

There are literally mountains of information available on stress and how to manage it effectively. Yet as a society and as a profession we are still suffering from acute, chronic and prolonged stress. In fact the effects of excess negative stress are so severe, and are affecting so many people, that is now being widely referred to as the 'Black Death of the 21st Century'

The word stress is derived from the Latin word 'stringere' which literally means "to draw tight"; this is a wonderfully descriptive root word, which aptly captures how stress feels in the human body. Many of us can relate personally to this feeling of being pulled like an elastic band, fully extended and about to break.

Stress is normal and as we all know, it comes in the good stress (eustress) and bad stress (distress) categories. Good stress prevents boredom and enhances motivation. Many of us are at our most productive and creative when there is a looming deadline. Good stress enhances focus and concentration and gets us moving. Bad stress is different! It's the feeling or perception that you do not have the resources to complete or achieve the task at hand. It creates imbalances in your life on all levels and can be crippling.

As administrative assistants we are exposed to physical and emotional stress daily due to the nature of our profession. We are expected to get things right and be organized all the time and our margin for error is very small indeed. As the right hand person to a high powered executive you are also exposed to their stress, a recent study by the University of Hawaii has found that stress is as contagious as the common cold. We therefore not only contend with our own stress (be it work or personal) but we are also exposed to our boss' stress due to the close working relationship that is unique to this role.

Another cause of distress is hyper-connectivity and poor life balance being created by technology and working for companies that have offices in different time zones. We are currently living in a society that never shuts down and we are being engulfed by waves of information that hit us on a daily basis in the form of never ending emails, reports and statistics. Smartphones have created a new working culture of checking mail and responding after hours and on weekends. Being constantly available and switched on. This is particularly hazardous to the type A, perfectionistic, people-pleasing personal assistant, who feels the pressure to respond in real time to anything that happens in the mailbox and feels guilty when their phone is switched off.

A study at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden on "techno stress" has found that heavy computer and cell use adversely affects stress levels and general mental health. The light from your computer screen disrupts your melatonin production which disturbs your circadian cycles and damages your sleep patterns.

Another significant factor is the worldwide recession which is placing strain on companies who need to either downscale or retrench. As a result, administrative professionals may suddenly be working for more than one boss or be in a position where they are working as a team secretaries, having to juggle tasks, manage priorities and maintain a professional standard of work while looking after the needs of

multiple stakeholders. Our salary increases are getting smaller every year and our expenses are rising exponentially. All this creates stress which can feel overwhelming and debilitating.

There are many other causes of stress which we will explore in more detail in this series, but what we all need to understand is that it is not necessarily the stressor but our reaction to it which creates the stress. It is in the gap between the stimulus and the response in which our power lies to overcome stress.

Another critical factor is fatigue. Stress is created by adrenaline and other stress hormones like cortisol being released, this makes us alert which in turn makes it hard to sleep. Not being able to sleep creates fatigue which makes you less and less resilient and more prone to stress and so the vicious cycle continues. One of the most critical factors to manage when you are experiencing bad stress is your sleeping pattern. This can be done by reducing your caffeine intake, exercising more and managing your diet.

Another critical point to note is that chronic ongoing stress is much worse for you than once off acute stress. It is the ongoing long term exposure to stress hormones which damages neural pathways, your internal organs and causes diseased fat.

Research in the US has also found that one third of stress related illnesses are as a direct result of bullying in the workplace. They also found that one-fourth of all the prescriptions filled are for tranquilizers, antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications. Stress and depression related expenses worldwide go into the billions of dollars. These are terrible statistics!

It has long been known that stress contributes to, and aggravates diseases like diabetes, heart disease and hyper tension. It creates blood clots, disrupts the immune system (reducing the body's healing ability by as much as 25%) and is responsible for as many as 30% of infertility cases.

Chronic and prolonged stress and the resulting hormones released by the body, has also been proven to kill brain cells, increasing the ability of harmful chemicals and viruses to pass the blood-brain barrier.

Yes, stress is scary, but it is also a reality of the modern world that we live in. We need to be aware of its negative impact and start to manage and mitigate its harmful effects on our bodies and minds. We need to arm ourselves with the theory but also implement some practical plans to reduce our own stress.

In this five part series on stress we will be looking in detail at the following from an administrative professional's perspective:

Part 2 – The difference between good stress and bad - how to mitigate and harness your stress

Part 3 – What causes stress for PA'S?

Part 4 – Toxic work environments

Part 5 – Creating your own stress management strategy

Stress management is a bit like dieting, sometimes you will backslide but the most essential thing is that you try and maintain perspective and not give up on having a more balanced and stress free life.

I hope that you will enjoy this journey with me!