

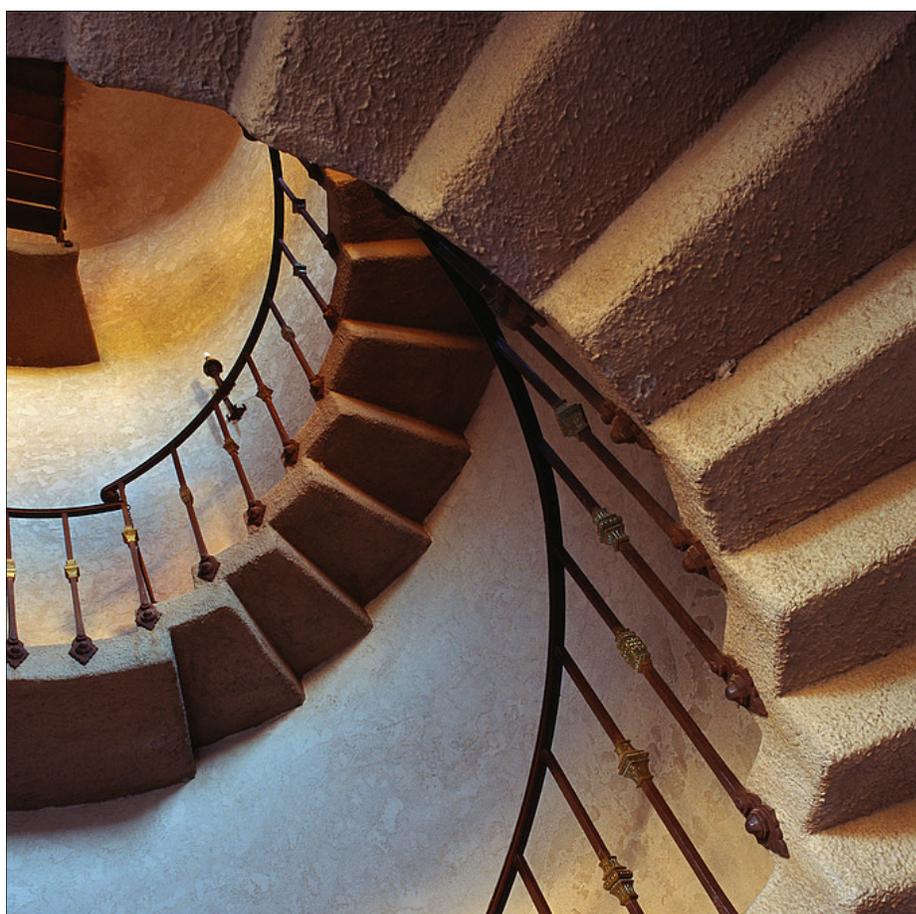
# PEACE by PIECE

Series 2: A step up

## **Creative Meditations for humanitarian workers**

*"The best way to deal with stress  
is to prepare to beat it before it  
begins to beat you."*

More concepts and tools to help  
you thrive in the face of stress



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This information is provided solely for educational purposes. The exercises are not intended to be used as diagnostic or treatment tools. Any concerns you might have about mental health issues should be discussed with a qualified mental health professional.

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If I really wanted to  
beat stress,  
I would. . .

## BE STRATEGIC

Welcome back to the second series of Peace by Piece! Last time we focused on some of the basic tactics involved in staying physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally balanced. We discussed the importance of understanding our reactions, setting goals, nurturing relationships, counting our blessings, refusing to worry, exercising, eating right, working to relax, feeding our souls, understanding trauma and taking time out. In this series we're going to build on that foundation and focus on some higher-order strategies for managing stress, starting this month with a focus on strategy itself.

So, before continuing, get out that notebook again and take two whole minutes to brainstorm a list of the things that are causing you some stress this week. Now look your list over. What's the first thing you noticed?

One important thing to notice is that there is probably more than one thing on your list. You may have jotted down everything from not having found the time to mop the floor and clean the kitchen yet this week, to dreading a phone call you have to make, to that huge work project due on Friday that you haven't started. And that could be just the beginning!

A big part of our stress can lie in simply feeling overwhelmed by all the stress! Take a breather and step back. Look at your list again and ask yourself whether there are one or two items that are key points of influence. *Which issue, if you could do something about it, would result in a general improvement in life and a reduction of the stress caused by some or all of the others?*

The answer is likely to be different for every person, even those with similar lists. Take the simple example above. Some people will feel calmer and more in control of other areas of their life if they can just walk into a clean kitchen. Others will not even notice whether the kitchen is clean. The tactics individuals use to address the issue will also differ. Once recognizing that a clean kitchen is a key point of influence, some people will have the time available to prioritize cleaning the kitchen themselves. Others might hire some help once a week. If neither of those is an option a third useful strategy might be to work towards changing your thinking about the problem.

