

The

*Surprisingly Simple Method*

to LEAD & LIVE with

LESS STRESS & MORE JOY

# CHEERS

*to* **MONDAY**



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# Contents

<i>AI Use Declaration</i>	ix
<i>Introduction: 10 Words Changed My Life</i>	xi
<b>PART I See</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>What if we've been seeing stress all wrong?</i>	
<b>Chapter 1</b> Reimagine Work	3
<b>Chapter 2</b> Rewrite Your Stress Stories	19
<b>Chapter 3</b> Reconnect to Stress Warnings	39
<b>Chapter 4</b> Recognize What's Important	57
<b>Chapter 5</b> Reclaim What's Yours	71
<b>PART II Sort</b>	<b>89</b>
<i>How do we sort stress into actionable categories?</i>	
<b>Chapter 6</b> Schedule Stress	91
<b>Chapter 7</b> Suspense Stress	107
<b>Chapter 8</b> Social Stress	121
<b>Chapter 9</b> Sudden Stress	133
<b>Chapter 10</b> System Stress	145

<b>PART III Solve</b>	<b>165</b>
<i>How do we stop spinning and start solving?</i>	
<b>Chapter 11</b> Acknowledge Then Move On	167
<b>Chapter 12</b> Accept Without Fixing	183
<b>Chapter 13</b> Ask for What You Need	195
<b>Chapter 14</b> Act on the Next Right Thing	205
<b>PART IV Celebrate</b>	<b>217</b>
<i>What if the goal isn't just less stress but more joy?</i>	
<b>Chapter 15</b> Celebrate the Shift	219
<i>Appendix: The Un-Stressing Method</i>	225
<i>Notes</i>	229
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	253
<i>About the Author</i>	255
<i>Index</i>	257

# Introduction

## *10 Words Changed My Life*

It's been 10 years since 10 words changed my life. They changed *everything*. And I mean *Ever. Rec. Thing*. Here's what happened.

It was summer, just after my 40th birthday, and I was sitting in the waiting room of my doctor's office. The air conditioning was blasting – so much so that Vickie, the kind receptionist I'd known for years, was bundled in a cardigan. Meanwhile, I was sweating like I'd just done hot yoga. In the desert. Wearing a ski suit.

Some women glisten, glow, or lightly perspire. Me? I just sweat.

With clammy hands and a racing heart, I forced my focus onto the clipboard of paperwork balanced awkwardly on my lap. This was my *seventh* week in a row of sitting in the same chair, in the same waiting room, filling out the same anxiety checklist. I'd always thought of the number seven as lucky, but sitting there that day with sweat dripping down my back and my heart beating out of my chest, it seemed like luck was passing me by.

I'd driven myself to the appointment that day, and I knew my doctor would notice. Last week he greeted me with a smile and said, "No Corey today? You must be feeling a little better?" Until that moment, it had never occurred to me that driving myself to an appointment – as a middle-aged woman without my husband – could be considered noteworthy. And yet, here I was.

At 16, driving meant freedom. It meant that I was in the driver's seat of my own life – both figuratively and literally. Driving with the windows

down, and music blaring, I felt alive, hopeful, and free. And now, driving made me feel none of those things. Driving was nerve-wracking, taxing, almost torturous. And those awful feelings weren't limited to driving – they applied to almost everything in my life at that time.

Facilitating a meeting at work? Nerve-wracking.

Writing a to-do list for the day? Taxing.

Navigating a loud, busy grocery store? Almost torturous.

These are things I had done hundreds (thousands?) of times in my life without giving them a second thought. I had just assumed that I would always be able to do them. I'm a planner, but I sure hadn't planned for this. I hadn't planned that stress, burnout, and anxiety would shake my confidence, steal my energy, and make my own life feel unrecognizable.

## **Seven Weeks**

It had been seven weeks since I was convinced I was having a heart attack.

The good news? I wasn't.

The bad news? It was the first of many stress-induced panic attacks that would define the next few months of my life – along with medical leave, countless doctor's appointments, and the terrifying realization that my body had finally hit its limit.

I remember sobbing in my doctor's office, flooded with relief when he said no, I wasn't dying, even though it felt like I was. My relief that it wasn't a heart attack was quickly followed by exasperation: how had this suddenly become my life?

In hindsight, it wasn't so "sudden" at all. The stress had been building for months. Years. Maybe my whole career. I couldn't remember a time when I wasn't stressed – when there wasn't a deadline looming, a problem to solve, or a decision that couldn't wait.

What was I so stressed about? Pretty much everything, including how stressed other people were about my stress.

## **Dream Job or Nightmare?**

Family and friends kept telling me I was working too hard – that I needed to slow down. I assured them – and myself – that I would, just as soon as *fill-in-the-blank* was over. A big project, a busy legislative session, a leadership transition – it didn't matter. Because as soon as that ended, the next thing began.

My body had been whispering to me, and when I wouldn't listen, it started screaming. Until that summer, I had simply accepted that this was how I was wired: I thought fast, I talked fast, and worked even faster. I never missed deadlines – and I expected the same from everyone around me.

That “on time, every time” mindset earned me plenty of praise and promotions at work – and caused plenty of pain and problems at home. As I quickly climbed the career ladder, my leadership responsibilities grew – and so did my anxiety. I was overwhelmed, exhausted, and confused.

