Success Under Stress
Powerful Tools for Staying Calm, Confident, and Productive When the Pressure’s On
by Sharon Melnick

SUCCESS Points
From this book you’ll learn:
• What you can control, and what you can’t control
• Why it’s imperative to be impeccable for your 50 percent of any given situation
• How to reduce feelings of stress and overwhelm
• Why it’s essential for home-based business owners to have an “off” space

Surviving vs. Thriving
Strategies for Enjoying Life—Even When It’s Stressful

QUICK OVERVIEW
Are you surviving or thriving? Too many people in today’s overbooked culture operate in a “survive under stress” mode. Author and business psychologist Sharon Melnick says that although the “new normal” of a fast-paced, distraction-packed reality is here to stay, you can experience Success Under Stress. Her new book prescribes practical, simple activities and strategies to help you make the shift to a healthier, more manageable way of life.

Melnick sets the stage by encouraging readers to take 100 percent responsibility for their 50 percent of any situation. Rather than try to control everything, focus exclusively on what is actually within your control. Next, she offers advice for reducing stress and cutting down your to-do list, as well as how to negotiate high-tension relationships with grace. As Melnick explains, changing your perspective and managing your physiological response can empower you to succeed in even the most stressful situations.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
Technology makes it easy to be “on” 24/7. Sharon Melnick explains that to effectively manage stress it’s important to build downtime into your day. Fortunately, even small amounts of recovery time can be beneficial. A brisk walk or mindful breathing exercises can provide immediate relief.

Try this simple “Mental Reset Three-Part Breath” exercise Melnick offers in Success Under Stress.
• Bring your hands together so that your fingertips are touching.
• Inhale through your nose for five counts, hold for five counts and then exhale for five counts.
• Do this for three minutes once or twice a day, or anytime you feel overwhelmed.
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Imagine a person who responds to daily challenges and minor emergencies by thinking only of short-term solutions instead of looking at what's best for the future. Unable to see new approaches or new opportunities, he looks only to the past for solutions. He focuses on the problem, not the whole picture. He overreacts; he stresses over how a situation could possibly go wrong, keeping himself anxious and on guard.

Of course, we want better control over how we respond—we want to respond thoughtfully, not reactively. And, in a manner that's future oriented. We want to build value for a long-term benefit—not just for ourselves, but for everyone we work with as well. We want to respond with the best available option to solve problems, maintain good relationships and conserve energy. That's a Success Under Stress response!

Many of us are locked into Survival Under Stress but don't even realize it! Lack of sleep, muscle tension, and impaired concentration are often viewed as justifiable by-products of doing business in today's world. Some people see these as badges of honor for being a road warrior and a multitasker. But we might not notice that our decisions aren't based on listening intently or thinking through the facts. We may rush into what is right for the moment—or not act at all—instead of doing what's best for the long term.

And who can blame us? The average business professional has between 30 and 100 projects on his or her plate—all at once; is interrupted on average seven times per hour; and faces incoming communication from multiple technologies 24 hours a day. You may be paid to think, but it's hard to find the time!

This daily onslaught comes at you against a backdrop of rapid local and global changes that force you to adjust your priorities and innovate to capture the attention of your target market. You worry that if you don't work all the time you could lose an important client or won't earn enough money. You run mental movies of what might happen if you lose your job or don't earn enough each month.

This overload is just the base of a stack of other stresses that compound one another to magnify the effect. For example, perhaps your high expectations of yourself (and others) create an extra layer of pressure to do more. If you have any doubts about yourself, you may worry about what other people think; you may feel the need to invest extra effort in getting their approval. We constantly judge ourselves on whether we are doing enough at work or at home. And yet we know that in order to succeed, it's more important than ever to speak up and show confidence instead of staying in our comfort zone.

In the face of all this, you try to produce meaningful work, make your mark, and be well paid for your services. No wonder stress has become a national epidemic! (Over 80% of workers feel stress on the job and over 70% of healthcare provider visits are due to stress-related conditions.) The pace feels unsustainable, and many of us are already near a breaking point, with no relief in sight. The New Normal is here to stay, but there's good news: it can work for you.

CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

Stress is not necessarily the result of the workload, the lack of response, the interruptions, or the “traffic jam” of unfinished projects and overextended commitments. It occurs when the demands of a situation exceed your perceived ability to control them. The key is that the more you perceive you can control, the lower your stress, and vice versa.

Stress is not external. It's internal. On a moment-to-moment basis, our brains coordinate an elaborate and delicate symphony of responses that will determine our neurochemistry and, consequently, how we feel and what we are prone to think. Without knowing it, once these internal patterns are established, we lock into them.

Since stress is experienced internally, changing it is within your control. How to begin? By changing your response.

You can flip an internal “control switch” to take you out of survival mode and into success mode in any situation. All it requires is some proactive effort to steer your responses away from the automatic, involuntary, and reactive toward the deliberate and purposeful.

