



Stress in Sheep's Clothing

5 hidden stressors and how to take the bite out of all of them

Hidden Stressor #1 - Using your computer

Here's what happens when you flick on your iMac: "Your breathing rate goes up 30 percent, your blinking rate goes way down, and you tend to tighten your arms and shoulders without knowing it," says Erik Peper, Ph.D., director of the Institute for Holistic Healing at San Francisco State University.

Slash the stress: Change your body position every half hour or so--simply standing while talking on the phone can improve bloodflow and ease muscle strain. Visit cheqsoft.com for free software that will tell you to also take microbreaks--quick pauses to close your eyes and flex your wrists.

Hidden Stressor #2 - Surviving a layoff

The ax fell and missed you. Good news, right? Maybe not. A Finnish study found that those who remain employed after a corporate downsizing are twice as likely to die of heart disease triggered by job stress.

Slash the stress: If you weren't told why the layoff happened and what will happen next, ask. "Information is a great calming force," says Harry Dahlstrom, author of *Surviving a Layoff or Downsizing*. "You should ask your boss questions about your job security and what new duties you have."

Hidden Stressor #3 - Living with a newly pregnant wife

She's glowing--but you're sweating. A study in Australia found that the first months of a pregnancy are the most stressful for first-time fathers, many of whom don't feel prepared for the responsibilities that lie ahead.

Slash the stress: Develop a financial strategy--draw up a new will, start a college account, get your insurance in order. "It gives men a sense of satisfaction and well-being to take care of the people who depend on them," says Glade Curtis, M.D., author of *Your Pregnancy for the Father to Be*.

Hidden Stressor #4 - Trying to relax

Forget those bills you have to pay. Forget the six projects waiting on your desk. Forget that noise your car is making. Just breathe deeply. Feel better? Maybe in the short term, but even the most effective relaxation technique is no substitute for getting to--and dealing with--the root cause of your stress.

Slash the stress: Use some of your downtime to address what's worrying you. "You have to think, What can I do? How can I fix it?" says Allen Elkin, Ph.D., author of *Stress Management for Dummies*. Make a list with two columns--stressors you can eliminate and those out of your control--and then start working on the first item in the first column.

Hidden Stressor #5 - Driving

Even after the engine cools down, you haven't. Scientists in Canada found that men who reported the most irritation while commuting were most likely to act stressed and hostile throughout the day.

Slash the stress: If your daily commute ties you up in traffic that's more stop than go, accept that you may need to wake up a half hour earlier. You can also explain your situation to your supervisor and try to adjust your morning schedule (that is, unless you just survived a layoff).

"People who have more flexibility in their work environment have less stress when they drive, because the time emergency isn't such a big concern," says Dwight Hennessy, Ph.D., author of the Canadian study.