I had finally landed the dream job I'd work so hard for . . . so why was I so unbelievably miserable?

By the time I filled out the anxiety checklist for the seventh time, I could practically recite it.

- Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge? Check.
- Not being able to stop or control worrying? Check.
- Worrying too much about different things? Trouble relaxing? And being so restless that it is hard to sit still? Check, check, and check.

But this time there was a second page. And it was about to change my life.

## 10 Little Words

The question was only 10 little words, but it sent me into a long, slow unraveling – first disbelief, then flashes of anger, quiet negotiations with myself, a heavy sadness that lingered, and finally, a fragile kind of peace.

The question led me to the painful realization that I had lost myself.

Thankfully, it also became the starting point for finding myself again.

So, what was this infamous, 10-word, life-changing question?

What are your hobbies? What do you do for fun?

I read the question, and then I read it again. The third time. The fourth time. I lost count. What are my hobbies? What do I do for fun? I literally had no idea.

The question may as well have been about roasting a turkey or creating an Excel pivot table (two things I despise doing and rely on Google to tell me how when I'm forced to engage in such things). Google could tell me hobbies, but not *my* hobbies. Google could tell me what people do for fun, but not what *I* did for fun. And if Google didn't know, how in the world was I supposed to know?

I sat there vacillating between the stages of grief, unaware that this was the first day of a new journey – a soul-searching, gut-wrenching process to figure out what I really wanted to do and, more important, who did I want to be. Those were the questions I had been afraid to ask, because deep down I knew the answers. I had always known.

### **Sad, Angry, and Lost**

As I was trying to answer the question about hobbies (I'm a rule follower at heart), I went through the list in my mind of things I enjoy. But I couldn't recall a single time when I had done *any* of those things since the blue lines first appeared on a pregnancy test years ago, and for some, it was even before that.

I felt sad and angry and lost. I answered the question how younger me would have answered, "Traveling, yoga, theater, spending time with family and friends!" (Yes, I actually used an exclamation point. Have I mentioned I'm a recovering people-pleaser?)

After my appointment, I barely made it to the safety of my car before breaking into tears. I called my husband, and the second I heard his voice, my crying turned to sobbing. He asked me what was wrong, and I finally choked out, "I don't have any hobbies, and I don't know how to have fun. Why didn't you tell me I'm not any fun?!"

He laughed – laughed! – and said, "Oh, Amy, you're fun! You're the 'funnest' person I know!"

I almost told him about an interesting article I'd read recently about the origin of the word *fun* and how *funnest* is, in fact, grammatically correct despite the prevailing preference to use *most fun*. But then it hit me. That is *not* something a fun person would do. So, I said nothing.

My husband tried to reassure me and stayed on the phone with me until I caught my breath.

It took me 10 minutes before I felt ready to drive; it's taken me 10 years before I felt ready to write this book. It took a decade of researching, rethinking, and really listening to hundreds of leaders and teams share their stories of stress and burnout – and the toll it took on them and the people they love.

### **The Un-Stressing Method**

In my search for answers, I dove into research on stress and burnout. Why did it keep resurfacing? What was driving it? What role did I play in it? And most important, what could I do to break the cycle and help others do the

same? Chronic, unmanaged stress leads to burnout, so by learning to manage stress, we can prevent burnout from taking control of our lives.<sup>1</sup>

As I dug deeper, I realized the myth that had been sabotaging me all along: the myth that stress is the price of success. This myth isn't just misguided – it's dangerous. It fuels patterns of overwork, self-doubt, and the kind of burnout that sneaks in wearing a name tag that says *ambition*. But here's the truth: stress isn't the price you pay for success; it's the thief that steals it.

**STRESS ISN'T THE PRICE YOU PAY FOR  
SUCCESS, IT'S THE THIEF THAT STEALS IT.**

With that clarity, I created The Un-Stressing Method (trademark pending with the US Patent and Trademark Office). It's a surprisingly simple way to un-stress your work and transform your life using three-steps: see, sort, solve. (Oh, and then celebrate!) It's practical, powerful, and designed to help you take back your life from the grip of chronic stress.

Its power lies in its versatility – it works just as well in your professional life as it does in your personal life. Its simplicity makes it easy to learn, live, and share – whether you're sketching it on a whiteboard with your team at work or jotting it down on a napkin during happy hour with your friends.

This book is divided into four parts – one for each of the three steps of the method and a fourth about the importance of celebration:

**Part I, See:** What if we've been seeing stress all wrong?

**Part II, Sort:** How do we sort stress into actionable categories?

**Part III, Solve:** How do we stop spinning and start solving?

**Part IV, Celebrate:** What if the goal isn't just to stress less, but more joy?

### *Why I Wrote This Book*

I wrote this book for two reasons:

- You asked me to.
- I had to.

After nearly every keynote, I get asked two questions. The one I hear most often? “Is your mom here?” And many times – she is. She's the Director of First Impressions for my company for a reason, and if you've met her, you know exactly why people ask.

The second question I hear just as often: “Where can I get your book?” For years, I didn’t have an answer. Now I do.

But even if you hadn’t asked me to write it, I would’ve done it anyway – because I *had* to. I’ve been writing this book in my head (and my heart) for years. When I was at the worst part of my burnout, I would envision making it to the other side – and using my story to help others get there, too. I wanted to show people they weren’t alone. They weren’t broken. And they didn’t need to be fixed.

