

How to Take the Heat
Out of Life's Stress

COOLING DOWN STRESS

Cameron Johnston

Praise for Cameron Johnston's previous books and workshops

"Cameron's books and the stress soup concept are outstanding."

Dr Hans A Diehl, bestselling author, founder of CHIP and Professor of Preventative Medicine, Loma Linda University, School of Medicine

"Cooling Down Stress provided our employees with straightforward, uncomplicated tools to manage their stress in our ever-changing, fast-paced technological world. In business we are always updating systems and processes and we recognise that change is always stressful for our employees. Cameron offers everyone the essential skills to manage stress in the 21st Century."

Beki Held, Human Resources Manager VantageOne Credit Union, Vernon, British Columbia, Canada

"Deep-seated stress healing tools are priceless especially where grief, anger and other negative emotions are rife."

Garth, Ontario, Canada

More from Australia

"Practical stress management steps that anybody can use. Helpful to know others have experienced burnout and healed. Positive and encouraging."

Bunbury, Western Australia

"I love the soup illustration, which brought out so many aspects of managing stress for me."

Perth, Western Australia

"Clarified a stress management plan for me that will work, thanks."

Queensland

"I came away feeling so positive. I can do it! I can enjoy life!"

Bairnsdale, Victoria

"Very informative. Simple, well thought-out methods."

Perth, Western Australia

"An excellent resource. Meets a real felt need."

Perth, Western Australia

More from Canada

"Excellent. I gained more practical help here than in a recent 2-day stress management workshop."

T Fagrie, Police Officer, RCMP Regina, Saskatchewan

"A few years ago, I found Cameron's stress management materials and he literally changed and saved my life. I now enjoy life and can laugh again."

Debbie S., Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan

"Very user friendly and easy to read."

Tammy B., TV Host, Okanagan Today, British Columbia

"This book is a really good read, very informative and I enjoyed the story format."

Anne Marie K., Kelowna, British Columbia

"Job burnout section was good eye-opener. Well done!"

B Sperling, British Columbia

"Identified problems, then gave practical solutions. Didn't leave me wondering what to do. Some actions I can start immediately!"

J Osterlund, Manager, British Columbia

"Practical stress coping strategies that I now use daily to prevent stress from making me sick."

Diane W., British Columbia

"Cameron recently presented two workshops on managing stress and there was an astounding 97% satisfaction with the program."

P Kenmey, Director Education Services, Atlantic Health Sciences Corp., New Brunswick

"The resources and humorous stories are very valuable and practical."

V Mehaney, Program Services Co-ordinator, David Thompson Health Region, Alberta

"Our group of over 100 rated this presentation as the highlight of our annual conference. Cameron's presentation was professional and easy to follow, with just the right amount of humour."

J Tighe, President, News Group, Victoria, British Columbia

"Gives hope for resolving deep-seated stress and moving forward with effective tools."

K Smith, British Columbia

"Very clear steps to managing stress with valuable life lessons that are often overlooked."

Student, University of British Columbia

"Every student needs to master these stress management strategies."

Student, University of Northern British Columbia

"If everyone applied the principles Cameron shares, burnout would become an issue of the past. This stress management material should be mandatory reading for everyone who works in people professions."

Pastor, Grand Prairie, Alberta

"This is critical stress management information that should be made available to all teachers."

Teacher, 150 Mile House Elementary, British Columbia

"This seminar has been another positive turning point in my life."

D Grice, Salvation Army Officer, British Columbia

More from USA

"This book is excellent on stress management. The presentation is uncomplicated and the book is well worth reading with practical and time-tested advice."

Dr J S Maresca, New York

"Bright and fun! Very useful book."

Writer's Digest

"The book is excellent for students, faculty and staff. Informative, energetic and interesting."

C Howard, Director of Student Life, Hazard Community and Technical College, Kentucky

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Preface

It is hard to believe but I have been using the analogy of cooling down soup to teach stress management principles for over 25 years. Tens of thousands of people have increased their resilience and stress hardiness by learning and practising these basic principles of stress management. These tools are evergreen; that is, they can be adapted to different times and circumstances across all professions to deal with all the most common stressors.