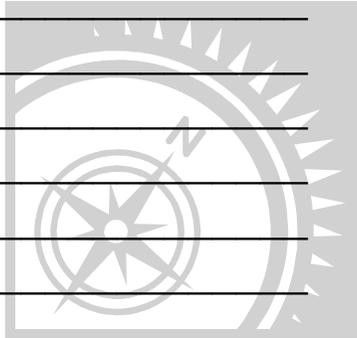
More than two thousand years ago the famous Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu wrote, "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." The take home message for this month is to not try to control everything in your life at the same time. Pick your battles. Identify one or two key points of influence and use some of the tactics we focused on last year to map out a strategic plan of action.



***This week, why not:*** Starting today, keep a rolling list of things that are putting you under pressure. Where is your stress coming from? Write them down, big or little. At the end of the week review that list. Identify one or two key points of influence and map out a plan of action for the rest of the month by setting some tangible goals and deadlines.



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### THINK CONCIOSLY

Life is all about choices. And one choice that we face daily, hourly, every minute...is how we think. Many different things happen *to* us in life. Often we have limited or no control over these events. However, even as they are unfolding, we are interpreting and evaluating them. We're thinking some version of "this is good or bad" and, usually, "I am good or bad."

Our minds are always busy interpreting life's events. Sometimes our thoughts are so habitual, and happen so quickly, that it doesn't seem like there was any thought at all. We practice some thoughts and reactions so many times that certain ways of thinking become almost automatic. For example, you miss an important appointment and powerful feelings of frustration, guilt and self-loathing begin to mount. If you slow down the tape recorder in your mind you might see that you've been telling yourself repeatedly, "I'm a complete idiot. That was an unpardonable screw-up. I can't do *anything* right this week!" The feelings of frustration and self-loathing stem directly from your interpretation of the event. You have thought them into being. Your thoughts have produced a mood. That mood will influence behavior.

We are *always* telling ourselves something. The only choice you have in the matter is whether you'll do it consciously or unconsciously. Today, why not play a game? Practice taking the role of a neutral observer – of yourself. At intervals throughout the day watch your mind as if from the outside. Try labeling what you're thinking at different points as if witnessing someone else. For example, after you miss that appointment, your witness might comment dispassionately and without judging, "anxious, self-hating." At another point during the day the witness might note that you are "worrying" or "planning."

You may wonder what the point of this is, but I encourage you to try it. The witness stance by its nature facilitates change. Simply observing from a detached perspective that we're worried and anxious can sometimes help those thoughts and feelings to arise, crest, and depart. Practicing detached observation can help our negative thoughts to lose some of their compulsive hold and toxicity.

However, the benefits of learning to pay more attention to the constant stream of "mind-chatter" running through your head go beyond just being able to cultivate detachment. When you can identify what you're thinking, you can consider the possibility that your first thought and reaction may not be accurate or helpful. You can challenge your thinking and look for other explanations for what happened. You can *choose* more balanced and positive thoughts.



*Today, why not...*Practice being a neutral observer. Make notes. Don't judge.

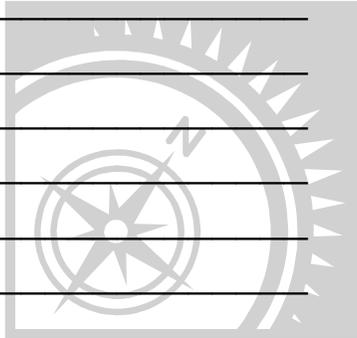
*This month, why not...*Look at your notes. What patterns do you see? What other options are there of messages to tell yourself? Work on choosing the positive.



*"The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make heaven of Hell, and a hell of Heaven."*  
(John Milton)



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### SEEK OUT THE POSITIVE

We all know people who are hardy and resilient when it comes to stress. They seem to be able to handle more stress in their lives with less distress, and they tend to bounce back after negative events. In general, people who are more resilient tend to have optimistic, zestful and energetic approaches to life. They are curious and open to new experiences, and are characterized by “high positive emotionality.” This month we’re going to focus on one of those key ingredients – high positive emotionality. In layman’s terms this basically means “feeling good.”

Negative emotions, such as fear, anger and sadness, cause distinctive reactions in our bodies. For example, experiencing fear causes our attention to focus on the threat and our body to pump more blood to our muscles to help us prepare to deal with the situation. While these reactions can be helpful in the short term, over time they can take a destructive toll and increase our risk of experiencing a heart attack, stroke or other stress-related illness.