My dad was the first to say, “This would make a great book someday.” And I hope he was right. He usually is.

## **A Love Letter**

The book you’re holding in your hand is the book I wish I had back then – when I was exhausted, overwhelmed, and burned out. I made every burnout mistake in the book . . . before I wrote the book. If it helps even one person avoid the absolute hell I barely crawled out of, then every word was worth it.

*Cheers to Monday* is a love letter to every leader who seeks expert advice but struggles to trust their own wisdom. It’s an invitation to shift from looking outward for validation to turning inward – to the most overlooked guide of all: yourself.

This book will help you rediscover what you already know: when we’re weighed down by stress and burnout, we suffer, and so do the people around us. But when we finally let go of the myth that stress is the price of success, we can get clear on who we truly are and what we actually want.

## **The Funnest Thing We Ever Do**

Because here’s what I know deep in my bones: we were built for wildly wonderful lives. We weren’t made to survive on caffeine and cortisol alone. We’re meant to live – and lead – with less stress and more hope. This book was my starting place, and I hope it becomes yours, too.

*Cheers to Monday* is about shifting from managing your stress to leading your life.

Because less stress was never meant to be the finish line; it’s the starting point for something better.

And that my friend, is the funnest part of all.

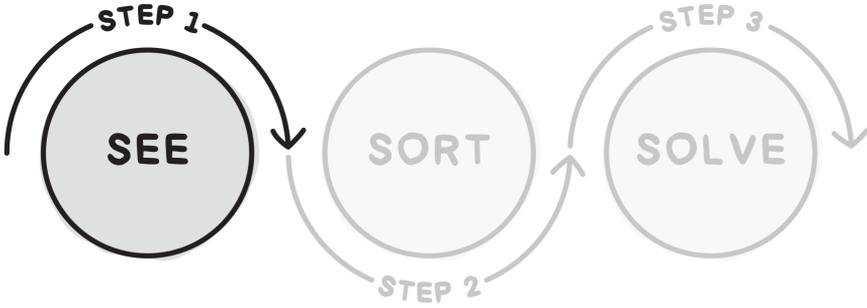
PART

I

See

You can't manage what you can't see.

In Chapters 1–5, you'll identify your stressors, clarify what's important, and get clear on what's within your control.



# 1

## Reimagine Work

Friend, we need to talk.

Somewhere along the way, we were sold a lie – a big, exhausting, soul-sucking lie – that stress is the price of success and we need to suck it up or step aside.

Spoiler alert: it's not. And we don't.

Buried beneath that lie? Another one: that we can – and should – have it all. Both myths are toxic. Together, they create a pressure cooker of impossible expectations. And when we can't meet them, the blame turns inward.

Rather than questioning the unrealistic expectations and broken systems that got us here in the first place, we tell ourselves that *we're* the problem. Maybe we're just not good enough, strong enough, organized enough.

### **Oh, How We Stress**

Well, that ends today. Once we see these myths for what they are, we can't unsee them – and we certainly don't have to keep living by them.

Is it any wonder that many of us believe that excruciating levels of stress are simply the price of admission for a successful life? It's everywhere. "No pain, no gain" is preached from boardrooms to gym floors, glamorized on social media, and baked into the unrealistic expectations we set for ourselves. Just keep going. Keep pushing. Keep proving.

So, we do.

We strive.

We hustle.

We stress.

Oh, how we stress.

But in the race to “have it all,” we rarely pause long enough to ask the questions that matter most: “Is this even the life I want? And if it is, what’s the actual price I’m willing to pay for it?”

As a former C-suite executive and now a leadership consultant to organizations – including Fortune 100 companies – I’ve seen firsthand how deeply stress is embedded in modern workplaces. It’s disguised as drive, rewarded as resilience, and praised as passion. And that’s what makes it so dangerous.

### **Dream Job. Total Nightmare**

After landing my C-suite dream job, I thought I would *finally* feel successful – instead, I mostly just felt, well . . . stressed. I was doing meaningful work that I was proud of, and yet somehow that made the stress feel even more significant. Sure, there were moments of pride, joy, and fun sprinkled in – but they were the exception, not the rule.

Most days, stress was running the show, and success felt like a moving target I couldn’t quite reach.

I did all the things. Got the degrees. Racked up the student loans. Hustled like it was a sport with no halftime or water breaks. And for what? So I could answer emails at midnight long after my family was asleep? So I could cry in the bathroom stall at work with my feet up, praying no one would hear me? I was exhausted, overwhelmed, and confused. This isn’t what success was supposed to feel like . . . was it? How did this happen? Where did I go wrong?

So, I did what I always do when I feel overwhelmed – what any self-proclaimed-research-nerd-workaholic with strong Wi-Fi and an even stronger flair for avoidance would do: I channeled my stress into a full-blown literature review. I was desperate for answers. Why was stress my constant companion? What was driving it? What role did I play in it? And most important, what could I do to break the cycle and help others do the same?

It all started with untangling what was happening in my own life – and trying to make sense of my own stress story – how it started and how it spiraled. But the more I untangled my own stress story, the more curious I became about others’ stories, too.

So, I started asking questions. Lots of them. I was relentless. I became a heat-seeking missile for stress stories.