I clearly remember the Sunday afternoon, during a break in a stress management seminar I was presenting, when a lady came to me and said appreciatively, "Five years ago you saved my life!"

It is always nice to receive such kind words and my reaction was simply, "How did I do that?"

"Five years ago, in this very room, you presented the same seminar," she continued. "I was here with my life in a mess. At the time I was working at a job I hated, with the boss from hell, plus I was in the advanced stages of burnout.

"That day, I learned three crucial things from you. First, you gave me hope that I could heal and get my life back. Then I heard that it was possible to go back and re-train for a better job. Finally, you gave me the basic steps to manage stress, which I began to put into action immediately. The last few years have been tough, especially as a single mum, but I recovered from burnout and have trained for my new job which I love. Thanks to you I just fired that boss and I am here today for a stress management refresher."

This is a sample of the many such healing stories I have heard from participants at stress management seminars or readers of my book. These people come from across all segments of society and professions, especially teachers, health care providers and business leaders in

communities across Canada, Australia and the USA.

The soup analogy that I use in my seminars and in this book came about through a conversation with a friend. It was about nine o'clock one evening, when I visited Fritz Wirtz Sr in his Kelowna, British Columbia, real estate office. We had been discussing an upcoming stress management seminar and, as I was leaving, he said, "We hear a lot of talk today about managing stress. My father taught me a simple principle of stress management that has served me well over the years."

"What's that?" I asked casually.

"Don't eat the soup as hot as they cook it!" he replied.

It seemed an odd thing to say and it caught my attention, but I didn't understand the principle at first.

"Pardon me?"

"Don't eat the soup as hot as they cook it!"

Sensing my interest, Fritz continued. "People can make your life complex, if you let them. Strong reactions and high emotions can make you stressed, but letting people and circumstances cool off can be very helpful."

I was beginning to get it. Don't eat the soup as hot as they cook it! In other words, let things cool down before you take on the problem or situation. This was a profound stress management insight.

If you were to meet my friend Fritz, you would get the impression that nothing bothers him. He is always busy, but he appears relaxed and seems to have little stress. The truth is, he has pressures and demands on his time and energy that few can appreciate. But he has developed coping skills that allow him to manage his stress effectively.

Recently, while greeting participants arriving at a stress management seminar, I happened to pass by the registration table when a participant recognised Fritz and asked, "What are you doing here? You never have any stress."

After the woman had moved into the lecture hall, he whispered to me,

“She thinks I have no stress. If she only knew!”

He shared with me just one major challenge he was facing at the time. He knew stress firsthand, that was clear. Yet he appeared to be relaxed and stress free. He had learned through years of practise not to eat the soup as hot as they cook it and how to cool it.

There are several ways to cool soup before eating it. You can let it sit awhile; stir in cold milk; blow on it; drop in a couple of ice cubes; or begin by eating around the edge. There are also ways to cool the stress in your life and reduce its negative effects. This book is designed to give you ways to cool your stress and—like Fritz—be relaxed, confident and able to grow, whatever your circumstances.

However, while most readers will need to cool off their soup, a few will need to heat theirs up. Boredom and living below one’s potential can be as stressful as a super busy, fast-paced lifestyle. What follows will help in both situations.

Chapters 1 to 12 of this book were originally published as *Don’t Eat the Soup as Hot as They Cook It!* These chapters have been revised and updated and the book is now re-published with a new title, *Cooling Down Stress*. It continues with the original story format, adding four new chapters which focus on strategies to resolve deep-seated stress. Resolving negative emotions with forgiveness and going through grief after major loss are two areas we focus on in the new chapters. They contain practical solutions that bring healing, resilience and protection against the negative effects of today’s increasingly fast-paced life.

Stress is the spice of life. I hope this book will assist you in mastering skills that will help you enjoy life to the full while preventing serious stress-related illnesses.

Cameron Johnston

April, 2020

Chapter 1

THE PRESSURE COOKER OF UNMANAGED STRESS

Business was unbelievable for Chris Brooks. His new start-up business had taken off and was expanding rapidly. But Chris' personal life was spinning out of control. He was always busy. There was never enough time.

