



STRESS, BURNOUT & COMPASSION FATIGUE DURING SEASONS OF UNCERTAINTY

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INTRODUCTION

I am sure you have heard about stress. I am pretty sure you may have also heard that stress is going to kill us. It is known as the silent killer of the twenty-first century. We see reports with titles such as, "Stress is Linked to 80 Per Cent of all Medical Illnesses" or headlines like, "Best to Not Stress the Small Stuff, Because It Could Kill You" or "Stress: The Killer Disease." These headlines run in reputable magazines and journals. It is a common message across the board that stress is bad and it is going to kill us.

Stress is all around us. **TRUE**

Believing that stress is going to kill us. **FALSE**

It is imperative that we start learning more about stress and working with a more productive narrative about its effects. We know our daily lives are stress-filled. And, at times, it feels impossible to change or escape what society has become. This is true. What is also true is that how we THINK about stress is the key. Researchers like Dr. Kelly McGonigal help us to understand that it is our perception of stress which is linked to negative outcomes, not the stress itself.

*"I finally accepted that I could not calm the storm,
but I could calm myself, and the storm did pass."*

CURRENT STATE OF OUR WORLD & STRESS

Recent global events have exasperated an already fragile system. This was evident when we found ourselves in a global health pandemic with COVID-19. The year 2020 walloped us. People across the planet struggled and continue to struggle in their own way. I know that the events of the last 14 months will be taught in future history classes.

We are all knowledge holders of what this experience has been like to live through. As global citizens, we were first instructed to shelter in place. For some, this meant trying to work from home, and/or navigating elder care, or raising and teaching children out of school. For others, sheltering in place brought total isolation from everyone and everything. Grocery shopping required people to learn new protocols. Loved ones were separated. Many people died and are dying still. We all collectively grieved our illusions of certainty and predictability, the semblance of normal life. Events that had been planned were cancelled. Stress was rampant. Then, as the global pandemic was going into the sixth month, a much needed racial reckoning swept through North America. An already weary world was faced with another reality that rocked many of us to our core. I feel as though the world and our way of life has been scorched to the ground, leaving her mark on our mental and emotional health.

AND YET, WE PERSIST.

Here is my big idea: We need to learn how to STRESS WISELY! And in this white paper, I will show you how.

UNDERSTANDING STRESS

We all know what stress feels like in the moment: the raging pulse, a pounding heart, and the short, heavy, uncontrollable breathing that overwhelms us when we experience a freight: a near traffic collision, the pressure of an important deadline, a computer update just as you are logging into a Zoom call! We recognize the sudden surge feeling but we do not often talk about the silent creep. The slow, steady build up that leads to the real damage in our lives. Like the boiling frog fable: if you put a frog in a pot of boiling water, the frog will jump out immediately. But if you put the frog in the pot of water and bring it to a boil gradually, the frog will boil to death. As we navigate our lives, sometimes we take an immediate hit, and other times, there is a slow leak. Both can bring down a ship. And with the current state of the world, we are taking both types of hits daily- slams and slow leaks. That is why we feel as though we are going under.

The most common feedback I am hearing from people, from all walks of life and vastly diverse industries, is this: "I'm done". I appreciate that. I feel that. What we need to do now is find a kinder way of getting better at stress.

LEARNING ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL STRESS PATTERNS AND BEHAVIOURS

- 1. **Understanding how you stress:** How does your stress show up in your life? Ask yourself how your thoughts and actions are different in times you feel stressed.
- 2. **Identifying your sources of stress:** Where is your stress coming from? List it. Name it.
- 3. **Develop self-awareness of your own stress signals and your go-to responses:** What does your stress behaviour look like? What are your patterns? What does your coping look like?
- 4. **Identify how you would like to respond to your stress?** Being proactive about stress is obviously ideal but not always possible. How do you want to express your stress? Who models stress responses well that you could learn from?
- 5. **Make your own stress playbook:** Make a list of your common stress behaviours and map out how you will cope.

Here is a common example:

Stressor: Working with a computer all day

STRESS SYMPTOMS	REMEDY
Tight neck and shoulders	Mindful Moment: Pause - Draw circles in the air with your nose in both directions for 30 seconds.
Eye Strain	20-20-20 Rule: Look away from your computer every 20 minutes for 20 seconds and look 20 feet away.
Headaches	Schedule water breaks at the top of every hour and 3 paced breath cycles - Inhale for 4 - hold - Exhale for 4.
Lack of Motivation	Take breaks - 50 mins on-task max then 5-minute recovery activity.