## A Surprising Discovery

Curiosity became my plus one – we were inseparable. I led interviews and focus groups with leaders and teams across industries. I asked questions during trainings, after keynotes, and in coaching sessions. Every setting became a chance to learn more. If someone was willing to talk, I was ready to listen.

I even conducted more than one “stress-intervention” in line at Starbucks – because apparently nothing invites curiosity quite like waiting for your Tall Iced Decaf Non-Fat White Mocha – light on the whip, heavy on the bonding with complete strangers about stress.

All that research led me to a surprising discovery. As I dug deeper, I *finally* pinpointed the myth that had been sabotaging me all along – and I bet it’s been sabotaging you, too: the myth that stress is the price of success.

The myth isn’t just misguided; it’s dangerous. It fosters destructive patterns of overwork, self-doubt, and relentless pressure to do more, prove more, and be more. It normalizes chronic stress and celebrates burnout like its ambition’s loyal sidekick.

But, friends, here’s the truth I’ve come to know through research, hundreds of conversations with leaders and teams, and my own lived experience: stress isn’t the price of success; it’s the thief that steals it.

## Stress Is Not a Success Strategy

If you are struggling at work, in life (or both!), you are not alone. More than 80% of US workers report experiencing workplace stress, and over half say it spills into their home life.<sup>1</sup> And yet, the lie persists: that chronic stress at work is normal. Necessary. Even noble.

And it’s time we talked about it – the way we’re working isn’t working.

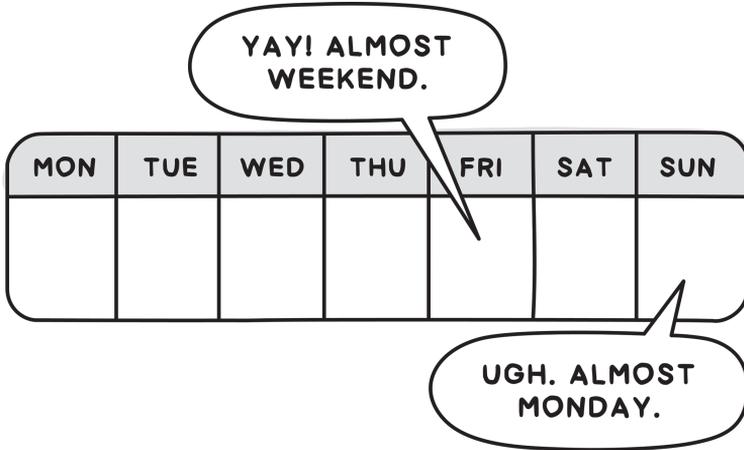
## 2,109 Mondays

The average person spends around 90,000 hours at work over their lifetime – 84,365 hours, to be exact, but who’s counting?<sup>2</sup> And what about Mondays? Well, you’re likely to spend 2,109 of them working. When we resign ourselves to dreading, tolerating, or disliking Mondays, we’ve resigned ourselves to dreading, tolerating, or disliking 2,109 days of our life. And why in the world would we do that?

As a leadership consultant, I spend *a lot* of time in workplaces. In my work, I often ask leaders and teams to tell me about their Sunday night/Monday morning mood. Why? Because your Sunday night/Monday

morning mood doesn't lie – it reveals the truth about your relationship with work.

A bad Monday here or there is to be expected, but if you wake up *every* Monday morning feeling exhausted before the day even begins, that might be a sign of something deeper. It might be more than just “a case of the Mondays” – it might be a signal from your body and brain (and heart) that work isn't working. Worse yet, is when that feeling starts on Sunday night as you begin to brace yourself for a new work week.



### One Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Boss

I spent over 20 years working and leading in the public sector, and I was fortunate to have some exceptional bosses. I had bosses who took a chance on me, who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself, and who set me on the path to be the leader I am today.

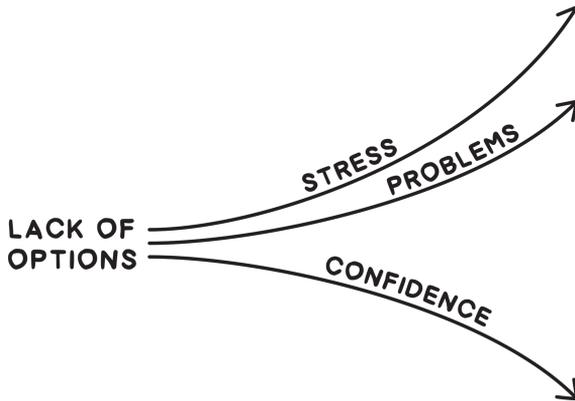
But not every boss is like that; there was one who didn't do any of those things.

They were a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad boss, and they made my life a living hell. They were controlling, disrespectful, and always ready to raise their voice at someone (usually me). The worst part? They got away with it – because they could.

That's the ugly truth about unchecked authority.

Every instinct screamed to get the hell out and never look back. But I stayed. And I suffered. I've had to make peace with how I responded

then – and how differently I would respond now. Staying felt unbearable. But leaving didn't feel like an option. The truth is, the younger me didn't just lack confidence, she lacked choices.



### **No-Win Situation**

I had no savings. I was living paycheck to paycheck. And after spending much of my life without health insurance, I finally had coverage. Leaving – no matter how stressed I was – felt reckless. Irresponsible.

I was also terrified of what would happen if my boss found out I wanted to leave. I'd heard the horror stories. It was a no-win situation – if I told them, they'd be furious. If I didn't, and they got a call for a reference, they'd be furious.

