

Why You May Be Feeling Frantic These Days

There's so much pressure on young women right now, plus they've got an endless to-do list. Free yourself from a crazy-busy cycle with our advice.

By Michelle Stacey

■ Drop everything and take this pop quiz. Are you (a) surgically attached to your to-do list, (b) unable to turn off your cell phone or BlackBerry for fear of missing something crucial, (c) tempted to just skim this article, or (d) all of the above?

If you answered *yes* to any or all of these, you just may be a "stressette": a word that sounds cuter than what it means. Market-research firm Synovate coined the term to describe a type of high-achieving young woman—one who drives herself crazy with stress, pressure, anxiety, and unending busyness—when a survey it conducted found that young women today feel the need to succeed more than ever.

The strange part is that no one's complaining. In fact, some people are bragging. "I see competitive stressing all the time," says Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, PhD, professor of psychology at Yale and author of *Women Who Think Too Much*. "It's a marker of status. It means you're important and other people are demanding your time and attention." Some experts are even beginning to characterize this drive for a

constant whirlwind—meetings, deadlines, parties, dates—as a kind of addictive behavior.

"When you're under pressure, your body responds with a hormonal surge of chemicals like cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine," explains Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress*. "You become hypervigilant, all senses on alert. You feel powerful." That can be great at times, fueling you through a deadline crunch at work or a crazed holiday season. But if you live on that high all the time, it becomes toxic.

Girls Gone Anxious

So what prompted women to begin driving themselves this nutty to begin with? A survey by the Associated Press and MTV found that jobs and finances were the most commonly cited stressors for young people ages 18 to 24, and certainly, the recent economic downturn hasn't helped.

But the Synovate survey found additional factors: a constant struggle to be both the hot, desired girl and the successful woman, and an im-

mense pressure to live up to unrealistic standards to be "perfect," from looks to relationships to careers.

"You start to see everything, even relationships, in terms of success or failure," says Mandel. Once you're thinking only in terms of winning, you can literally forget how to relax—or how to accomplish things without being frantic. Mandel remembers one woman she met in a stress workshop who said she went on a trip to the Amazonian rainforest and found herself saying to the tour guide, "I can't get reception on my BlackBerry!"

The Good, Bad, and Ugly Sides of Pressure

Stress itself is not inherently bad. In fact, says Nolen-Hoeksema, "a certain amount of stress and anxiety is actually motivating. You're alive cognitively; you perform better. You have to be up for a challenge, a bit hyped." This kind of stress, says Mandel, is acute (as opposed to chronic): a surge of energy focused on a particular outcome, like a presentation at work.



Think hard:
When was the last
time you weren't
overwhelmed?

Stress by Gender
45% of young women said they felt stressed frequently, as opposed to 32% of young men.
SOURCE: AP/MTV SURVEY

Keeping superbusy can be a way of avoiding the important stuff in life.

Chronic stress, on the other hand, is a killer, causing such physical symptoms as fatigue, sleep problems, changes in appetite, stomachaches, headaches, and back pains. Chronic stress has been shown to weaken your immune system, making you more susceptible to illness, slowing the healing process, and producing inflammation that can lead to heart disease.

On the emotional side, being too stressed for too long makes you a basket case: Your temper frays, your attention wanders (you find yourself spacing out as a friend is talking to you), and you're plagued by bouts of generalized anxiety and low-level depression. And perhaps worst of all, you can lose touch with the big picture.

That may be the most insidious result of stress: Lots of people make themselves superbusy as a way of avoiding the real stuff (i.e., the hard stuff). But if you're always too frantic to stop and focus on important questions—about things like why your third relationship just tanked or whether you've chosen the kind of work that truly makes you happy—then you really have put yourself on an endless treadmill where nothing ever feels like it's progressing.

"You need personal, unscheduled time in order to develop the other parts of your identity, to get to know yourself better," explains psychiatrist Jeffrey Brantley, director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program at Duke University.

