

# 'Discover The 20 Best-Kept Secrets For A Stress-free Year'



by

**Carole Spiers**

World Authority on Corporate Stress

Carole Spiers Group

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1

## Stress and Dehydration



The human body is far more susceptible to lack of water than it is to lack of food. As a survival mechanism, it's hardly surprising therefore that the stress response can be triggered by lack of water. The average person needs to drink 6-8 cups (2.4 litres) of water per day just to keep functioning - and this amount rises if your fluid intake includes lots of caffeine or alcohol, both of which contain diuretics that cause your body to lose even more water. Wherever you are, make sure you have a plentiful supply of water, or you'll end up depleting your body of its most important nutrient.

2

## Give Your Antioxidants a Boost



Free radicals that cause damage to body cells are neutralised by antioxidants, which is why efficient antioxidant mechanisms are so important for health and well being.

Green tea (made from *camellia sinensis*) contains more antioxidant compounds than any other food or drink, and can significantly reduce oxidative stress.

Drink green tea two or three times a day for a week, and you may even find that you like it!

3

## A Diary Can Help You Take Control



Keeping a personal diary can be a great way of giving yourself the encouragement you need to live your life the way you really want to. It can also help you to see what you should be doing more (or less!). As the starting point for your diary, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you happy with your life at the moment? If not, what would you most like to change?
- Could you be managing your health better? What do you most need to start or stop doing?
- Are you getting enough exercise? If not, how can you create the time to make sure you do?
- What recent lessons have you learnt that could be helpful in the future?

Record your major challenges and achievements, and review them at regular intervals.

## S/He Loves Me S/He Loves Me Not...



Arguably, Valentines Day means more things to more people than virtually any other day of the year.

For those of us who have a partner, it can be an opportunity for joy and celebration – but also a potential minefield where forgetfulness or a wrong decision can risk damaging an otherwise healthy relationship. And that's assuming, of course, that we are happy. If we are not, the pressure of trying to pretend to be can simply heighten our feelings of discontent, possibly even reopening wounds from that other great relationship-buster – the festive season.

Then there are those of us who are not currently in a relationship but would like to be. In this instance, the day presents a unique opportunity to express our feelings and desires – but again with the potential sting in the tail that if these are not reciprocated, we risk them being dashed, and becoming a loser in a game that might otherwise have yet to be played.

Then of course there are those of us in neither category – for whom the shores with their apparently limitless appetite for anything remotely heart-shaped, are simply a reminder of what might have been, and therefore an additional source of sadness and heartache.

Finally there are those that fall into none of these groups, seeing the day instead as just another example of rampant commercialism and a cause of yet more unnecessary expense.

Whichever category you find yourself in – be careful! Think through what you want to do. Prepare properly and don't leave everything to the last minute. Try not to get too carried away with excessive or inappropriate gifts or gestures. And remember that whatever you may personally think of Valentines Day, get it wrong and it could take your partner (real or intended) until this time next year until they forgive you!

## Better Safe Than Sorry



Many thousands of people are victims of 'identity theft'. This can be a particular risk when linked to major life events such as moving house, divorce, separation or changing jobs – as the stress involved in these can make victims extremely vulnerable.

If you are expecting a major life change, it is essential to look after your personal information even more carefully than usual. Identity theft can cause enormous stress – but you can reduce the risks by taking sensible precautions. For example:

- Treat your personal data as 'confidential' – especially your place of birth as this can make it easier to obtain a copy of your birth certificate.
- Dispose of your documents securely.
- If you are moving house, have your mail redirected for at least a year, and when you do receive redirected mail, advise the sender of your new address. This will prevent pre-approved offers for credit cards, mobile phones etc from falling into the wrong hands.
- If a personal relationship has recently broken down – particularly in an acrimonious way – close all joint accounts and make sure you have no financial connection with your ex partner.
- If you are changing jobs, limit your CV to basic facts, and when you leave your current position, make sure that any personal data is deleted from your PC and company laptop.

## Stress and Boredom



While routines and procedures help to simplify our lives and allow us to complete mundane tasks almost 'without thinking', too many of these can result in stress created by boredom. Changing one or more of your routines – even if only for a short time – can therefore be a great stress buster. For example:

- Take a different route to work
- Listen to one of your favourite CDs, rather than the radio
- Change your PC's screen saver
- Eat something different for lunch
- Rearrange some of your furniture

Try it for a week and experience the difference!

