

Coping with Stress

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. [Charles Dickens (1812–1870), British novelist. A Tale of Two Cities, Ch. 1, p. 1, “The Period,” (1859).]

I arrived home around 8:30 Thursday night, having chaired a successful and rewarding meeting of the Stamford, CT TENG Chapter. Sitting with my wife and sharing the day’s activities, she recounted a conversation she had with our daughter. She has just begun to read A Tale of Two Cities in school and remarked that the above quotation could be applied to almost anyone, at any point in time. From the mouths of babes, as they say.

Last week I discussed fit and its implications in the job market. I appreciate your responses. Job fit is only one source of your unbounded frustrations and their resulting stress. From our numerous Emails, phone calls and personal conversations, it is obvious that most of you are tired and frustrated at all the negatives you encounter on a daily basis. We are living in a period of contradictions. We enjoy comforts and amenities that are nothing more than vague dreams for many others in this world, yet we are suffering an unprecedented level of stress and fear that has shaken our confidence to the point that it reaches beyond pessimism. For many who are unemployed, the glass is neither half full nor half empty; it is broken. As someone once said, “When your neighbor is unemployed, it’s a recession; when you are, it’s a depression”. Unemployment also can be very depressing and highly stressful.

I was raised by two hard working parents who came of age during The Great Depression of the 1930’s. Now in their late eighties, they are living a modest yet comfortable retirement, the stuff of our dreams. They were avid savers. They believed that hard work diligence and living in moderation would bring a lifetime of security, and for them, it did. Neither of them ever faced unemployment. While they endured the Depression and World War Two, as workers they had experiences different from ours and they retired before the swells of corporate acquisitions, restructurings and layoffs began in the 1970’s and 80’s. They, like the rest of us, could not have anticipated the tech bubble, Y2K and 9/11. Somehow, our generation and those coming behind us, not only have to deal with these issues and their impact, but with them as our backdrop, we also have to set some kind of positive example for our children. It’s hard to be positive about much of anything when you have been out of work for a year, your retirement savings are being devastated by a fitful stock market and you have been dipping into the remainder to support yourself. Add that to dealing with arrogant recruiters and indecisive, fickle hiring executives and

your job search along with life itself reach new heights of being unbearable. At times like this, we are all overcome by feelings of helplessness and futility. IT executives are builders who create order where there existed chaos. It stands to reason that they will be very unhappy when they feel that their world is being torn apart or rendered chaotic. We are on the outside looking in at a seemingly very prosperous world that offers the comfort of kings, but not to us.

Stress manifests itself in many ways, some not readily apparent, and it pervades every aspect of our existence. Some element of stress is positive. It motivates us to get up each day and do our best. Some results of high stress include sleeping difficulty, unexplained aches and pains, over eating, poor appetite, overindulgence in alcohol, substance abuse, smoking, irritability, isolation, illnesses, and in extreme cases violent behavior and death. While each of us dreams of hitting the lottery and being set for life, I have read numerous stories of lottery winners who ended up bankrupt, worse off than if had they won nothing. Wealth had changed them for the worse. I suspect that all of us would like to be rich enough to never have to work again for the rest of our lives, unless we chose to do so for the fun of it. This would allow us to lead the isolated lives of privilege that allows many of the well heeled to be detached from everyone else of lesser means, ignoring their existence and problems. The newspaper, USA Today runs daily graphs of topics that impact our lives. A few years ago, it printed one that illustrated the top ten fears of Americans. The first eight or nine were financial. As I recall, the list leader was fear of outliving personal assets. Yet if we were all wealthy enough to live in our secure cocoons until the day we die, I submit that we might be not as fulfilled as we now are by helping each other to confront a common problem. To avoid making a hasty generalization, many wealthy people are generous and sharing. But if each of us had no further need to work, we would not feel the necessity and the urgency to support each other the way we do now. This same painful stress of our uncertainty also builds character, relationships and innovation.

History teaches us that our world has been fraught with spells of political and economic turmoil since the beginning of time. A study of US history reveals numerous boom and bust cycles frequently associated with the introduction and manufacture of newer technologies, initially with many small competitors, speculation, mergers, business failures and the final emergence of dominant players. The invention of the automobile caused such an event early in the twentieth century. I am simplifying things, but the present political instability caused by the violence between Israel and the Palestinians appears to be a continuation of tensions that have existed for thousands of years. Read the Old Testament portion of the Bible or the Jewish Torah and you will see what I mean. We may be living in comfortable surroundings, but we share a world that is as hostile and unpredictable as ever. Such economic and political conditions create forces that are beyond anyone's control, yet they impact all of us.

Problems and the stress they create are relative. Our lives may seem intolerably burdensome and stressful but none of us has to look very far to find someone else who has it worse than we do. Any of you who have dealt with serious illnesses, loss or illness of a loved one, or who may have relatives in Israel or elsewhere in the Middle East know

exactly what I mean. In May 2000, two major business deals for senior searches that were supposedly solid fell through within days of each other, through no fault of my own. This was very stressful and upsetting for me since I had noticed that the pace of hiring was beginning to slow in the wake of the stock market plunges the previous April. The approaching summer would only make conditions slow down more. As it turned out, this loss represented a significant percentage of my business for that year. Shortly thereafter, while driving home from work on my usual route, I passed a small grassy triangle that creates a fork in the road. A forlorn-looking couple, my neighbors, were planting a flower garden in it as a memorial to their sixteen-year-old daughter, who had died suddenly from a severe asthma attack, two years before. I had barely passed them when it occurred to me that while I was distressed over finances, they would have gladly parted with every cent they had to have her back. Though the stress from my loss didn't disappear completely for some time, whenever I felt it return, I also felt a sense of thankfulness that my family was still intact.

