

*Brainworks*

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Also by Simon Jackson:

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# **Brainworks**

## **Meditation & Mind-Hacks for Creatives**

**Simon Jackson**



## Introduction

**This is a book of solutions to problems that busy people, particularly creatives (those working in a range of industries, such as the media, graphic design, IT, etc.) can face.**

Although I'm going to explain a series of techniques that can be used to generally aid the creative process, the focus of this book is just as much about ways of getting a *release* from the continual stress of creativity when you need it too.



I've been a meditator for about 25 years now, and along the way have also been involved in other areas of mental exploration, such as hypnosis and NLP, which led me to discover useful techniques that helped make both my meditation sessions and my general day to day working life a

lot easier. These techniques aren't big secrets, and yet not enough people are aware of them or how much they can help you to become generally happier and more productive, so it's my aim to draw them together here in what I hope is a logical, no-frills way, to make them more accessible.

However, I don't want to give the impression that through my own superhuman mental focus and determination, I have somehow reached a point where none of the problems I write about here are ever an issue for me. I've spent the last 30 years within careers that required me to be imaginative on a daily basis: graphics and design for the computer games industry, then journalism and feature writing, then later PR for IT companies. All of them had their own stresses, and sometimes I coped, sometimes I didn't. Although I'm happy to say that I've got some areas of my life more under control than before, in others I'm still learning too, just like everyone else. I've done everything wrong that a person can do if they want to stay creative, sane and in work, and most of the problems here have applied to me at some time or another. Being creative for a living is not always an easy task, and trying to avoid the stress it can cause is a constant battle. If you're in the position where you have to stay in the 'on' state for your entire working career, or perhaps lose your livelihood, it's no wonder that stress in the media and other similar fields is notorious for worker burn-outs.

Before I get started on the tactics you can use to avoid stress though, I'd just like to talk about its effects in some detail, as it's too easy to be unaware of (or ignore) the warning signs that can tell us that it's time we did something about the way we're feeling. But, please note that although I explain the impact of stress below, and at

times talk about the simple pitfalls that can make us work less effectively, this book isn't just for people who find themselves under pressure or who need to be continually creative, but for everyone. No matter how care-free and well-adjusted you are, I can guarantee that the techniques contained here will make your life even more enjoyable.

## **Know the enemies**

### **The 2000 Integra Survey reported that:**

- 65% of workers said that workplace stress had caused difficulties, with more than 10% describing these as having major effects.
- 10% said they work in an atmosphere where physical violence has occurred because of job stress and in this group.
- 19% Had left a previous position because of job stress.
- 62% routinely find that they end the day with work-related neck pain
- 44% reported stressed-out eyes
- 38% complained of hurting hands
- 34% reported difficulty in sleeping.

Acceptable levels of stress are different for everyone. Some people thrive on adrenaline rushes, some fall apart at the first signs of a busy day, no two people are the same. We can define negative stress as that which causes us distress, and takes us to a point where we no longer feel in control of ourselves or events, leaving us unable to carry out effective decision-making.

Unremarkably, absenteeism due to job stress has escalated over the last few years. Whilst manual handling, and health and safety issues are, on the whole, being well-managed, few businesses pay much

attention to dealing with the mental stressors that might be present in the workplace. Office size, level of noise, staff-bullying, even getting through traffic to work plays a part in creating increasing daily pressure on many people. According to a survey of 800,000 workers in over 300 companies, the number of employees calling in sick because of stress tripled from 1996 to 2000, and an estimated 1 million workers are absent every day because of it.

When we're under stress we can easily find that we're unable to remember simple, familiar facts or juggle information as we usually can, making us flustered and unable to cope. This is because stress hormones divert blood glucose to muscles for the 'fight or flight' response, so the amount of glucose that reaches the brain is greatly lessened. This in turn creates an energy crisis in the hippocampus, the part of the limbic brain central to learning and memory, which stops it from creating new memories or accessing old ones. Sustained stress can actually damage the hippocampus in the long term and lead to a variety of related disorders. Stress doesn't just make you under-perform, it affects everything about you, from physical fitness to mental health.

