

The Superstress Solution

Roberta Lee, MD

Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

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BANTAM PRESS

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

First published in the United States
in 2010 by Random House,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,
a division of Random House, Inc., New York

First published in Great Britain
in 2010 by Bantam Press
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

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Design by BTD NYC

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9780593061886

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Bungay Suffolk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1



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Introduction

A NEW KIND OF STRESS, A NEW SOLUTION

I'M TAPPING THIS OUT on my laptop under the sole lightbulb in the dark jet bringing me home to New York from my monthlong stay on the islands of Micronesia. I first went to these coral reef islands in 1988 when, as a newly minted physician fresh out of residency, I joined the U.S. Public Health Service and was immediately dispatched there for five years. My task then was to provide Western medical care to those who needed it and, when necessary, to bring the islanders to the main island for more intensive treatment. For the past nine years, I've returned there for a month every year to do research with traditional healers, studying their vision of health and illness, as well as learning about their use of herbal medicines. Much of what I learned and observed there has informed my medical practice today. I continue to be awed by the methods and philosophies of these indigenous healers.

Tonight, as the drone of the engines pulses steadily through the cabin, I feel that all of my fellow passengers are asleep. I wish that hum could lull me into oblivion so I could tune out at least some of the twenty grueling hours that remain of the flight. But I can't sleep—and not just because I'm cramped in my airline seat. I can't because a nagging ache that started at the base of my neck is now radiating down to the muscles between my shoulder blades. It used to appear a month or so after I returned home, but now it shows up sharply and acutely just a couple of hours into my return flight. I think I know why.

With each passing year, my New York life grows exponentially more hectic and demanding, and I know what's facing me almost as soon as I get off the plane. As a doctor, I must respond and react far more swiftly now than I did a decade ago—and at all hours of the day and night. My patients expect this, as they, too, seem to be caught up

in their own frenetic worlds. Also, I know all too well that the serenity that I have just enjoyed throughout my monthlong stay on the islands—a serenity I have grown to cherish—will be gone the moment I unbuckle my seat belt.

In Micronesia, no matter how hard I work—and some days I go nonstop from dawn to dusk—at the end of the day I always feel a sense of peace and tranquility. And yet each time I return to the States, I see the tranquility gap between here and there widen. While the islanders seem suspended in a state of calm, I and my patients back home in New York City, where I have lived for many years, are getting more and more frenzied.

And here is something else: Not only do my patients appear more stressed; they have started describing symptoms of stress at *increasingly younger ages*. It used to be that most people in the waiting rooms of general practitioners were there for treatment of diseases associated with aging, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. They were in their fifties, sixties, and older. And yet my patient population has been heading in the other direction. It now includes a growing number of thirty- and forty-year-olds.

I also see a whole new battery of complaints creeping into patient histories, from young to old. Some people come to me knowing that they are terribly stressed, but not really sure why or what to do about it. Others come in describing what we now know are stress-induced illnesses. And yet, when I ask them whether they are feeling stressed, they tell me they're not. "I'm not sure what it is, Doctor," said one patient who practically dragged himself into my office. "But I know I've got *something* because I'm not sleeping. I'm exhausted. Energy's gone . . . along with my sex drive." Another patient, a woman in her late thirties, a commodities trader whose office was very near where the World Trade Center had been, came in with a terrible case of hives on her chest and forehead caused, she told me, by nothing she could put her finger on. She only knew that she was anxious all the time. When I asked about what might be stressing her—other than her high-stress job—she stoically told me that nothing was any different from the usual. It hadn't even occurred to her that her proximity to a place that had known such catastrophe might be psychologically weighing on her.

These two people are hardly isolated cases. I regularly see any number of patients who are plagued with irritable anxiety, substance abuse, sleep disorders, and withdrawal from life. Many come in bewildered by what they are experiencing—everything from strange digestive, allergic, respiratory, sexual, and skin problems to autoimmune dysfunction and heart disease. And yes. Some patients do understand what's happening enough to complain, "I'm so stressed out!" But the great majority has no idea that stress is playing a significant or catalyzing role in their afflictions. All they know is that they've slipped over an edge; that they've caught something that won't go away.