In contrast to negative emotions, positive emotions, such as joy, serenity, gratitude, amusement, interest, contentment and hope, all cause an entirely different reaction in our bodies. They act to undo the cardiovascular effects of negative emotions, and help our bodies settle down again. They also help us think more clearly and broadly, which means we can problem solve better.

Research suggests that resilient people proactively cultivate positive emotions by strategically using humor, relaxation techniques, optimistic thinking and creative expression, and by seeking positive meaning. While it may not be possible or appropriate to use humor in many situations, there are other positive options. For example, we can identify positive outcomes (such as newfound strength and resolve in yourself or others), or seek meaning and value in ordinary events (by expressing appreciation and love for even simple things). We can also identify, pursue and attain realistic goals.

Resilient do not completely replace negative emotions with positive ones, and the positive emotions don’t need to be intense or prolonged to have beneficial effects. Resilient people are simply able to experience positive emotions even amidst negative ones, such as anxiety and frustration.

One research study tracked people who intentionally sought to identify the positive meaning and long-term benefit within their best, worst and seemingly ordinary experiences every day for a month. At the end of the month these people showed increased resilience, and were more likely to feel good in the future when compared to people who did not make the effort to find positive meaning. In one month they had created a positive upward spiral towards improved emotional well-being.

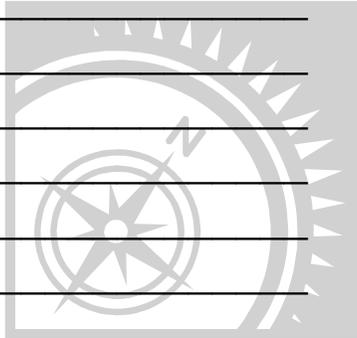


*Today, why not...*Identify one good, one ordinary, and one unpleasant experience you have had today. Seek the positive in each one. Make notes.

*This month, why not...*Make a goal that you will intentionally seek the positive at least once every day. Make notes so that you can review them at the end of the month and reflect upon whether this has helped you become more hardy and resilient.



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### FIELD HASSLES GRACEFULLY

If you're anything like me it's rare that you can sit back, survey life, and not find something askew. Sure, you might love your friends and your job. But spring allergies are dragging you down, one particular co-worker is driving you up the wall, the electricity's been off for most of the last week, and you've been standing in line at the bank for an hour thinking about your flatmate or spouse's secret longing for their own personal little ant farm. Why else would they insist on leaving toast crumbs and sticky knives on the kitchen bench every morning?

Over time the chronic stressors and minor hassles we face every day are more consistent predictors of our stress levels than the occasional traumatic event. As such it is clear that how we manage to navigate the minor hassles we encounter every day has a huge impact on our quality of life. So this month we are going to pause, look backwards over the different installments of this series, and summarize a variety of strategies that may help you deal with your particular "toast crumb episodes" of life more gracefully. As you read the following list, consider how each of these may prove useful for you:

- Get in the habit of challenging your thinking. Ask yourself questions like: "Where is the evidence?" "Am I being realistic?" and "How much control do I have over this situation?"
- Ask the question, "If I look back on this next week, will I think it was something worth getting worked up about? What about next month, next year?"
- Search out alternative explanations for frustrating or hurtful events.
- Put yourself in someone else's shoes and practice seeing the situation from their point of view.
- Play witness. Catch yourself at odd moments and dispassionately comment on what you're doing and feeling.
- Take no more than a couple of minutes and vent about the frustration to a close and trustworthy friend.
- Catch yourself feeling frustrated and practice gratitude instead.
- Focus on what you've achieved that day. Even when it feels like there's nothing, there is always something.
- Try and view delays as peaceful moments life has offered you, rather than stewing or fretting.
- Focus on a picture or a saying that you can use as an anchor to bring your thoughts back into line. Use something that's framed positively rather than negatively, for example "I am relaxed and calm," rather than "I will not get angry."
- Try and find something funny in the situation. Mentally exaggerate how horrendous your day has been and picture yourself dramatically telling someone all about it.
- Try and identify at least one possible positive in the situation. When I face days full of toast crumbs I tell myself that they are "Boot Camp" days specifically designed to help me practice my stress management skills instead of just dishing out advice all the time.
- Catch yourself reacting. Picture a big red stop sign. Tell yourself to stop, and concentrate on your breathing.
- Use other strategies designed to relax your body and dissipate tension. Controlled breathing can be especially useful in hassle situations.