## **Office Noise**

Even low-intensity background noise can stress you almost as much as an impending deadline. In a study at Cornell University, environmental psychologists found that low-level noise in open-style offices appears to result in higher levels of stress in workers, and lower task motivation. In a comparative study, workers in a noisy office experienced significantly higher levels of stress, made 40% fewer attempts to solve an unsolvable puzzle,

and made only half as many ergonomic adjustments to their workstations, compared to their colleagues in quiet offices. What's interesting here is that the workers themselves didn't feel that being in a noisy office was causing them to become stressed at all.

Gary Evans, leading the study, said, "...Just because people fail to report that environmental conditions are negative, we can't assume that there are no adverse impacts. Our findings resemble those in studies of very noisy environments in that we found that realistic, open-office noise has modest but adverse effects on physiological stress and motivation, and might contribute significantly to health problems such as heart disease (due to elevated levels of epinephrine) and musculo-skeletal problems. Even low levels of noise can have a potentially stressful effect."

## **Ageing**

You may have the worrying feeling that, as you age, you feel less able to cope with stresses that weren't a problem to you when you were younger. Sad to say that this is true and, unless you can get the time to put things in place that will slow the effects of the decline, it is inevitable. You might think that with more exercise and a better diet that you could get back to your former youthful capacity for work, but, whilst these things will certainly help, in the long run you can't get over the fact that the levels of stress hormones naturally present in your body rises with age, whilst those that disperse them diminish. To truly counteract this problem you need not just a good diet and exercise, but a healthy mind too, one that's better equipped to manage conflict and tension. If there are no, or fewer, stress hormones in the first place,

there are none to deal with.

Stress, in large amounts at least, obviously isn't just something that bothers creative people, so it's an

Note too, computer prisoners everywhere - recent research by the University of Leeds reported in *New Scientist* (11<sup>th</sup> August 2007) showed that there's a direct link between neck muscles and a part of the brain-stem called the nucleus tractus solitarius (NTS), which plays a crucial role in regulating blood-pressure and heart-rate. Ian Edwards, a scientist from the Leeds team, commented that it may show that long hours spent hunched over a keyboard directly contributes to high blood-pressure. "The pathway exists for bad posture to really have an effect," said Edwards.

advantage to know what it's capable of, particularly as it can cause illnesses that really don't seem like they could be related to it at all. It's always worth considering that the bad back that stresses you out and stops you from working may not be a real physical ailment at all, but is actually caused by stress itself. Rather than spending weeks getting physiotherapy or taking pills, you could find a simple change in your approach to work would be a quicker and more effective way to heal it. It's important to be able to recognise when stress is affecting you

negatively, and that's sometimes far from being straightforward or obvious, as I'll show below. However, the ultimate effect of stress, burn-out, is unmistakable.

## **Burn-Out**

It has to be said, that, in some male-oriented

businesses, there can be a macho attitude towards stress, an unspoken tenet that if you show any signs of buckling under the pressure of work that you're weak, unable to compete and not up to the job. "If you can't do it we can get someone in who can".

There's a growing body of evidence to show that noise can disrupt learning and education. A 1975 study by Arlene Bronzaft showed that the reading skills of children in classrooms next to noisy railway lines lagged behind those in quieter classrooms by three to four months.

In more recent research, Staffan Hygge at the laboratory of Applied Psychology, Gavle, Sweden, showed that the long-term memory recall of children living next to an airport in Munich, Germany, improved by 25% when the airport was closed. Those children in a school near where the new airport opened in its place, suffered a deterioration in skills by the same amount.

Not being able to show that you're under stress is, in itself, the worst kind of pressure that anyone can have to endure. I'm sad to say that I've worked with and met people who didn't show their stress at work, and they kept going until it was far too late. Their final collapse happened quickly, over a matter of days. When it was over it took them years to come back to being remotely like the people they were before their collapse. Bad burn-out is devastating, and is the closest thing you can get to a nervous breakdown without actually having one. Unfortunately, burn-out is becoming all too common in high-power industries nowadays, though it shouldn't be with what we know about the effects of stress and the adoption of modern working practices.

