

We all have colleagues who act like everything is a breeze, while you flap from one task to the next. But the truth is, those who appear immune to stress have learned to lessen its impact – and you can, too.

"It's not about never experiencing stress, it's about bouncing back from it quicker, by noticing when it's rising and dealing with it," says Alice Law, co-founder of Unstressable, a movement helping people transform stress into strength.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 91% of us feel stressed at work.* But not all stress is bad – short bursts, known as "eustress", can make us move quicker and perform better. Sometimes, though, we get stuck in a state of chronic stress, and the continuous release of stress hormone cortisol takes a huge but hidden toll. It impacts everything from our skin, to sleep and emotional wellbeing, and can increase the risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes, plus can stall career progression.

"Though some people say they work better under stress or pressure, it can lead to mistakes and wreak havoc on conflict resolution if you are always on edge," says lifestyle coach Selen Gülbahçe.

The good news is, you can rewire your stress response in work and life. Here's how...

The secrets to a STRESS-FREE LIFE

Prone to panic attacks or meltdowns? From the 'let them' theory to setting boundaries, experts share how to rewire your stress response **BY SUSAN GRIFFIN**

RELINQUISH CONTROL

First, understand what you can and can't control – ultimately, the only thing you can control is yourself. This is the concept behind *The Let Them Theory* by self-help guru Mel Robbins. She recommends you stop trying to fix or convince other people. Instead, let them do, say and feel what they want, while you decide how you are going to react and how much time and energy the situation requires. Likewise, you can't control what has happened or what the future holds.

"We waste so much time ruminating about the past or obsessively worrying about the future, when the present moment is the only thing that's real," explains Alice. "If you feel yourself about to spiral, write down the situation you are stressed about. Ask yourself: 'What are the facts? What can I actually do, and what do I need to let go of?'" By taking a rational, proactive approach, you will feel calmer.

SET BOUNDARIES

Women in midlife bear a particularly heavy burden – on top of work, they're caring for kids and elderly parents, all while coping with perimenopause and menopause.

"I've worked with hundreds of women suffering burnout, resentment at the load they're expected to carry and anger at feeling exploited. They often have migraines, stomach issues, musculoskeletal or autoimmune conditions," says Jennifer Cox, psychotherapist, author of *Women Are Angry* and host of podcast *Women Are Mad*. Her solution is to state what you need. Afraid of conflict? This is not the same thing, she says. At work, it means telling your boss you are logging off at 5pm and will prioritise your to-do list accordingly. It could also be deciding not to look at emails on holiday. Setting boundaries helps protect your peace.

MAKE CONSCIOUS CHOICES

Treating yourself to a chocolate bar at 3pm when the day's work feels heavy may seem insignificant, but small choices add up. "Sugar impacts stress levels, as uncontrolled blood sugar can cause you to feel tired and lethargic, which makes it harder for you to complete goals," explains Selen. And that glass of wine that "helps you to decompress" after work? "Alcohol can impair judgement and exacerbate problems already caused by stress, including sleeplessness," she says. Perhaps you find yourself doom-scrolling during your break. "Being exposed to distressing comments or images can increase your cortisol level. Life is stressful enough, without being glued to social media," says Selen.

Instead, actively choose activities that reset your stress response, rather than confuse it. Listen to music and sing along to it while cooking a nourishing meal, or exercise to boost endorphins. "Match movement with mood, so boxing to release frustration and a walk when feeling low or demotivated," says Dr Sula Windgassen, AKA The Health Psychologist and author of *It's All In Your Body*.

REFRAME YOUR PERSPECTIVE

A lot of stress comes from the fear that you won't be able to handle it. That is why it's crucial to stop catastrophising. For example, your boss emails to say they want a catch-up, and you instantly assume you're going to be fired. "When we're stressed, we struggle to have bird's-eye-view thinking to see the bigger picture," says Alice. "It is about managing your thoughts, so say to your brain: 'Bring me a calming thought,' or: 'Bring me a thought that's helpful.'"

Dr Elena Tourni, a consultant psychologist and co-founder of The

Chelsea Psychology Clinic, shares her top three tips in helping reframe your perspective.

- 1 Ask yourself: "Will this still matter in five years' time?" Most situations lose their intensity over time.
- 2 Practise the reverse catastrophe technique – picture the worst-case scenario, then consider how you'd handle it. Often, you realise you'd cope better than you think.
- 3 Consider what advice you'd give to a friend in the same situation. Doing this helps you access a calmer and more compassionate perspective.

SEE STRESS AS GROWTH

Stress is often an accumulation of things that actually don't matter, whether it be a huge pile of laundry or being late to a meeting. It's why people say: "Don't sweat the small stuff." But how, exactly? "One thing I love to do is say out loud or to myself: 'What a pleasure.' It shifts my perspective on the challenge in front of me to something I can learn from or laugh at. And it makes me smile, taking me out of my own head spin," says Alice. When the cause of your stress carries a lot of weight, it can help to view the challenge as a chance to learn, grow or adapt. "Reframing helps us move from feeling stuck to seeing possibilities. So, instead of asking: 'Why is this happening to me?' try: 'What might this teach me?'" says Elena. "It's easier to move forward, rather than getting caught in self-blame or fear." And the more you do it, the easier it will become. **F**

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