## Coping With Exam Stress



While thorough revision and a good understanding of your subject are among the keys to minimising exam stress, there are a number of positive steps that you can also take to reduce the stress of revision and of the exam process itself. For example:

- Plan your revision thoroughly. Construct a timetable that will enable you to cover all the topics you need to, and stick to it.
- Dedicate a realistic amount of time each day to revision. Don't be tempted to "have a day off", as you'll probably feel guilty for doing so, and this will simply make the next day's revision more daunting.
- Do, however, build scheduled breaks into your timetable. You'll be able to enjoy these, safe in the knowledge that you're still on target, and when you are revising, you'll feel more positive knowing that you have a break to look forward to.
- Spend a few minutes each day "visualizing" your exam in a positive way. Imagine yourself opening your exam paper and feeling confident that you'll be able to answer the questions.
- Don't leave your revision to the last moment, as cramming will simply increase your already heightened stress levels.

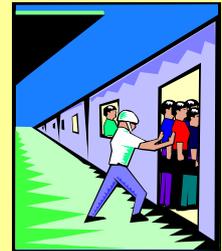
## Stress and Travelling



Summer is a time when many of us take to the road more than usual – often for unfamiliar journeys. Heat, congestion and time pressures can easily take their toll, so try the following as a means of preventing yourself from 'boiling over':

- Ensure you know where you're going and how to get there. Where possible, avoid congestion and traffic 'black spots'.
- Remember to check your vehicle before a long journey, including oil, petrol, water, lights, indicators and tires.
- Leave adequate time for the journey – including allowances for delays and rest breaks.
- Be tolerant towards drivers and other road users and anticipate their actions and reactions.
- Adhere to legal restrictions including vehicle speed, and don't use a cell phone while driving.
- Don't allow yourself to lose concentration by being distracted. Be awake and aware at all times, and if you're tired, don't drive.
- Accept that there are situations on the road over which you have no control, and adopt a mindset that allows you not to become frustrated and stressed.
- Don't take medicines containing sedatives before driving.

## Stress and Commuting



Commuting is an activity that regularly appears in 'top ten' lists of major stressors – not least because, for many people, it is impossible to avoid. And when the weather adds to our discomfort by making us hot and sticky, the problems simply get worse. Our previous Stressbusting Technique dealt with stress and travelling, so here is some additional advice, specifically designed to help you reduce the stress of commuting:

- Always leave an extra 15 minutes for contingencies. If transport schedules are unreliable, this extra time will be invaluable, whereas if everything goes smoothly you'll have more time for thought or relaxation before you start your day.
- Continual clock watching won't help you get to your destination any quicker, but will increase your stress levels.
- If you travel by car, whilst stationary or sitting in heavy traffic, try to perform simple relaxation techniques to help reduce tension in your body - especially vulnerable areas such as the neck, shoulders and arms.
- Be tolerant of others. Accept that drivers (including you) make honest mistakes and have occasional lapses in concentration. Be courteous and thank others for their courtesy.
- Have tapes or CDs that you enjoy listening to so that time can be used effectively. View the car as a personal time and space capsule away from everyone else – an environment that provides your own selection of music and radio channels.
- If you commute by bus, train, tube etc, use the journey time profitably. Treat your journey as an opportunity rather than an imposition.

## Holiday Stress



Although regular breaks are a vital part of an effective stress management regime, holidays - and particularly the school summer break - bring with them their own particular 'stressors'. The change in routine, abnormally close proximity to family members for extended periods of time, and constant pressure to avoid the dreaded 'boredom', can transform what should be a time of peace and relaxation into 'holiday hell'.

As with many aspects of positive stress management, the key to avoiding holiday stress is managing expectations. Expecting your holidays to run without a hitch is almost certainly unrealistic - and simply means that when something does go wrong, its negative effects will be magnified out of all proportion. Try instead to focus on what you really enjoy about your holidays, and allow these high points to be the substance of your memories, rather than the occasional 'glitches'.

## Managing Children on Holiday From School



School holidays can be a stressful time for parents - particularly if you are single or don't have the money to keep your children entertained. They therefore need special consideration if you're going to prevent yourself from becoming stressed:

- Be aware of your 'trigger points'. If you have a difficult relationship with your children, this will be magnified by the long summer vacation so try your hardest to keep your cool. Or, if you worry about how much money the holidays will cost you, set a budget and try to stick to it.
- Whatever your children's interests - art, cookery, reading etc - plan ahead and stock up on a range of resources that will keep them happy and occupied.
- Check what's on locally. Your local press will have details, or your library will often have leaflets and money-off coupons.
- Many museums are still free of charge, and run special events and workshops for children during the holidays.
- If you can't afford a vacation, try day trips instead. Many bus and coach companies offer all-inclusive days out to theme parks and other attractions.
- Make the most of your support network. If you have friends or family who can help you with looking after your children, use them!

