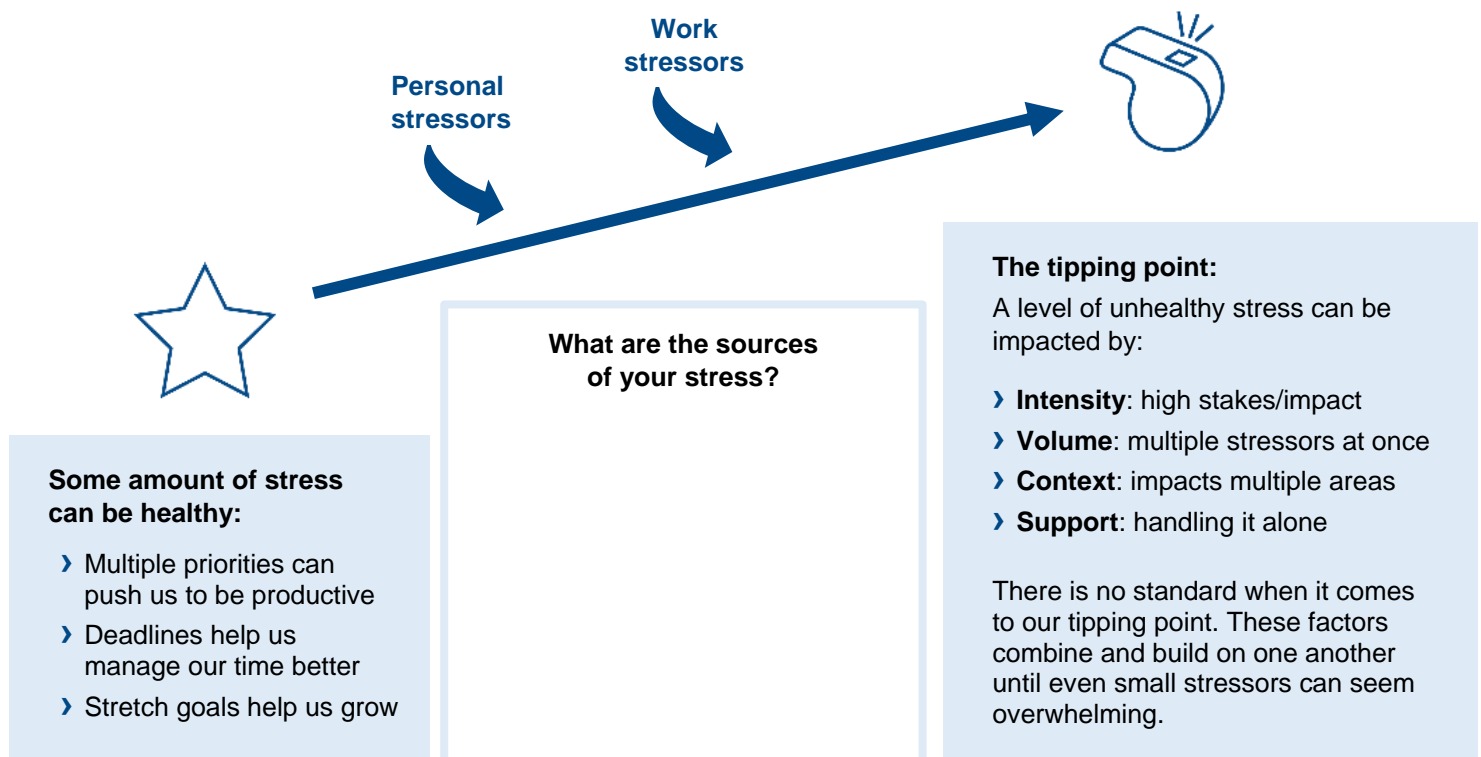


WHAT CAUSES YOUR STRESS?

Whole Person Wellness for Leaders

Leadership pressures can be stressful. Workplace environments are constantly changing, with new processes, faster and more global connectedness, a “do more with less” mentality, an “always on” culture. Add to that real-life stressors, from struggles in our personal lives to the broad, global challenges of recent times. These stressors can build on one another to a level that is unhealthy:



How do you react?

