

## CHAPTER 1

# What Is Your **Stress Number?**

**SAMPLE**

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**S**tress is everywhere you look: It's in the little things that get under your skin such as traffic jams, difficult customers, long lines, rude remarks, bad drivers, noisy neighbors and impolite children. It's in the bigger things that drag you down, such as downsizing, rising prices, unemployment, angry bosses, having to work two jobs, crime, terrorism and even foreign wars. And then there are those life-changing events, such as accidents, illness, the death of a loved one, getting laid-off, or going through a divorce or breakup. These are just a few of the stressful influences that leave us feeling sad, anxious, nervous, frustrated, frightened, overwhelmed, depressed, lonely and/or just plain lousy.

### How Do We Manage This Ever Increasing Stressload?

Typically, we “manage” our stress by overspending, overeating, smoking, drinking and even becoming dependent on prescription and over-the-counter drugs like pain killers and sleeping pills. Also known as “counter-productive coping,” this way of handling stress only leads to even bigger problems such as maxed-out credit cards, obesity, diabetes, lung cancer and alcoholism—which only adds fuel to the fire.

Experts estimate that between 75 to 90% of all doctors visits are for stress-related conditions. (Maybe you've experienced some of these stress-related conditions yourself?) They include: migraine headaches, tension headaches, colitis, irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, asthma, allergies, rashes, anxiety, depression, insomnia and back pain. These conditions can all be adversely affected by stress.

### “Prescriptive Solutions” Don't Get To The Heart Of The Problem

Doctors are sometimes as baffled as their patients by the reason for the symptoms—so they quickly prescribe any pills that might temporarily lessen their patient's pain. But these “prescriptive” solutions often come with a price (AKA side effects), which, depending on the prescription offered, may or may not include: drowsiness, weight gain, agitation, low libido, lethargy and—in rare cases—death.

Besides some pretty scary side effects, there's another big problem with this pharmacological approach. When you take a sleeping pill, a pain pill, an anti-anxiety drug like Xanax or Valium—you're usually not addressing the *source* of the problem. You're eliminating the symptom, but not the cause of the symptom.

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Of course you can make it easier to cope with the problem by eliminating or reducing these annoying symptoms like sleeplessness, pain, nervousness and low mood. But, you are absolutely NOT addressing the root of the problem. The pharmacological approach is roughly the equivalent of asking your auto-mechanic to put masking tape over a warning light on the dashboard of your car. Your problem isn't fixed, you're just not as aware of it anymore.

Doctors write out most prescriptions for a limited time. They hope the prescription will get you through a rough patch, and that when it runs out, you won't need it any more. That's the hope. But when the rough patch doesn't go away for weeks, months or years, then what do you do? If you're like most people, you go back to your doctor and ask (and in some cases beg) for the prescription to be renewed. And, as a result, your body continues to take a beating while you carefully cover up all the evidence (or symptoms) of your stress. In effect, you're pharmacologically propping yourself up, acting as if you have no symptoms.

This book is about how to get you out of a vicious cycle you may not even know you are in.

As you can see, there are some fundamental flaws with this approach to handling stress. We either make our problems worse by overeating, overspending or over-drinking—or we try to cover them up with a pill that may or may not be good for us in the long run.

With options like these, *something has to change.*

## This Book Is About Helping You Make That Change

This book is about how to get you out of a vicious cycle you may not even know you are in. All the solutions (mostly counter-productive) that have been mentioned so far—from overeating to over-drinking to over-dependence on prescription drugs—only anesthetize you to the pain. They allow you to keep going when your body is screaming for you to stop!

You say to yourself: *"If I just keep on pushing myself, maybe I'll get through this rough patch."* This book is also about how to address what's causing the rough patch. It's about understanding the rough patch, finding all-natural ways of getting through the rough patch, and what to do when the rough patch doesn't go away.

Managing stress is not as hard as you think. In fact, *you can lower your stress right now.* Not next week, or next month or even next year, *but right this minute.* And you won't need a pill or a drink, or even have to pull out your wallet to do it.





## Are You Interested?

If so, start by ranking your stress (how tense or relaxed you feel right now) on a scale from zero to ten. Zero is the complete absence of tension, (no anxious feelings in the gut or tension in the body), and 10 is a full-blown panic attack, (where you have so much tension that you either feel like you are having heart-attack-like symptoms, tunnel vision, feeling sweaty all over, or are having a nervous breakdown.)

So what's your stress number right now? Write it in the box to the right. (Don't over-think this. A reasonable guess is fine.)

What is your current stress number?

