

**LORELEI MATZAU**

**WHEN REAL MEN**

**BLACK OUT**

**A STRESS GUIDE FOR MEN**

**END OF  
STRESS ZONE**

## PROLOGUE THE ELITE SOLDIER

One day, a 42-year-old, very masculine man came to my clinic for an appointment. He was big and muscular; at first glance he actually reminded me of the Hollywood actor Steven Seagal. When I asked why he had requested a consultation, he replied that he was 'having a bit of a rough time'. It was obvious, however, that he was having a very rough time indeed, and by experience I know that when a real man asks for my help, he is either about to go over the edge – or has already.

In other words: Here was a man on the verge of a breakdown.

When I interviewed him, I learned that in his professional life he was (and had long been) an officer and instructor in one of the Danish military's toughest elite units. He had carried out numerous military missions in conflict zones throughout the world, and he was now active in several national search and rescue corps, where he might be called out on urgent rescue actions at short notice. In addition, he served as an advisor to several military think tanks and last – but not least – he was the head of a fifteen-person team in a private company. In his 'free time' he did hard-core adventure sports.

He was big and imposing, and during our initial conversation it became increasingly clear that he was not just 'having a bit of a rough time' but was in fact on the verge of a full-blown breakdown. He had several stress symptoms: He was unable to sleep at night and could not handle being alone in his own home. In his long military career, he had learned to ignore and suppress his physical and emotional signals and to focus narrowly on the mission at hand. He brought this mode with him into his life in general – including his civilian job as a team leader. He could not handle being on his own because that forced him to sense himself. Also, throughout his military career he had suppressed so much pain, apprehension and tension that his nervous system and his subconscious were like a ticking time bomb.

Eventually, anyone who persistently suppresses the signals from his body and ignores his emotions by always taking action will reach a point where he can no longer escape his body, his soul and his inner self. And that was about to happen to my client, too.

I described this scenario to him – clearly and succinctly, spelling out the consequences, options and underlying processes. He was not prepared to make any changes in his lifestyle, however. His position was that he liked things the way they were. When he walked out the door, I thought, well, he would simply have to break down, then.

He came back the following week – a changed man. He was trembling, and he had tears in his eyes, but his body language was open, and his gaze was focused. What had happened?

A few days prior to our second meeting, he had been on his way to work, and when he got to his car he had experienced strong chest pains and passed out in the driver's seat of the parked car. A neighbour walking her dog had seen him sitting in the car, both hands clenching the wheel. When the neighbour returned and saw him still sitting there, in the same position, she called an ambulance.

He did not regain consciousness until he was in the hospital. Here, he underwent a battery of tests, which found that his blood pressure was highly elevated. However, the tests also showed that there was no blood clot, no arrhythmia and no stroke. Based on these tests, the doctor painted a similar picture to the one I had presented him with. The diagnosis was clear: stress. The elite soldier had broken down and literally blacked out.

Only after this experience did he let down his armour and psychological defences, so that we could initiate his recovery process.

## INTRODUCTION

In the UK, the official figures say that around some 12% of the population suffer from severe stress, meaning that they are either on sick leave or on the verge of sick leave. The 12% is the average occurrence, but the gender distribution seems unequal, as severe stress affects 9% of men and 15% of women. This gives the impression that women are more susceptible to stress than men are, which is often explained with reference to stereotypical gender roles, such as a particular female inclination towards perfectionism. I have encountered this assumption over and over again in my professional work as an organisational psychologist, working with clients, giving lectures and teaching. Over the past fifteen years, I have treated and counselled thousands of people suffering from stress, men as well as women, and developed comprehensive stress treatment methods for therapists and companies.

But are women really more susceptible than men? Or could something else be at play? Might it be, for example, that men's stress is absent from the official statistics because their stress is not acknowledged to the same degree – or because men fail to seek professional help to deal with stress issues? There are many indications that this is the case.

In my professional practice, I have met countless men who, like the elite soldier we meet in the prologue, do not reach out for help until they collapse with what they think is a heart attack. The scenario is classic: A man who has been pushing himself too hard for years suddenly collapses in a cold sweat with chest pains and breathing difficulties. Typically, he is then picked up by an ambulance, admitted to the cardiology ward and examined from head to toe. Usually, the conclusion is that there is nothing wrong with his heart; instead, he is found to be suffering from severe stress.

In many cases, it is only at this point that men will acknowledge the problem and seek help. We should therefore assume that the number of men who are afflicted with stress is much higher than the statistics suggest.

It is a documented fact that men in general have a life expectancy that is three to five years shorter than women's. And we know that men are more susceptible to severe diseases, because men tend to discover their medical conditions too late. For example, only half the men who are diagnosed with a depression receive treatment for this condition. That is one reason why men are three times more likely than women to commit suicide.