We can't control many of the events that affect our lives, but sometimes we can manage how we deal with them and we can take steps that might soften their impact. Maybe some of these thoughts will help you:

- You are not suffering alone. You are in the ranks of many like yourself.
- You are probably not facing anything that someone else hasn't previously encountered. Others coming after you will also encounter similar challenges. Ninety-five years ago, it was the Panic of 1907. Historians will give our present state some convenient name. But the devastation and fallout from these events are similar: a plunging stock market and recession, spelling financial stress.
- As Tessio said in the movie, The Godfather, I, "It's just business". (It's not personal.)

What personal actions should you take? Consider doing some or all of the following if they apply to you:

- Exercise regularly. You don't have to join an expensive gym. Take a long walk everyday. Walking offers all the same benefits as jogging, but with less physical damage to your body. You can do it almost anywhere. I enjoy long walks at sunrise, as the world around me comes to life. I also enjoy them on winter afternoons. For me the cold is bracing and drives away any lethargic feelings. A decent pair of walking shoes at a discount shoe store should not be too costly. Regular exercise revitalizes you, gives you more energy, keeps the pounds off and helps you to deal more effectively with stress.
- Eat a healthy diet. Avoid junk food and eat only when you're hungry, not when you're stressed. Easier said than done.
- Drink plenty of water.
- If you consume alcohol, limit your usage. It is a depressant
- If you drink coffee, limit your usage. It is a stimulant.
- Get the same amount of sleep every night. Don't sit up until the wee hours watching television.

- Connect with your loved ones. Interact with them; let them know that you love them. Spend time with them.
- Talk about your feelings with a friend. Sometimes speaking about problems diminishes their size in your own mind.
- Read books. This is an excellent way to relax. If you live near a library, you have access to a wealth of periodicals, books and probably computers with Internet access. If I were retired today, I would want to live near a good library and have a laptop computer with DSL or cable modem access.
- If you are a homeowner, make improvements you can do yourself. Paint or wallpaper a room. You can do it for the cost of materials. A gallon of good paint costs about thirty dollars. If you are able, do a spring cleanup of your yard. Plant some new shrubs or perennials. You can find them inexpensively at the larger chain stores, such as Wal-Mart, Home Depot or Lowe's. You will feel a sense of pride in your accomplishment.
- Wash or detail your car. When I have the time, I find this to be very therapeutic activity. It is physical exercise, it doesn't require much thought and the end result is a spiffy looking car. Being a car nut, this is a source of pleasure for me.
- Join a warehouse club and bulk buy necessary foods and home supplies. Some people think this is not worth their time and trouble, but savings can be considerable. The savings on one shopping trip may pay for a year's dues, which are typically \$35 for a couple. As one financial reporter said, "Bulk buying toilet tissue and other necessities is like getting a forty per cent return on your investment".
- Read the sale flyers and coupon inserts in your local newspapers. You may save between ten and thirty percent on your weekly food bill.
- Monitor gasoline prices in your area. I know a local, major brand gas station that is consistently fifteen cents per gallon under all of its competitors. I buy between ten and fifteen gallons of gas about every five days. At the end of a year, my savings are substantial.
- Repair leaky faucets, and turn off unused lights. Find the lowest cost long-distance carrier or make long distance calls on your cell phone if it offers free long distance. Replace inefficient appliances, if possible. Last year, while still self-employed, I asked my two part-time employees to turn off their computers and lights when leaving for the day. My office electric bill went down noticeably.
- Volunteer in your community. Help others who are less fortunate than you are. Life may look better to you.
- Find a professional financial advisor. I don't mean a stockbroker or your insurance agent. What I mean is a trained and certified professional planner who will sit down with you for hours to discuss your entire financial picture and offer appropriate short and long-term solutions. Before selecting one, you should meet with several to determine which one will best serve your needs without you losing sleep. Make them show you their ADV form, which the federal government requires them to have. It is a written narrative of their experience, qualifications and the nature of their business.
- If you are suffering from burdensome debt, see a credit counselor. Try to renegotiate gentler repayment terms.

- If you are still stressed, seek professional counseling. If your medical benefits have expired or don't cover this service, try to seek help through a community resource or religious organization.

How do you deal with the frustrations of your career search?

- Continue to network. The TENG adds at least one new member each day. You have good company. Refer more new members and refer the leads. The more we grow the greater service we will provide. Our sister organization, The FENG, share about nine hundred leads per month.
- Go to www.brunerconsulting.com Click on the TENG button, go to prior newsletters. Read Vol. 2 No 6, concerning your search strategy. Take over your job search; don't just react to the job boards.
- Remember that those people you encounter in your job search, who are arrogant, rude, uncooperative and inflexible will be jobseekers themselves someday.

Most of all, try to have faith. If you practice a religion, pray regularly. It works. If you have no religious belief then have faith in yourself and in the support of your friends and loved ones. We are minor players on history's stage. What we are experiencing will get brief mention in some future history book. Live for today, enjoy your life and do your best to help those around you. We may be in an age of dramatic change, but human nature and the vast reward earned by helping others, is more constant. May happiness and reduced stress be just around the corner for you.

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