0 ----- 10  
NO TENSION  
OR  
ANXIETY

PANIC ATTACK  
OR NERVOUS  
BREAKDOWN

Look at your watch or a clock. Before the second hand goes around twice, you are going to significantly lower your level of stress and by so doing, learn to self-regulate your nervous-system. Here's how.

## HOW TO SELF-REGULATE YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Take a minute to reflect on the following instructions before beginning.

- 🕒 **Breathe in deeply (through your nose) to a count of four.**
- 🕒 **Hold that breath in for a count of four.**
- 🕒 **And then, breathe out to a count of six.**
- 🕒 **Repeat this cycle three times.**

Reread these instructions until you have them memorized. Close your eyes if desired before beginning. (Please do the above breathing exercise before continuing on.)

What is your stress number now?

If your second number is lower than your first, then you've just done something that Western science once thought was impossible. You've self-regulated your autonomic nervous system.

## About The Autonomic Nervous System

It's called the autonomic nervous system (or ANS for short) because it's supposed to work on auto-pilot, without any conscious control by you. Up until the 1960s, most Western scientists believed you couldn't self-regulate your autonomic nervous system. Then, in the late-sixties, a group of yoga practitioners agreed to meet at a lab on the campus of Harvard University to see if they could control the ANS by simply meditating. This idea was considered so radical at the time that the Harvard professor who had agreed to see them was afraid of losing his job. That's why he had his test subjects meet him at night—he wanted to minimize any chances of his colleagues finding out what he was doing. That professor's name was Dr. Herbert Benson.

In his lab, and later in his writing, Dr. Benson would identify the antidote to what we now refer to as *the fight or flight response*. (But more about Dr. Benson later.)

## The Fight Or Flight Response

The fight or flight response was a term coined by another professor at Harvard, Dr. Walter Cannon, (as it turns out, in the very same lab) fifty years earlier. His research explained why our hearts beat faster, our pupils dilate, our blood vessels constrict, our mouth dries up and our muscles become tense whenever we experience stress. Cannon theorized that this response allowed our prehistoric ancestors to go from a calm state to a highly aroused state in a matter of seconds, and that it had evolved over millions of years.

These fast-acting physiological changes of the fight or flight response were designed to help our prehistoric ancestors fight an attacker or flee to safety, hence its name. This response worked perfectly for the caveman who used it only when his life was in danger. However, in our modern world, this primitive response tends to backfire. Our stressors today consist mostly of psychological threats to our well-being, such as a rude remark, a car honk or a bad day at the office. None of these stressors could possibly kill us, but we react to them as *if they could*—almost like the caveman would react to the sight of a lion or a tiger.

Managing stress is not as hard as you think. In fact, you can lower your stress right now. Not next week, or next month or even next year, but right this minute. And you won't need a pill or a drink, or even have to pull out your wallet to do it.



When you find yourself in a stressful situation and you hear yourself saying “I’d like to strangle that guy,” or “I’m really angry with him or her,” or “I’m not going to take this anymore,” you probably have already *needlessly* activated your fight or flight response. When you feel your hands get cold and clammy before getting up to put on a presentation, you have already *needlessly* activated your fight or flight response. When you feel your heart pounding when someone cuts ahead of you in line, you have already *needlessly* activated your fight or flight response.

Why is it needless? Because in all of these modern-day situations you’re basically stuck: *You can’t fight and you can’t flee.* This response does you absolutely no good at all. *In fact, this same response that was designed to save our prehistoric ancestors is gradually (and in some cases, not so gradually) killing us now.* It’s needlessly calling up all this energy and tension, for which there is no outlet and no purpose. This puts a lot of unnecessary wear and tear on the body that eventually shows up in the form of pain or disease.

## The Harmful Effects Of Too Much Stress

When you see the connection between your strong reactions and the events that precede them you begin to realize the power that this stress response has over us. And when we look at the changes that take place during fight or flight, it becomes painfully obvious that there’s a connection between what the stress response does to the body and the list of stress-related diseases to which it can lead.

Think about that word disease for a moment and break it down into two syllables. DIS-EASE. *It’s a synonym for the word stress!* (See the list of stress-related diseases in the sidebar.)

The fight or flight response fills us full of adrenaline, raises our blood pressure, causes our hearts to beat faster, shuts down our immune system, halts our digestive system, turns off our reproductive system and even causes our bowels and bladder to “void,” all in an effort to make us into a lean, mean fighting (or fleeing) machine. Is it any wonder then, that insomnia, high blood pressure, heart disease, immune system disorders, infertility and digestive tract disorders are the most common types of stress-related concerns? Do you see the relationship between what the fight or flight response does to our body and why (when we activate it chronically and unnecessarily) it makes us sick?