*Today, why not...* Think about your week and jot down five minor hassles you've faced. Think about how you coped with each of them. If there's room for improvement, jot down three things you could have done or thought that may have helped lower your stress levels.



*This month, why not...* Pick two or three of these hassle strategies that may work well for you. Figure out a way to remind yourself to use them when you are faced with the toast crumb episodes of life.







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## CULTIVATE HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

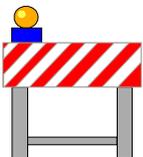
Almost half of the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day, and almost 800 million people are currently malnourished because they have not got enough to eat. The scope of need in the world today is overwhelming! Everyone reading this has probably based their career decisions, at least in part, on their desire to help meet that need. Around the world right now, many direct and indirect acts of service are being performed by humanitarian workers. At the same time, many of these workers are also struggling with feelings of guilt regarding their own relative wealth and freedom, and the compulsion to work harder and longer in an effort to assuage a need that's not going away anytime soon. Humanitarian workers, perhaps more than most, must pay attention to the issue of healthy boundaries.

Although healthy boundaries tend to look different for each person, in general there are two main components that need attention. The first component centers on your ideals and expectations. Idealism and compassion are wonderful and admirable qualities. Both probably played a role in your decision to undertake humanitarian work. However, you should seek to be "realistically idealistic" about the amount of change you can expect to see as a result of your efforts. Even if you pour your life into addressing one particular issue, such as the spread of AIDS in Africa, you may never see the issue "fixed." Humanitarian workers, more than most, must keep in mind that most of us are only called to be "responsible" for the task that we've been handed and for our impact on one small corner of this world. We can't fix it all.

Realistic expectations and tempered ideals provide the foundation for your efforts to cultivate the second important component - boundaries that will enable you to stay happy and healthy doing this type of work for longer. You can "think" your way to less stress in your life, but this month it's time to check in on how you are at "acting" your way to less stress. What strategies do you use to balance the pressures of work in a way that's going to enable you to be as happy and fulfilled as possible? Can you disengage from work at some level every day, even when you're on the field? What about taking one day off a week? Do you constantly feel like you're being pulled in 10 different directions?

Research suggests that very few people can put in more than 10 working hours a day (50 a week) and still be productive. In general, working harder and longer beyond that point is not only unproductive, it's counterproductive! The specific form that effective boundaries take may vary, but if you can't pinpoint some boundaries you have around your work and relationships consider whether any of the suggestions on the following list might help you:

- Don't bring work home. If work ideas occur to you at home jot them down. But don't deal with them until the next day, and don't check work email from home. At home, give the answering machine a work-out.
- Create a buffer between work and home. Take some down time (even just 15 minutes) between leaving work and walking into the house, and don't watch the news or read the paper on the weekend.
- Limit the time spent with people who tend to drain your energy.
- Help when you can, but consciously try not to own other people's problems.
- Take 24 hours to consider any new major commitment at work, church, etc. that you are tempted to make.
- Make a conscious decision about how many evenings a week you want to be working or going out.



*Today, why not...* Identify two boundaries you need to implement or protect.

*This month, why not...* Guard those boundaries so that you have the needed time to refresh yourself.





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## GET ORGANIZED

Pause for a moment and think about your life. How often do you feel like you've got too much on your plate, like everything in your life is on the edge of sliding out of control? Do you feel like you're constantly being bombarded by demands and information? Perhaps it's because you are! Consider this fact: we are currently receiving information at 400 times the rate of a Renaissance person. This means that one weekday issue of the New York Times contains all the information that an average person in the seventeenth century assimilated during their entire lifetime! However, we'll try and browse through the paper in twenty minutes after we get to work, while simultaneously carrying on a phone conversation and downloading email. In the modern world, assimilating all this information and organizing a home, a job, and everyday life can be a monumental task, especially if you travel regularly for work.

In the first installment of this series we discussed the benefits of being strategic about managing stress. One of the most strategic steps we can take in trying to manage our stress is to be fairly well organized. This means being organized in the way we manage information overload, our workload, and all those hundreds of little tasks (like paying bills) that is the not-so-fun part of being an adult. Think about it this way: being disorganized is not a disease, it is a decision. If you want to be organized, there are proven systems to help you. Once you know these systems and apply them, you will be organized. Being organized means you're more in control. Generally, feeling in control of most of the major areas in your life will greatly reduce your stress and anxiety.