This book is a stress handbook intended for the many men who struggle every day to make ends meet in their daily life, and who fail to reach out to the people around them for help. The goal with this book is to offer knowledge, tools and specific advice to the many men suffering from stress in order to help them address their condition at an early stage – before it develops in a worse condition, such as a full-blown depression. For as the book will show, that happens far too often. The good news here is that stress is relatively easy to overcome, if it is managed correctly and in a timely fashion, with sick leave, rest and relaxation and an optimal amount of physical exercise. Once stress develops into a chronic condition or a depression, the task is much more challenging, and treatment is more difficult.

The recommendations of this book are intended for men with a normal degree of resilience without any history of long-term mental illness or substance abuse. Thus, the target group for this book includes most British men. For someone with a history of recurring stress-related sick leave or medical treatment for stress, the knowledge and tools in the book will be equally relevant, but the recommendations concerning sick leave and the gradual return to the workplace do not apply.

## REAL MEN ALSO HAVE BLACKOUTS

Essentially, stress is not about gender. Stress is a biochemical physical reaction to a perceived threat, and although there are variations in influences and reaction patterns, stress affects both men and women. Of all ages. Across all professions. And stress afflicts men of all personality types, not just 'sensitive men', as many seem to assume. The premise of this this book is that all men are 'real men'.

Thus, this book is also a guide for men who wish to understand the widespread and difficult phenomenon of stress better, in order to be able to choose a deliberate path forward, focusing on optimal performance and, not least, quality of life. The purpose of the book is not to add fuel to the fire of the ongoing debate on feminism. Instead, the book aims to reach out to you – and all the other men who struggle with stress in their everyday life – and offer accurate and updated knowledge and tools for understanding the interactions between the human nervous system and the human mind in the effort to lead a meaningful life that is balanced in every regard.

Here, it is essential to sort the facts from the myths in order to know what is true and well-documented, and what should be ignored.

Popular science is full of myths about stress. Myths about who develops stress, why they develop stress, and what they ought to do about it. Myths that typically hold a grain of truth, but which are more misleading than not, and therefore have the potential to do more harm than good.

Therefore, the first part of the book is dedicated to a theoretical introduction to stress and what it does to your body, your mind and your nervous system. In this section, we challenge a number of common myths, including the idea that stress is related to certain personality types, that exercise is a cure for stress, or that stress is a women's condition. A condition for eliminating the most harmful stress factors is to be able to see through the self-deceptive nature of stress. In the first part of the book, we also examine the modern lifestyle factors that produce stress for all of us – especially men. As a look behind the scene in the life of the modern man will reveal, there are many such factors.

The second part of the book is a self-help manual with advice and recommendations to help men recover from stress. Are you stressed? If so – what do you do? Should you take sick leave? Should you exercise? Should you go to work? How do you eliminate stressors? At work? At home? What do you tell your wife? What do you tell your supervisor?

In other words: When real men black out, what is the right way forward?

If you have already determined that you have suffered a stress-related breakdown, I recommend that you go straight to the second part of the book and start reading from Chapter 6. If you are currently suffering from a stress-related breakdown, you do not have the cognitive capacity to deal with the theoretical introduction that makes up the first part of the book; instead, you need specific and practical advice, step by step. Only once the stress and the state of emergency in your nervous system begin to recede will you begin to benefit from your cognitive functions again and thus gain access to a more profound and specific understanding of why you broke down, and what you can do to pick a new, brighter and better path going forward.

## CHAPTER 1

### WHAT IS STRESS?

*'The whole concept of stress is a fad.'* *'You get stress from talking about stress.'* Over the years, I have heard similar statements countless times from course participants and clients. Especially from men. These points of view are very common, and they are in themselves part of the problem. A person who sees stress as either a fad or a personal defeat will be much less likely to acknowledge stress – whether in him/herself or in others. That is the challenge that men face in our society where the traditional perception of the masculine role has revolved around qualities such as self-reliance, strength and resilience.

*'Stress is just a trendy term for being busy,'* is another classic. I have heard that view from countless male executives; men who are charismatic and effective, and who take pride in putting in a top performance and achieving results.

#### **What are your perceptions of stress?**

Write down the first three things that come to mind:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

#### **The stress epidemic**

Through-out the modern Western world, stress is viewed as one of the biggest challenges, and WHO has predicted that stress will be the leading global health risk in 2020. Recent studies show that half of all adults in the UK feel stressed on a daily basis, and that 59% of British adults say their life is more stressful than it was five years ago.

Workplaces in both the public and private sectors report of a growing occurrence of sick leave due to stress.

These figures show that stress is a national health issue. As mentioned in the introduction, untreated stress is a common cause of both mental illness, especially depression and anxiety, and somatic illness, including arteriosclerosis, thrombosis and hypertension. The dramatic figures illustrate that regardless of how we understand the concept of stress, it is a phenomenon that affects almost everyone of working age in the UK, either directly or indirectly.