A NEW KIND OF STRESS, A NEW SOLUTION

What they've "caught" is a menacing form of stress that closely resembles post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Known as "shell shock" when it was first identified after World War I, PTSD usually stems from a catastrophic life event—combat, rape, involvement with a deadly accident, or a major illness—that leaves its victim in a persistent highly anxious state that leads to disengagement from life, sleep disorders, and substance abuse habits that are so elevated as to place them in a new category on the diagnostic scale. After the original distress and emotional fallout, many victims gradually return to life as usual. But not all. For some, the stress—and the memories—persist. Occasionally, PTSD sufferers re-experience the traumatic event or events through flashbacks or nightmares and, as a result, they tend to avoid places, people, or other things that remind them of the event. They remain off-balance, their bodies literally in an I'm-at-war mode all the time. But most of my patients haven't suffered through the experiences that are so often linked to PTSD, yet their symptoms are very much the same.

What's going on?

About a decade ago, I decided to keep a closer eye on a group of patients who had been exhibiting a number of physical symptoms that more often than not came in multiples. They denied experiencing any unusual stress in their lives. After I talked with them for hours on end, it came to me one day, right out of the blue: *These people had been living with extreme stress for so long that they didn't even realize they*

were stressed! They had crossed the line from a pale shade of gray to a very deep dark black state in their bodies, but they hadn't noticed the transformation. Stress had become an invisible part of the landscape of their lives.

And it wasn't just job stress. They had job stress *and* money stress *and* parenting stress *and* relationship stress *and* trying-to-find-a-taxi-in-the-rain stress. Layers upon layers of stress weighed on them in increments so small that they didn't feel them separately. Here, right under my nose, was an insidious new threat to everyone's well-being, a menacing, twenty-first-century kind of stress that, because it was above and beyond anything I had ever seen before, I gave the name *SuperStress*.

It's not your grandmother's stress, that's for sure.

I don't mean to imply that any specific event—not even 9/11—caused this epidemic. Not at all. What I think is that the pace of life has escalated so radically during this decade that we can no longer fool ourselves into thinking that we're living the lives of our grandparents—or even of our parents. The twenty-first century is barely a decade old, yet it is already posing new and dangerous challenges that many of us not only welcome but also actually seek out.

Just consider the advances in the technology we use every day. Between cell phones, handheld computers, and new communication modes like texting and Twittering, we're "on call" and open to intrusion twenty-four hours a day. One recent survey commissioned by support.com reported that 40 percent of eighteen-to-twenty-five-year-old students said they couldn't cope without their cell phones. And yet, when they stopped using them for three days—as the study asked them to do—these students reported less stress and had lower heart rates and blood pressure.¹ And, then, of course, there's the computer. Most of us spend long hours every day staring at flickering monitors, ever alert to emails and instant messages that demand quick replies. That same survey of over a thousand people found that 65 percent of respondents spent more time with their computer than with their spouse or significant other. More than 80 percent of those polled said they were more dependent on their computer today than they were three years ago.

Technology isn't the only offender, either. Noise pollution, even in the smallest towns, can cause stress in a major way. Have you ever pulled up to a red light and found yourself alongside a car that's blasting its music so loud that *your* car begins to vibrate? Your choices are to a) run the red light, or b) sit there and take it. Have you ever sat down in a coffee shop for an eagerly anticipated catch-up lunch with a friend, only to find that the young woman sitting at the very next table is having a catch-up lunch with *her* friend? Only there's no one else at her table; she's loudly crossing the miles on her cell phone. For Shakespeare, all the world was a stage. Today, all the world is a telephone booth.

Television has been our electronic hearth for decades, but it, too, has changed. Today's not-so-small-screen programming unfolds at speeds that make our heads spin. We're blitzed with fast-paced sensory stimulation whenever we turn it on, and our nervous systems respond with a rush of arousal. Stepped-up-volume commercials change images as fast as MTV videos do, and we never give it a second thought. We just sit and listen, numbed to the outside world. Today, TV sets are everywhere. A decade ago there was never a television screen in your bank. But now there is. You can watch *Oprah* in your local coffee shop, CNN at the airport, and the sitcom du jour in the back of your New York City taxicab. There's probably a TV in your dentist's waiting room and one in his examining room. You can get your teeth cleaned while you watch Judge Judy mediate between dueling spouses. (Talk about multitasking!)