When you control a situation, you influence the outcome. Each and every time you exercise control—for example, by changing a thought, slowing your breath, choosing your words carefully, or blocking time on your schedule—you determine what happens in your brain, your body, and the situation itself. In a confident and calm state, you work faster, solve problems more easily, and make fewer mistakes. You react more positively to others and can motivate them to help you get desired results.

Any single action can begin to put you on the Success Under Stress cycle. Every time you take control of something you actually can control, you reinforce the other affirmative acts, which keeps you on the positive spiral. Like a butterfly flapping its wings and eventually changing the world, you can create immediate and dramatic shifts in your effectiveness and stress level by exerting control in small situations throughout the day.
The 50% Rule

Every challenge can be divided into two categories—the 50% of factors we can control and the 50% we can’t. Factors we can’t control include macrolevel forces, such as market trends, technology developments, senior leadership decisions, reorganizations, traffic jams, other people’s illnesses, and foreign country bankruptcies. Additionally, there are a myriad of microlevel forces we can’t control, such as someone else’s tone of voice or what they write in an email.

Things that are out of your control attract your attention like a magnet attracts metal. However, by focusing on factors outside of your control, you’re setting yourself up for stress. You’re back on the treadmill, merely surviving.

When caught in the grips of a stressful moment, remember to focus on what’s in your control. To help you do that, I’ve developed a Golden Rule of Resilience that thousands of corporate managers and business owners have used to lift themselves into Success Under Stress in any interaction: Be Impeccable for Your 50%.

Being impeccable means controlling only what you can control and taking 100% responsibility for it. Being impeccable for your 50% motivates you to be proactive. Don’t wait for conditions or other people to change. Instead, take charge of the part you can play. Changing your own emotional and physical state allows you to be “part of the solution rather than part of the problem.”

When you focus on your 50%, you start from the premise that there is always something you can do to shift the situation—even if it doesn’t feel that way initially. Keep in mind that there are three categories of stress shifters. No matter what the situation, you can always:

- Change your perspective
- Change your physiology, and
- Do something to change the problem

Even the mere perception of control reduces the stimulation of a stress response and will break the Survival Under Stress cycle. This shift in your emotional and physical state will motivate you to want to deal with situations rather than endure them unhappily or avoid them. Literally even a simple, one-minute visualization about how you could bring value to the situation will flood you with positive emotions and alleviate fear.

GET THE CALM AND FOCUS OF A YOGA CLASS IN 3 MINUTES (OR LESS)

In your nervous system, you have a natural response to stress that includes an On Button and an Off Button. These reflect the two parts of your nervous system that are supposed to work in yin/yang balance. Your On Button is your Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS). It energizes and focuses on problems. It fuels you to zoom around all day. It reacts to external stimulation, such as an email alert, a refreshed Internet page, or the sound of your boss’s voice. It switches on automatically whenever you have to muster energy.

Your Off Button is your Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS). (In nonstressful moments, it regulates all of your basic body functions, including breathing, heart rate, and sleep cycles.) Once your stress system

Off-Button Activities for Recovery

Physical
- Exercise, or even a few quick calisthenics, stretches, or easy yoga poses in your work area. Sit on a bench outside or even in your car to do breathing exercises.
- If there’s a park or a body of water nearby, go for a walk or just sit down there.
- Walk to lunch.
- Put on headphones and listen to music.
- Meditate.
- Draw or sketch.

Mental
- Visualize your goals.
- Watch funny videos or judiciously circulate funny stories you read online.

Emotional
- Schedule a time to talk with a friend or family member who lifts your spirits.

Spiritual
- Appreciate the people who contribute to your life.
- Be grateful for all of the material things and opportunities you have.
- Remind yourself of your sense of purpose and the reason why you come to work.
your position or business to become so unwieldy that you never allow yourself the time you crave to get away and unwind. Try to spend time in natural settings, such as the mountains or the ocean; they help to reset your physical and mental rhythms.

This sprint-recovery strategy is on my “greatest hits” list of recommendations for Success Under Stress. Notice that it gives you control over the depletion and renewal of your energy resources—thus putting you on the positive cycle.

Now it’s time for you to make your plan to incorporate the sprint-recovery pattern into your day. Take out your calendar, and think about how you can introduce that pattern at least once a day for the next two to three weeks. After that time, you can begin to schedule your days according to this pattern. Also, make a list of your preferred “recovery” activities.

FREE YOURSELF FROM THE PRESSURES OF PERFECTIONISM

As comedienne Tina Fey wrote in her hilarious memoir Bossypants: “Perfect is overrated. The Saturday Night Live show we produced was never perfect. Perfect is boring on live television.”