Recent figures show that 60% of all men in the UK aged 25-45 years feel stressed. 12% of the general population suffers from severe stress (either being on sick leave or on the verge of sick leave) – 15% of women and 9% of men.

As mentioned in the introduction, this unequal gender distribution does not necessarily paint the full picture, since we know that women are generally much more likely than men to reach out for help and to consult their general practitioner. Men are generally less likely to seek preventive or early help, whether for stress, depression or somatic conditions. Therefore, we should assume that there is a large number of men who are severely afflicted by stress but who do not seek or receive the help they need ... and who may not even that realise that they are suffering from stress. For many of them, undiagnosed and untreated stress will be the precursor of even worse conditions, such as depression, anxiety and somatic conditions.

#### **What every man should know about stress**

Over the years, stress has been addressed from many different angles, but the issue is complicated by the fact that 'stress' is both a term that is used loosely in everyday conversations and a clinical diagnosis implying a serious imbalance. This would be like confusing the clinical use of 'depressed', indicating a

serious imbalance. This would be like confusing the clinical use of 'depressed', indicating a serious condition that requires treatment, with the common use of the term to characterise a passing and much less severe feeling of sadness or discontent.

A classic definition of stress (by Richard S. Lazarus) is that stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that 'demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.' In short, it is what we feel when we think we are losing control. Stress can thus be defined as a state that depends in part on the demands (stressors, which may be environmental or intrinsic) and in part on individual sensitivity and response.

Seen in this light, stress is neither positive nor negative. Stress is instead a natural reaction to excessive demands, and in that sense, the stress reaction is a useful sensor that allows us to regulate the demands we expose ourselves to, and the way we live, based on the messages we receive from our stress signals. If we choose to pay attention to these signals, that is. As we shall see in this book, that is, unfortunately, more the exception than the rule when it comes to the typical male response to stress.

### **Modern caveman**

Most of the biological mechanisms at play in stress have been mapped in recent years, and the following chapter will give you a good basic understanding of the precise biochemical causes and effects involved in stress. For the purposes of the present chapter, it is helpful to know the classic stress hormones at play. The most important hormones are cortisol and adrenalin, commonly known as the fight-or-flight hormones. Stress can thus be understood as changes that occur in the body and in the brain when we are exposed to internal stressors, in the form of thoughts and emotions, or external stressors, such as pressures in the workplace. These changes are caused by stress hormones and the signals that are triggered in our nervous system when we are under pressure.

Although human cognition and emotions have developed as a result technological and societal developments over the past 10,000 years, our basic physiology remains the same as it was for primitive cave-dwellers. When modern man experiences a stress situation, the above-mentioned basic and highly potent fight-or-flight hormones are released – exactly as they were when our cavemen ancestors encountered a bear or a wolf. In other words, our physiological stress response has remained more or less unchanged since we lived in caves or hunter-gatherer tribes.

Our ancestors living in forests or on the plains benefited greatly from the activation of these hormones in fight-or-flight situations, because they boost our physical strength. That is why modern athletes still use hormone supplements to boost their physical performance, and the temporary improvement of physical strength also enhances our odds for survival in a life-threatening crisis or accident.

In today's thoroughly civilised society or the formalised context of the business world, however, it is not appropriate to engage one's supervisor in a fist fight or to flee from the board room during a tough negotiation. We keep the proceedings civil and keep a straight face, while our stress hormones bubble and sizzle inside. We are raised to maintain a professional attitude and to avoid responding to high-pressure encounters by acting out. We are taught to repress our physiological fight-or-flight responses in most situations.

However, the stress response continues unabated, which leads to harmful stress and may ultimately lead to cardio-vascular disease.

### **When we black out**

When high levels of stress hormones are activated, our cognitive functions are impaired. That includes our rational capacity for reasoning, memory and problem-solving. The activation of fight-or-flight hormones increases our physical strength, which improves our chances of physical survival in stressful situations. That is the source of the countless examples of people who display near superhuman strength in a crisis situation, finding the strength to lift a burning car in order to rescue a child. In a rational world

that requires constant reasoning and problem-solving in complex situations, however, the activation of fight-or-flight hormones has the unfortunate effect of suspending our cognitive functions – causing a blackout.

A momentary blackout describes the panic reaction at an exam or other types of performance anxiety, which many people experience in certain situations, and this momentary 'collapse' in reasoning is a common phenomenon that occurs under stress. That is why pilots, for example, are trained to manage and control their mental and physical stress reactions in emergency situations to preserve their cognitive functioning. In our modern world, the activation of fight-or-flight hormones in fact often reduces our chances of survival or success.