Professional and personal expectations have risen exponentially as well. In a culture that downplays long-term thinking in favor of constant, measurable productivity, our employers set frequent, must-hit benchmarks that we must, of course, hit—or else. With tough competition for slots at top schools, parents feel overwhelming pressure to manage their kids' every move, often at the expense of their own downtime as well as their child's. Does five-year-old Sammy really need to be in chess club? He does if he buys into his parents' fear that he might not be smart enough in thirteen years to get into an Ivy. (Welcome to the next generation of SuperStressed individuals.)

Add to these daily challenges and intrusions the cultural back-

drop: a 24/7 news cycle that keeps us edgy with Code Orange and Code Red terror alerts; cynical corruption in Washington; devastating wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; threats of bird and swine flu, anthrax, ricin, and lethal strains of staph; gunmen on the rampage in schools, workplaces, and shopping malls; mass-transit bombings in Madrid and London; the tragedy of Darfur; martial law in nuclear-armed Pakistan—and the list goes on and on.

Biologically, the human species hasn't evolved beyond "island time," that is, the slower pace of life on the island. And yet we're expected to increase the pace of our activity by orders of magnitude just to keep up. We can't do it. Not without paying a price. And that's because the hardwiring of our brains and bodies is the same as it was in the days of our ancestors, even while change accelerates all around us. For example:

Our food sources have changed. It's no secret that our food is moving farther and farther away from its natural form. Pick up a small packet of beef bouillon the next time you're in a supermarket and try reading the list of ingredients out loud. It's a good thing that the FDA has determined by law that foods post their ingredients on the package, but there are few limitations to that list of ingredients. And our food choices have changed along with the availability of fast—and even of gourmet—foods. (Don't get me started on portion sizes.)

Our daily sleep-wake rhythms have shifted. Few of us wake up when the sun rises and go to sleep when the sun sets. We're rising before the sun to get to the gym because there's no time to work out later in the day. And we're up working at all hours of the night because our jobs rarely finish at a normal hour. Even if we do go to sleep well before midnight, in many cases ambient streetlight makes its way into our bedrooms and disturbs our natural circadian rhythm.

Our job satisfaction seems to be rapidly eroding. There are many reasons for this, one being the number of roles our society allows most men and women to choose from. While we enjoy the variety and the opportunity to choose, we also face the complexity that comes with

them. Perhaps we're attempting to fill too many roles when our basic human nature is to have one: to either provide or protect, to either nurture or feed.

In our urban workplaces, the fear of being laid off has reached epidemic proportions. *Downsizing*—a word that decades ago was known only to business school graduates and CEOs—has become all too familiar. So has *outsourcing*. And the human factor in many of the jobs that we do have doesn't seem to be the kind of human relationship that really gives us pleasure back. In other words, small pleasant conversations at the grocery store or coffee shop are all too rare these days. I recently went to a fast-food chain and ordered a sandwich and coffee. The server behind the counter took my order, typing it into the computer as I spoke. She put together my sandwich, dispensed the coffee from an enormous vat, placed both in a paper bag, secured the top, handed the bag to me, took my money, gave me change, and all the while *never looked up*. In Micronesia, where it's rude to have any kind of transaction in which there isn't at least eye contact, this behavior would be unthinkable.

WE'RE DELUDING OURSELVES if we think that we can indefinitely endure the macro stresses that accompany impersonal encounters, less sleep, more work, less leisure, raising kids in this dangerous world, bad marriages, less exercise, junk and processed foods eaten on the run, hyper-caFFEinated and sugar-saturated beverages, addictive devices that give us "screen sickness," traffic jams, flight delays, and so much more, and come away unscathed. Each one of these situations carries with it a hit to our nervous system, and a collection of such hits literally jackhammers us right into SuperStress. The bottom line: our nervous system is not designed to take that kind of beating.

We as a species have evolved to handle short-term stress situations. We can even endure, if we must, some fairly longer-term stress, such as a bad marriage or a stack of overdue bills when there's nothing left in the bank account. But all stress all the time changes the nature of this into a different disease. This is the one I call SuperStress.

SuperStress is not just a matter of so many jangled nerves. It's a new pandemic, as deadly as any public health crisis we have ever faced.

In the last half of the twentieth century a large majority of health issues were related to cigarette smoking, and there was an all-out blitz to get people to give up the habit. That was followed by a decade or so of what came to be known as a fat epidemic. With a high incidence of obesity endemic to our society, medical science has been trying every which way to stem the tide before diseases like diabetes affect as much as 50 percent of our population.