Most people struggle to address stress because they are trying to address everything, all at once. Break it down into smaller focus points. You need to address the immediate presence of stress in your life, then you can explore a more proactive approach to stressing wisely.



UNDERSTANDING BURNOUT

Stress and burnout are often confused, and it is easy to understand why that is. After all, the physical manifestations are often quite similar: headaches, fatigue, difficulty regulating sleep. However, unlike stress, which is a response, burnout is a very real condition which, according to Amba Brown, is the accumulation of stressors over time resulting in “unmanageable stress levels”. In other words, burnout is the natural evolution of chronic stress if it is goes **unchecked**.

Burnout is characterized by three critical symptoms beyond the more common stress responses:

1. Emotional exhaustion
2. Cynicism
3. Personal inefficacy

Psychology Today identifies burnout as most commonly emerging when we feel out of control, are working toward a goal that doesn't resonate, or simply do not feel supported. On the difference between stress and burnout, Dr. Haas, writes, “if the stress feels never-ending and comes with feelings of emptiness, apathy and hopelessness, it may be indicative of burnout”.

Originally coined by American Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in the 1970s to describe the effects of extreme stress placed on “helping professionals”, Amba Brown notes that the term “burnout” has evolved to include the consequences of excessive stress and the loss of our ability to cope.

When we think of burnout, we often consider workplaces to be the culprit. In fact, the WHO defines burnout as “a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”. People not only suffer emotionally but work productivity suffers as well. Researchers explain that working 50 hours decreases productivity, but working beyond 55 hours is like letting our work fall off a cliff! It is riddled with errors and mistakes and forcing us to spend additional time making revisions and corrections.

Yet, while workplace burnout is very real, accepting this as the only definition of burnout limits its scope and impact on our health and well-being. Dr. Carter notes that “non-work burnout” is less known and can be the great cause of stigma and stereotypes, making those suffering from it feel as if they are to blame for their challenges and as a result, they often hide their struggles from others.

BURNOUT REFRAME

In my remote work with thousands of people, all around the world, since COVID started, it is not just the volume and time in work that is leading to burnout. It is the TIME OUTSIDE OUR VALUES and the INVISIBLE LABOUR that is causing significant levels of burnout. Burnout and disconnection are the pandemic within a pandemic. Here is an example: You value family above all else; yet, you are now sending your children away because you are in online meetings, or you are putting them in front of screens for hours and you feel like a terrible parent. You value being a present parent, but now you are a distracted parent and that takes its toll on you. Or, you value collaboration and community, and you are working in a silo. Without your mates next to you, your work becomes heavy and unfulfilling. I have spoken with front line nurses who prides themselves on excellent patient care, and now they are forced to fill up medical gloves with warm water to leave on patients, to give them a sense of someone being with them. When we spend time living and working outside our values, it erodes our soul.

ADDRESSING BURNOUT: RESET AND RECOVERY

According to Dr. Kotler, burnout is not just extreme stress; it is peak performance gone off the rails. He writes that burnout costs you both motivation and momentum. It would be optimal to avoid getting into burnout, but this is not always possible. Recognizing that some of us are already there, Dr. Kotler recommends active brain recovery that shifts brainwaves into the alpha range. This can only be achieved through a complete interruption of our routine and demands. We need to rest. Fully rest.

We need active brain recovery through sleep, self-care, and a total reset.

Sleep is critical to recovery and learning. Kotler recommends a dark room with cold temperatures and

no screens as they interfere with our brain's ability to shut down. Self-care must become a protocol you put into place. For some this is body work. You need to address the body for rest. For others, it is mind work. You need a literal break from thinking and being productive. I call this the need for full 'suspension of responsibility' when mental overwhelm hits.

My extraordinary colleague, and favourite physiologist, Dr. Greg Wells is a brilliant resource for all things recovery. Check out his book, Rest, Refocus and Recharge! It is the best in the field.

The bottom line is this: When you recognize that you are experiencing burnout you must STOP to minimize the blast radius and PRIORITIZE active recovery immediately. You cannot afford not to.