People who have been under intense pressure for sustained periods have excessive levels of stress hormones and stress signals in their physical system and live in a constant state of alarm and emergency. Frequent eruptions of stress hormones flood their physical and mental systems even in the face of minimal mental pressures, and their capacity for clear, rational thinking, memory and problem-solving becomes impaired.

In my professional work, I have met countless men who, instead of pausing when they experience obvious memory impairment, compensate by relying on Post-it notes or other memory aids, so that they can buckle down and keep going.

### **Ask yourself:**

- How good is your memory?
- Is it better or poorer than it was a year ago?
- Five years ago?
- Are you compensating?

### **When the empathy flies out the window**

*'I "couldn't hear" what the parents were telling me about their kids' jumpsuits, which had to hang in a particular spot. I was short-tempered with the kids I was reading to. This one girl kept saying that she couldn't see. I slammed the book so close that it hit her in the face, and she fell off the bench she was sitting on. Afterwards, I asked myself, what the heck's wrong with me!'*

Daniel Wilson, 43 years, preschool teacher

Another consequence of stress is reduced empathy. There is little reason to show empathy in a high-risk situation. When our ancestors faced an enemy in a combat situation, it would be a bad idea to start empathising with the other person's pain. If our distant ancestors had become engrossed by such thoughts, the enemy would strike at once, and our ancestor's last experience would be the feel of stone axe slicing through his skull.

When the stress level is high enough, our empathy is impaired; this allows us to make life-or-death decisions without thinking too much about whether the other person's feelings might be hurt.

That was a helpful mechanism in our prehistoric past, but today it causes problems, because the same stress mechanisms are activated in situations that do not involve an existential threat, and where we therefore do not need to ignore others' well-being in order to survive. A sign of stress therefore may be a difficulty feeling and showing empathy.

### **Long-term versus short-term stress**

Stress researchers distinguish between long-term and short-term stress. Short-term stress activates our physiological alarm system, our stress hormones and our nervous system. Once the threat has been dealt with, the alarm system is switched off, and our physiological and mental balance is restored. A short-term state of alarm may produce a rush, a sense of high performance – a feeling of being fired up and

and energetic. Some people can become addicted to this high-performance state; the release of stress hormones feels like a rush, and the person keeps striving for this sense of being fired up and 'on'.

Moderate and temporary stress can strengthen the immune system, while long-term stress impairs it and leads to reduced levels of infection-fighting blood cells and antibodies. In long-term stress, the body is in a constant state of alarm, which puts a heavy strain on the body and mind. Regardless how exciting the job is, long-term stress is neither healthy nor constructive.

Many people who are at risk of crossing the line from a healthy to an unhealthy state use the popular term 'positive stress' as an excuse for continuing their high-paced lifestyle, but in doing so they are misleading themselves and the people around them. The line between the healthy, challenging state and an excessive, dangerous state is blurred, and the result can be a sudden collapse due to long-term stress.

*'For eight years, I ignored the signals. I thought I had learned to pay attention, but no ... five years later, my wife was certain something was wrong, and she insisted that I see my doctor. At this point, I took painkillers five or six times a day for headaches. When I saw my doctor, I had hypertension (240-135), in fact my blood pressure was so high it would normally be deadly. I walled myself up, so no one would notice. My body shut down completely, and eventually I had a complete existential collapse. I obviously refused to listen to my body, and the end of the line was a suicide attempt.'*

Thomas Campbell, 50 years, head of department

That is one of the biggest problems concerning male stress. The failure to acknowledge one's own stress is part of the male stress syndrome – although the body's and the mind's stress signals are usually hard to miss.

### **Stress symptoms**

As described in the introduction, it often takes dramatic reactions such as chest pains for men to have their stress diagnosed. For a sustained period leading up to such an incident, the stress level will have been escalating, expressing itself as increasingly severe tension and pain. Symptoms that initially typically manifest as indigestion and tension in the solar plexus, a trembling in the body or tension headaches.

Given the typical male response of ignoring the symptoms, the body and the nervous system will gradually shout louder and louder, unless calm and balance are restored. The pain, the tension and the general sense of discomfort increase, and often it takes a complete collapse or blackout and stress-related sick leave before the person 'wakes up' and begins to acknowledge the stress and the many stress signals.

Stress symptoms fall into three categories: physical, behavioural and emotional. The perception of stress and the manifest symptoms are individual, and it is therefore worthwhile getting to know one's own personal stress symptoms. Below is a list of the most common symptoms – mark the signals you recognise from yourself – and be honest.

