

**CRAZY**

**BUSY**

THIS LAUNSPACH  
**CRAZY BUSY**  
keeping sane in  
a stressful world



**Crazy Busy**



# Crazy Busy

**Keeping Sane in a Stressful World**

Thijs Launspach



**CAPSTONE**  
A Wiley Brand

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# Introduction

**G**iven the incredibly hectic lives we lead today, is it even possible to find enough time to relax and unwind? Can you reduce the amount of stress you experience without your life becoming boring? How can you avoid a burnout while staying productive at the same time?

Meetings, deadlines, breaking news, e-mail notifications, social media updates, a thousand consumer choices per day, our free time filled to the brim with social activities – the life we lead nowadays can be incredibly busy. And we seem to like it that way. We like to feel productive. We value hard work. We enjoy our leisure activities. All things considered, we regard a busy life as a good life.

There may not be a lot wrong with leading a busy life, if you're able to manage the excesses and find ways to recover from the busyness, that is. If you're not careful, however, being 'nicely busy' can easily tip over into being 'crazy busy'. And if you're crazy busy all of the time, this can lead to all kinds of trouble: exhaustion, anxiety and even burnout.

Burnout is a huge and growing problem. Approximately half of all employees in the US say they experience dangerously high levels of stress because of their work. In the UK, one in

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five employees complains of being on the verge of burning out because they are no longer able to handle the pressure of work. For certain groups (women, 25 to 35-year-olds, people who work in the health care sector or in education) these numbers are even higher. In the UK, one in three of all cases of absenteeism are directly related to burnout.

While your body and mind are quite able to process normal day-to-day stress, prolonged stress can result in you suffering a burnout. Up until quite recently, complaints related to stress and burnout were often dismissed as nonsense. We considered burnout to be something that only ever affected perfectionists who were unable to handle the ‘normal’ pressure of work. People who suffered from stress were thought of as ‘weak’ and labelled as drama queens. Fortunately, we now know better: given how busy our lives are these days, everyone is a potential victim of burnout. And that’s all down to the way in which we live and work.

Not only are the people who burn out are feeling the heat. Even if you never reach the burnout stage, an excess of stress can easily diminish your quality of life. This ‘everyday’ kind of stress can cause you to enjoy life less and pay too little attention to others. It can make you feel like you are a slave to the machine. It can give you the feeling that you are always playing catch-up and are never on time with your work, a bit like the White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland who is always ‘too late!’ Stress has a negative effect on how you interact with others and it makes you less outgoing. It prevents you from being fully present in the moment because your mind is always elsewhere. And in the long term, stress can lead to many negative health outcomes, such as heart problems.

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In other words, a high level of stress often comes at a very high price.

There is no need to let it come to that, however, and there are a number of basic principles you can use to prevent stress from ruling your life. Of course, it is impossible to avoid stress completely – it's a simple fact of life – but this does not mean you are condemned to suffer interminably from its slings and arrows. There are plenty of things you can do to minimise the effect busyness has on your life and to prevent excessive levels of stress. And you don't have to wait until the last moment, either, before intervening. You can take steps now that will prevent you from falling victim to stress. You don't have to be wealthy or privileged to be able to enjoy a more relaxed life and experience less stress. Nor does your life have to become boring. It is possible to be as productive as you have always been and to enjoy doing interesting things, but then with a much lower level of stress.

Beating stress requires a bit more effort than engaging in a few wellness sessions, drinking cups of chamomile tea and taking out a subscription to *Happiful Magazine* (although all of these can help, too). If you want a more peaceful life, you might need to rethink the way you live and work. There are a couple of adjustments, techniques and exercises that can help you to deal with the inevitable stress in your work and life. And this book will show you how to use them.

My interest in the subject of stress is not purely academic. Stress has been a recurring theme in my own life, too. Unlike many of my friends and colleagues I (touch wood) have never suffered a burnout. Like many of us, however, I have had

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periods in my life where stress affected me in negative ways. I wasn't much fun to be around. I felt overwhelmed, anxious and depressed. My mind was always preoccupied with work. I lashed out frequently at the people closest to me. The busier I was, the shorter my fuse became. Sometimes I failed to notice what was going on right in front of my nose because my mind was simply miles away. Stress put an enormous strain on my relationship with family and friends. It spoiled holidays, too, because I would spend them running around like a headless chicken. In the past, stress has turned me into a less likable person on more than one occasion. This, I felt, was not the way I wanted to live my life.

While researching the material for this book I read countless studies and publications. I also spoke with many experts in the areas of stress and burnout. And I even subjected myself to some rigorous self-study. I attempted to cure my Facebook addiction. I made drastic changes to the way in which I work (and the way I think about work). I signed up for a mindfulness trainer programme. I hired a personal assistant to see what effect that would have on my stress levels. I even took Ritalin to find out how it would affect my concentration. In an attempt to banish stress I tried different kinds of yoga, learned how to slow my heart rate down with the help of breathing techniques and signed up for different types of massages and wellness treatments (hard work, I know, but someone's got to do it).