How to Stop Stressing

The truth is, you don't have to drive yourself crazy (or crazy-busy) in order to get things done or feel like your life has purpose. Here are rules and

tips to help you use stress to your advantage—while still being able to get some decent sleep at night.

Live an Hour at a Time

"This is the multitasking generation," says psychologist Dale Atkins, PhD, author of *Sanity Savers*, "and many people feel they're being more productive when they do several things at once." But in fact, the opposite is true: Research has shown that a 50-minute task takes four times as long to accomplish if you're juggling too many things simultaneously.

You also can't think as creatively when you're multitasking, says Atkins, because "the process gets interrupted. Creativity comes in bursts and in silence. If you don't have any downtime, you can't think outside the box." Some ways to calm the chaos:

- Clear your desk of everything except the one project you're focusing on, says Atkins. If you can't work on only one project at a time, says Nolen-Hoeksema, at least compartmentalize your day—break it into morning and afternoon or into two-hour chunks.
- Ask your boss to help you prioritize, if necessary: "I can have this done by 5, but it means I won't have that other project done until tomorrow. Which do you prefer I focus on?"
- Force yourself to schedule tasks by deadline, then do them in order (e.g., don't let yourself obsess about next week's term paper when your mind is still on this week's assignment).

Separate the Positive From the Negative

Good stress—the kind that makes you stronger—flows from doing things that, though they may be difficult, are

energy
metabolism+
focus
immunity

Crystal Light has fabulous drinks to help you refresh, replenish and recharge. Take your water from pale to pumped.



important to you personally. "If you feel that what you're doing has little meaning or purpose, that it's something others want you to do, that it's not moving you toward your goals, it's the kind of stress that takes a toll," says Nolen-Hoeksema. Here's how to identify the healthy variety of stress.

● Take five minutes in the morning to take stock, suggests Nolen-Hoeksema. Are the things you have to do today worth your time and energy? Are they valuable to you? Are they somehow helping to further your ambitions?

● Ask yourself, *If I could drop everything and start over, which things would I continue to do and which would I never do again?*

Watch Your Words

Changing your language means not just the way you talk about being stressed out but also the way you beat down yourself (and your confidence) with negative self-judgments. "I'll kill

myself if I don't get this done" or "I'm so crazed!" are what Atkins calls the language of reinforcement—you're feeding the shark within yourself.

Even more insidious is that mean inner voice whipping you, saying "You will never get this right" or "You're a failure." As a culture, says Dr. Brantley, we are more self-critical than self-encouraging, and that can be paralyzing. Adjust your inner dialogue like this:

● Become aware of what your inner voice is saying, suggests Dr. Brantley, and then challenge it: *I'm not defective or a failure. Calling myself that is simply an old habit that I can break.*

● Talk to yourself as you would to a friend who is overwhelmed and needs a pep talk. Develop the skill of comforting and soothing yourself.

● "Learn to count your successes more than your failures," says Mandel. "Who responds to a negative coach?" Remind yourself of the last time you aced an exam or a presentation. ■

10 Instant Stress Busters

LAUGH. Collect a list of funny Websites, like cartoonbank.com or someecards.com.

CRY. It's nature's de-stressor.

CUDDLE with your cat...or dog or other nonverbal creature.

SMELL lavender oil. It's known for its calming effects. Keep a vial in your bag.

EAT complex carbs. They enhance serotonin, your body's natural tranquilizer.

LISTEN to a favorite song or a track of nature sounds, like rain or waves.

LOOK at a memento of happy memories. Keep a snapshot—

or a pebble—from a beach trip in your office.

SAY NO to something you really don't want to do.

BREATHE in deeply through your nose, filling your belly with air, and then breathe out through your mouth.



CLEAN out your purse (or your closet, if you're feeling really ambitious).

Maria Menounos gives you the 1-2-3



use Volume shampoo & conditioner, then spray Root Lifter on damp sections



use velcro rollers to get that wave



flip hair, spray, flip back and smooth

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