### **Typical physical symptoms include:**

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Hypertension
- Heart palpitations and rapid pulse
- Hands shaking
- Pressure and pain in the chest region
- Shortness of breath
- Tension in the body – including the neck or jaw
- Restlessness and buzzing in the body
- Sleep problems
- Discomfort in the solar plexus



- Stomach problems and indigestion (diarrhoea, constipation)
- Reduced libido and erectile dysfunction
- Recurring infections
- Getting sick just before or during your holiday
- Chronic condition flaring up or worsening

There are many other physical stress signals, and you are bound to have symptoms that are not included on this list. Stress is often evident as tension, pressure and pain in various places around body. A participant in a stress management course described how her hands would clench into fists while she sat on her sofa in front of the TV at night. Tension in the jaw is another typical symptom, as is muscle tension in the neck and shoulders.

Severe stress impairs the immune system, and therefore stress is often associated with severe flus, colds and other contagious infections, just as chronic conditions, such as migraine or asthma, are often exacerbated.

All physical stress symptoms and reactions are temporary, however, and it is helpful to know that the physical symptoms simply reflect what is going on in the mind: The muscle tension comes from a disturbance in our thoughts and emotions. The body is a tattletale, constantly disclosing our mental state. As we shall see in the coming chapters, in today's world stress is always due to mental overload. Once we manage to calm the mind, the physical reactions and signals are reduced, and eventually they disappear, often without any further intervention.

#### **Typical male behavioural symptoms include:**

- Overeating
- Skipping meals
- Increased consumption of alcohol and medication
- Mood swings
- Irritability
- Impulsive behaviour
- Restlessness
- Reduced sense of humour
- Social withdrawal
- Unstable work performance
- Increased occurrence of errors and sloppiness
- More conflicts
- More sick days

As with the physical symptoms, stress manifests itself in a far greater range of behavioural reactions than the ones included on this list. The stress signal that most men recognise, however, is a short fuse and social withdrawal. In many cases the person's sense of humour will also be impaired.

Further, there is a heightened occurrence of errors and accidents, and many men do not acknowledge their stress until the day they break a leg or pass out. The reason for the errors and accidents is the impairment in cognitive abilities – the capacity for reasoning, memory and problem-solving – that follows from the release of stress hormones. The natural fight-or-flight response enhances our physical strength but blocks our cognitive capacity. The physical symptoms and behavioural reactions are accompanied by a wide range of emotional reactions.

#### **Typical emotional stress symptoms include:**

- Feelings of guilt and inadequacy
- Anxiety
- Low self-esteem
- Nervousness

- Hyper-sensitivity
- Aggression and a short fuse
- Frustration
- Restlessness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Reduced empathy
- Feeling powerless
- Feeling depressed
- Fatigue

As mentioned earlier, the physical stress reactions are not a result of digging too many holes in the ground or hauling too many heavy boulders. The physical tension stems from mental tension: the thoughts and emotions that are the underlying cause of our stress. A man who suffers from stress often has strong feelings of inadequacy, feels overwhelmed and has a strong focus on 'surviving', which in our modern world means meeting deadlines and completing assignments. But that in itself is part of the reason why he developed stress in the first place.

In my experience, people suffering from stress often have a profound sense of guilt and blame themselves much more than they blame their surroundings. That is why it is important to be aware that depressive feelings and symptoms are a natural part of the stress syndrome, and that they are not signs of an actual depression.

### **Have you become speed blind?**

Any signal from the body or the mind is a wake-up call. The body is a tattletale that naturally seeks to draw attention to our physical and mental state. Being in touch with oneself means paying attention to these signals and regulating one's workload and challenges to restore the balance.

We live in a performance culture where men in particular are taught to neglect this inner connection. They suppress the signals and have no room or time for feelings of discomfort. Today's generations of men were raised to think that it is a sign of strength not to cry or show emotions, as part of the masculine gender role. Men therefore often ignore their stress signals or dull them with painkillers and alcohol, and over time they get used to having tense neck muscles or stomach aches. They develop habituation and tolerance and forget that the tension is a danger sign. They forget that our natural state is a state of well-being.