He began to experience frequent headaches and chest pains. He was irritable with his employees and family. His energy levels were low. Lack of sleep made him chronically tired, and facing mornings was becoming especially difficult.

"Wake up, wake up!" Jessica, his wife, urged as she shook him awake one morning. She had noticed the gradual change in Chris and she was concerned. "Chris, start moving or you'll miss your appointment with the legal team!"

With a groan, Chris realised that a new day was upon him. But where was his energy to attack it? Each day it seemed to take him longer and longer to get less done.

Chris stumbled into the bathroom. Jessica mumbled something about no hot water. He wasn't really listening and what he heard was, "Go easy on the hot water."

Suddenly and without warning he was completely awake! The cold water splashed over his tired body. His brain, now fully alert, recognised that if he wanted to have a shower this morning, he was going to have to have a cold one! He was pleasantly surprised to find that he soon got used to the cold water.

When finished, Chris was more awake than he had been in weeks. He even felt good. He told Jessica so over a quick coffee and cigarette—his

usual breakfast.

“Oh!” Jessica responded, “I read about that in a magazine at the doctor’s office the other day. Apparently, cold water is not only good for waking you up, but if you alternate hot and cold water while you’re showering it also improves your circulation and increases your white blood cell count—that helps the body fight off disease.”

Jessica was in her late 30s and was becoming more interested in health. She had started following some fitness and health accounts on social media and had recently registered for an upcoming wellness seminar. She was worried about Chris and hoped he would come along with her, but thought she had little chance of convincing him to. She decided that she would have a serious talk with him when he came home from work that night.

“Interesting!” said Chris as he rushed out the door. “If it’s that good for me, maybe I’ll try a cold shower again sometime!”

Tragedy on the sales team

The next morning, Chris dragged himself to the office. Jessica’s talk the night before was still challenging him. He didn’t think he had seen her so serious in the nearly 20 years they had been married. First, she made it clear that he needed to slow down and spend more time with her and the kids. Then, he had to start taking better care of his health. She wanted him to make a doctor’s appointment for a complete physical. Finally, she’d asked him to attend a wellness seminar with her.

It’s not as bad as Jess thinks, Chris mused. I am a bit tired and overworked, but I’m only 40. We’ll take a short vacation in a few weeks and everything will be fine. As for the wellness seminar? Have mercy! Jessica has gone too far with that.

As Chris was thinking about his counterstrategy, the phone rang. It was his business partner, Joshua.

“Chris, I’ve got bad news. I’ve just had a call from Andrew’s wife, Sarah.

Andrew collapsed this morning on his way to the office. Some passers-by called an ambulance, but they weren't able to revive him. It was a heart attack. Sarah's in shock. We'll have to tell the team, Chris. I'll arrange some flowers."

Chris was speechless. His 30-year-old sales manager dead of a heart attack? As reality settled in, Chris began to shake uncontrollably. Andrew was the most talented salesperson on the team. Just yesterday, he had been sitting in Chris' office planning a business trip to Asia.

The next few days were a blur and, shortly after the funeral, Chris was in his doctor's office. As Dr Moore examined him, Chris mentioned Andrew's death, and the fact that he was only 30 years old.

"Yes," his doctor said. "Heart attacks are occurring at younger and younger ages and they're nearly all lifestyle related and preventable. In fact, with nearly half of all heart attacks, the very first symptom is that the person drops dead!"

Then he leaned over and looked directly at Chris and said, "Chris, you're a prime candidate for a heart attack. You're a heavy smoker. You're significantly overweight and you have high blood pressure."

He went on to explain how, at his age and stress levels, eating the typical high-fat, low-fibre diet, combined with little or no physical activity, he was a heart attack waiting to happen.

"My advice is for you to make some serious lifestyle changes immediately. Most risk factors of heart disease can be reduced and even reversed. Stop smoking, slow down, and learn to manage your stress. Eat a more plant-based diet and start exercising regularly."

Chris was in shock. *Maybe Jess was right*, he thought as he left the doctor's office. *I need to make some major changes. The question is how?*

Cancer hits a dear friend

Jessica was thinking happily about Chris' agreement to attend the wellness seminar as she came home from dropping the kids off at school.

