



Dear Reader,

Martial arts are a good way to release tensions at the end of the day. But what about using Aikido's energy principles during your working hours, as a way to focus, be present, and be at your best with the lowest stress level? Aimee Bernstein, Coach and author of [*Stress Less Achieve MORE: Simple Ways to Turn Pressure into a Positive Force in Your Life*](#) gives us some hints about how to incorporate this art into your day to day existence.

Enjoy and get centered.

Stop and Reflect

Issue # 166

June 2014

Stressed out? Try Aikido

Interview with Author Aimee Bernstein

S&R: *It used to be that only certain industries were considered high pressure. Now it seems that almost all work environments are. What's going on?*

AB: I know what you mean. People used to say "fine" when you asked them how they were. Now they say, "busy." Part of the reason is that although the economy is getting better, many companies are still reluctant to hire, causing others to work longer hours in order to pick up the slack. Globalization has expanded the playing field adding more competitors within any given industry, which in turn puts more pressure on companies and their employees. We are besieged



by information and many of us are expected to be available 24/7. One senior manager I coach was contacted by her boss on a matter that was far from an emergency while she was at her brother's funeral. Instead of drawing the line, she did what her boss requested, although she was enraged at the insensitive intrusion. Within many companies, being

available 24/7 has become the new standard for team players just as the ability to handle constant demands, emails, and interruptions has become the new performance requirement.

S&R: *Wherever I go, I notice people tethered to their smart phone, checking their email constantly or fixated on social media. The intent of technology is to make our lives easier and to give us more free time, yet we've become addicted to it. It seems we can't live without it yet we aren't living well with it. What's the solution?*

AB: The problem is not the technology; it's the way we attend to it. To have such a large portion of our population, and in particular young people, hooked this way, is dangerous both to themselves and the society as a whole. By consciously letting go of our addiction to technology, we hone our skills of attending and can apply this learning to any other aspect of our lives. The potential is unlimited. Just think of Zen student, Steve Jobs, whose skill in focusing his attention guided him to let go of the inessentials in order to produce powerful yet simple products.

S&R: *Tell me more about focusing our attention.*

AB: I learned a lot about habits of attention through years of training in aikido, a Japanese martial art which teaches the harmonious resolution of conflict. Through training I learned that wherever you place your attention becomes your center. For example, one evening, my teacher Robert Nadeau, attacked me with a strike to the head. I countered and he went down. But then, for a split second I shifted my attention to him and in the next moment I found myself splattered on the mat. "Did you get it?", he asked. "Yup, I got it." You see as soon as you locate your attention inside another person or situation you lose your grounding, your power and your sense of self. By locating your attention in another, you'll know what the other person feels, needs thinks and wants but you won't be very aware of what you think, feel, need and want. "There" is not a great place to function from.

A second common pattern is placing your attention inside yourself so you know what you think, feel, need and want, but because you keep your attention closed instead of open, you have a difficult time knowing what others think, feel, need or want. I am reminded of the highly intellectual supervisor who abruptly ended the performance evaluation meeting he was conducting because his employee was crying and he didn't know how to deal with her. People with this habit often are unaware of the depth to which their words and actions affect others. Depending on how extreme their habit of attention, they may believe they must disengage or move against others in order to be safe, in control and get what they want.

Although there are times it makes sense to close down to the world, health is in operating from a balanced, centered place while maintaining a strong connection to the ground, just as the strongest tree does. It's about locating your attention inside yourself while remaining open and extending your energy to embrace others. It is from this internally centered yet open position, that we are best able to perform well, access our intuition and creativity, and establish positive relationships with others.