My confidence was shaken. I was so stressed and exhausted that even the thought of job searching felt impossible. But today? I have something I didn't back then: options. I know my worth – and I've built the kind of financial freedom that ensures I'll never feel stuck again.

If I could go back in time, I'd tell that younger version of me this: being disrespected and bullied at work isn't okay – even if the bully is your boss, and especially when the bully is your boss.

I'd tell her she's not alone. Shockingly, over 52 million American workers – about a third of the workforce – report being bullied on the job.<sup>3</sup>

I'd tell her to start building financial independence, because that's what creates options.

And I'd remind her that life is way too short to wake up every Monday morning with a pit in her stomach.

### SOMETHING NEEDS TO CHANGE

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
■	■	■	■	■	□	□
■	■	■	■	■	□	□
■	■	■	■	■	□	□
■	■	■	■	■	□	□
■	■	■	■	■	□	□

■ HIGH STRESS

### Stress Isn't Cheap or Harmless

For the global workforce, stress is up, employee engagement is down, and overall well-being is trending in the wrong direction.<sup>4</sup> The cost? An estimated \$8.9 trillion hit to the global economy and a major blow to workplace productivity.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps even more alarming than the financial impact is the fact that we're also paying with our health: physically, mentally, and emotionally.

I work with leaders every single day who are stressed. And I mean STUH. RESSED. They are stressed about their own stress. They are stressed about their team's stress. They are stressed that their stress is causing their team to be stressed. And that's just at work.

Sound familiar? There's got to be a better way. (And there is; it's why I wrote this book.) And it starts by understanding what stress is and what it isn't.

### Types of Stress

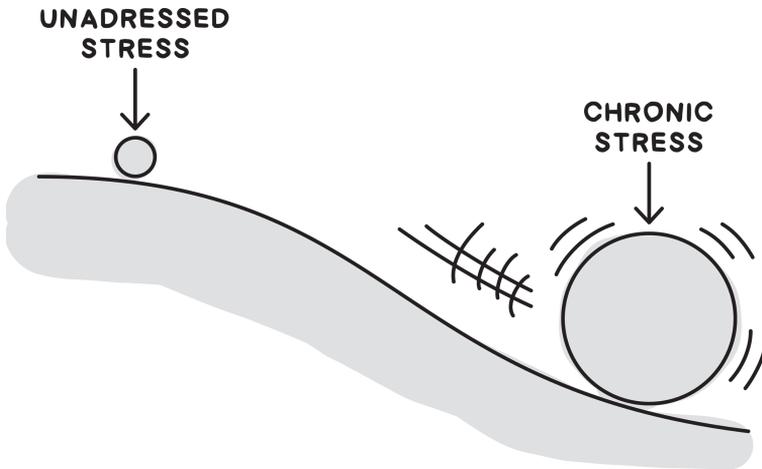
Stress is the natural reaction your body has when changes or challenges occur.<sup>6</sup> It's your body's built-in alarm system – a natural response to change, pressure, or perceived threats.<sup>7</sup> It can affect your body, emotions, and behavior in surprising ways. And here's the twist: not all stress is bad.<sup>8</sup>

Some types of stress can be helpful. Others? Not so much.

Here's a quick breakdown of the four types of stress we'll explore in this book:

- 1. Eustress.** Positive stress. The excitement before a big presentation or energy before a race. It can boost motivation and performance.<sup>9</sup>
- 2. Distress.** Negative stress. Overwhelming, draining, and often accompanied by worry or anxiety. It's what people usually mean when they say, "I'm so stressed."<sup>10</sup>

3. **Acute.** Short-term stress in response to a specific event. A little jolt that helps you focus or act fast – like cramming for a deadline or navigating a tough meeting.<sup>11</sup>
4. **Chronic.** Long-term, unrelenting stress that sticks around and wears you down. If unaddressed, it can take a serious toll on your physical and mental health.<sup>12</sup>



So yes, stress is normal – but **normal doesn't mean healthy**. Understanding the type of stress you're experiencing is essential for finding relief that lasts. Left unmanaged, stress can set off a cascade of physical and psychological effects that reach far beyond the workplace.<sup>13</sup>

## Job Stress

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) adds another important layer to how we understand stress at work. They define job stress as “the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of a job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker,” noting that this mismatch can lead to health issues – and even injury.<sup>14</sup>

The physical impacts of chronic stress read like a warning label: heart disease, high blood pressure, muscle tension and pain, headaches, poor sleep, stomach discomfort, and excessive weight gain or loss.<sup>15</sup>

And that's just the body. Chronic stress wears on your mind, too. It can show up as depression, anxiety, burnout, emotional outbursts, social withdrawal, substance use, restlessness, fatigue, or irritability.<sup>16</sup>

The U.S. Department of Labor reports that chronic stress doesn't just hurt individuals – it harms performance and culture. The ripple effects are felt across entire organizations:

- **Increases absenteeism.** Ongoing stress takes a toll on physical and mental health, leading to more sick days, unplanned absences, and extended leaves.
- **Diminishes productivity.** High-stress environments overload the brain, reduce focus, increase mistakes, and decrease overall performance.
- **Elevates risk of workplace incidents.** Stress-related fatigue slows reaction time, clouds judgment, and increases the chances of accidents or safety violations.
- **Erodes morale and exacerbates turnover.** Chronic stress chips away at engagement and commitment, leaving employees dissatisfied and disengaged.<sup>17</sup>

## Simple Not Easy

I bet you didn't need this book to tell you that workplace stress is a problem – you've seen it, heard about it, and undoubtedly, felt it. If you're ready for a new way of working – and living – with less stress (and I know you are because you are holding this book), well . . . I've got good news and bad news.