Andrew's sudden death and the doctor's serious chat, including his prescription, were not lost on Chris. Fear can be a good motivator, if only temporarily. Just then, Jessica's phone rang.

"Sweetheart," Chris said, "I've just heard from Joshua. The results of Kate's biopsy weren't good. She's got breast cancer and it looks serious. She's in the hospital now and is scheduled for major surgery first thing tomorrow morning. Joshua is with her but maybe a female friend would be helpful. Do you have some time today to go and see her?"

"I'll *make* the time," Jessica replied.

"Thank you, honey," Chris said. "First, Andrew and now Kate. I can't believe it."

After ending the call, Jessica sat down in shock. *Kate with breast cancer! She was only 35—and with a young family.* Joshua, Kate's husband, and Chris had been business partners for more than 10 years. She and Jessica had become good friends as their children grew up together.

Jessica's visit with Kate was more difficult than she had expected. The doctor had just brought word that, even with radical surgery, she only had about six months to live. Everything had happened so quickly.

Chris came home for dinner exhausted. With Andrew gone and Joshua off work to be with Kate, he was now down two key staff members in the office. He was devastated for his friends and, at the same time, he was stressed to the limit with the extra work.

Over dinner, health issues dominated the discussion. Their four teenage children were full of questions. First it was Andrew's sudden death and now Kate's cancer. They felt threatened.

"Dad, are you going to die?"

"Mum, are you going to get sick?"

The questions were frightening.

"We really don't know what the future holds," said Jessica. "But we're getting some strong signals that we can no longer take our health for granted."

The wellness seminar

“Welcome to The Wellness Factor, a seminar to help you take charge of your life. My name is Dr Harvey Morgan. Our goals for this evening’s session are to encourage you to take personal responsibility for your health and to help you find areas where you need to modify your lifestyle for better performance.”

Chris and Jessica sat in the front row. It had been two weeks since Andrew’s death and only a few days since Kate’s radical mastectomy. Chris and Jessica’s awareness of their need for lifestyle changes and levels of motivation were high.

“Make yourself comfortable,” said Dr Morgan. “We want you to enjoy our time together. To begin, I want to ask what you think of when you hear the word *wellness*?”

“Energy,” Chris said impulsively.

“Vitality,” someone added.

Other answers came from around the auditorium: “joy,” “contentment,” “endurance,” “a sense of accomplishment.”

“Excellent,” said Dr Morgan. “Wellness includes much more than eating well and jogging three times a week. The good news is that you can choose wellness by taking personal responsibility for your health.”

Chris and Jessica became engrossed in the subject and were surprised when it was time to take a break.

“Well, I knew health was important,” said Chris, as they left the lecture room for some fresh air and a smoke. “But I guess I hadn’t thought too much about taking responsibility for it.”

“For me,” Jessica added, “the big point is that heart disease and cancer are lifestyle related and mostly preventable! Imagine the potential to prevent so many early deaths!”

“Let’s go back in for the second half,” Chris urged.

Jessica was pleased that her husband was responding so positively to a lecture on health.

As they drove home that evening, Chris' mind was racing. Actually, his mind was always racing. Jessica was deep in thought too, reviewing what the doctor had shared that evening. They both knew the time had come for them to be serious about making lifestyle changes. The vital question now was *where to start?*

Don't eat the soup as hot as they cook it!

The weekend after the wellness seminar, Chris reviewed the workbook materials they had been given. The personal wellness profile especially caught his attention. His score was poor—very poor. His list of recommendations was extensive and included stopping smoking, exercising, reducing stress, reducing his weight and eating more fibre.

Facing more than 20 recommendations, Chris was overwhelmed and wondered how he could put together a personal wellness plan incorporating all these new ideas. Change is common in business, but these were personal lifestyle changes! It seemed so much harder.

Jessica's wellness score was only marginally better. She had already made some plans for change and was waiting to see what Chris would do. Finally, he said, "I've smoked one to two packs of cigarettes a day for more than 20 years. All the food I like contains either too much fat or sugar—empty calories, they said. Jogging bores me to tears. The choice seems to be live a long, miserable life or enjoy it and die young."

