



► HIGH ANXIETY

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*Keep calm and carry on.*

When the manager of a Santa Rosa manufacturing plant began showing signs of job-related stress, he first sought help from his primary care physician. “I’d reached a point where I was making myself physically ill from the amount of stress I was carrying around on a daily basis,” says Mike (not his real name), who suffered from exhaustion and occasional headaches. He also had a troubling outbreak of pimple-like bumps on his scalp. “I kept thinking, ‘This is bizarre; my body shouldn’t be doing strange things like this just because I’m going to work.’”

Myriad physical and emotional issues caused by work-related stress can send people to the doctor for answers. The symptoms of stress and heightened anxiety may include (but aren’t limited to) insomnia, headaches, weight gain or loss, hypertension, irritable bowel syndrome, odd skin rashes, teeth grinding, chronic worrying, poor concentration, mood swings, depression, restlessness and increased self-medication (including alcohol and drugs).

Numerous studies and surveys on the subject paint a bleak picture. The American Institute of Stress reports that 1 million Americans call in sick to work every day due to stress. Sixty-six percent of us suffer from some degree of stress-induced chronic health conditions, says the American Psychological Association, and our jobs are more stressful than home life for more than half of us. Workplace stress costs American employers more than \$200 billion annually in related expenses, such as workers’ compensation claims, absenteeism, turnover and loss of productivity, according to the *FDU Magazine*.

*Worry on top of worry*

Northern Californians want to believe that the workplace vibe here is more mellow and stress-free than elsewhere, but the Great Recession was a wakeup call. Compared to five years ago, local companies now expect higher productivity from fewer employees, while increased competition on a global scale means greater responsibility and accountability in many jobs. Executives in other parts of the world who call the shots at their company’s North Bay outposts also create extra tension and uncertainty for local employees. Slaves to their mobile devices, many find it difficult to power down even on days off, concerned about missing crucial emails and texts. Pile on worry and anxiety about future layoffs in any local company—in any industry—and stress levels shoot into the stratosphere.

Yet many businesspeople in the North Bay are finding ways to take back control of their pressure-filled lives.

At the time that Mike, in his mid-40s, sought medical attention for stress, he reported to a supervisor in another time zone and frequently worked 12-hour days. “I had a boss who was unpredictable, controlling and also a bad communicator,” he says. “I was the only one in our facility who had to interface with this manager and, as a result, I carried more stress by trying to keep it off the backs of my 18 employees.”

So Mike began a pattern of what he calls “check-in” behavior, circumventing his supervisor by checking with other managers in the company to find out what was going on, get into the loop and receive feedback. His work cell phone was “on my body all the time and turned on, even on weekends,” he says. On days off, he would call the office to check in rather than enjoy his personal time. If he happened to be passing near the plant, he might stop in, too.

Not only was this behavior a huge waste of his time, says Mike, “but once I got caught up in that cycle, I didn’t even realize I was doing it. You don’t think about how it’s invading your daily life. My dysfunctional manager had forced me to act like this, and it finally made me stop, take a look at the bad habits I’d created and ask myself, ‘Am I doing something wrong?’”

Mike tried Xanax and another anti-anxiety medication for short-term relief, but eventually went looking for a therapist at the recommendation of his physician. He turned to the [Santa Rosa Center for Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy](#) for guidance.

#### [Developing realistic expectations](#)

“Stress is all over the board in every type of occupation, and the people most vulnerable can be the chronic worriers,” explains Jennifer Shannon, MFT, clinical director of the center, which treats adults and teens. “The theme I see in our adult clients is excessive worry and also perfectionism, which is a driving vulnerability factor. We talk to a lot of businesspeople who can’t stop thinking about work. They don’t know how to disengage from worrying about it.”

Perfectionists are always running from a fear of failure, she adds. “They believe they have to get everything done perfectly, and they work too many hours toward that goal. That can set them up for tremendous anxiety. Even if there’s more demand put on them now in the workplace than ever before, it still comes down to developing realistic expectations of oneself—recognizing what you can and can’t do. It’s the human condition that we each do some things well and other things less so.”