One of those proven systems is the simple "make a list". You might be one of those people who pride themselves on being able to remember every name and detail. Good luck to you. You'll need it, especially as your life gets busier and you get older! Making a list unclutters your mind and creates an environment where you are more efficient and less likely to make errors. Making lists that relate to specific projects helps you to think through them more exactly. This makes setting goals, prioritizing and planning much easier. Plus, it's fun to cross things off after you finish them. I must admit that occasionally I write things down I've already done, just so I can cross them off. You don't have to stoop to that level, but consider doing some more research on organization and time management and try some of the following basic strategies:

- Clean out your inbox and go through everything in it once a month
- Have a system for dealing with e-mail overload on those days when you are being flooded
- Keep only one day planner or calendar
- Put it back where you found it
- Keep a rolling grocery list on the fridge and a master gift-giving list in your wallet
- Have a filing cabinet and a family message board (and use them)



*Today, why not...*Brainstorm all the areas in your life that could benefit from organizing and updating. This might range from your garage, to your address book, to the way you pay your bills, to the way you organize your travel and packing. Now, pick the most important four or five. These are the areas that would significantly decrease the "hassle and worry factors" in your life if they were more under control.

*This month, why not...*Commit to spending 15 minutes a day working on those areas. You'll be surprised at how much you get done.





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## TRAVEL SMART

Many humanitarian workers spend a lot of time traveling. Whether it's ducking across to Amsterdam to attend a conference, spending weeks in the Sudan evaluating refugee programs, or heading to Iran for several months to help coordinate relief efforts after an earthquake – humanitarian work tends to be a mobile profession. While there are definitely fringe benefits, traveling regularly is tough. You have to learn to cope with sudden and dramatic changes in climate, time zones, culture, daily routine and responsibilities. Travel also brings confrontation with suffering, as well as separation from loved ones.

Frequent travelers risk sleeping and eating problems, upper respiratory infections, and other less obvious manifestations of wear and tear. For example, after reviewing more than 10,000 health care claims filed by their employees in 1997, the World Bank found that staff who traveled 4 or more times a year were 3 times more likely than their stationary colleagues to file health claims for psychological problems like anxiety and acute reactions to stress.

It's clear that humanitarian workers who travel regularly for work are faced with the same three choices available regarding other stress points in life: (1) change the situation, (2) change your exposure to the situation, or (3) change your attitude towards the situation. As usual, a multifaceted approach to addressing the issue is probably going to be the most effective. So, take a minute and think about what you find stressful about traveling. What are the elements that contribute to the way that you feel? Now, brainstorm strategies aimed at easing the strain. You are the one who knows the limitations of your travel schedule (and how hard it is to exercise regularly while living in a tent in Iran) but perhaps some of the following suggestions will spark ideas...

- Stay packed. Keep essentials ready to go. Use a checklist to take the mental effort out of packing.
- One effective way to deal with stress is to slow down. Leave plenty of time to make flights. Consciously move, talk and behave in a more relaxed manner while traveling.
- Reward yourself. See something new and do something pleasurable when you get the chance. If you never get the chance while traveling... make a chance.
- Stay in touch with home. Phone calls and emails can be a fun break that helps you relax, stay grounded and readjust faster when you return home.
- Take time out to eat right, and carry water and some food with you if need be.
- Exercise.
- Write about what you have seen and experienced. It's often an effective way to demonstrate to yourself the wonderful aspects of your work and travel.
- Don't expect to get as much work done on the road as in the office, and draw a line around the job, even on the road. Try and ensure at least two hours a day of downtime away from work.
- Establish travel rituals. People with high stress in their lives tend to live in an environment low on ritual, surrounded by mental and physical chaos. Travel tends to remove you from established rituals...so create some new ones that you find relaxing or comforting while traveling.

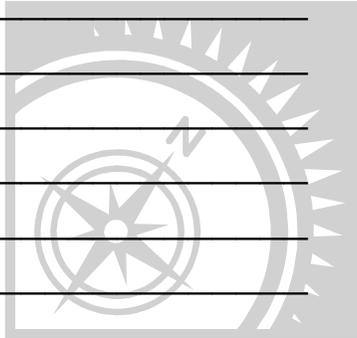


*Today, why not...* Write down answers to the questions above. What do you find stressful about traveling? What strategies might ease the strain?

*This month...* Deliberately try a new travel strategy. If you're not on the road this month take some steps that will help you prepare to beat stress. Whether it's buying an iPod or stocking a cosmetics kit, prepare for your next trip.



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### LISTEN MORE INTENTLY

I have run stress management seminars for humanitarian workers all over the world. These professionals may be working in conflict zone, or in a headquarters office in New York, but they generally have at least one thing in common - a large part of their stress results from interactions with other people. This is not surprising when we take a moment to consider the dynamics of humanitarian organizations. They usually employ staff from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures and expect them to work very closely together, often under difficult circumstances. This degree of interpersonal diversity can have many benefits. However, it can also contribute to increased levels of interpersonal conflict resulting from personality and cultural differences and communication difficulties.