Dr. Martin Samuels has an interesting job. He is head of the Neuro-Cardiology Department at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, where he studies the relationship between THINKING and heart-disease.



## STRESS-RELATED DISEASES

Ulcers\*

Depression

Insomnia

Allergies

Digestive Tract Disorders

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Colitis

Infertility

Chronic Pain

Migraine Headaches

Recurrent Colds

Hypertension

Heart Disease

Sudden Cardiac Death

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Fibromyalgia

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

\*Ulcers used to be solely attributed to stress but now they are believed to be caused by the helicobacter pylori bacterium. Yet most people (80%) have this bacterium in their gut all the time. Still, only a small percentage of these EVER develop ulcers. Stress experts suggest that maybe stress makes the gut more vulnerable to the bacteria and that’s why the ulcer develops.



## Scared To Death?

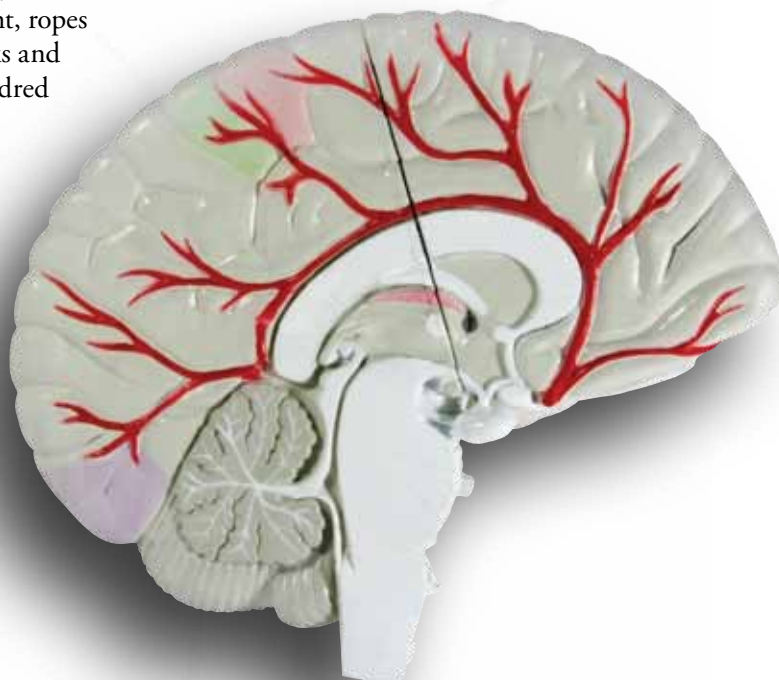
One of Dr. Samuels' work-related hobbies is collecting stories of otherwise healthy people who were literally scared to death. Ken Lay, the CEO of ENRON—who died suddenly of a heart attack while awaiting sentencing—may have been an example of someone who was scared to death. Samuels has also collected several stories of young people with absolutely no history of heart disease who died suddenly while riding a roller coaster. He even has evidence of several medically-confirmed accounts of voodoo death where the victims' strong belief in the power of the medicine man was enough to kill them.

All of these examples attest to the extraordinary power of the autonomic nervous system (ANS.) "The ANS uses the hormone adrenaline, a neurotransmitter, or chemical messenger, to send signals to various parts of the body to activate the fight-or-flight response," Dr. Samuels explained in an interview in *Scientific American*. "This chemical is toxic in large amounts; it damages the internal organs such as the heart, lungs, liver and kidneys. It is believed that almost all sudden deaths are caused by damage to the heart."

## Triggering Stress Hormones

Another neurotransmitter related to the stress response is called cortisol. Cortisol is the stress hormone that makes you feel tense, irritable and edgy. It rises and falls throughout the day. It's typically highest in the morning when you wake up and lowest at night when you go to sleep. But it can rise and fall during the day for other reasons, such as when you are late for work and get stuck in a traffic jam. It can also rise when you drink caffeinated beverages such as coffee, tea or cola.

