

# Wired for stress

*A career in IT is increasingly marked by struggles against deadlines leading to despair, distress, pressure and stress.*



*Anna has a fantastic job, is very self-driven, has a supportive family and untreated ulcers in her five years as a software developer.*

*Sujit, Anna's colleague, has migraines, dizzy spells and temporal dissociations in a career that spells dizzy heights for him. As his credentials rise, so do his medical bills and, recently, he was warned by his doctor to cut back if he wanted to add healthy years to his 27-year-old life.*

*Rohit's wife politely asked him to marry his computer; his three-year-old relationship crashed, while he continues to work against his will, as he claims.*

*Sunny is not glowing anymore; the business head of an information technology (IT) giant, he is snuffing out his bright future in alcohol-dependence, which he denied till the day he was medically diagnosed.*

ALL these people have a few common credentials - they are below 35 years, IT professionals, highly qualified, well experienced and... struggling to stay alive... with one common condition - STRESS.

A career in IT is increasingly marked by struggles against deadlines, rapid mobility in projects and frequently differing reporting relationships, collapsing inter-personal relationships at work and the shark-style of conflict management, temporal dissociations, the night here-morning there syndrome, free-time misuse than use and growing infectious cynicism that leads to despair, distress, pressure and stress.

Stress is the latest killer - the cause rather than the effect of several physical-mental-emotional problems. In fact, a whole range of psychosomatic ailments are linked with stress, which seems to be steadily degenerating mankind.

Is hi-tech insidiously damaging the intouch abilities of people? "Too tired to feel"... "A general numbness prevails"... I hear these so often. IT - the new-age desire and envy of most people - seems to be coming down heavily on its people, like a cascading, catastrophic nightmare.

Signs of the boom going bust have led to a rise in the cut-throat competition, the drive to excel and retire with the safety chips stashed away for security. Others view it as

the challenge, the passion to possess the globe as the world's masters in IT that leads to a paranoia which is ignored and denied from the beginning. The early warning signals - pressure, burnout and fatigue - are played down until stress and its depressants set in.

Changes in metabolism and appetite, tension headaches, dizzy spells, allergies, blocked sinuses, aches and pains, and stiffness are viewed as mere physical discomforts - "nothing that a pill can't handle". Concomitantly, one is forced to play out a work-life drama of irritability, anxiety attacks, obsessive worry, confusion, apathy and a sense of powerlessness leading to increased cynicism. Even at this stage, one tends to look for causes in the external environment rather than turn inward. Soon enough, negative behaviour patterns surface - playing hookey at work, faking learning and attention, restlessness, indecision, inability to delegate and missing out on personal activities such as exercise, hobbies, sports or social appointments.

Often, despite recognising that stress is here to stay, we are oblivious to its effects or wish that it will vanish like magic. Why? The reason is that stress has both obvious and diffused symptoms and effects. Most people treat stress as insignificant or try to walk around it with the belief that 'I am too strong to be overcome by it'. The fact is, most IT professionals use their heads, and not their hearts, in accepting the presence of stress.

Says Mohit, "Once I began to accept that it was happening to me, I became tougher to combat it." In a similar vein, Sudha says, "We compute all the time; what does not add up logically is deleted from our system, without a blink of a thought to stop and see how damaging it's been." Well, there are the Mohits and Sudhas out there who race through the whole gamut, from denial to acceptance.

Sneha adds, "We build super-computers, superior products, superb distribution networks but, ultimately, we are human; our fabric tears, we must learn to press pause."

Ali claims that, as an aspiring IT professional, from his early training days he relegated fun and relaxation to trash. Later, on the job, he felt trapped by pressure. The



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**etc.**  
RAVIKANTH



“All thanks to new age techniques – an occasional nap relieves stress and enhances performance.”

organisation, which primarily stressed on performance and profit, pushed him to the brink of paranoia. By the time he realised he was in distress caused by stress, it was too late for him to learn to relax. He now encourages young students and professionals to treat themselves well. His mantra: Self-care towards increasing self-worth and accomplishment.

Major stressors include working assiduously on projects at different locations, under demanding project heads. Survivors and successful IT professionals swear that it is ‘hi-tech and hi-touch’ that make for an excellent professional and human being at work. Remember Naisbitt anyone?

A couple who are both IT professionals often go into switch on/off mode unconsciously and fail to relate, even when pressed ‘re-start’. Some others virtually exit

each other’s lives. This happens during holidays, too, when the power of connection seems to have a short fuse. Many children have sold their soul to the Net and nestle more in the lap-top than their parents’ laps.

Is there a cure for this malady, an escape from this self-afflicting nemesis? Although the effects seem ravaging, the solutions are simple (that’s why most people pooh-pooh stress). That ‘prevention is better than cure’ is still a truism.

- Check for EWS (early warning signals) regularly. I wish stress-monitor was a gadget that could be hooked on to a machine.
- Resign from the crown of the need to control; let go, especially when the going is tough temporarily.
- Unload excess baggage. Little accumulations of both personal and professional nature, cause overload eventually.
- Check for dependencies and stop fooling yourself with “I can surpass it”.
- Have one trustworthy mentor, colleague or friend at least, who will support you through rough times.
- Time your breaks in accordance with your personal/professional style of work.
- An annual health check-up is a need, not a luxury.
- Music-meditation-massage, not necessarily in the same order, are more virtuous than medication.
- Large doses of humour help maintain the equilibrium. Eventually we are all dispensable matter, aren’t we? Happiness is a laughing matter, as someone said.
- It’s never too late to find a rhythmic balance between work and fun.

A final line: Respond to stress receptively rather than defensively to survive the IT revolution. ■

*(The author is a counsellor and director of Dimensions, a Chennai-based human resources consultancy)*

SUMATHI, SENIOR  
SOFTWARE ARCHITECT,  
DEVELOPS AN  
EXCELLENT STRESS  
RELIEF TECHNIQUE.



"Creativity alone  
was not enough  
- I needed a  
couple of extra  
hands."

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