What I found out was this: learning how to cope with stress is not rocket science. The most effective ways of dealing with stress are, in fact, pretty self-evident. They involve listening to what your body tells you, setting priorities for yourself and

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being able to say ‘no’ when required. It’s all about finding the right balance between availability and rest, about training your attention and working more efficiently. The challenge lies not so much in knowing what you should do, but in maintaining consistency in how you do things: how do you take care of yourself while people are constantly demanding something from you? In order to manage the stress in your life, you need to take care of yourself first, even if others are demanding your attention. The choice for a less busy life is yours and yours alone, but to be able to make that choice you need to be armed with sufficient self-confidence and self-knowledge.

In this book we will examine the ‘stress problem’. Which aspects – of our work, our personal life and our mind – cause stress? Why do we feel the need to be busy every waking moment of the day? How have we come to accept a busy life as the normal state of affairs? We will examine what stress is exactly, what constitutes a burnout and what you can do to deal with the stress in your life. The book also contains lots of tips on how to prevent stress and boost your concentration and attention. These tips will help you to bring more calm to your life and relieve stress. Take it from me: all of this can make your life a lot more enjoyable.

When you are reading this book you may sometimes have to pause and think about how it applies to your own specific situation. In places I may use the word ‘he’ where I could just as easily have used ‘she’. Remove and replace as you see fit.

You will also encounter the phrases ‘your work’ or ‘your job’ frequently, while you may in fact be your own boss or still a

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student. I also use the word ‘task’ regularly to describe everything from a conversation with a client or writing an article to performing a surgical procedure. Feel free to use the words and phrases that best suit your own situation.

Remember, you are the one who decides how to live your life. And how you manage the stress in your life is your choice, too. But if you don’t choose, others will force their decisions upon you. If you’re unable to make the hard choices, you will be left with a diary that is permanently full to bursting, an eternally hectic life and a perpetual feeling of haste. I cannot guarantee that after reading this book your life will be completely free of stress. But I can promise you that the tips in this book will help you handle stress more effectively. Not a bad prospect, really, considering how crazy busy we all are these days.



# 10 Ways to Lower Your Stress Levels – A Quick Guide

Okay, great, a book that will help you to deal with stress, but chances are that right now you don't have the time to read a whole book about how to live a more relaxed life. So, to start with, here are a few tips that will help you to quickly lower your stress levels; a kind of first aid kit for stress. These tips summarise the main ideas addressed in the individual chapters in the book. To explore the tips in more detail, you can go straight to the relevant chapter.

## 1. Take care of yourself (sleep, eat, rest)

Do you get enough sleep and at the right times? Do you eat well? Do you get enough exercise? Do you have enough time to relax, to 'switch off'? If you answer 'no' to any of these questions, you need to change your lifestyle. Your physical fitness has a major effect on how you feel. If you don't take care of your body, you will automatically experience more stress than when you are rested and fit. That's

why one of the first steps when tackling stress is: take good care of your body, especially when you feel like you don't have the time to do so.

(Chapter 6: Warning!; Essential maintenance)

## **2. Just breathe**

Breathing, you do it all day long. However, by becoming more conscious of how you breathe you can lower your stress level in a matter of minutes. Breathing deeply slows down your heart rate and lowers your blood pressure, which results in a less troubled mind. You can delay or even eliminate your stress response simply by doing a few breathing exercises. It helps just to breathe calmly in through your nose and out through your mouth for a few minutes. For a deeper form of relaxation try breathing in less frequently but more deeply using the 4-7-8 technique: inhale for four seconds, hold your breath for seven seconds and exhale for eight seconds. Sounds simple, but it works like a charm.

(Chapter 4: Your Boss is a Bear; Breathe)

## **3. Turn off all notifications on your devices**

One of the main sources of stress is the many different devices we use throughout the day. Our telephones, laptops and tablets overload us with information, even when we're not looking for it. Once you receive a notification it will stay in your head until you do something with it – that's just the way our brains are wired – including

## 10 Ways to Lower Your Stress Levels – A Quick Guide

when you are busy doing something else. Turning off all notifications will result in fewer interruptions, less switching and consequently less stress. You will still have access to all the information, but only when you decide to access it yourself.

(Chapter 2: Always in a Hurry; The dictator in your pocket)

### 4. Check your e-mail no more than three times a day

Research has shown that people who check their mail only three times a day are happier, more efficient and less stressed than people who check their e-mail continuously throughout the day. This suggests that you can cut your stress level dramatically simply by checking your mail less often: for example, early in the morning, after lunch and at the end of the day. Let's be honest, before the invention of e-mail no one spent the entire day in the hall waiting for the post to drop through the door.

