



## A Modern Solution to Stress

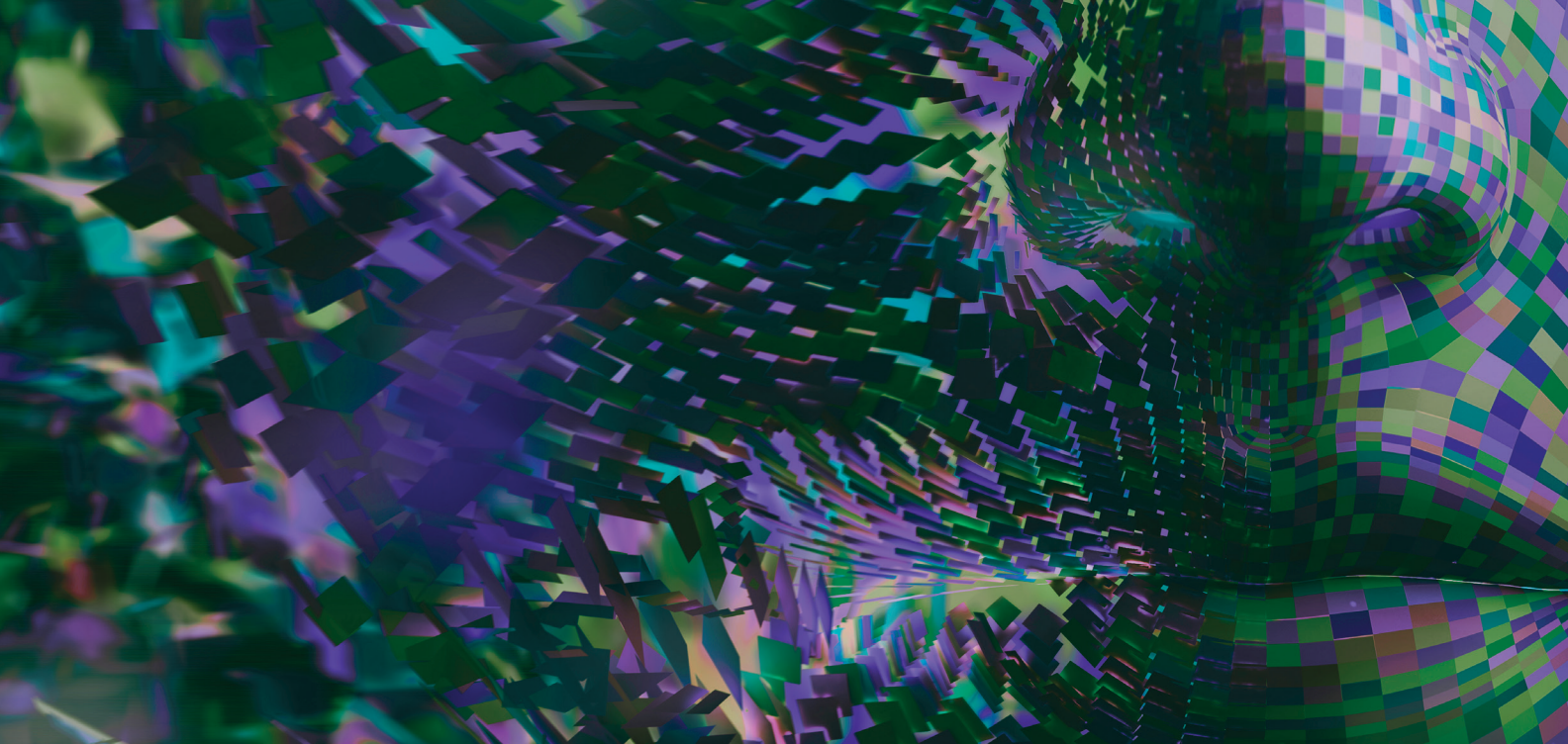
**T**he world of ancient Greece may not evoke images of a stressed-out population, but one of its greater philosophers, Epictetus, offers a bit of wisdom about it: “It’s not what happens to you but how you react to it that matters.” Which brings us to today’s modern world, where stress is generally considered a near-mortal enemy both to workers and overall corporate health. Indeed, one recent Korn Ferry survey found that not only do executives feel stress has grown in just the past five years, but one in six leave their jobs because of its toll.

So it isn’t surprising that workers and firms alike are looking for organizational fixes to all this stress, from lessening top-down pressures to rooting out authoritarian leaders. But there’s another class of solutions, easily overlooked but worth a try: help executives, managers, and workers at all levels get better at handling stress. That takes boosting their self-management abilities—a key part of emotional intelligence.

As Epictetus pointed out so well, our reaction to stress varies enormously—and neuroscience studies this in terms of biological measures, including our levels of cortisol, a stress hormone that floods the body as we grapple with pressure.

Look around and you’ll notice a great variation in how different people react to the same stresses. Some folks might lose it at the least hint of pressure, while others seem unflappable no matter what comes down the pike. They react quite differently to the same event—*the boss wants to see you*—which can trigger high levels of cortisol and great upset, or little cortisol, letting such executives stay cool under pressure.

Our body’s design assumes that after a stressful episode we’ll have a period of peace and quiet to calm down and recover—the way things were during human prehistory, when the brain’s architecture was shaped. Technically, this rest period means a switch from sympathetic nervous system (or SNS)-driven anxiety to parasympathetic (or



PNS) calm. PNS action not only helps us recover from stress, it drives such pleasures as falling asleep and being in the mood for sex.

But too often we get caught in an unending cycle of one SNS trigger after another—*that text, this report, my too-crowded schedule*—that keeps our stress reactivity in perpetual motion, with nary a wisp of PNS peace. So we need to get more purposeful about giving ourselves PNS time-outs.

In short, the key to all this is both simple and critical: schedule downtime. Make time-outs a priority, and when you do, make sure you get the PNS active and avoid SNS overdrive. Obviously, you'll avoid incoming distractions like texts, emails, and phone calls, but here are a few other suggestions:

### **Spend time with people who help you relax.**

**Pets work well, too. Watching fish swim in a tank, research shows, lowers blood pressure and heart rate. So, too, will walking a dog.**

### **Be in nature.**

**Just a 10-minute stroll at the park or in**

**the woods (if you have some handy) will put you in a better state, studies find.**

### **Go for a jog or a walk.**

**Or play any sport you love—but only if you let go of those persistent worries about whatever's upsetting you.**

### **Cultivate a relaxer.**

**Mindfulness, where you put aside distracting thoughts and focus only on your breath or body sensations, puts your body and mind in the relaxed mode. So does yoga or exercise, if you are mindful of the moment.**

You get the idea. In terms of emotional intelligence, this stress-handling upgrade means improving the self-management competence I call “emotional balance,” where you master self-control over disabling feelings like anxiety, anger, and frustration. Neuroplasticity tells us that the brain reshapes itself as we practice a given habit. The good news: like all the other emotional intelligence leadership competencies, unflappability can be learned. //

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