THE NEXT FRONTIER OF DISTRESS & BURNOUT: COMPASSION FATIGUE

Compassion fatigue is a unique type of distress. Unlike burnout, it is not depletion from everyday stressors; it is depletion from feeling another person's pain. Dr. Haas defines compassion fatigue as a condition in which someone becomes numb to the suffering of others, feels less able to display empathy toward them, or loses hope in their ability to help. She notes that it most often affects healthcare professionals, soldiers, or anyone who is regularly exposed to human suffering. First coined by nurse Carla Joinson to describe the unique form of burnout experienced by caregivers, it was further developed by Dr. Charles Figley who likened it more to secondary traumatic stress.

DR. FIGLEY SUMMED UP COMPASSION FATIGUE AS THE 'COST OF CARING'

For the first time in my work on resiliency and wellness, I am seeing compassion fatigue in non-traditional industries. I am seeing it in the faces of business leaders, pharmacists, banking professionals, HR professionals, educators, and administrators, just to name a few.

Compassion fatigue dramatically impacts a person's ability to practice empathy to others and themselves. Therefore, self-care and well-being practices are collapsing. People have lost hope that they can feel any differently. In my practice I see a correlation between compassion fatigue and self-neglect. People have lost hope that they can feel any differently while the pandemic rages on. They are waiting for it to end to feel better once more. It does not have to be this way.

WHAT DOES COMPASSION FATIGUE LOOK LIKE?

Dr. Carter identifies **denial** as "one of the most detrimental symptoms" of compassion fatigue because it prevents those experiencing it from effectively assessing how fatigued they are, which prevents people from addressing it or seeking out help.

Dr. Stern of the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence refers to the **"emotional labour"** as the effort needed to manage a discrepancy that often emerges with compassion fatigue: the "happy face" those experiencing it put on for the rest of the world regardless of how they are feeling on the inside. Further, Dr. Stern identifies the **"overwhelming emotional residue"** of other people's trauma as leaving those suffering no longer knowing how to "nurture their inner life". When someone is experiencing compassion fatigue, they cannot make themselves care anymore; they cannot care for others nor for themselves. This is where the "I'm done" feeling comes in. You have given everything you have, and it feels as though it didn't make a difference at all.

DR. ROBYNE SAYS: YOU NEED TO HELP YOURSELF TO HELP OTHERS.

As global citizens we have cared so deeply, for so long, about so many things. Many people are left feeling numb, disconnected, and uninterested or incapable of caring anymore. We just have no more empathy to give. What is amazing about the human condition is that we can heal and reframe our perspective. Many people I work with share that they are not allowed to feel bad or have a bad day because they are living in an abundance of privilege. I hear, "People have it so much harder than me, Robyne, who am I to feel bad?" Even when you live with privilege, you can still have a bad day! The reality is that when you stop practicing empathy for yourself, you actually stop showing empathy to others. The more you show empathy to your situation, the more you have to offer the world. If you are overwhelmed right now, allow yourself permission to be overwhelmed and tend to your needs. It doesn't matter if you are drowning in 2 feet of water or 10 feet of water, you are still drowning. Take the side of the boat. Reach for the hand. Every human has the right to receive 'care'.

BEWARE FOR THE HIDDEN TRAP WITHIN COMPASSION FATIGUE

In her 2016 Ted X talk, "Drowning in Empathy: The Cost of Vicarious Trauma", Amy Cunningham, explored the concept of **self-entitlement** in the context of compassion fatigue. Essentially, Cunningham describes self-entitlement as the justification of negative, maladaptive and potentially destructive behaviours because of the positive things we do. This may explain why we might snap at a colleague or family member because we are carrying the weight of the whole world right now! As the person who is managing everything we engage in self-destructive behaviours because we feel as though we earned the right to. I see people neglecting their self-care because they are simply fed-up. I get that. I feel that. I also know that there is another approach.



WHAT CAN WE DO?

In my work as an educator, I often challenge my students to think about wicked problems (problems that do not have one clear solution and will need an interconnected and multidisciplinary approach to solving them) by asking themselves three questions:

1. What (What is happening?)
2. So, What? (Why does this matter?)
3. Now What? (What can we do about it?)

I think this works for our discussion here too. We know what stress is. We have established that it matters and needs to be addressed. Now, let us jump into what are we going to do about it!

PRINCIPLE 1 FOR STRESSING WISELY: SIGNATURE STRENGTHS

When thinking about stress, we rarely think about our strengths concurrently. Yet, here lies the first key to unlocking your stressing wisely practice. Use what you've got!

