underlying value of vacations: to create a backlog of memories that can ground us on our return to everyday life.

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