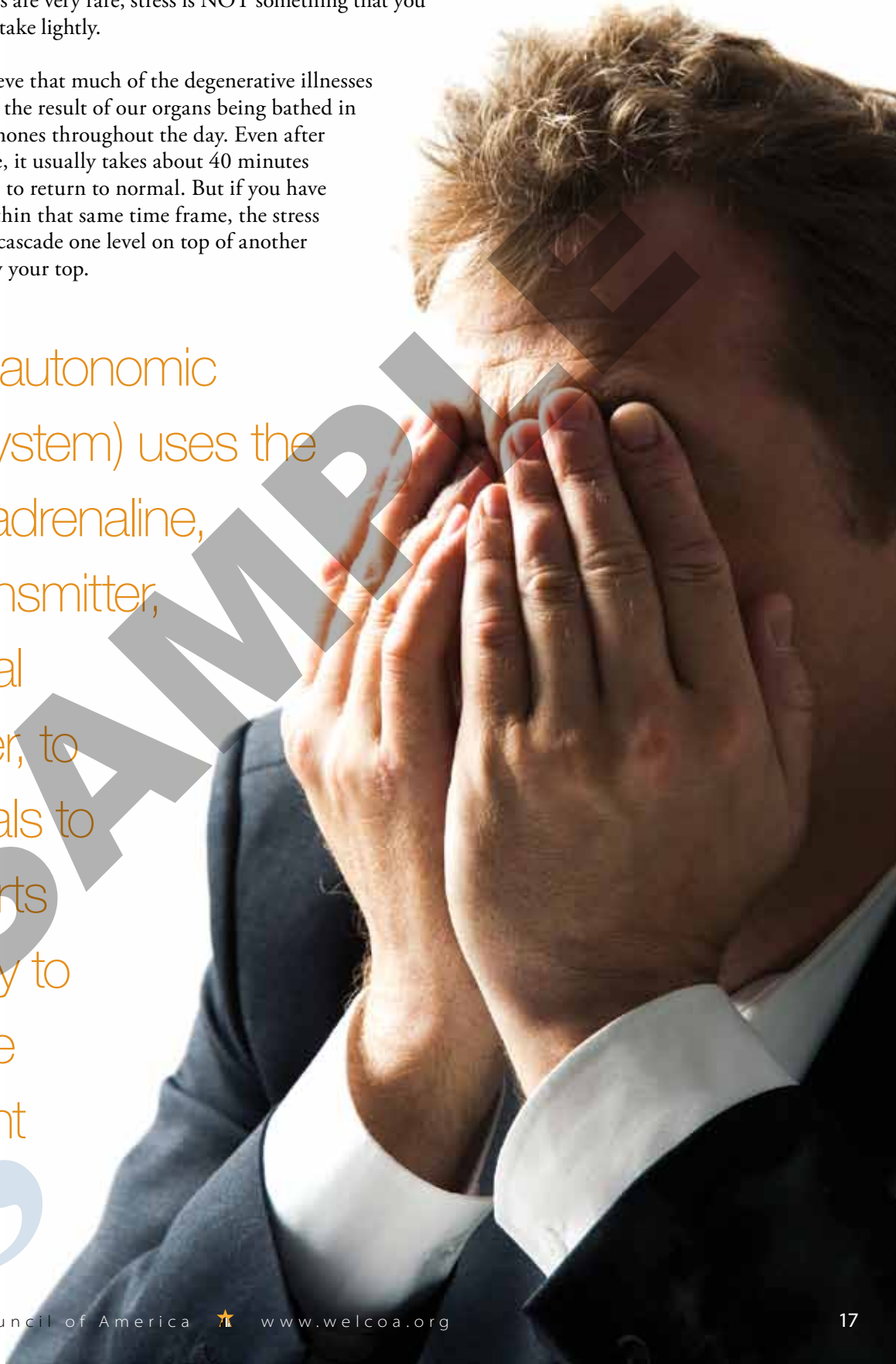
You can even make your cortisol levels rise by simply *thinking* of something stressful. For instance, I have a picture of a rock climber next to my desk. He climbs with no equipment, ropes or grappling hooks and hangs from a hundred foot cliff with his bare hands. All I have to do is LOOK at that picture and my cortisol levels rise. As for the recipient of a voodoo spell, or Ken Lay, or the kids on the rollercoaster—their *thoughts*




resulted in a drenching of stress-hormones that led to death. Even though those kinds of fatal events are very rare, stress is NOT something that you should underestimate or take lightly.

Many stress experts believe that much of the degenerative illnesses we suffer from today are the result of our organs being bathed in high levels of stress hormones throughout the day. Even after a minor stressful episode, it usually takes about 40 minutes for your stress hormones to return to normal. But if you have more stressful events within that same time frame, the stress hormones in your body cascade one level on top of another until you often just blow your top.