But this is century twenty-one, folks. Today, much of the scientific interest has shifted from fat to stress—and not a moment too soon. You’ll see as we get further into the book that stress is at the base of as many if not more diseases than are associated with obesity. But while obesity is easily diagnosed—let’s face it, you know it when you see it—stress has no face. It hides insidiously behind illnesses of its own making. Any doctor—indigenous, conventional, integrative, or functional—will tell you the same thing if you are continually stressed and you don’t deal with it: *this kind of stress can kill you.*

BUT HERE’S THE GOOD NEWS: it doesn’t have to.

THE SUPERSTRESS SOLUTION

Take heart. I’m not going to suggest that you move to an island in the South Pacific. Nor am I going to suggest that you remove yourself from every stressful situation you encounter, because we both know that in this day and age, it’s clearly impossible. (Let’s be honest, here. Are you going to quit your stressful job? No. Are your children never going to worry or challenge you? You wish.)

Rather, the resolution lies in a new paradigm for health—an easy-to-use approach to your well-being that I call the *SuperStress Solution*. Some of the traditional therapies that I learned and embraced in Micronesia find a place in the solution, as do the integrative modalities that I learned as one of four physicians in the first graduating class at Dr. Andrew Weil’s famed Program in Integrative Medicine in Arizona. Put those together with things I have learned since then in my own integrative practice in New York, and you’ve got my holistic prescription. It’s all here, in this book that you are holding in your hands right now.

After more comprehensively defining SuperStress in a scientific sense in Chapter 1, I invite you to take the robust questionnaires on pages 42–50. This will help you pinpoint your own level of SuperStress and begin to see patterns of when it strikes you most often and how it manifests in your daily behavior. What are you giving up when you remain in a SuperStressed state? You'll find that out, too.

Part 2 of my plan defines what I call the tools for change, a series of six different SuperStress-busting, lifestyle-enhancing tools that are the foundation of the Four-Week SuperStress Solution, week-by-week details of which you'll find laid out for you in Part 3. If, however, you are like many of my patients and would prefer to spot treat your stress-related symptoms, I also offer you specific quick-fix solutions in the “SuperStress Solutions for Your Type” chapter starting on page 209. Attending to the most obvious or serious of your stress-related symptoms in this way may be just what you need to ratchet down your stress enough to begin taking a longer view. At that point, I hope you'll consider the four-week program as well.

If you are looking for proven life-changing benefits—from clearer thinking to better relationships in love, family, friendship and work, increased efficiency, more joy and laughter, and better general health—the Four-Week SuperStress Solution will help you do just that. It offers twenty-first-century treatments for a twenty-first-century ailment and will, in effect, retrain your nervous system to default to a state of rest. It will teach you to shut down the stress circuit and relax deeply.

My program, rooted in the principles of integrative medicine, is designed to teach you how to control your thoughts and the negative emotions that are so closely associated with SuperStress. You'll be able to identify exactly how you feel when you feel your best and most relaxed, and how you feel when you're at your worst and most stressed. You'll learn to recognize the specific circumstances that are making you feel that way, as well as how to use your mind and body to get to the good place and maintain that feeling—no matter what real and pressing problems you experience. In essence, this program is a way for you to take back control, to build access to your own private sanctuary of peace and tranquility.

Life is so much more than a series of emergencies, deadlines, mis-

takes, calamities waiting to happen, impossible decisions, traps, guilt, worries, and losses. And it's yours to live any way you want. Sure, I understand that letting go of your stress might seem as scary as jumping from a speeding train, but by the end of this book you'll understand why you feel stressed, and why it has become impossible for you to live even a single day with a calm mind. You've worn your stress as a badge of honor for a long time, but now it's time to give it up.

This treatment plan is divided into four one-week periods that will make the transitions to new behaviors much easier. If you want to take longer than four weeks to get through it, that's fine, too. Go at your own pace. I want you to feel empowered, not overwhelmed. None of these changes is that hard; anyone can make them. Anyone, that is, who has the insight and capacity to learn—and *the courage to change*.

So why not go for it? Why not get rid of your unnecessary stress overload—the SuperStress that's making you sick—and retrieve all the good that you know is missing from your life?

The door to your sanctuary is open. All you have to do is walk through it.

— ROBERTA LEE, M.D.