Too many high-flyers end up in forced retirement because they get to a point where they can't do the job they

## **Symptoms of stress:**

- Headaches and jaw clenching.
- Insomnia, nightmares, grinding teeth
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Stammering
- Tremors, trembling of lips and hands
- Forgetfulness, confusion
- Neck ache, back pain, muscle spasms
- Faintness, dizziness
- Ringing, buzzing or popping sounds in the ears
- Frequent blushing, sweating
- Nervous habits, such as fidgeting or feet tapping
- Frequent colds and infections.
- Increased frustration, irritability and edginess
- Rashes, itching, hives.
- Unexplained or frequent 'allergy attacks'
- Heartburn, stomach pain, nausea, wind
- Hair loss
- Decreased libido and performance
- Obsessive or compulsive behaviour
- Constipation, diarrhoea
- Difficulty breathing, sighing
- Panic attacks
- Chest pain, palpitations
- Frequent urination
- Weight gain or loss without diet.
- Increased or decreased appetite.

trained to do any more because of burn-out and nobody else will have them.

Read through the symptoms of stress here and consider honestly how much you're bothered by any of them. A decline in mental health can happen very quickly, and it's obviously a good idea to be aware of signs that indicate that things might be going wrong for us.

## **Mini Burn-Out**

Burn-out doesn't always entail a complete shut-down, or come after months of stress. People who do intense, week long projects are likely to suffer a smaller version at the end of every project that's just as debilitating in the

short-term. If you're putting your all into a job with a tight deadline, living on coffee and adrenalin, when the project comes to an end your sigh of relief may soon be replaced by the dreadful knowledge that you're going to have to go through it all again on the next job, and the next. If you're not in tip-top mental and physical condition, the fear and weariness can be all-consuming, and last for a few days at the end of every project you complete.

Even if I'm not feeling particularly stressed at the end of a project that's been a bit full-on, the days after it's over can sometimes be very unproductive, and I have to make a real effort to get going again afterwards. Although it doesn't happen every time, I now prepare for the eventuality of it doing so beforehand, sorting out a handful of varied jobs to do that don't need the same kind of intense thought as my usual work does. This keeps me working and being productive, so I feel less anxious about not being able to be creative during this period.

## **The Big Picture**

It's beyond doubt that stress can have wide-ranging effects on emotions, mood and behaviour. Equally important, but often less appreciated, are the effects on various systems, organs and tissues all over the body that it can have too. There are tens of physical disorders that have been linked to stress, and although those given above might seem logical effects, there are others here below which will seem less likely, and that we might not therefore consider:

- Heart attacks
- Strokes
- Increased susceptibility to infections, such as colds, herpes, AIDS, some forms of cancer.

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- Hypertension
- Autoimmune diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis.
- Skin problems, like: rashes, hives, atopic dermatitis.
- Stomach problems, such as peptic ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome and ulcerative colitis.
- Contributes degenerative neurological disorders like Parkinson's disease.

In fact, it's hard to think of any disease in which stress cannot play an aggravating role, or any part of the body that it's unable to affect. However, not all stress is bad, and at least a small amount of it is perfectly healthy and even necessary to your well-being. 'Good' stress causes the brain to release nor-epinephrine, one of the main excitatory neurotransmitters that are needed to create new memories, and improve mood. It's beneficial in other unexpected ways too. Researchers at Ohio State University found that stress created by carrying out a memory-related task activated the immune system of subjects, whereas the stress from passively watching a violent video weakened immunity. This suggests that short-term, manageable stress may actually help strengthen the body's defences.

But, that aside, stress isn't really going to help many of us perform at the level we have to, creative or not. Honesty with yourself is paramount in deciding how badly or how well you're coping at work or at home. It's no bad thing to admit that you're succumbing to pressure and to try to do something about it. And there's the rub; it's one thing identifying a problem and quite another to actively seek an answer to it. We're all busy people, we have our routines, and doing things that are going to help us requires that we have to make space for them in our

already far too busy days – something that many are loathe to do. Unfortunately, burn-out has no respect for the way we want to live our lives, get it before it gets you.

This wouldn't be complete without a look at something that's even more of a problem for some than stress, something that can lead to an apparent total loss of our ability to be creative, or tackle the simplest of jobs, or prevent us from doing much more with this book than using it to prop up a wonky table-leg. Although this terrible malady affects millions, there are very few things we can do to overcome it - but knowing that we have it is the first step to recovery. Let me explain...

**Continued in 'Brainworks - Meditation & Mind-Hacks for Creatives', by Simon Jackson.**

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