"We definitely need to reprogram," responded Jessica. "We just need to make a start."

"I'm ready to start, but I'm just thinking where," Chris said thoughtfully. "It is definitely going to be a long-term process. We need a plan that will work but is enjoyable too. Maybe we need some group motivation and more information. Did you pick up any of those flyers on upcoming seminars? I was interested in the one on managing stress. I could use that with work at the moment!"

Jessica looked quickly through the material and found the flyer. She

read the title: "Don't Eat the Soup as Hot as They Cook It!"

"It does look interesting," she replied. "And it seems to touch on exercise, nutrition and other things that would be helpful to us. It starts in two weeks and it is five weeks long—the sessions are on Tuesday nights. Will that work for you?"

"Yes, let's make the time," said Chris, pulling out his phone and going to the seminar website. "Let's register."

Jessica was impressed. Chris was taking this very seriously and she admired him for that. *When Chris decides, he acts*, she reminded herself.

All stressed out and the day's not over!

Jessica's phone lit up and she saw that Chris had sent her a message: *Honey, I'm not going to make it home for dinner. You won't believe what has happened today and, to top it off, a delivery truck just backed into my car. Can you please bring me a sandwich and pick me up at the office? I'll eat on the road. I'll fill you in on the way to the seminar.*

"OK," was all Jessica could manage in reply.

She was barely coping with her own day and had forgotten about the stress seminar, which started in two hours. The two weeks since they had registered for the seminar had gone by in a flash, with no relief in their hectic schedules. Jessica felt like cancelling, but if Chris still wanted to go, even with a day like he'd had, that was a good sign! *Yes, we should go*, she decided.

Jessica's day had begun with an emergency. Her dad had called just after breakfast. Her mum had fallen down the stairs and broken a leg. Both were shaken up and it took most of her morning to support them. Arriving back from the hospital, she found the sewer had backed up, covering the bathroom floor with foul-smelling water. The plumber had worked on it all afternoon.

Mid-afternoon, the school phoned. Their youngest daughter, Corina, was crying on the line. She had fallen during gymnastics practise. The

injury was not serious, but it meant she would miss the rest of the season, including the tour she had been looking forward to for months. The grief from the loss of the trip was worse than the injury.

Up until a couple of months ago, Jessica had been working full-time, but with the success of the business, she had been able to cut back to part-time. Now she didn't know how she survived before. Her days were usually full, but today was unreal! As she drove to pick Chris up, she realised that she had not even had a chance to look at her to-do list for the day. *Well, it will all have to wait for tomorrow*, she thought, groaning internally. She was tired just thinking about it, and the thought of hearing about Chris' day drained her even more.

Fortunately, Chris had wound down somewhat by the time Jessica picked him up. His day, as hectic as ever, had a few additional challenges. Still without a sales manager and well into their busy season, today brought the threat of a new lawsuit, and one of their best accounts had filed for bankruptcy protection while owing them a considerable sum. The car damage seemed minor in comparison.

They arrived as the large hall was filling, both thinking that what they really wanted was to be at home on the couch. But they had already paid, and they had made it here, so why not stay for a while?

"We may not be able to stay the whole time," Jessica heard herself saying to the woman at the registration desk. "It's been quite a day for both of us."

"That's OK," the woman responded. "You'll enjoy the presentation. Here's your workbook, and there are still a couple of seats near the front."

Jessica consciously relaxed for the first time that day. *Maybe this will be helpful*, she thought.

As they settled into their second-row seats, they looked around and were impressed by the wide cross-section of people, ranging from teenagers to seniors. They recognised several business associates and acquaintances.

A woman who looked as if she was a little younger than Jessica approached the lectern at the front of the hall. The buzz in the room quietened before she spoke.

“Welcome to ‘Don’t Eat the Soup as Hot as They Cook It!’ My name is Ashley Armstrong. I’ll be your presenter for this seminar. Stress is a bit like soup—sometimes it’s too hot but we try to eat it anyway. In this program, we’ll be covering practical stress coping skills to help cool stress down. When it is the right temperature, stress is the spice of life. Regardless of how hot your stress soup has been today, relax. We don’t want this evening to be stressful. There’s no final exam except for school teachers who insist that they need one!”