## Stress and Flying (1)



Flying can be stressful – whether you're a seasoned traveller or if flying is something you only experience very rarely. The following will help make sure you don't add to an already pressured situation:

- Always check your tickets as soon as you receive them – not at the last moment when any errors may be too late to correct.
- Check the flight time the day before you leave, and ideally on the day of your journey.
- Allow plenty of time to get to the airport. Anticipate and plan for possible delays, rather than having to deal with them if they occur.
- Plan to arrive when the check-in desk opens, not at the last possible moment before it closes.
- Before leaving for the airport, make sure you know where your passport, tickets, insurance etc are, and that they're easily accessible. Carry them with you – not in your luggage.
- Take a 'survival kit' with a copy of your passport, emergency contact numbers, medical insurance, a small amount of money and a credit card. Keep this separate from your wallet so that you'll still be OK - even if this is stolen.
- If you're taking your mobile phone abroad, check with your service provider that you'll be able to make and receive international calls, send and receive texts etc. If you have voicemail, check that you know the correct number for your message box, as you may not be able to access it via your normal speed dial number, and may also require a special PIN. Make sure you know what number to call if your phone is lost or stolen - and don't forget your charger.
- At the airport, never joke about bombs, hijacking etc. It sounds obvious, but you wouldn't want to miss your flight because somebody took you seriously!

There are so many things to consider in ensuring stress-free flying, so the next tip is also dedicated to this subject. .

## Stress and Flying (2)



Our previous Stressbusting Tip (12) also looked at stress and flying, and in particular preparing for your flight.

- Take travel adaptors that you know will be suitable for the country(ies) you'll be visiting.
- If you're taking electrical devices such as a digital camera, make sure you have enough memory cards, batteries, a charger etc, as these can otherwise be quite difficult to obtain.
- If you need to take sharp objects with you, make sure you put these in your luggage, not your hand baggage. Swiss army knives are the most popular items for confiscation at airports.
- Take a book or magazine to read, or music to listen to on your journey.
- If you need glasses to read, for driving etc, make sure you take a spare pair with you.
- If you plan to phone or email people while you're away, don't forget their contact details.
- When you've boarded the plane, listen to the safety briefing. Many people don't, and then worry about what they've missed.
- Drink lots of water during the flight, as this will help to protect you against the effects of dehydration.
- Be careful how much alcohol you drink. Many people have a lowered resistance to alcohol while flying.
- Get up and walk around the plane - particularly on long-haul flights. While you're sitting, regularly stretching and rotating your ankles will help your circulation, while neck stretches will help to prevent you from getting a stiff neck.
- When you arrive at your destination, check your luggage is secure and unopened. If there's a problem, report it immediately - before leaving the airport.

If you're a regular business traveller, you can find a wealth of advice and information at [www.joesentme.com](http://www.joesentme.com), while by joining [www.airmedassistance.com](http://www.airmedassistance.com), if you have an accident or medical emergency abroad, you can arrange pre-paid air ambulance transportation back to your local hospital.

## Back to School Stress



### Don't add to the pressure of your children going "Back to School"

With research by Cambridge University (2004) showing that exam stress among children rose by 50% over the previous 12 months to an all-time high, and that boys in particular can become very stressed if made to do homework or prepare for exams with their parents, the end of the summer holidays can be a stressful time for many children.

If your children don't enjoy school, or if they're facing the prospect of moving to a new or more grown-up school, this will simply heighten their apprehension. But as a parent, you can help tremendously with minimising these pressures:

- It's difficult, but do try to strike the right balance between encouraging your children to do their best, while avoiding adding to their pressures.
- Be aware of the signs and symptoms of stress in your children. These can include short-term behavioural changes such as different eating patterns; tiredness or lethargy; mood swings; changes in sleeping patterns; difficulty concentrating; abnormal behaviour; and physical effects such as stomach aches and headaches.
- However busy your life, make sure you regularly create times of peace and tranquillity for your family. These will help your children feel safe, loved and cared for. This doesn't mean just sitting with your children in front of the TV. You need to make special time for talking and listening, as this is invaluable in helping to form a strong bond with your children.
- Be attentive. Stop what you're doing when your children speak to you. This will help them feel supported and confident they can confide in you if they're experiencing a problem.
- When talking to your children, don't ask 'open' questions such as 'how was school today' as all you'll receive will be one-word answers. Ask specific questions and you'll gain much more - especially if these are linked to actively listening to your children about their concerns and interests.
- Make sure that your children understand there are more ways to succeed in life than through academic achievement, and encourage them to develop their other skills and positive personality traits.
- Help your children to think of experiences that may make them feel uncomfortable - such as going back to school - as a challenge rather than a threat.
- Remember that if you're stressed by the prospect of your children returning to school, so will they be - and vice versa!