S&R: *In your book **Stress Less Achieve MORE: Simple Ways to Turn Pressure into a Positive Force in Your Life**, you differentiate between pressure and stress. What's the distinction?*

AB: According to Webster's dictionary, pressure is the "exertion of force (strength, energy, power) upon a surface by an object, fluid, etc. in contact with it." Consider that whenever you are faced with a job, be it simple or complex, energy, in the amount equal to the job, immediately streams through your mind/body/field in order to help you accomplish it, putting pressure on your system. Just think about giving a speech, competing in a sport or approaching a beautiful woman across the room whom you would like to date. Immediately your heart beats faster, your legs may feel wobbly and your mind may be inundated with thoughts. In fact, the more you want--be it money, success, love, power or even peace of mind-- the more you invite pressure into your life. If you open **and align to the energy**, you will experience a power and aliveness that enables you to perform your task efficiently and effectively. You will feel invigorated by your work and may speak of the experience as "being in the zone or the flow." Pressure then becomes the fuel that uplifts, strengthens and expands who you are. However, if you close down, resist or do not line up to this energy, you will experience discomfort, distress and over time disease. So it's not a matter of avoiding pressure because you can't. It's how you deal with it that matters.

S&R: *Tell me more about how to open to this energy or pressure.*

AB: A few years ago, I coached an executive director of operations for a world-class beauty company, whom I'll call Chris. Everyone agreed that Chris was very competent and likeable, however he lacked focus and thus ran from one project to another. When he spoke, he spoke in volumes, so much so that people would look at their watches while waiting for him to get to his point. Because his attention was so habitually focused out there, he lacked a strong inner center and consequently the courage to assert himself to his boss.

Now I know through my own experience and through coaching others that everyone has moments in which they are very aligned to their own center and thus are at the top of their game. Thus, when I found out Chris had been a sprint runner in his youth who had won medals, I asked him about his experience. First, I wanted to know what he felt when he was kneeling down at the start of the race, waiting for the gun to go off. "My heart would beat fast and energy would rush through my body," he told me. "What did you do with all that energy?" I asked. "I just said YES to it." Probing deeper I asked, "When you ran did you ever look back at the other racers?" "Never," he said. "My focus was only on myself. If you place your attention on others when you run, you'll lose the race." That's when I knew that Chris had an inner map of how to perform well when under pressure. He just had never translated and experientially applied it to his day job. That became the focus of our coaching. We didn't just talk about it because that wouldn't have been enough to create consistent behavior change. Instead, we engaged in mind/body/energy practices to strengthen the patterns of handling pressure he knew as a sprinter and practiced applying them to aspects of his work life. You can begin that process by deeply inquiring into what happens to you when you are performing well and then, step by step, translating that knowledge to other activities within your life.

S&R: *The usual prescription for creating a less stressful life is to exercise, meditate, eat a healthy diet and sleep eight hours each night. Yet in your book, you say that often this is not enough. Would you please explain?*

AB: Certainly there has been enough research to prove these methods reduce stress and anyone who engages in these approaches knows firsthand that they work. But who has

time for yoga poses amidst nonstop meetings and pressing deadlines? Stress reduction becomes one more thing to do!

Although over years of practice you'll notice you have more control over your nervous system, the state of consciousness that is linked to these activities doesn't always translate automatically to other activities or situations. For most of us, it is too easy for the peace we find in meditation to dissipate when someone narrowly cuts us off on the freeway; too easy for the balance and strength we find in the gym to evaporate when we are taken to task by our boss. When the pressure rises, our old imprinted reactions tend to take over. Thus, we need to imprint new stronger responses to handling pressure within our nervous system that will allow us to shift quickly. Think about how special forces are trained. They not only envision various possibilities for handling stressful situations, they are put into simulations with increasing degrees of pressure in order to build their resilience and strength. The best of the best thus learn how to maintain their focus and center/ground while expanding their energy field so their perceptions and intuition increases exponentially. In this way, they learn to turn pressure from an enemy into an ally. My book maps out how you can begin this process on your own.

S&R: *In your book you offer an inner formula that leads to skillful action. What is that and why is it important?*

AB: The formula is : Self-Awareness & Hereeness = Conscious Presence -> Skillful Action. Self-awareness brings insights but insights alone don't necessitate change. Even when they do generate new behavior, we often lack the energy to sustain the change. Just think of your New Year's resolutions. For self-awareness to be most effective it needs to partner with the body- the place of emotions, sensations and actions. I call this ability to be present in the body, "hereeness."