When stressors are pervasive and outside of our control, they can trigger the primitive survival reactions our minds and bodies instinctively use to keep us safe from danger. These “go-to” reactions are different for everyone, but tend to fall into some general categories, as listed below. Sometimes these “default” responses can actually add to stress levels. What is your go-to response? How effective is it in helping you navigate stress? Could trying different responses be helpful?

- › **Fight back:** feel defensive, combative, push back
- › **Get away:** avoid, escape the tension, shift blame
- › **Freeze up:** shut down, disengage, panic
- › **Reach out:** connect, support, seek allies
- › **Make it OK:** absorb, please others, fix it at all costs
- › **Something else?** Can vary by context, stressor

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STRESS AND BELIEF SYSTEMS

Whole Person Wellness for Leaders

Place a check in the blank for any of these that apply to you:

Perfectionism

- Do you feel a constant pressure to achieve?
- Do you criticize yourself when you're not perfect?
- Do you feel you haven't done enough, no matter how hard you try?
- Do you give up pleasure in order to be the best in everything you do?

Inflexibility and need for control

- Do you have to be totally in control at all times?
- Do you worry about how you appear to others when you are nervous?
- Do you feel that any lack of control is a sign of weakness or failure?
- Are you uncomfortable delegating projects to others?

People-pleasing

- Does your self-esteem depend on others' opinions of you?
- Do you ever avoid challenges because you're afraid of disappointing others?
- Are you better at caring for others than caring for yourself?
- Do you keep most negative feelings inside to avoid displeasing others?

Insecurity and doubt

- Do you regularly compare your work to others?
- Do you feel that your colleagues are better at the job than you are?
- Do you get stuck in worrisome "what if" type thoughts?
- Do you feel like an imposter when told your work is good?

Checked items indicate areas where stress may be stemming from a self-defeating belief system. These are mindsets that you can start challenging. Start to notice self-defeating thoughts and substitute more balanced ways of thinking. Experiment with different responses. Try pushing against the comfort zone dictated by these mindsets. Be open to the possibility that you can still be successful AND less stressed with a more balanced approach.

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INITIATING THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

Whole Person Wellness for Leaders

A tense mind creates a tense body and vice versa. You can break this feedback loop by using your body systems to send an “all clear” signal to your brain. This is called the relaxation response. To initiate it, we target three areas:

Mind: Shift away from stressful thoughts to a neutral focus

You can stop the constant triggering of emotional alarm centers by moving your focus to something neutral. This can be as simple as focusing on your breath or mentally repeating a calming word or phrase. Doing this as a regular practice can actually retrain the brain and change your stress response. This is a strategy taught in the practice of mindfulness.

There are many apps that can help you infuse it into your day, such as: www.stopbreathethink.com/meditations

You can also explore guided mindful meditations from the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center¹: www.uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations

Nervous system: Use slow deep breaths to signal the brain

The vagus nerve runs from the brain all the way down to the abdomen. We can use slow, deep breathing to stimulate this nerve. Doing this sends signals back to the brain that it's OK to switch off the “fight/flight/freeze” response. Deep “belly” breaths from the diaphragm and a long exhale seem to send the strongest signal.

Belly breathing

- › Find a relaxed, comfortable position. You do this exercise in any position, but it's best to lie on your back, with your knees bent. If seated, keep your back straight, but not tight. Put a hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other on your chest.
- › Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out as the muscles relax. Your chest should not move.
- › Hold the breath for a moment, then breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Straighten the back. Let belly muscles tighten. Feel the hand on your belly go in.
- › Take your time with each breath. Try to increase each in and out breath. Notice where you feel your breath in your body – chest, abdomen, nostrils.
- › Your mind may wander. That's OK. Just notice and gently redirect your attention back to your breathing.
- › Repeat 5 to 10 times. If you feel dizzy or begin to breathe fast or feel short of breath, take a few normal breaths and slow your breathing. Get up slowly when done.
- › Practice daily for several weeks until you can use this technique to de-stress in any environment.