The good news: it's simple.

The bad news: it's not easy.

What's the difference? It might seem like semantics, but it's not. Simple is about clarity; easy is about effort.

Simple means something is clear, straightforward, and easy to understand. There aren't a lot of moving parts – but that doesn't mean it's easy to do. Running a marathon is simple: keep putting one foot in front of the other for 26.2 miles until you reach the finish line. Simple to understand. Not easy to do. It requires effort and energy.

Easy, however, means it doesn't take much effort or energy. It doesn't drain you – it feels doable, maybe even effortless. Like ordering pizza: a few taps on your phone and just like that dinner shows up at your door. (And for a brief, glorious moment, you're a hero to your hangry teenagers and their friends who were just moments ago acting like they hadn't eaten in days.) Easy to do. Not simple to understand how the app magically worked behind the scenes.

## Stress Is a Warning

Changing your relationship with stress at work might be simple in theory, but it's far from easy in practice – and the shift often starts with noticing what no longer feels easy. When something that used to feel effortless suddenly feels hard, that's a signal that's something's off. Think of it as a warning – like a car's check engine light. When a check engine light comes on, it means pay attention.

Ignoring a check engine light might seem harmless at first, especially if your car is still running fine, but the longer you wait, the higher the cost.

- **Minor issues can become major and expensive.** I learned this the hard way as a teenager when I ignored the check engine light in my orange Datsun 210. My dad said I turned what “could have been a \$50 fix into a \$1,500 problem.” Yikes. (So sorry, Dad!)
- **Wasted energy decreases performance.** The check engine light might be signaling an issue that affects how your engine burns fuel. Without even realizing it, you could be burning more gas and wasting money.
- **Long-term damage may not even be repairable.** It seems like the car is running just fine (even with the light on), until it's not. Depending on the damage, repairing it may not even be an option.
- **A constant alarm gets ignored.** When your car's check engine light is always on, you eventually stop noticing it, so you might miss the signal when something new (and even more serious) goes wrong.

## What You Don't See *Can Hurt You*

If you're starting to wonder if this is a book about cars or leadership, stick with me. Leaders need to monitor their internal stress dashboard for the same reason drivers need to monitor their car's dashboard – because **what you don't see can hurt you**, and the people around you, too.

Your internal stress dashboard will warn you when something needs your attention. Ignoring your internal stress dashboard warning light might seem harmless at first, especially if you or your team are performing just fine, but the longer you wait, the greater the risk.

Since we looked at what could happen when a driver ignores a check engine light, let's look at what could happen when a leader ignores warning signals of stress for themselves and their teams:

- **Minor issues can become major and expensive.** An issue may start small, but because it's ignored – or not addressed appropriately – it snowballs into something bigger. As a certified mediator who specializes in workplace conflict, I've seen this more times than I can count. By the time colleagues arrive at mediation, the issues have likely grown exponentially in terms of complexity, emotional impact, and cost.

Here's just one example: I recently mediated a conversation where a misinterpreted comment in a meeting turned into a months-long conflict full of resentment and reduced productivity. Oof.

- **Wasted energy decreases performance.** Do you ever feel like you're spinning your wheels at work? Or that you're spending a lot of energy on something with little to no return? While it may seem easier to just keep doing what you're doing, ignoring the warning signs that something isn't right comes at a cost, including time, energy, and money.
- **Long-term damage may be irreparable.** It may seem like you're doing just fine – even with the warning lights flashing – until you're not. For years, I ignored my body's whispers for rest, telling myself I just needed to get through one more thing: a tough project, an urgent deadline, a busy quarter.

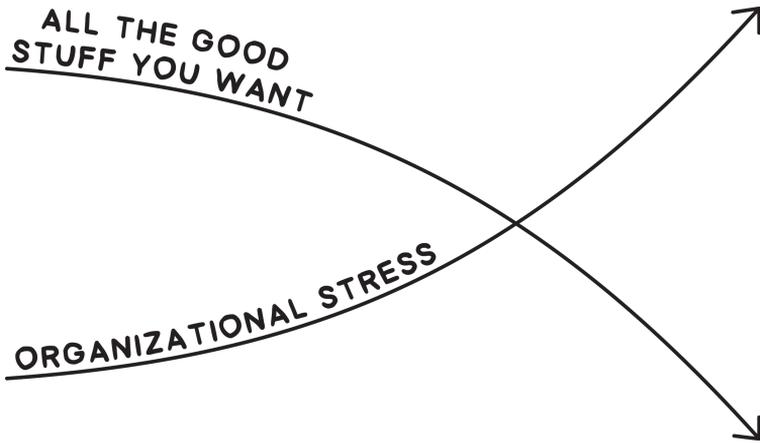
Then work would slow down. Then I could rest.

Only it didn't. And I didn't.

Those projects, deadlines, and quarters didn't end. They just got replaced by new ones. Rest became a goalpost that kept moving. I regret not listening sooner. By the time I paid attention, my body wasn't whispering, it was screaming.