## Banish Those 'Post-Holiday Blues'



The end of the summer can be a difficult time. With the annual holiday fading in the memory faster than your tan, and no more holidays until Christmas, any problems you may be experiencing with work or relationships can very easily become magnified and appear even more intractable than ever.

Reduced exposure to daylight has also been shown to have a negative effect on our moods - contributing still further to the 'post-holiday blues' - as can the simple fact that the autumn makes us naturally more aware of the impending passage of another year, rather than the beginning of a new one.

To counter the effects of the above, now can be an excellent time to undertake a thorough review of your life, and where you think you could or should improve. If you're unhappy with your work, the numbers of job advertisements often increase after the summer months; while if you've been thinking about a lifestyle change such as joining a gym, improving your diet or expanding your social network, now's a great time to get started.

Why wait for New Year - an even less conducive time of year for making changes - when you could get ahead of the game and start reaping the rewards straight away?

## The Importance of Planning



Many people understand the importance of time management in ensuring a stress-free working day. But even when you've completed your work, tidied your desk, and are ready to leave for the evening, there are still proactive steps you can take to help ensure a stress-free tomorrow, as well as today:

- End each working day by evaluating what you've accomplished that day, and, more importantly, by reviewing your schedule for tomorrow.
- Schedule phone calls for times when you're most likely to reach the other party, and plan the topics you'll want to cover with them prior to the conversation.
- Review your 'to do' list. See what appointments are coming up, and what projects you need to work on. List them in order of importance. (This needn't take more than a few minutes, and will be more than worth the investment in time). Then close the book on that day and go home - happy in the knowledge of a job well done, and with a clear plan of action for your return.
- Even if you are stuck in traffic on the way home, your mind should be congestion free. Tidying your mental 'in tray' may even help you to sleep better.
- Keep a notepad by your bed so that if you do remember any additional actions or items, you'll have a ready means of 'filing' those as well.
- At the end of the week, repeat the exercise by listing all your actions for the following week, together with the dates by which they'll need to be completed.
- You'll then be free to concentrate on your work-life balance - with a stress-free, relaxing weekend!

## Banish Those "Winter Blues"



The onset of winter can be difficult for many people. Our rhythm of life changes, and it can be all too easy to spend our evenings slumped in front of the TV. But for the sake of our physical and mental well-being, we still need to achieve a balance in our lives - even if the winter months make this more challenging than usual.

- In its most extreme form, our reduced exposure to daylight can result in Seasonal Affective Disorder. Caused by a biochemical imbalance in the brain, the condition is believed to be suffered by many thousands of people in the UK.
- Symptoms include sleep problems, depression, tiredness, loss of sex drive and increased appetite. These can be ameliorated through light therapy, psychotherapy, counselling or other therapies aimed at helping individuals to cope with their illness.
- Even for non-sufferers, it's increasingly accepted that most people benefit from getting as much natural daylight as possible during the winter months - particularly during the middle part of the day.
- The stress-relieving benefits of regular short breaks away from home are well documented, and with quieter roads and the wonderful colours of fall, now is an excellent time for a visit to the country.
- Simple things like the joy of kicking through a fresh pile of leaves will bring back childhood memories of a less pressured, more 'grounded' life - and a reminder of the importance of making time for ourselves, not just others.

## Strike the Right Pre-Christmas Balance



Balancing work and home pre-Christmas and during the holiday can make this a difficult time for already strained relationships. It can also make it very hard to strike the right balance between work and family life. December can become an 'endurance test' where one office party or social gathering follows another in an endless cycle of late nights and subsequent hangovers. However good your intentions, the added pressure from friends or colleagues can make it virtually impossible to say 'no'.

If this is the scenario you could be facing, the following will help you to survive all the 'fun' and make it through to the true test of endurance – the festive season itself!