Shannon says too many businesspeople worry excessively about things beyond their control, such as being downsized from their job. And the more they worry, the more the stress builds. This stress can manifest as a panic attack, which has happened to many of us at least once, she says. But it can also lead to panic disorder, which is triggered by worrying about having even more panic attacks.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) closely monitors a person’s thinking to pinpoint the thoughts and beliefs that drive his or her behavior, says Shannon. A big component of CBT is getting people to change their expectations and face their fears, so Shannon coaches her stressed-out clients to take a step back and write down what gives them the most anxiety.

“Anxiety can create avoidance behavior, procrastination and a feeling of overwhelm,” she says. “So we show our clients how to tackle a difficult job task—say, creating a presentation for a meeting—in small, manageable steps. We help them identify their way of thinking and develop more realistic expectations in their work.”

Since opening five years ago, the Santa Rosa Center for Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy has seen approximately 550 teens and adults, almost all of them afflicted with stress-related anxiety, including about 250 who sought help specifically for job stress. Most of Shannon’s clients have already been to medical doctors for physical problems traced to stress, she adds, and have also tried prescription medication for depression and anxiety before contacting the center.

“CBT is a more active, problem-solving and goal-oriented therapy,” she explains. “We can usually help people in a short amount of time, typically in 12 to 16 sessions that teach them ways to change their behavior.” As a result, many clients are able to reduce or discontinue their anxiety medications altogether.

#### [Staying fit for the job](#)

At the [Stress Management Center of Marin](#) in Larkspur, which specializes in yoga therapy, many businesspeople sign up for sessions ostensibly to learn to stretch, according to owner Robin Gueth. “But in most cases, they’re trying to stay fit for their jobs. A lot of executives come here for yoga therapy after they’ve had a stressful event, such as blowing out their back from hauling luggage around airports, when a checkup at the doctor’s office points to a potential problem or when they experience their first heart ‘episode.’”

They tell me, ‘This is not OK. I don’t want to go down that road.’ So we design a program for them based on their needs.”

Yoga therapy combines breath control and movement with specific bodily postures. “Studies show that yoga therapy is great for anxiety and sleeplessness,” says Gueth. “It regulates the rate of breathing, which has a positive impact on heart rate efficiency. Yoga has also been shown to improve the immune system and calm the nervous system. A good yoga class can do a lot to mitigate stress, and our center offers a solid, down-to-earth program anyone can follow.”

Businesspeople may initially come to Gueth’s center to overcome a temporary ache or pain, she says, but many stay on because they soon discover that one hour per week of one-on-one attention is a beneficial stress-buster/health booster. “Yoga therapy helps them keep their rudder in the middle,” she says, adding that some of her clients in the upper echelons of the business world are “trying to stay at the top of their game. These are executives whose health affects their company’s stock prices.”

Many physicians refer their patients to Gueth to help with conditions such as migraine headaches and breathing difficulties. “Medical doctors are beginning to understand that yoga is really good for some of their patients, and it’s a basic, commonsense approach to help myriad health concerns.”

The future of yoga therapy as a bona fide medical treatment is also looking bright, with the industry taking steps toward accreditation so that insurers may sanction it. “There’s a big push to get the yoga therapy industry up to the level it needs to be so insurance companies will be more willing to cover the costs,” says Gueth. “So hopefully we’ll see more yoga programs showing up in mainstream health care as yoga instructors pass their boards and become licensed providers. Once one insurer figures out how to offer coverage, we hope all the others will follow.”

Over the years, Gueth’s 13-year-old center has served a clientele of almost 5,000. Her staff also provides yoga therapy for participants of the Brain Injury Network of the Bay Area, war veterans in Santa Rosa and at Kaiser Permanente facilities in Marin County and Petaluma.

Gueth says yoga therapy has been a life-changer for many of her overstressed clients. “We’ve helped people who came to us after having a heart problem, yet none of them has had a second occurrence, and none of our clients with high blood pressure have experienced heart attacks. Sometimes yoga is exactly what people need.”