Knowing ourselves, how we stress and essentially, how we engage in stress is a learned skill. According to Dr. Niemiec, a strengths-based approach to managing stress is one that leverages our inner capacities, character strengths that are unique to us, to navigate daily stressors sustainably.



WHAT ARE SIGNATURE STRENGTHS?

There are three key features:

- Essential:** the strength feels essential to who you are as a person.
- Effortless:** when you enact the strength, you feel natural and effortless.
- Energizing:** using the strength uplifts you and leaves you feeling happy, in balance, and ready to take on more.

Here are some examples of signature strengths based on the work of Peterson and Seligman (2004):

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-control• Social intelligence• Gratitude• Hope• Humor• Creativity• Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open-mindedness• Love of learning• Wisdom• Bravery• Integrity• Kindness• Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fairness• Leadership• Forgiveness• Modesty• Prudence/Discretion• Appreciation of Nature• Spirituality
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Reflection Questions:

- What are your signature strengths?
- How can you bring your strengths into your stressing wisely practices?
- How can this approach to stressing wisely with signature strengths change how you currently feel?

EXAMPLES OF SIGNATURE STRENGTHS IN ACTION

Critical thinking	Reframe a negative situation or stressors.
Hope	Protect your peace and practice holding a hopeful morale.
Prudence	Use Day Mapping (To Do Lists – To Be Lists – Not To Do Lists)
Self-regulation	Hold calm and engage in life with work balance practices.
Forgiveness	Let go and move on from little-but-distressing experiences.
Gratitude	Counting our blessings and share gratitude for others.

TAKE AWAY: Use your signature strength to address your stress. Remind yourself about your strengths and align those strengths into your stress management practices.

PRINCIPLE 2 FOR STRESSING WISELY: BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are an essential personal practice for stressing wisely. We need boundaries not to keep people out as much as to protect our peace. Boundaries in your professional and personal life are **your life’s furthest limits to how far you can go, or how much you can handle, or how much you can hold**. Boundary setting is meant to be a life enhancing system of ‘yes’ and ‘no’.

Grab and go idea: Will saying yes to this request, attending this event, or giving someone my time enhance or hinder my day? There are five types of boundaries:

PHYSICAL

Honour your body, home, and space. My favourite metaphor for this type of boundary is “pulling up your drawbridge” to your life. Sometimes we open the drawbridge to our life and welcome people in, other times, we must close it. And in extreme cases – we may even need to form a shield wall (Just one Viking reference in this paper).

TIME/ENERGY

Own your time and energy, leaving something for yourself at the end of the day. (This is not selfish – it is science!)

MENTAL

Protect your mental state. Don’t allow people to label or gaslight you.

MATERIAL

Set limits to your giving or lending of your material goods.

EMOTIONAL

Hold the freedom to think and feel how you like, not how you are told to feel. Your feelings are valid and real even if they are inconvenient to someone else. Side note – I recall being told by a former supervisor that my feminist approach was inconvenient in the workplace!

At first, boundary setting may feel strange or awkward. Thankfully, the more we practice setting up boundaries, the less challenging it becomes to institute them. You may even start liking the process! It is a mighty and powerful force that comes over you when you look after your own needs. The warrior that lives within us all says, “finally!”.

TAKE AWAY: Boundaries are necessary for stressing wisely. Each time you set and hold a personal boundary, you are affirming that you matter and you have the right to make choices that are best for you and your loved ones.



PRINCIPLE 3 FOR STRESSING WISELY: FEELINGS BEFORE BEHAVIOURS

This is the game changer. Brace yourself. You are going to radically shift how you do self-care!

Think about **HOW YOU WANT TO FEEL** then find the behaviour to elicit the feeling.
This is going to change your life!

To fully embrace this practice, we need a quick re-cap on emotions. Emotions are universal. Dr. Paul Ekman is the Wayne Gretzky or LeBron James of emotion research. He is the master of this field. He deduced we have the six base or primary emotions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise.

Emotions live within our subconscious and, by definition, can only be felt through the experience that gives rise to them. Feelings are both emotional and physical sensations of a conscious experience. So, emotions serve as the feeling factory. And that feeling factory needs an atlas to contain all the feelings we can feel up!