- However tempting, don't over-commit yourself. Your body needs time to recover from the excesses of this time of year, but committing to one social event after another will make it impossible for it to do so.
- Take sensible precautions – especially in your consumption of alcohol. Opt for 'weaker' drinks, do not drink on an empty stomach, and at the end of the evening make sure that you drink plenty of water.
- Under NO circumstances drink and drive.
- If you are planning to meet friends or family – or invite them to spend the festivities with you – discuss and agree this with your partner before you commit yourself.
- Difficult though it may be, try to take regular exercise. This will help to remove all the toxins from your system and get you back to feeling more like 'normal'.
- Make an extra effort to make time for your family or partner. It can be very easy for them to feel 'left out' while you are partying the night away – and this will inevitably have consequences for your relationships.
- Pre-empt any disagreements by committing to spending time with your loved ones, and don't go back on your promises once you have made them.
- In particular, plan time with your children. Remember that for them this can be the most magical time of the year.
- Make 'to do' lists for all of your important tasks and tick them off as you complete them. This will make it harder to forget anything important and help you to feel more in control.
- Don't leave buying your presents to the last minute, and avoid the queues by taking advantage of late night shopping.
- If you are going to be at home over Christmas, plan your activities and use your time productively.
- Even though this is traditionally a time for 'letting your hair down', try to avoid doing anything that may come back to haunt you in the future!

## Don't Let New Year Resolutions Stress You Out



With the Christmas and New Years celebrations fading fast, many of us will have set our sights on creating a better future for ourselves with some well-intentioned New Years resolutions.

Sadly, a high percentage of these will fail to be adhered to for more than a couple of weeks – let alone for the whole of the year. Worse still, this can make us feel as though we have added to our problems – due to the guilt created by our inability to make a decision and then stick to it!

While part of the reason may be that our 'resolutions' were in fact frivolous and we had no intention of adhering to them, if you *do* want to use the opportunity presented by New Year to make positive changes in your life, the following will help to give you the initial impetus to see these through:

- New Year resolutions are an opportunity, but if you do not think them through properly they can easily turn into a threat.
- It is important therefore to set yourself goals that are reasonable, sensible and most importantly achievable. They must also relate to issues about which you have a strong personal commitment.
- It may sound obvious, but write your resolutions down. The simple act of doing this – rather than just thinking about what you would like to change – will reaffirm your intentions, and give you a helpful reminder if your commitment starts to flag.
- Do not set yourself targets that will be impossible to achieve. If you have decided you want to lose weight / cut your alcohol consumption / give up smoking / reduce your stress levels etc, try to set targets that you are confident you can achieve, and take pride in the results.
- If necessary, break your targets down into smaller ones, and give yourself a sensible amount of time to achieve them.
- If you are in any way half-hearted about your New Year's resolutions, it is probably better to rethink them into something you *can* commit to.
- Remember, change does not have to be huge to be effective. Even a small (but well considered) change could be the first step in creating a better life!

## Exchange 'I Used To'... For 'I Do ...'



In the previous stress tip (19) we looked at New Year resolutions and the actions you can take to improve your success in adhering to them.

Many New Year resolutions are to do with aspects of our lives about which we are unhappy – I must lose weight, I must stop smoking, I must do more exercise etc. But while the need for them may be less obvious, there are also many other ways in which we can improve our lives, simply by recapturing activities or interests we used to enjoy. In this respect the 'I used to...' list is an invaluable tool in reminding us of these experiences – and the positive effects they used to have on our lives.

When, for example was the last time you said, 'I used to like doing "X"', but now I just don't have the time'. With our increasingly hectic lives, we can all make excuses for not doing things we have previously enjoyed, but it is important to acknowledge that doing this has its price. Every time we give up something that we enjoy, we give up part of what makes us who we are. This inevitably can lead to sadness and frustration at what we have lost.

Your personal 'Xs' might include playing a sport, visiting the cinema or theatre, spending more time with your family and friends, or something as simple as a walk in the country. Whatever you miss the most, bringing it back into your life is much simpler than you think – and will pay real dividends in helping you to manage your stress:

- Firstly, make a list of all the activities you used to enjoy, but which you feel you no longer have the time to pursue
- Secondly, list those activities you spend your time on that are not necessary, could be completed more quickly, or are less enjoyable than those you have given up
- Prioritise the two lists in terms of enjoyment and potential for time saving
- Progressively exchange activities on the second list for those on the first
- Monitor your activity on a monthly basis

Before you know it, your 'I used to...' list will have become your 'I do...' list – and your life will be greatly improved as a result!



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Carole Spiers is a respected international Motivational Speaker and weekly columnist for Gulf News (Dubai) writing on corporate stress and human resources issues and is the author of *Tolley's 'Managing Stress in the Workplace'* – a comprehensive guide to stress management published by LexisNexis<sup>UK</sup>.

She is an Expert Witness before the UK Courts and launched National Stress Awareness Day on behalf of the International Stress Management Association<sup>UK</sup> of which she is a Vice-President. Carole is also the Past President of the London Chapter of the Professional Speaking Association.

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by  
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