



# DON'T BLOW IT!

SIMPLE, RADICAL STRATEGIES FOR  
DEFUSING STRESS (BEFORE IT KILLS YOU)

By Brent Darnell

**WARNING:** This article contains information about yoga, meditation, deep breathing, nap rooms, laughing clubs, taking a full minute to eat a raisin and other new-age bullshit that just might save your life.

For 20 years I was a construction cowboy. Most days I managed projects (and my stress headaches) by downing Tylenol at 10 am, a quick chili dog and fries from the roach coach at lunch, then antacids just after as a preemptive strike on afternoon stomach problems. It was much easier to pop pills than deal with the underlying stressors causing these symptoms.

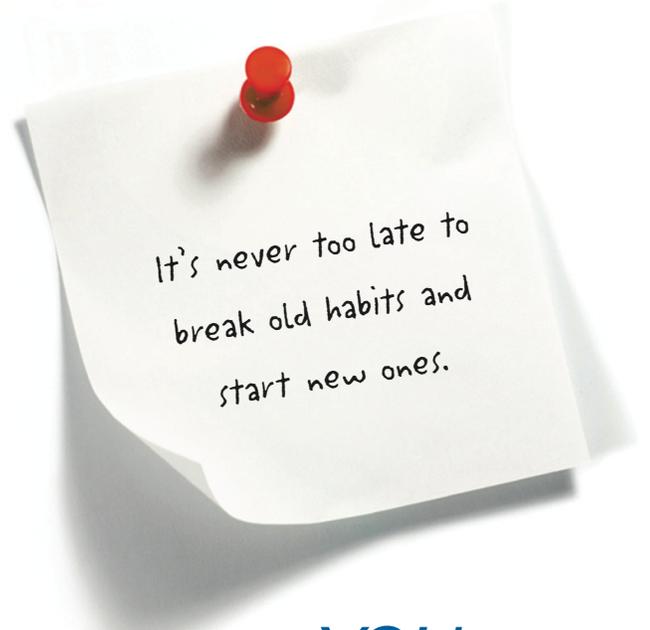
You can't take the stress out of this business, so it's how you deal with it that counts. That's the conversation I have daily with construction managers around the world. Not only are stress and burnout on the rise in our industry, our nation leads the world in stress-related illnesses and health care costs. If you do one thing this year, I challenge you to find the stress recovery activities that work for you and build them into your routine. By learning how to defuse stress, not deny it, you can increase your energy, focus, optimism and longevity.

## **"Fight or flight" = burnout**

The emotional intelligence profile of most construction tough guys (male or female, no gender bias intended) isn't great for stress. Most individuals I work with score high for stress tolerance and low for self-awareness and impulse control. They're driven, assertive and independent (all qualities needed for success) but aren't great listeners. They feed on stress, staying in a reactive crisis-management mode, and may have anger management issues or compulsive/addictive behaviors. But staying in perpetual "fight or flight" just isn't sustainable. Eventually all that adrenaline and cortisol lead to burn-out, or a heart attack. Memory and analysis are impaired. (The decision-making part of the brain, *the neo-cortex*, actually shuts down.) The key is learning how to recognize stress in your own body and manage it better.

## **Learn to breathe again**

In my seminars I teach conscious relaxation techniques for defusing tension, releasing stress in the body and calming the mind. Many of these are based in yoga and meditation and involve deep breathing. When under stress we hold our breath and tense our muscles unconsciously. We deprive the brain of oxygen. Learning to breathe properly may be the most important thing you can do for your health. Try taking three slow, deep breaths every hour. Concentrate on making your exhalations last longer than your inhalations. (Count in your head: 4 beats as you inhale, 6 to 8 as you exhale.) The point is to move away from shallow, chest breathing, fully inflating the diaphragm and releasing the stress as you exhale. Practice deep breathing and you'll feel less stressed, less fatigued, all day long.



### **Build in rest and recovery time**

It's critical to offload stress by taking short breaks and building in rest or recovery activities every 90 to 120 minutes throughout your day. Sit quietly with your eyes closed. Take a walk. Go running. Eat your lunch outside. Drive to a nearby park and take a 15-minute power nap. Listen to music. Play Wii sports or online video games, if that works for you. One man I know breaks from stress by looking at photos of his young daughters and talking with them by phone when he can. Schedule regular "laugh time" with team members on your next project, and see how good that endorphin kick feels.

### **Be present (and unplugged)**

Every day, we're pulled in all directions, slaves to electronic media and multitasking, and it fragments our focus and concentration. You can regain your energy and calm by practicing "mindfulness." That means living in the present moment, fully conscious of every action, mentally engaged in what's right around you. Try being quiet and unplugged from your Blackberry, phone and email for a full 30 minutes or more each day. Chew your food slowly and intentionally, savoring every flavor, discarding intrusive thoughts as they arise. In my sessions we do this exercise where we mindfully eat one raisin, taking a full minute to look at it, smell it, taste it, and chew it at least 30 times. Participants learn just how hard staying in the "now" can be. But in recent studies executives with mindfulness training made better decisions and had lower blood pressure than their non-trained peers.

### **The last laugh**

Executives at another construction company almost laughed me out of the building when I suggested nap rooms in their corporate offices almost 10 years ago. Admittedly, I was a little ahead of the curve, but today nap rooms, laughing clubs, and mindfulness training are in demand at many Fortune 100 companies. Sure, yoga and meditation may not be for everyone, but at least half the people who try yoga, meditation, visualization and deep breathing exercises with me keep using these techniques in their daily lives. Why? They work. The positive changes in your physical and mental outlook can be amazing. Call it new-age bullshit if you like, but try it. Or adopt what works for you. As one executive said to me, "This yoga and meditation stuff is complete crap, but the deep breathing really helps me."

### **Schedule your life (like it matters)**

Most construction managers are numbers people, very measurement and results-focused. Once they understand the problem of stress, they're often faster to adapt and change than the average person. My final advice to you? *Schedule your life like you schedule your projects.* Eat regular meals. Get consistent sleep. Exercise. Schedule time for vacations, fly fishing, running, whatever recharges you. Replace negative behaviors like excessive caffeine or alcohol use with more positive recovery activities. Find what works and make it happen. How much time do you spend watching TV? Surfing the Internet? Commuting? Making wasted phone calls? The choices and consequences are fully yours, so choose carefully. Your life – and the lives of your loved ones – is at stake.

## SO HOW ARE YOU DOING?

### IMPROVE HOW YOU HANDLE STRESS BY FOLLOWING BRENT'S "TO DO" LIST.

1. Eat breakfast and 5 to 6 small meals a day.
2. Avoid simple sugars.
3. Sleep regular hours. Go to bed and get up at consistent times.
4. Find time to laugh each day.
5. Drink ½ your weight in ounces of water per day.
6. Use caffeine, nicotine or alcohol in moderation.
7. Exercise at least 3 times a week.
8. Quiet your mind with meditation/prayer/deep breathing
9. Maintain family and community ties
10. Seek rest or recovery every 90 to 120 minutes