A chuckle, mixed with a sense of relief, rippled across the room.

It could kill you!

After a short outline of the evening, Ashley moved right into her topic. “As I mentioned, stress is the spice of life. In fact, life would be boring if there was nothing to cause stress. The difficulties come when our stress levels are more than our coping skills and reserves can handle. Few people have stress levels that are too high all the time, but all of us find ourselves in highly stressful situations now and then. Our biggest challenge with stress is that most of us haven’t learned how to manage our regular stress effectively. Learning and developing these skills is what this seminar is all about.”

Jessica felt glad they had come. This would be good for them both. She noticed Chris’ interest and began to relax. As the instructor directed them to turn to page one in their workbooks, Chris looked over, winked at Jessica and whispered, “After today, I almost didn’t come, but I’m glad we’re here. We need this.”

As the instructor continued, the video projector went dead. Everyone watched with interest as she handled the stress this brought her. Calmly, she asked for an assistant to come and solve the problem.

“Is this stressful?” someone asked. But it was obvious that she had dealt with this public stress before and had developed the skill to deal with it effectively.

It took a few minutes to get the equipment up and running again. Meanwhile, Ashley continued, “What if you eat the stress soup too hot?” She answered her own question. “It could kill you or you might experience serious burnout. We will talk about burnout in the last session of the program. Poorly managed stress is a major contributor to heart disease, headaches, digestive problems, insomnia and a number of other chronic ailments.”

The projector returned to full power just as Ashley was encouraging participants to fill in the blanks in their workbook as they went along.

She went on, “What is stress? Stress is the body’s response to any demand made on it. This definition is adapted from Dr Hans Selye, who was a pioneer in stress research. Stress, in effect, is the wear and tear of life on the body—physically, mentally and emotionally.

“Our body’s response to stress is often non-specific. That is, it can be difficult to determine how stress is affecting us. For instance, you may have several physical or emotional symptoms, like chronic headaches, upset stomach, sleep difficulties and anxiety, so you go to the doctor. Even after a series of tests they may find nothing physically wrong. The doctor may then ask if you’re dealing with a lot of stress.”

Chris whispered to Jessica, “Maybe stress is the cause of my tiredness over the past few months. After all, today’s stress wasn’t that unusual.”

The instructor brought Chris and Jessica back to attention: “Now don’t miss this. The amount of stress we experience is not so much determined by what happens to us, as it is by the way we react to it. Suppose, for instance, that you had a car accident or an *almost* accident. The amount of stress you experienced would be in direct proportion to how you reacted. A relatively calm reaction will cause less stress than going over to the other driver and yelling at him for several minutes.”

“How did she know a truck hit my car today?” Chris asked, as he poked Jessica. They both smiled. “My reaction to that crisis was mild compared to what it might have been,” he whispered. That made him feel good.

“Stress,” Ashley repeated for emphasis, “is not so much what happens to you as your reaction to it! This is very important. How much stress you experience from an incident or event, whether positive or negative, is determined by the intensity of your reaction to the event.

“One evening, about two weeks ago, a deer suddenly jumped out in front of my car, as I was driving. Fortunately, I wasn’t going very fast, but just as I hit the brakes, my car struck the deer. It was a scary experience for me and for the deer. But the deer didn’t appear to be hurt and there was no serious damage to my car, so I travelled on and all was well.

“For me, a miss is as good as a mile and I drove on, simply being more careful. My heart rate and blood pressure went up significantly for a while. That was an automatic reaction that we’ll discuss later. But for some people, the stress reaction from such an event would have been so severe, they would have needed to pull over and sit for 20 minutes to calm down. Then they would have worried for a week about what might have happened. Such individuals would have experienced significantly more stress than I did.”

As Jessica listened, she realised that most of her stress that day had been unnecessary. She had overreacted several times and wasted energy. She consciously decided that she would be more cautious in the future.