Communication is foundational for satisfaction and effectiveness in most areas of life – at work and at home. For example, leaders and project managers are directly engaged in one form or another of communication for about 70% of their waking moments. Friendships and marriages are built on all types of communication. Good communication skills are a must if we want to increase our satisfaction quotient and minimize unnecessary stress in our lives by forestalling misunderstandings and demonstrating concern for others and their feelings.

Effective communication involves two basic processes: giving and receiving. When we talk about improving communication skills, most people focus primarily on the “giving” – how to clearly express their message to others. Yet “receiving,” or effective listening, is an equally important part of successful communication.

Really listening to others is not easy. Our minds tend to think 3 to 4 times faster than a person can speak so paying attention can be hard. However, really listening pays off in a number of ways. It helps you better understand another person’s expectations, experiences and instructions. If you can do that, you’re already two steps ahead of the game. Listening can even be good for your health! Research suggests that the act of intently listening to someone else tends to reduce blood pressure in the listener.

As we kick off several installments focusing on communication skills, let’s start with listening. Are you a good listener? In most Western cultures (and therefore most organizational cultures of large humanitarian organizations) good listeners tend not to interrupt, especially to correct mistakes or to start their own stories. They concentrate on what is being said and avoid rehearsing answers while the other person is talking. They give appropriate verbal and nonverbal cues, like maintaining eye contact, to let the speaker know that they are paying attention and understand. They refrain from immediately judging. They think before answering. They face the speaker. They look for the feelings and basic assumptions underlying remarks. And they ask for more information, examples and impressions if they’re unsure about what is being conveyed.



*Today, why not...* Play observer and watch how good you are at really listening to other people. Even if you feel that you’re excellent at this, write down some cues that you utilize to let others know that you’re listening. How could you improve?

*This month, why not...* Forget about trying to improve how you frame your message and spend the entire month doing your best to *really* listen to others. You might be surprised at how effective this is at reducing your stress.





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### EXPRESS MYSELF CLEARLY

Communication is an iterative cycle that goes something like this: *Spoken - Heard - Understood - Agreed To - Acted On*. Last month we focused on listening, but that is only part of the communication process. There are times (although perhaps not as many as we tend to think) when we have something to say. What you say, and how you say it, makes a big difference in the amount of stress you and others will experience.

Let's look at how you say it first. In general, it is as much *how* you are communicating as *what* you are communicating. Consider that your words account for about 10% of a communication. This means that in any given communication our tone of voice and body language are generally speaking louder than our actual words. Way louder! Our behavior will be read unconsciously by other people, so it pays to be more aware of that, and therefore better in charge of the reading matter. When you're talking to other people try catching yourself and asking what your tone and body language are communicating to them. Regardless of the actual content of your message are you sending intimidating, frustrated, rushed or preoccupied signals? Or are you communicating that you are approachable, encouraging, supportive, patient and open?

You can send all the open and appropriate non-verbal signals you want, but if the content of your message is unclear they won't do you any good. Goal-oriented communication, like most of what we engage in at work, is most effective when it's simple. Most people can only absorb 80% of what they hear. That percentage drops if people are communicating in a non-native language. In management terms this means that it is helpful if information is:

- Offered to groups in small bits and pieces, and in a step-by-step logical order
- Offered in a written form, with a verbal report
- Checked for understand by asking something like, "Would someone please give the group their interpretation of this information?"

Not all communication takes place at work (thankfully) so the issue of effective expression is naturally a much larger one than simply goal-oriented communication. Consider the following basic suggestions for making what comes out of your mouth less stressful for all concerned:

- One sure way to escalate any communication into a stressful confrontation is to start blaming and finding fault. Instead, use "I" statements. An "I" message relies on description rather than criticism, blame, or prescription. It allow us to tell people what impact their behavior has on us. The message is less likely to prompt defensive reactions and more likely to be heard. For example, "When you miss staff meetings I get concerned that we're making plans without your input."
- Don't label. Describe behavior instead. For example, "You've disagreed with almost everything that's been said," rather than "You're being unreasonable."
- Stick to one thing at a time and avoid using words like "never" and "always."
- Practice damage control. When you're aware that your mood has headed south, try and let people around you know how you're feeling (and why, if you can).