HOW I WANT TO FEEL	WHAT I CAN DO?	
Affectionate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spend time with a loved one• Play with a pet	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read or watch a love story• Send a card or message to someone
Focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write a To-Do-List• Do a week/month plan or battle-board	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wear noise cancelling headphones
Energized	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get outside - 'Vitamin Nature'• Workout	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Play. Dance. Laugh.• Listening to music
Confident	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Map your skill sets, talents, and gifts• Make a plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Check out Dr. Ivan Joseph's work
Engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify meaning, purpose and value-add• Set a new goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mentor someone
Hopeful	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be in hope with others• Look for examples of hope and caring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Re-frame negative thoughts and tendencies
Grateful	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Each day revisit new things to be grateful for• Share your gratitude for others	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use visual reminders to stay mindful
Refreshed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Change in body temperature• Rest	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Perform activities that bring you joy and laughter

TAKE AWAY: We can use our emotional psychology to our advantage when it comes to self-care. Think of what you want to feel then go for the behaviour to make this feeling come to life. This is just a start. The possibilities are endless.



WHAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO TO MITIGATE STRESS

Leadership during a crisis is not for the faint of heart! I explored leadership and resiliency in my paper, *Cultivating Resilient Leaders and Teams* (<https://robynehd.ca/open-resources/>). I do want to take a moment to highlight some research informed practices that I have come upon, seen, and have developed during the past year that have shown significant promise for supporting our teams and organizations when it comes to stress, burnout and compassion fatigue. I also recognize that these are not always possible, but I do encourage leaders to get creative. Just because we have never tried this before, does not mean that it is not possible. If it does not work the first time, do not forgo all solutions. Sometimes we need more than two rodeos to get things right!

JOB FUNCTION

- Flexibility in workflow, hours, response time.
- No Friday afternoon meetings or no meetings at lunch time.
- Emotional health supports offered as a regular part of the job (not stigmatizing people who need it).
- Encouraging time away from work.
- Offer mental health days, or OOO (Out of Office) days without explanation.
- Promote life with work balance (ensure your actions match your words and expectations).
- Adjust workload as needed and be clear with priorities.
Not everything on your list can be priority number one.
- Check-in and address any arbitrary rules that could be impacting your team.
- Ask your team what would help right now?
- Shorter work weeks in the summer (4 days) or Fridays off before long weekends.
- Stipends for using personal resources (computers, WiFi, telephones) to do company work.

RECOGNITION

- Respect the people as people first and foremost, then as employees.
- We are still in the thick of a global pandemic. It is still overwhelming for many. Everyone is at different places emotionally, mentally, and physically.
- Acknowledge invisible labour and the uniqueness of every person and situation.
- Realize that we as employers are going INTO people's home via technology. No person working remotely should have to apologize for also being a parent, dog owner, or having other people in their home. We are intruding on their home.
- Address toxic behaviour immediately.
- Create a culture of gratitude and collaboration.

COMMUNITY

- Be mindful of new employees and how they are connecting with others.
- Be aware of life events like retirements, birthdays, graduations, etc.
- Think about mentorship programs.
- Make time for things other than work as a team - Party with Purpose!
- Foster team identity and a sense of belonging.
- Start a book club with your office mates.
- Recognize and acknowledge small acts of everyday leadership.
- Find a way to give back. Even small acts of service as a collective help.





FINAL THOUGHT

Stress is part of life. Burnout will happen when prolonged stress goes unaddressed. Compassion fatigue is real and needs a different approach to restore balance. Never have I witnessed such stress AND such strength. I want to take a moment to thank each and every person for their service. For whatever role you hold, whatever job (paid or unpaid) you have fulfilled, and for every time you contributed to the recovery of our communities, I thank you.

Acknowledging and validating our realities is the first step in stressing wisely. We may be depleted but we are not defeated. Stress, burnout and compassion fatigue can co-exist with resiliency. Rest but do not quit. The world needs you.



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ABOUT

Described as one of the most sought-after, engaging, thought-provoking, and truly transformative international speakers and scholars in her field, Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe is a multi-award-winning education and psychology instructor, author, and resiliency expert. She specializes in navigating stress and change, personal wellness in the workplace, and optimal performance. In her speaking and scholarly work, Dr. Robyne offers us accessible and practical strategies grounded in research that helps to foster and cultivate resiliency within ourselves and others.

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