“There are other factors that determine how much stress you experience,” Ashley continued. “First, we all relate to stressors differently. What may be a major stressor for me, may be a minor one for you. A second factor is your coping skills. Whether a specific stressful event is beneficial or harmful will depend in large measure on your coping skills. Dr Peter Hanson says it well in his book, *The Joy of Stress*:”¹

Stress can be fantastic. Or it can be fatal. It’s all up to you. As well as respecting the dangers of stress, you can learn to harness its

benefits.

Ashley continued, "Whether the stress of your life is positive and productive or negative and unproductive depends on how well you develop coping skills that work for you. This class is designed to help you with this process and it's vitally important that you're here for each of the following four sessions.

"Stress management is a process. We will always have stress. We need some stress. Life would be boring without it. The key is to manage it effectively for optimum benefit."

Who or what heats up your soup?

"We need to take a brief look at some major stressors," said Ashley. "We all have stressors that have been with us since there was life on the planet. There are, however, a few that are unique to the past few decades.

"The first is information and technology overload. So many people are addicted to their devices and it's not surprising. Games and social media are designed to keep us playing, keep us scrolling. We are constantly bombarded with news, research, opinions and advertising. All this information creates a multitude of new opportunities and can be very positive, but we need to be aware that it can also be a major stressor.

"A helpful stress buffer for information overload is to take a digital fast for at least one day a week and, occasionally, for a week or two at a time. If you can't turn off your devices completely, at least take a break from news and social media, because you can easily get the sense that the world is totally out of control when all we hear is bad news. This is especially important for people who tend to be prone to anxiety."

Jessica looked at Chris and whispered, "We should talk about how much time our kids have been spending behind their screens." Chris nodded.

"The second major stressor is fed by the information and technology explosion: rapid change," Ashley's continued.

"We're creatures of habit and, even with a positive attitude toward

change, it becomes one of our major stressors. It's especially true today because the pace of change is so fast. For example, you learn to use some new software or equipment at work and it saves you time and energy. Then suddenly, there's an upgrade, which means you have to relearn things."

For a few moments, Jessica let her mind wander as she reviewed the major changes in her life over the past few months. She had never thought of them as stressors because they were mostly positive changes: the new house; her decision to quit her job and work part-time so she could spend more time with the children; her parents getting older and moving closer.

"Rapid change leads to our third major stressor—decision overload." *Decision overload.* That caught Jessica's attention.

"Decisions, decisions, decisions," Ashley said with emphasis. "They come constantly and relentlessly, and it seems they're also more complicated as our society becomes more complex. We're bombarded with thousands of decisions every day! Of course, we can deal with only a small number of these, but the process creates significant stress.

"You know you're experiencing decision overload when someone innocently says, 'What are we having for dinner?' and your response is, 'I don't know and I don't care! We can have Corn Flakes, so long as I don't have to decide!'"

A ripple of understanding laughter spread through the audience, and Chris and Jessica looked knowingly at each other.

"Finally, there's the daily hassle factor that has always been with us, but it seems to be magnified with today's technology and the speed of life. Here are a few daily hassle laws that you may find interesting."

Ashley put a list up on the screen. The group laughed as she read them:

- **Balance's Law:** How long a minute is depends on which side of the bathroom door you're on.

- **Bedfellow’s Rule:** The one who snores will fall asleep first.
- **Kovac’s Conundrum:** When you call a wrong number you never get a busy signal.
- **Fischer’s Finding:** Sex is hereditary. If your parents never had it, chances are you won’t either.
- **Gold’s Law:** If the shoe fits, it’s ugly.
- **Lawrey’s Law:** If it jams, force it. If it breaks, it needed replacing anyway.
- **Crane’s Rule:** There are three ways to get something done: do it yourself; hire someone; or forbid your kids to do it.

As the laughter subsided, Ashley wrapped up the session, “To get started in your workbook, list the primary pressure points of your life—the stressors. When finished, take a few minutes and discuss them with someone sitting near you. This will take us up to the break, and when we return we’ll find out how hot your stress soup is!”

Who or what makes me stressed?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

¹ P Hanson (2012), *The Joy of Stress*, StressWorks.

End of product sample

This product is available at:

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