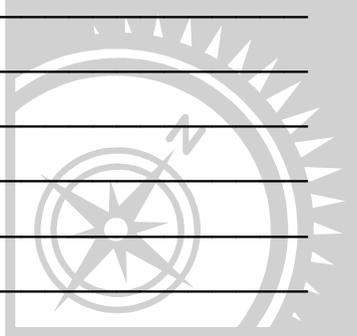


*Today, why not...* Think about where you, or those you work with, tend to fall off the communication cycle. Brainstorm ways of addressing that, and pick one or two aspects of expressing yourself that you want to work on this month.

*This month, why not...* If you feel that this is a problem area for you, do some extra research and practice hard! Good communication skills are worth investing in.



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### TELL MY STORY

How do you document your life, capture your struggles and triumphs, and pay attention to how you have grown and changed? This might not be an easy question to answer, but is an especially important one for humanitarian workers. Humanitarian workers are generally exposed to multiple competing demands upon their time and energy, and a high degree of novelty and change. This environment can add spice to life. But life can also seem like it's slipping by bewilderingly fast, with intense experiences blurring together into one long challenge. While it is impossible to undertake relief and development work without being challenged and changed by its demands, it's sometimes difficult to identify and evaluate those changes amidst the busyness that usually comes with the work.

One of the best ways to check in with yourself and stay balanced is to make a habit of telling your stories, even if you aren't entirely sure what they're going to be before you start telling them! Of course, you can tell stories just by talking to others. However research suggests that there are added benefits to telling stories using a tangible, re-workable medium...like writing. A growing body of research suggests that writing detailed accounts about stressful or traumatic experiences in a way that links feelings with events leads to significant physical and psychological improvements that can endure for months. This remains true even if the experience of writing is upsetting in the short term.

Personally, I find that not only does writing help me feel better, but that merely considering how I'll word my next letter home while an experience is unfolding can transform something potentially frustrating into something bearable, or even amusing. A good example of this can be seen in an excerpt from a letter, titled "Bridget Jones moves to the Balkans," that I wrote while I was a young trainer on assignment in Croatia...

3:45pm: Joy! Just received two books on training from Amazon. Noooooo! They're not on STRESS but SALES! Arghhhhh! This means waiting another 10 weeks while Amazon ships them to Vienna, then a courier ships them to Croatian customs, where they will no doubt languish indefinitely. I can't believe this! I thought I was joining a cutting edge training team - focusing on the pressing needs of today's humanitarian workers. I have no resources. No help. And less expertise than people seem to think I do. Note to self - have identified dysfunctional thought patterns here. Do not use the realism challenge as this will probably make you feel worse. Stick to plain old positive thinking. I am a stress management trainer extraordinaire...I am a stress management trainer extraordinaire...In fact - I am an excellent person full stop... I am... I am... I am HUNGRY! I wonder what I have to eat around here?

Writing can take many forms – letters, fiction, autobiographical prose, poetry, plays and journaling. Many people who commit to the discipline of regular writing find that it becomes an essential part of their self-care routine. I also realize, however, that it's not everyone's passion. You might prefer to use other artistic mediums such as painting, drawing, quilting, scrap booking, or organizing and labeling photographs. Even something like collecting favorite recipes from places you've lived and visited can become a tangible marker of your experiences. But however you choose to do it... make sure you're telling your stories.

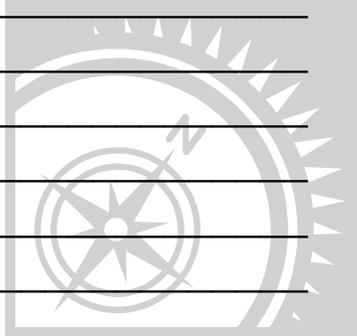


*Today, why don't you...Write down all the ways you enjoy telling stories.*

*This month, why don't you... Spend some time at least once a week telling your story in a way you enjoy.*



A series of horizontal lines for writing notes, spanning the width of the page.





*If I really wanted to  
beat stress,  
I would. . .*

## FOCUS ON OTHERS

This series we've explored the role of strategy and thinking, ways to deal with daily hassles, cultivate healthy boundaries, get organized, travel smart, and communicate effectively. These are all important pieces of the puzzle. However, we can spend too much time and energy focusing on ourselves in an effort to hone our personal stress management strategies to perfection. Over time, an absorption in controlling our lives and our stress can spiral into a self-focus that's almost narcissistic. We can become consumed by thoughts of "How am I doing? Feeling? Appearing?"