And the recovery? It was slow, painful, and far more costly than taking a break would have been in the first place.

- **You stop noticing the stress warnings.** When stress becomes constant at work, it starts to feel normal. You tell yourself, "*This is just how things are around here.*" If you're lucky, someone from outside the team might point it out – like a passenger getting into your car and saying, "Uh, did you notice your check engine light is on?" But if you're not so lucky, the warning light stops working altogether. And by then, you're not just ignoring stress – you're in full-blown burnout.



### Who's Driving: Stress or Joy?

Why do we treat stress as inevitable and joy as indulgent? Life's too short to delay, dismiss, or downplay joy. Joy isn't a distraction from our work; it's part of what makes that work sustainable.<sup>18</sup>

At first glance, stress and joy might seem like opposites, but they're not. Stress is a reaction – your body's built-in alarm system – a natural response to change, pressure, or perceived threats.<sup>19</sup> Joy is a feeling of deep gladness or delight that arises from well-being and connection.<sup>20</sup> More than a passing mood, joy builds the resilience we need to thrive over time.<sup>21</sup>

Joy comes from within, often independent of external circumstances; even when external factors don't make you happy, you still can experience joy.<sup>22</sup> That explains why you can experience stress and joy at the same time. I picture them as two people in a car headed to the beach: they can both be along for the ride, but only one can drive at a time. As a leader, you decide who's behind the wheel – and the whole trip (and maybe even the destination) changes based on that choice.

Stress (the negative kind) is a terrible driver. It grips the wheel with white knuckles and speeds past Starbucks, even though an Iced Passion Tea would be perfect right now. With urgency clouding its judgment, stress takes a detour to save time. Meanwhile, you're in the passenger seat doing the math, and so far, that detour has added three hours to the trip and taken four paint chips out of car because you've been rattling down a gravel road for miles.

At this point, you don't even want to go the beach. You just want to turn around, go home, and watch Netflix in peace.

But joy? Joy drives differently.

Joy drives with the windows down and takes the scenic route. Not only does it stop for Starbucks – instead of the drive-thru – you also get out of the car, stretch your legs, and enjoy your tea standing in the sun.

You swing by a roadside farmers market and buy the best peach you've had in years, the kind that tastes like being a kid again: riding in the backseat of the car with your siblings while your mom drives and your grandma sings from the passenger seat. You buy a kite, too. Because what's a day at the beach without a kite? You hop back in the car, ready for the adventure ahead.

Same day. Same destination. Two wildly different experiences.

Of course, real life isn't quite that simple. It's not like stress is always driving and joy's just along for the ride, or vice versa. They take turns. Sometimes joy gets a few miles in, then stress takes over with bad news about the weather and worse news that the cooler you spent an hour packing was left in the driveway.

But here's the good news: even in the middle of stress, research shows we're still capable of experiencing moments of joy.<sup>23</sup> Those moments don't erase stress, but they *do* give our brains and bodies a break. They help us reset, recharge, and keep going.<sup>24</sup> So maybe you don't skip the gravel road altogether. But you do laugh about it once you're back on the main road.

You're still headed to the beach, and joy is still in the car.

Joy lives in the quiet spaces between our emotions when we're grounded in what matters most.<sup>25</sup> It doesn't need perfection. It just needs space.<sup>26</sup>

And that's the problem: when we're stressed, overwhelmed, and running on empty, joy doesn't disappear; but just gets harder to reach.

## Reducing Stress Is a Joy Strategy

That's why reducing stress isn't just a wellness strategy, it's a joy strategy.

When we're no longer in stress survival mode, we start to see things differently. We notice small moments of good. We reconnect with what matters. We stop rushing past our own lives.

Joy becomes accessible, not as a reward we earn after something we do, but as a guide for how we want to be. And when joy is in the driver's seat – even part of the time – life feels a whole better. Studies show that joy improves problem-solving, boosts cognitive flexibility, and leads to more effective decision-making.<sup>27</sup>

Joy helps us think better and lead more effectively.<sup>28</sup> But it doesn't exist in a vacuum, and it can't thrive in a culture where stress is seen as the price of success.

## **Leaders, Teams, and Organizations**

Stress isn't just a personal issue; it's an organizational one. And treating it like a private problem to be solved outside of work hours only makes it worse.<sup>29</sup>

When leaders, teams, and organizations ignore stress, they miss critical opportunities to intervene. But when they tune in, those signals become a powerful source of insight, revealing what's working, what's not, and where change is most needed.

So, what can leaders, teams, and organizations do? Here's where to start.

### ***For Leaders***

On an individual level, stress can be incredibly isolating. We might assume we're the only ones struggling. We might convince ourselves that if we were stronger, more capable, more together, we wouldn't feel this way. So, we stay quiet. We keep grinding. We hide the warning light indicators of stress, even from ourselves.

The more we normalize this kind of silent suffering, the more we reinforce a workplace culture that rewards stress and burnout. Stress thrives in isolation; relief comes through connection.

**STRESS THRIVES IN ISOLATION;  
RELIEF COMES THROUGH CONNECTION.**

#### ■ **Reflect on the myth that stress is the price you pay for success.**

Awareness is the first step to change. Take a moment to consider how the myth that stress is the price you pay for success might be showing up in your leadership – whether you lead people, projects, or both. Reflect on the following questions:

- Where I am modeling this myth, intentionally or unintentionally?
- What kind of workplace culture am I reinforcing?
- What kind of workplace culture do I want to help build?