Examples of activities that can trigger the relaxation response

- › Meditation
- › Focused breathing
- › Progressive relaxation
- › Guided imagery
- › Visualization
- › Faith practices
- › Tai chi
- › Yoga
- › Knitting
- › Playing an instrument
- › Rhythmic exercise, such as running, rowing, or swimming

Muscles: Release held-tension

You can actively discharge tension from muscles by using releasing techniques such as progressive relaxation. This not only creates calming cues to the brain, it can help you notice how held-tension contributes to feelings of stress. Doing this regularly, you gradually you learn what a relaxed muscle feels like and how to create it on cue.

Full body relaxation exercise

Find a quiet, calm place. Get in a comfortable, fully supported position. For each muscle group:

- › Breathe in and tense a muscle group for 4 to 10 seconds. Tense hard, but not to the point of cramping.
- › Then breathe out while you suddenly and completely relax the muscle group. Don't relax it gradually.
- › Rest for 10 to 20 seconds, then move to the next muscle group.

Muscle group	What to do
Forehead	Raise eyebrows as high as you can.
Eye area	Close your eyes as tightly as possible. (Remove contact lenses if wearing.)
Cheeks and jaw	Press lips together tightly.
Neck and shoulders	Pull shoulders up towards ears and tighten neck muscles.
Arms	Hold arms away from the body, lock elbows, and tense forearms and biceps.
Hands	Make a tight fist.
Chest and back	Take a deep breath and hold it, then breathe out.
Stomach	Suck stomach muscles into a tight knot.
Thighs and buttocks	Clench together.
Lower legs	Flex your feet up, as if trying to touch your shins.
Foot	Point your toes away and curl them downward.

- › Take note of how your relaxed muscles feel. Let your mind rest and experience this feeling. If you notice tightness remaining in any muscle group, repeat the tense and relax process there.
- › You may feel sleepy after this exercise. To "wake up" your body, count backwards from 5 to 1, and then move fingers, toes, hands, and feet, then stretch your entire body. Be sure you're alert before driving or other activities.

Note: Some experts recommend trying methods that balance out your stress response. For example, if you tend toward a tense "fight" stress response, progressive relaxation might help you rebalance. If you have a panicky "flight" response, meditation may help you get calm and focused. If you have more of a "freeze" reaction, exercise may be most helpful.

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¹ Mindfulness Meditations created by Diana Winston for the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC).
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BUILDING YOUR NATURAL RESILIENCE

Whole Person Wellness for Leaders

Taking care of yourself and prioritizing holistic wellness help form the core of our resilience, or the ability to “bounce back” from challenges. We are all capable of resilience: responding to failure with grace, to setbacks with persistence, to roadblocks with courage. We do it each and every day we gear up for another day. A helpful way to conceptualize how we build our natural resilience is in the GROW acronym developed by Cigna's resilience research team:

G	Ground yourself in the situation. What is your ideal outcome?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› What is your long-term goal?› Break this goal down into smaller, short-term goals.› Review your progress periodically.› Give yourself credit for what you've accomplished; take note of it on a piece of paper or a digital note.
R	Recognize what you can control. What can you do today?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Commit to one thing you can do today.› Crossing items off of your “to-do” list can help you feel purposeful and productive.› Activities that fuel your spirit “count,” like sitting outside in the sunshine or talking with a friend.› Make it a habit to reward yourself in healthy ways for a job well done at the end of each day, task, or goal.
O	Organize your resources. What resources do you already have?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› What personal qualities do you have that are a strength (e.g., sense of humor, optimistic outlook)?› Who are your support people (e.g., friends, colleagues)?› What resources do you have in your community?› Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) has many helpful resources available at no cost to you.
W	Work with your community. Ask for support when you need it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Asking for support is a sign of strength, not a weakness.› Look to friends, family members, community members, or support professionals to rally resources.› Surround yourself with positive people who will support you and help solve problems, not cause them.

Visit [CignaResilience.com](https://www.CignaResilience.com) for more information on resources on resilience.

Call your **Employee Assistance Program** to learn more about helpful resources available to you.

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