### ***Our natural state is a state of well-being***

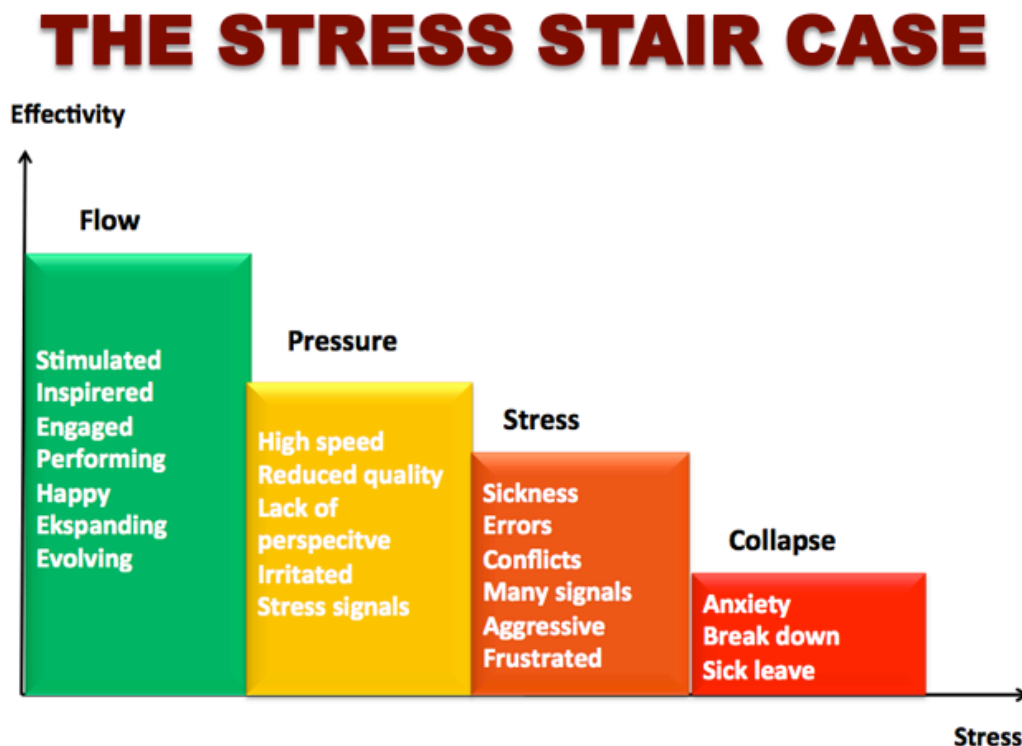
If we ignore the danger signs, we risk developing a phenomenon akin to being speed blind. You are probably familiar with the phenomenon: If you have been going all out for some time, you gradually stop noticing. Just as driving at city speeds can feel intolerably slow after driving on the motorway, you may feel unbearably passive if you are not constantly achieving results, delivering and living in the fast lane. In my work, I have met many men who have a hard time being at rest and taking the time simply to be. They feel a strong sense of restlessness, anxiety and physical discomfort when they are at rest instead of being out there, doing something useful. Usually, they quickly move on to avoid this sense of discomfort. Often, they keep themselves going in the time leading up to a holiday, and then they collapse, either falling ill with a flu or sleeping much more than normal.

*'I was having trouble breathing – shallow breathing and shortness of breath. I lost 20 pounds because I was smoking too many cigarettes and eating irregularly, including a lot of junk food. My memory began to suffer, and I didn't have the energy to do anything meaningful. I kept forgetting things, and I have a lot of gaps in my memory. I spent more and more time at work. I became more and more irritable – I had a short fuse and snapped at people. I had indigestion (bloating), irregular bowel movements, and I often had diarrhoea or constipation. I slept poorly and was always tired. I had zero energy and was mostly looking forward to sleeping. I was often sick – colds, diarrhoea, earaches, the flu. That went on for six years.'*

James Landon, 47 years, exporter

## The stress staircase: from speed to collapse

Stress is not a state that develops overnight; it emerges over time. The more speed blind we are, the less able we are to sense our signals, and the greater is the risk that simply being busy turns into increasingly severe stress.



### Flow

Being busy is not the same as being stressed. You may be busy in a healthy way, feeling efficient and in demand. When we are appropriately busy and working on tasks that we feel competent to handle, being busy contributes to a sense of being the right man for the job. We have a sense of 'flow'.

In psychology, this is considered a desirable state, because it leads to inspired, efficient people who feel at ease and in control. The same is the case at the workplace, because employees who are in flow seem dedicated and put in a strong performance, seemingly with ease. When you experience flow, you are balanced. You are not leading a problem-free, superficial life, but you feel that you have a certain overview, agency and options – and that it makes a difference when you make an effort to solve problems around you. You are making a difference.

We all strive for this ideal state, because it requires the least physical and mental effort while also offering the highest performance potential.

### Pressure

Most people in modern society are under some degree of pressure, which can also be characterised as early stress. Suddenly, conflicts are not resolved as quickly as they used to be, and perhaps the work tasks begin to pile up. At this point you get grumpy and feel tense. You may have trouble falling asleep, or maybe you wake up at four o'clock every night even though you do not have to get up until six. There is nothing dangerous about being under pressure for a limited period of time, but if it continues for a sustained period without time for you to recuperate – to return to your normal sleep pattern and a normal pace – you are headed straight for the next stage:

## **Overload**

Overload is actual stress. In this state, your reactions may be either physical or psychological, but typically, overload is accompanied by both psychological and physical warning signs. The physical signs may include severe tension, recurring infections or new aches and pains, which are hard to define. The psychological reactions may include irritability, angry outbursts, sleep problems, moodiness, impaired empathy in relation to your surroundings and the fear that everything is about to fall apart. The most natural response for a man in this stage is to deny the stress: 'It's just a phase,' 'As soon as I just...'