■ **Identify your stress warning light indicators.**

Are you part of the over 80% who feel workplace stress?<sup>30</sup> Start by learning your personal stress signals, those early warning lights that tell you something's off.

Build a habit of checking in with yourself regularly.

- If stress is low, a quick daily check-in might be enough.
- If stress is high – or if you've been powering through and hoping it'll just get better – you might need to check in more often.

The goal isn't to fix everything at once. It's to notice what your body and brain are trying to tell you.

***For Teams***

Have you ever been on a team where the leader believed the team could do *everything*, and it resulted in a culture of overwhelm, confusion, and burnout? I have. Not only have I been a member of that team but I've also been *the leader* of that team. More than once.

The leader who thought the team could (and should) do everything? Yep, that was me. The leader creating overwhelm, confusion, and burnout? Yep, still me. The problem is that without clear priorities, teams spend time and energy (and stress) reacting instead of delivering meaningful results.

■ **Discuss priorities as a team.**

As a team, have regular conversations about priorities. Is everyone clear on what they are? Is new work reviewed through the lens if it lines up with the existing priorities? Prioritizing out loud helps reduce confusion, prevent overload, and keep the team focused on what matters most. When priorities feel unclear, pause and revisit them together; don't default to the myth of believing the team can, and should, do it all.

■ **Spot stress signals together.**

As a team, pay attention to the early signs of stress: missed deadlines, low energy, irritability, or silence in meetings. Normalize sharing what you're noticing and checking in with one another. When everyone is tuned in, you can spot stress early, and support each other before it spirals.

### ***For Organizations***

Employee engagement in the United States fell to its lowest level in a decade in 2024, with only 31% of employees engaged.<sup>31</sup> The last time employee engagement was that low was 2014.<sup>32</sup> The United States isn't alone: in 2024, a global decline in employee engagement resulted in an estimated \$438 billion loss in productivity for the world economy.<sup>33</sup> One cause of lower employee engagement was a drop in manager engagement.<sup>34</sup>

Have you heard the saying that the best time to plant was 20 years ago and the second-best time is now?<sup>35</sup> Well, the same is true for investing in and supporting managers. The best time to have done it would have been 20 years ago, and every day since. The second-best time is now.

#### ■ **Rethink managers' roles.**

Organizations ask managers to embody the myth of having it all and doing it all. They're expected to be strategic thinkers, operational experts, conflict navigators, and mental health first responders (and more), all while meeting or exceeding performance measures. Yet too often, organizations give them little training, unclear priorities, and unrealistic workloads.

When managers struggle, it's often the predictable result of a system that sets them up to fail. If organizations want to succeed, they need to fundamentally rethink the role of their managers.

#### ■ **Train every manager.**

Fewer than half of managers worldwide have received management training – a critical gap with big consequences.<sup>36</sup> Providing effective training has been shown to cut extreme manager disengagement in half, and it also lays the foundation for better coaching, clearer communication, and stronger team culture.<sup>37</sup>

### **Three Things**

If you only remember three things from Chapter 1, make it these three:

- **Stress levels are high; employment engagement is low.**<sup>38</sup>

If you're struggling, you're not alone. Employee well-being has declined,<sup>39</sup> more than 80% of US workers report experiencing workplace stress, and over 50% say it affects their life at home.<sup>40</sup>

- **Stress isn't always bad.**

Stress is your body's natural response to change or challenge, and it's not always bad.<sup>41</sup> Stress can be positive (eustress), negative (distress), short term (acute) or long term (chronic).<sup>42</sup> Knowing what kind of stress you're experiencing is key to managing it well.

- **Reducing stress is a joy strategy.**

When stress becomes chronic, it can take a serious toll on both people and performance.<sup>43</sup> Reducing stress creates space for joy, and studies show that joy can improve problem-solving, boost cognitive flexibility, and lead to more effective decision-making.<sup>44</sup>

# About the Author

**Amy Leneker** is an optimistic, joy-seeking, recovering workaholic. She's also a leadership consultant who has helped over 100,000 leaders and teams – including those at Fortune 100 companies – lead with less stress and more joy.

Her soul goal? To help one billion people do the same.

With over 25 years of leadership experience – including a decade in the C-suite – Amy understands the soul-crushing toll of burnout because she's lived it. Twice. After surviving her own brush with burnout, Amy became determined to help others succeed without sacrificing their joy, their health, or their weekends.

A first-generation college student, Amy earned both her undergraduate and graduate degrees while working full-time and later raising a family. She has studied leadership at Yale, neuroscience at the NeuroLeadership Institute, and stress resilience at Harvard Medical School.

She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband of over 20 years, Corey, and their two amazing kids, Myles and Clara. For Amy, the perfect day includes sunshine, saltwater, and an empty inbox. The perfect evening? When plans get canceled at the last minute and she can stay home in yoga pants.

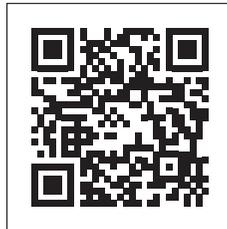
Amy believes life is worth celebrating no matter what day of the week it is – and she's on a mission to prove it.

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# What if your best Mondays are ahead of you?

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