



What Is Stress?

In my white paper titled "What is Burnout?", I used Bill Gorton's line from *The Sun Also Rises* to describe how burnout happens: "Gradually, then suddenly."

If Burnout is the "suddenly", the moment the balloon finally pops, then stress is the air. But here's the thing we often get wrong: not all air is bad. You need a certain amount of pressure for a balloon to fly, or for a high-performance tire to grip the road. The secret isn't necessarily living a stress-free life; it's understanding when stress is a tune-up for your system and when it's a slow-motion takedown of your soul.

Stress For Survival

Short-term (**acute**) stress is actually a gift. It's a survival mechanism that turns you into a temporary superhero. When you face a deadline, a competition, or a sudden threat, your body releases a surge of cortisol and adrenaline.

This "fight-or-flight" response is a masterpiece of biology. It sharpens your focus, boosts your memory recall, and even tunes up your immune system to protect you during injury. Think of it as a surge of oxygen to a fire; it makes the flame hotter and brighter so you can get the job done. This is the **Hormesis Effect**: brief episodes of stress that actually increase your long-term resilience.

Chronic Stress: Check Engine

The problem starts when the "fight" never ends and the "flight" never lands. When that surge of cortisol and adrenaline becomes a permanent resident in your bloodstream, it shifts from a survival tool to a wrecking ball. This is **chronic stress**, and the damage is systemic:

- **The Brain:** Under chronic stress, the hippocampus (your memory center) literally shrinks, making it harder to learn. Meanwhile, the amygdala (your fear center) enlarges, leaving you in a state of heightened anxiety and "mental fog."
- **The Body:** Constant adrenaline keeps your heart rate and blood pressure high, forcing your cardiovascular system to work in the "red zone" until it wears out.
- **The Cells:** Chronic stress actually accelerates aging at a cellular level, shortening your telomeres and breaking down muscle and bone density.

In essence, your body shifts from a state of repair and growth to a state of unsustainable survival.



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The Sources of Stress

Just like Burnout, stress doesn't just come from your "Main Job." It's the cumulative load of all the roles we juggle. Your "Care Job" (looking after children or aging parents), your "Ghost Job" (the self-doubt and regret), and the "Triple Burden" many women carry create a constant background noise of pressure.

Many people are stuck in the "**Yellow Zone**," a dangerous place where you feel like you're being productive because you're busy, but your body is actually accumulating stress at unhealthy levels. You might even be using "good" habits, like exercise or meditation, to ignore the fact that the balloon is about to pop. While healthy in appropriate doses, relying on them to ignore mounting, unresolved pressure can have unhealthy consequences. It's often just "avoidance" masked as "self-care."

Balancing Stress

Let's use the balloon as our analogy once again. In life, you should constantly be adding air (stress) to your balloon. This is the acute (good) stress, creating a stronger and more resilient "you." But you also need to let air out of the balloon!

In my personal life, I also struggle with this balance. I'm a runner who places an awful lot of meaning on my race results, and that is okay. But in the 10-12 weeks prior to a big race, when the intensity of my training amplifies, I know that something else **has** to give, that I also need to intentionally let air out of my balloon! Waking up early to get in a 5:00 AM run before a busy day at work is just piling stress on top of stress.

Maybe what I really needed was a full night of sleep, or to cancel some meetings that day, or push a project back. This is my version of **Creation by Subtraction**, chiseling away the marble of my schedule to make room for the training that matters. Whatever the solution, I need to be intentional about how I manage my stress over time.

Stress is a part of the human experience, but it shouldn't be the whole experience. You are not just a vessel for cortisol and adrenaline. Don't let the "gradual" pressure of stress steal the person you want to become. Manage the air in the balloon, but never forget that you are the one holding the string.