One clear sign that you are suffering from overload may be your reaction to the notion of sick leave. Many people who suffer from stress at this stage consider sick leave just as bad as losing their job. It feels like the ultimate defeat. However, if you remain in a state of overload for long, an eventual breakdown is inevitable. That is a dreadful experience, and no one who has not tried it first-hand can fully understand that stress can be that debilitating.

## **Breakdown**

If you do not stop in time, you risk a collapse, where both your mind and your body break down. Such a breakdown can be very sudden and should always lead to sick leave. A stress-related breakdown is the result of severe and harmful stress, and in the time leading up to the breakdown, there will have been a growing number of increasingly severe stress signals and reactions. This may include passing out, memory loss, panic attacks, migraines and serious errors in judgment.

Some people find themselves unable to get out of bed in the morning and feel paralysed. Some pass out, while others break down in tears at work. The affected person will often be very difficult for others to reach, because the person typically feels powerless and overwhelmed and therefore withdraws and avoids contact.

If this description matches you, know that you need to let the people around you take charge for a while, and you should expect a sick leave of up to three months. That is the time it will take for your nervous system to regain balance, and there are no shortcuts here. Trying to rush the process will only make it take longer.

Many recover from a breakdown in three to six months and are able to move on, but unfortunately, many experience lasting psychological reactions such as anxiety and depression as a result of their breakdown, because they did not receive the right sort of counselling and support during their crisis and in the subsequent period, or because they have been suffering from stress for much too long before they eventually broke down.

## **CASE**

### **If you're going through hell, keep going.**

*Name: David Miller*

*Age: 42 years*

*Family: married to Maria, three children from previous relationships*

*Job title: consultant for digital and social media*

*Education: Media science and political science. Also a trained firefighter.*

### **Describe your stress experience**

*It all began about two-and-a-half years ago when my dad called me at work and said that he was at the hospital, the intensive care unit. Our mother (I have two brothers) had been rushed to hospital, and it was serious. I dropped everything and told my colleagues that I had to leave right away. I biked to the hospital as fast as I could and found my dad at the hospital. He was pale and terse. My mother had had a stroke.*

*At the time, I was super busy at work, but I loved it. I was a partner and responsible for sales and relations — and in addition, I acted as a strategic consultant on some of our projects. I had just said yes to putting a lot of extra energy into our top client, and we were in the start-up phase with an important project that hadn't really been defined yet. But it was complex, under a tight deadline and a lot of fun.*

*At home, it was important for me to be a good father and an attentive partner. I have always seen my role in the family as the one who ultimately looks after everyone else when they need it.*

*My mother made it through the day she was hospitalised, and in the following days, we all spent a lot of time with her at the hospital. But she slipped into a coma, and the doctors couldn't tell us whether she would come back. Ever. She was in intensive care, where the most severe patients were, and where we heard alarms from time to time and then saw the doctors and nurses come running in with resuscitation gear.*

*I felt torn apart, having to take care of work, be a good partner to Maria and a good father to my children – and wanting to spend time at the hospital. I tried to meet all my obligations. Maria tried to help by taking over more and more at home, my co-workers tried to cover for me at work, but I wasn't really willing to compromise on anything.*

*For several months I just kept running faster and faster to get it all done, and I ignored the symptoms that I recognised, in hindsight, as crystal clear signals: I wasn't hungry, I slept poorly, had no interest in sex, had these weird tics by my eyes, stomach aches, short fuse with the kids, distant with Maria – over all, I just wasn't really present at home.*

### **How did discover that you had stress?**

*It hit me all at once at 200 km an hour – but I didn't recognise it as stress. In fact, I'd always seen it as a sign of weakness when someone said they had stress. That they didn't have what it took. I couldn't see myself like that. I effing HAD TO have what it took, because no one else could do it for me.*

*One day I was in a meeting with our top client. I had called the meeting, because I could tell that I had to have more people involved from our side, since my mother's condition had deteriorated further. She was still in a coma and on a breathing machine, had developed pneumonia with a high fever as well as an infection in her brain. I felt that she might be dying.*

*We started the meeting, and after just a few minutes I had difficulty understanding what the others were saying. I could see their lips moving, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. I checked my notes to keep up, but I couldn't read what I had written. I saw letters, words and sentences, but they made no sense to me. When I looked up from the paper, my field of vision contracted, all sound died away, and I began to shiver and cry. My only thought was to run, so I did.*

*When I came to, I was some distance away from the client's office, and I called Maria to try to explain to her what I didn't understand myself. She told me to get my things and come home immediately. When I came home she told me to go to bed. So there I was, playing Civilization on my iPad for forty-eight hours. I switched off all the notifications on my phone, iPad and computer, and surprisingly enough, I actually survived without receiving notifications of new tweets, Facebook status updates and check-ins on Foursquare.*