Pressure to “do it all”—and to do it all well—is a central theme for many of my clients. Their internal voices are a constant source of pressure and stress. The pressure stops you from pressing the “Off button” that enables you to relax and renew. Your inner voice drives you to attain perfection—whether it’s staying up late baking cookies, micromanaging your team to avoid mistakes, or worrying about doing enough on your own projects—and makes you feel guilty if you don’t meet your standards. But at what cost?

It’s always helpful to understand why you’re driven to behave a certain way and why you’re so hard on yourself. In my experience, there are three sources of fuel for perfectionism (and it’s helpful to know the source of your perfectionism so you can take actions to tame it):

• **Passion**: Sometimes perfectionism comes from pure passion. Are you a creatively gifted artist with a keen eye for the details of how something should look or the way a message should be communicated?
• **Prevention of Disapproval:** Your perfectionism can be a fear-based attempt to ward off disapproval and loss of “love.”  
• **Prepping for Approval:** Some of us harbor the mistaken belief that if only we could be perfect, it would get us the love and approval we hope for—perhaps because we think that people who were important to us when we were growing up gave us their attention based on how worthy we were. At the time we developed this misconception, we couldn’t recognize that the other person’s attention was conditional, based on their limitations, not ours. Try to pinpoint the source(s) of your perfectionism so you’ll know how to reverse the trend.

## A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON BALANCING YOUR WORK AND LIFE

When people think about stress, work-life balance is often the first challenge to come to mind. **How can I be present and give my best at work and be present and give my best at home?** And it is the number one wish children have for their parents: to come home less stressed and tired. The debate that has lit up the community forums has been whether we can “have it all” or not.

### Change Your Perspective

What people really want (and need) is not work-life balance, but to live deeply satisfying lives both personally and professionally, according to Matthew Kelley, author of *Off Balance: Going Beyond the Work Life Balance Myth to Personal and Professional Satisfaction*. Orient your life around having more satisfaction rather than counting the hours at work or outside of work. Part of doing your 50% is coming up with a clear definition of what career success and personal happiness is for you. Take some time to write out a vision of what dissatisfies you currently and what you really want in your life. Then put in place a step-by-step game plan to get on the path toward that deeply satisfying life.

### Accept Other People’s Level of Development... and Work on Yours!

Usually when we have to interact with someone who causes us stress, we’re inclined to distance ourselves, strike back, or try hard to make it better. But there’s a more effective short-term and long-term strategy: unhinge yourself from this automatic inclination. Try to understand the other person and have compassion for them. Stop hoping they will change. Accept that they are who they are.

I hear often from my trainees—who are reasonable, caring people—that they expect the “difficult person” in the interaction to act similar to them. Just because you might take into account other people’s feelings or be responsive or supportive doesn’t mean that the other person will or that they even have a psychology and biology that is capable of acting similarly. Instead of setting yourself up for disappointment and aggravation at other people’s inability to change, you can learn to “accept other people’s level of development… and work on yours!”

It’s helpful to remember that people, generally, do what they do for good reason—even if the reason isn’t always apparent to you! Not everyone has evolved to exactly the same level. Some people are more selfish than others; some are narcissists who puff themselves up by putting others down. Their behavior appears to come from arrogance and strength, but actually it comes from feeling powerless and insecure inside. They need other people to validate that they’re smart or “right”—all part of a never-ending (and never-fulfilled) quest to build up confidence and overcome the pain of early life experiences and a prewired biology.

My advice? Seek out the lessons you can learn from them (however slim) and shift your stance to one of adapting to and protecting yourself from their negative energy.
About the Author
Sharon Melnick, Ph.D., is a business psychologist dedicated to helping professionals “get out of their own way.” As a trainer and executive coach for businesspeople in varying functional and sales roles, she has spoken with organizations such as Deutsche Bank, Deloitte Consulting, Oracle Corp, Pitney Bowes, Visiting Nurse Service of N.Y., Merrill Lynch, Korn/Ferry International and Northwestern Mutual Financial Network. She has taught her effective techniques at the School of Management at Boston College, and at Fortune 500 companies and nonprofit organizations. Her training is from Yale University, UC Berkeley and the Institute for Management Studies.

Action Steps
Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned to your life. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. Do you feel you have control over your current work level?
2. If you feel overwhelmed with your personal or professional responsibilities, what are three things you can do to change that?
3. Are you controlling your 50 percent?
4. Are you expending valuable time and energy trying to control something outside your 50 percent?
5. What recovery activities can you build into your day today?
6. Review the three main sources of perfectionism. Are any of these issues in your life? If so, what can you do to change that?
7. Create a space in your home specifically for “off” times. A place where you can go and relax.

Recommended Reading
If you enjoyed the summary of Success Under Stress, you may also want to check out:

SuperStress Solution by Roberta Lee, M.D.
Spontaneous Happiness by Andrew Weil, M.D.
Funny Side Up by Rita Davenport

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