(Chapter 1: We're All Workaholics Now; The terrible tale of e-mail)

### 5. Recognise and react to warning signs

Stress does different things to different kinds of people. While one person may suffer headaches, another will experience pain in their neck and shoulders. Others have trouble sleeping or feel like they are always in a hurry. Some become cynical or develop a temper. It is essential that you learn to recognise your own warning signs and react appropriately

when required. It is only when you know how stress affects you that you can react in an effective manner.

(Chapter 6: Warning!; Recognising your warning signs)

## **6. Keep your head as empty as possible**

What things are currently fighting for attention inside your head? Most of us have a lot going on in our minds at any given moment. If there are too many bits of information demanding your attention, it can result in a permanent kind of background noise, like when there are too many tabs open in your internet browser. With a mind full of stuff it's easy to get overwhelmed. So, to avoid descending further into chaos, it is a good idea to keep your head as empty as possible. Train yourself to write down things that occupy your mind instead of storing them in your memory. The emptier your head, the more space you will have for the stuff that really counts.

(Chapter 2: Always in a Hurry; Organising stuff)

## **7. Plan like a boss**

There is a lot more to planning than simply making a list or adding dates to a calendar. A good plan involves creating an overview, setting priorities and making sure the most important things always get done. Ideally, it allows you to concentrate fully on whatever you are doing at the moment. And that helps immensely when it comes to keeping a clear head.

(Chapter 7: Peace of Mind; Planning for professionals)

## 8. ‘Good enough’ is good enough

Stress is often the result of feeling overwhelmed by your work. This is especially true if you happen to be a perfectionist: it is impossible to do everything perfectly and extremely quickly at the same time. Try experimenting with lowering the bar in terms of what you demand of yourself. Chances are that others will not even notice – if you’re a perfectionist, your personal standards are probably a lot higher than what others generally expect from you. ‘Good enough’ is good enough: this is true more often than you might think.

(Chapter 3: Being Busy is a Choice; Perfectionism)

## 9. Train your attention

When the pressure is on it is essential that you can concentrate on whatever happens to be your top priority at that particular moment. In these days of constant distraction, being able to focus your attention is like a superpower. Luckily, there are ways to train your ability to focus. Mindfulness exercises can be a great help. Here’s one simple exercise: go to the window and sit and stare outside for ten minutes. When you find yourself becoming distracted by your own thoughts, refocus your attention on whatever it was you were looking at.

(Chapter 8: Focused on the Job; Mindfulness)

## 10. Do NOTHING more often

If you're not careful, your week will have filled itself in the blink of an eye with important, enjoyable and interesting things to do. And if you feel you have no choice but to stick to all those plans – even when you have neither the energy nor the inclination to do so – you will soon end up in trouble. Try experimenting with the noble art of cancelling stuff. You don't have to stick to your appointments simply because they are in your diary. It's okay to cancel things, as long as you do this diplomatically and in a timely manner. And who knows, the other person might be just as relieved as you are when you do. . .

(Chapter 6: Warning!; Taking action)

1

**WE'RE ALL  
WORKAHOLICS NOW**





**B**ack in the 1930s the economist John Maynard Keynes had a vision. He predicted that in the future we would only have to work 15 hours a week. At the time, technology was changing fast and much of the manual labour was being taken over by machines, with the result that the same amount of money could be made in less time and with a lot less effort. Where workers once needed a whole day to complete a certain task, it now only required a few hours of their time.

This meant that workers would no longer be required to spend most of their day in the factory, Keynes reasoned, and they would have more time left over for the really important stuff: relaxing, studying, spending time with their families and generally enjoying life.

This prediction did not turn out to be entirely correct, however, and we all know what happened instead. Factory owners discovered that the opportunity to scale up using the same number of workers meant that they could actually produce more. They expanded their factories and invested in modern machines. They split the production process up into smaller

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tasks and gave workers the responsibility for one of those tasks. Workers went from being makers of products to just cogs in a machine, responsible for a single sub-task in a much larger production process. As a result, goods began rolling off the conveyor belt at lightning speed and productivity went through the roof. And the poor workers? They were condemned to working increasingly longer shifts, raising their production goals and dealing with micromanaging oversight. Instead of enjoying more free time, they ended up working even longer hours.

Today we are facing a similarly momentous change in the way we work: a digital revolution. Only 20 years ago the internet was the exclusive domain of nerds who dialled into the network using a modem. Now we are all connected to the web – and that has major implications for almost every aspect of our lives. The internet has changed work drastically. Messages are sent and received in the blink of an eye. Everyone is online and available all of the time. You don't even need to be on the same continent, never mind in the same room, as other people anymore in order to collaborate – a fact that entire industries were quick to embrace during the COVID crisis. In the modern era, you can work at any time of the day or night you like. But there are also drawbacks, such as the blurring of the line between your personal and professional life (especially when 'working remotely' from your own couch or bedroom) and the many extra hours of work you put in as a consequence.

The West is becoming more of a knowledge economy, as the actual production of goods continues to be farmed out to countries where the cost of labour is low. At work we now use our hands sparingly, but our minds all the more. Much of