*I still couldn't reconcile the notion of stress with my own situation. I didn't want to accept that I had stress, so the only way I could put it was that I had 'crashed', but it was obvious to me that things were bad.*

*For about two or three months, while my mother was in hospital, I completely ignored all my symptoms of stress. It was as if I registered all the signals but decided to tune them out because I had no room for them. As if they weren't part of me or had nothing to do with me – they were a strictly external issue.*

### **Did anyone else discover it before you did?**

*Probably everybody. I must have looked like crap, and my behaviour was rotten and unfocussed. Both at work and at home, my co-workers and Maria tried to take tasks off my shoulders and lighten the load for me, but I wasn't really able to hands things off, because I felt that I had to be able to fend for myself.*

### **What happened when you found out?**

*It wasn't until I began seeing a psychologist that I began to use the word stress, and when I did, I was initially ashamed about my weakness. For a long time, it wasn't even a relief to have a diagnosis, because it was a diagnosis I couldn't accept as something that applied to me or my situation.*

### **What helped you the most?**

*If Maria hadn't sent me to bed and told me to stay there and do nothing for two days, I seriously worry that I might have suffered permanent damage, because I was incapable of changing course on my own. That was life-saving first aid.*

*Next, it helped me to talk to a psychologist about my situation, but to my great surprise, one of the first things he did was to tell me he wasn't going to cure me of stress. Of course, I had thought it would be something like setting a broken bone. You make your diagnosis and prescribe a treatment. The psychologist insisted that all he could do was to scratch my surface and see what we would find.*

*It took several sessions for me to realise that my stress was in fact a result of losing the ability to sense myself and act on what I sensed. To say no when I felt it was necessary. I had lost sight of myself, and that was what led to stress in this extremely high-pressure situation, where I was unable to control the outcome of my mother's situation.*

*In relation to my work, I discovered how amazing my co-workers were. When they were told that I was suffering from stress, they simply told me to stay home and not to worry about anything at work. To my amazement, all the projects and the company itself were able to continue without me. I actually tried going back to work after about a week. Already while I was on the stairs going up to my first-floor office, my stomach began to ache, and when I opened the door to my office, I almost threw up, and a haze fell over my eyes. I turned around 180 degrees and went home directly. One of my co-workers sent me a message reminding me that they were still doing fine without me.*

### **What was your low point?**

*My low point was sitting at the meeting with our client and my co-workers – and feeling all my senses cut out one by one and then beginning to shiver and cry. That was the worst experience of my life. It was embarrassing and terrible, and worst of all: It felt ultimately unmanly.*

### **What was your turning point?**

*The turning point came when the psychologist asked me where I drew my energy from. At first, I didn't understand the question, and then he asked me what I did when I needed to do something for myself. Then I realised that I didn't do anything for myself; that I only ever did stuff for others. I had simply disregarded myself in favour of being a good co-worker, consultant, partner, father and son. It was probably during the same session that he had to spell it out to me that you actually can say no when something doesn't feel right. I remember the very notion gave me chills, because it's so simple and so true. And suddenly I saw my life up to that point in a different light. I understood old, failed relationships, bad periods in my life and times when I had felt a burning sense of dissatisfaction and inadequacy.*

### **What was your high point?**

*The high point came when I finally realised that although my stress-related breakdown was a terrible life experience, I would not want to have been without it, once I got through to the other side. The first time someone suggested that to me, I thought it was just about the dumbest thing I'd ever heard. But my life is different after that experience; I came out wiser and stronger, and I am grateful for that.*

### **What is the most important lesson you have learned?**

*That it doesn't make you less of a man to ask for help (even if you ask women for help). It can be okay to say that you've reached the end of your rope and to ask your partner to look out for you for a while.*

*I also learned to listen to my gut again, and I find it a tremendous gift to be able to check in with myself in a situation where I need to make a choice, and to be able to act on that feeling. I check in, and I say no if my gut tells me to say no. Even I can't come up with a socially acceptable reason for saying no.*

*At Maria's suggestion, for example, I went on a trip with my mother once she finally recovered, leaving the rest of the family at home. Again, I was able to do that without feeling bad, because I knew that it was important for me, and that the others would get along fine without me. Today I am so grateful I did that, because it brought me closer to my mother, who died four months later from cancer.*

**What is your best advice to other men?**

*I think that more than anything, as men we are burdened by a self-image of being able to do anything and not being allowed to crack when the going gets tough. We're supposed to live up to Winston Churchill's famous motto: 'If you're going through hell, keep going.' That's bull. If you're going through hell, you should reach out for help to get through it. As men, we are unbelievably bad at that, because we think it reduces our masculinity. As a man, I am totally in favour of not quitting, and of 'manning up' when you face a challenge. But even firefighters never go into a burning building without backup when they go in to save lives. You always go in with a buddy.*