Many humanitarian workers need to be encouraged first and foremost to focus on *their* needs and wants when it comes to staying balanced and healthy. But there is another side to that coin. A focus that's exclusively on us will never yield true joy or peace, but will breed loneliness and emotional poverty. This month we're going to focus on the stress management benefits of taking the focus off ourselves and putting it elsewhere. For it is at this point that we encounter a paradox – we best refill our own cup of contentment, peace and joy, when part of the effort goes towards pouring out some for others.

Those who give to others set in motion a cycle of blessing that often includes feelings of satisfaction, joy, happiness, fulfillment and a deep abiding sense of purpose. If we practice being generous in many ways we will often find our relationships flourishing, our attitudes about money changing, and our outlook on life brightening. Consider the many big and little ways in which you give to others. What other ways can you think of to give? Maybe some of the following suggestions for how to bring joy to someone else's life will spark some more ideas:

- Say "I love you."
- Thank someone: Who taught you how to tie your shoes? Who helped you get your first job? Who went out of their way to help you out last week? Who helped you see life differently when things were tough? Call or write one of your helpers and say thanks.
- Choose to see the best in someone. Acknowledge and praise an individual's gifts, talents, contributions and good work. Tell someone today what you admire most about them. How you choose to see others to a great extent influences your opinion of your own self worth. Let others know when you think good thoughts about them.
- Give and receive more hugs. Hugs can be an expression of love without words. Human touch connects us physically and spiritually to others.
- Take cookies to a friend or a neighbor. Food has been an important way of demonstrating acceptance and hospitality in almost every culture throughout history.
- Smile at someone.
- Be kind to a stranger.
- Give something away: Clothes, money, etc. Give in secret. Giving is a rich way of living.
- Rejoice with those who are rejoicing.
- Pamper your spouse or friend without expectation of the favor being returned.

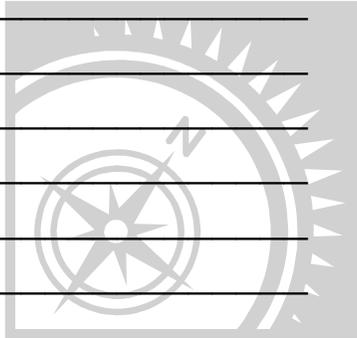


*Today, why not...* Make a game of noticing small opportunities for service: opening a door, fetching a glass of water, emptying the dishwasher. Do something nice for someone else, even if it's just a smile and a few friendly words.

*This month, why not...* Consciously do something nice for someone else every day without expectation of tangible reward.



A series of horizontal lines for writing notes, spanning the width of the page.





*If I really wanted to  
beat stress,  
I would. . .*

### TAKE IT SLOW, BUT STEADY

Managing your stress can be a bit like managing your weight. You know it's a good idea and in the beginning you're enthusiastic. But weeks (or even days) later you're on the couch eating ice cream from the carton, telling yourself that you'll skip the mashed potatoes during dinner that night to make up for the lapse, and trying hard to forget that you haven't visited the gym in a month.

Everyone has "those days." The real problem lies in having those days, most days. It's the same with stress management. Even if you have the right stress management tools you might find that you rarely use them and that you're struggling to manage your stress over the long haul.

Set aside some time to get out your notebook and review the past 23 installments of Peace by Piece. Read your notes. Now read the list of items on the next page and highlight any you *cannot* answer "yes" to. Put a question mark by any you're not sure about. (Hint, if you find yourself asking whether once a year counts as "regular", put a question mark down).

Now, think about the progress you've made in the last two years. Developing good stress management skills is a lifelong journey. Like weight loss, one of the keys is making your skills habitual. By integrating some types of behavior (like brushing our teeth) into daily life, we reduce our reliance on motivation and pure grit. While it's helpful to remember that you will never completely "arrive," it's also helpful to regularly take time to review and set new goals that work towards good habits.

As you do this, don't fall into the trap of only thinking about minimizing or eliminating the negatives in your life. Creating a lifestyle that is truly stress-resistant doesn't just mean eliminating the negatives. It means finding and building in positive sources of satisfaction and pleasure that compensate for the negatives you can't completely control or eliminate. These stress buffers are activities, involvements, and commitments that bring positive feelings to your life.



*Today, why not...* Look at your highlights and questions marks and set some new goals. You might want to pick one or two (one positive and one negative) of the strategies you've tried (or thought about trying) in the last year and brush up on your skills in that area.

*This month, why not...* It takes about 21 days to establish a new habit. Work on establishing one new stress management habit this month.





**Peace by Piece is a weekly series of creative meditations for humanitarian workers published by the Headington Institute. To find more free resources on resilience, stress, and trauma, for humanitarian workers visit the Headington Institute's website at [www.headington-institute.org](http://www.headington-institute.org).**



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