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### The Importance Of Monitoring Your Stress Number

It's your stress hormones fluctuating throughout the day that give you that subtle feeling of anxiety in the pit of your stomach. When you wake up and realize today's the day you are having a root canal, both your level of stress hormones and your stress number are going to rise. However, when you stop to rank your stress on a scale from 0-10, to a large degree, you are self-monitoring your stress hormones.

And by so doing, you are giving yourself the opportunity to stop your stress from getting *out of control*. Stressful events can and do build on previous stressful events. And when you lose control in regrettable ways, it's usually the result of a progression of stressful events and not one isolated incident.



(Even though, through lack of awareness, you may think it was only the ONE straw that broke the camel's back.) When you take the time to monitor your stress levels, you will learn some interesting lessons.

## The Mianus River Bridge Lesson

A lesson I learned while driving on Interstate 95 over the Mianus River Bridge in Greenwich, CT, helped me forever change the way I think about and ultimately manage my stress—and I believe it will do the same for you.

### First, a little background about the Mianus River Bridge:

On June 28, 1983 the bridge collapsed in the middle of the night without any warning. The timing was lucky because only three people died. If it had collapsed in the daytime, the death toll would have been much higher. About 100,000 cars a day passed over that bridge at the time. I lived in Greenwich back then and even drove over that bridge on the day it collapsed.

### Fast-forward twenty years to 2003.

I was then living in a town about ten miles up the road and I rarely went over that bridge. But when I did, for some reason, it was beginning to frighten me. Whenever I would meet an old friend to play tennis in Greenwich, I could feel my anxiety levels grow from about a four to a seven in the half mile or so it took to cross over the bridge. Just when it felt like I was about to have a panic attack, I'd reach the other side and my stress would subside.

But here's the most interesting (and at first, baffling) part of all: on my return trip I would feel no anxiety crossing the bridge whatsoever! What was going on? How could I have almost had a panic attack in one direction and not feel a thing in the other. It took several trips—and the very same stress number technique I'm teaching you—to figure it out.



**Here's what I determined:** On the way down, I was stressed. I was in a hurry. I didn't want to be late. I was driving in rush hour traffic. And I was inherently (and with probable cause) just a little afraid of that bridge. Add to this volatile mix of stress chemicals the jolt of adrenaline I'd feel from just ANTICIPATING a competitive game of tennis—and there you have it.

I'd start out on the north side of that bridge bathing in cortisol and adrenaline and my stress number would already be at a five when I arrived at the bridge. By the time I got over to the other side, heart pumping with anxiety, my stress level and therefore, stress number, had cumulatively built on the stress chemicals ALREADY in my system and would often reach as high as a seven.

However, on the south side of that bridge—coming back—my stress number would start out much lower. The reason? My friend and I would have played about an hour or two of tennis. I would be exhausted from physical exertion. We'd always relax, laugh and have a good time afterwards. My exercise endorphins (the body's own morphine) would kick in, and on the way back—since it wasn't rush hour and I wasn't in a hurry—I'd hit the bridge from the south side with my stress number at a zero or a one. Thus, any elevation in my stress levels that occurred while I was actually on the bridge would barely even be noticeable.

Much of our stress is cumulative and major stressful events usually don't happen out of the blue.

Often times, it's a cascading series of events, the first couple of which might be too minor to even notice. But as these events build, so do the stress hormones in your body, and so does the likelihood of you getting even more stressed.”



This dichotomy between the going over and the coming home was a real eye-opener for me. I realized that MANY of the stressful situations in my life were only intolerable because I went into them feeling stressed ahead of time. And, if I could somehow keep track of and lower my stress beforehand, these so-called intolerably stressful events would have been much less stressful and sometimes not stressful at all!

I have applied this insight to all kinds of situations—whether flying on a plane, speaking in public, or going to see the dentist. Any stressful situation that I can *anticipate ahead of time*, I can now control by simply bringing my stress number down to zero or one beforehand, using techniques like the ones we'll demonstrate in Chapter 2.

## Stress Is Cumulative

This is probably the most important thing I've EVER learned about stress: much of our stress is cumulative and major stressful events usually don't happen out of the blue. Often times, it's a cascading series of events, the first couple of which might be too minor to even notice. But as these events build, so do the stress hormones in your body, and so does the likelihood of you getting even more stressed.

And even more importantly, I learned that you can control your stress by simply tracking your stress levels at all times, but especially before the start of something you KNOW is going to be stressful like going to the dentist or going on a job interview. 🕒

We have already shattered one myth about stress management. Do you know what it is? If so, write it down.

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Hint: It's something that Western Scientists didn't believe you could do.