#### Biofeedback intervention

While CBT analyzes thinking and behavior patterns, and yoga focuses on breathing and movement, one local therapist is tackling stress by going through the heart. Stephen Wood, MA, MFT, is a Napa-based psychotherapist who specializes in stress management, is trained in hypnosis and certified in biofeedback techniques. He’s also a certified HeartMath practitioner, using the methods created by the Institute of HeartMath in Boulder Creek, Calif. Wood practices primarily at [Synergy Medical Fitness Center](#) on the campus of [Queen of the Valley Medical Center](#) in Napa, where and he consults with many of its members as well as patients in its cardiac rehabilitation and cancer wellness programs.

“Stress is clearly associated with heart disease and heart issues. I see it with other health conditions, such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Business executives can be at high risk for heart problems,” says Wood. “Recent studies suggest that 75 percent of all consultations with primary care doctors are for stress-related conditions.”

When people are highly stressed, they’re not in a position to make good business decisions, he adds. “But when stress is lowered, they improve their ability to do what the business world demands and are able to think through decisions more consistently and logically.”

Wood uses HeartMath, a computer-based system to teach stressed-out clients how to regulate their heart rhythm through breathing. “Besides a minute or two of slowing down to about six breaths per minute, I guide the person to briefly think of a favorite pet or a place in nature, something heartwarming and soothing. The idea is to picture the things that make life worth living and put aside day-to-day worries.”

Wood calls it a “rapid intervention” for busy executives who can set aside two to five minutes during the workday to calmly refocus and significantly rebalance their nervous system. “I give them the tools, then on their own, once or twice a day, they can use the guided imagery approach to calm their heart rhythm and regulate their breathing.”

One of Wood’s recent clients was an executive in his seventies who runs a successful local company. “The man had so much on his plate that he couldn’t slow down enough to even consider an appropriate retirement,” he says. “I consult with people like this occasionally, including Type A personalities who don’t know how to step away from that rush they get by being on the front lines. But if a person’s stress level stays exaggeratedly high year in and year out, something in his system will give out. The body will attempt to slow a person down and make them either sick or dead.”

Regular exercise is still the best overall stress management method around, according to Wood, “but businesspeople can find it difficult to make time during their day to exercise, because many believe they have to stay ‘productive’ every minute of the day.”

Synergy Medical Fitness Center in Napa is unique to Northern California—a large, two-story facility that combines a public membership fitness center with programs for Queen patients undergoing physical cardiac and cancer rehabilitation. The center features personal trainers and classes as well as additional stress-busting techniques such as tai chi and meditation, and it’s appropriate for all ages and fitness levels.

#### Getting a grip

Mike the manager sings the praises of CBT and how it helped him take back control of his work life. “Jennifer taught me to stop and refocus, and to list all the things that are important to me and that I value. It’s not until you step back and evaluate your responses to stressful situations that you see where you have to make changes.”

Today, Mike has a new supervisor who is “more amenable” to deal with, making his day-to-day work interactions much more palatable, he’s back to working eight-hour days again, “and my work cell phone gets turned off and goes on the charger as soon as I get home,” he says, happily.

Mobile devices and voice mail can be a powerful force, luring people into believing they must respond immediately and always be on-call, even on vacation. But Shannon says we all need to learn to set boundaries and establish work-free zones.

“I’ve had clients who checked their messages right up until bedtime. So I recommend they change their behavior by revising their outgoing voice greeting to say that they check emails and phone messages only between certain hours—and then stick to it,” she adds. “When I was recently on vacation, most of the time I didn’t have Internet access, and it was really nice! If someone wasn’t able to reach me, I just told myself, ‘It’s OK. Everything will be OK.’”

Gueth says one of her clients with high blood pressure was recently stuck in stopped traffic on the freeway, late for a meeting and becoming increasingly agitated. “She told me that, to relax, she pictured herself doing yoga and hearing my voice coaching her. Then she took a deep breath and decided not to get all bent out of shape about not being on time. When she got to her meeting, she was focused and ready to work, not flustered. By listening to her body, she made good choices.”

Wood is more philosophical. “When humans look to the future, we tend to get anxious. And when we look to the past, we tend to get self-critical or depressed,” he says. “So it’s always best to do whatever you can to stay

in the moment and in the day. There's not much to be gained by worrying.”

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