Hereeness implies the embodiment of an idea, value or skill so that it is imprinted on your nervous system. When this occurs, you don't have to refer to your cognitive mind but are capable of responding immediately because you have access to the intuition, wisdom, flexibility and power of the body. Thus, you are able to walk your talk. When self awareness and hereeness partner, they produce a conscious presence which enables you to take focused, skillful action when under pressure. Conscious presence enables you to flow more effectively and efficiently with life rather than getting bruised along the way. I call this way Embodied Leadership.

S&R: *In Stress Less Achieve More you offer a model for conflict resolution based on aikido. Would you please describe it?*

AB: In most conflicts the actual difference in the two parties points of view may not be the same as the perceived difference. In fact, the two parties usually have a misunderstanding of the core issue and don't even recognize it. However, since we tend to believe we are right and have a need to feel in control, instead of inquiring into the other person's position with interest, our tendency is to stop listening and to fight for our point of view. Others, who tend to shy away from confrontation, avoid or become passive aggressive in order to feel safe. But what if conflict is not about who is right but about acknowledging and learning to use our differences in service of the common good? To that end, Aikido offers another alternative beyond fighting or fleeing, which they call "the blend."

When you make a blend, your attention is inside yourself yet expanded to include the other person. Thus, you are able to pick up their energetic intentions and understand the other person's emotions and point of view more clearly. Let me give you an example.

In one of the teams I work with, Danielle, a brilliant IT executive, was hurt and angry because she felt the other executive team members were excluding her. When another member tried to convince her that she received the same emails about meetings and parties as everyone else did, Danielle wasn't convinced. "Get over it," one team member told her, clearly annoyed. "What is it you want?" another member asked. "To feel included I want people to come to my office and invite me," Danielle responded. At first the team members just shook their heads and discounted Danielle's feelings since it seemed like she was making a mountain out of a molehill and they had other things to attend to. Then the team, using the aikido model for resolving conflict, decided to make a blend which resolved the issue. Here's what they did.

The first step they took was to feel where they were-- their physical, emotional and energetic reactions to Danielle's request. They noticed their tension, their resistances, and their desire to fight or flee. As they relaxed and recomposed themselves, they were then positioned to make a blend.

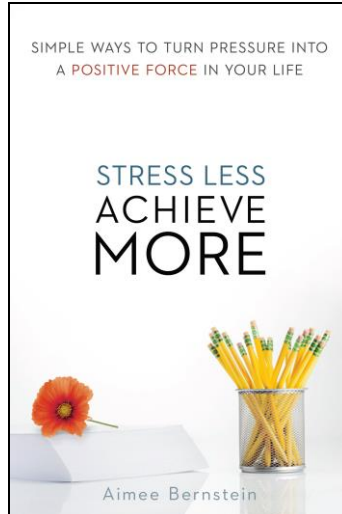
Recognizing that they were "one for all and all for one", they chose to see the world from Danielle's position. They stated her case better than she could, they discussed how difficult it was to feel excluded, and then for the next month, each member of the team went out of their way to include her. They did so with an open-hearted interest and a willingness to be vulnerable. This is the second step of the blend. Interestingly as they did so, Danielle who felt met and no longer isolated, was better able to understand their point of view and that they hadn't meant anything personal in their initial process. By month two, she felt so much a part of the team that she no longer needed special treatment. By blending with her perspective, the team was then able to lead her to see the seeds of truth in their perspective. (step three of the blend) By going back and forth in this way, they found a new and better way of working which was more inclusive and collaborative. Over time, the team developed an extraordinary reputation, as people from all segments of the company began talking about how much they enjoyed working with them. Furthermore, their new level of trust and collaboration led to the development of a number of significant innovations.

S&R: *What can an organization do to eliminate at least some of the stress within the work environment?*

AB: There are a number of things companies are already doing to reduce stress. This includes, for example, more work at home days, movable workplaces, gyms, meditation and yoga classes as well as health initiatives which offer services and training. However, most companies still offer a top down approach to problem-solving in which well meaning executives decide on the solution without including their workforce on every level in the conversation. Without shared ownership for change, individual accountability and commitment both to the work environment and to personal development are limited. But please don't send employees another survey to fill out. Most people see the survey as just another form and thus fill it out minimally. Human resources associates then have a hard time deciphering just what each person meant by their comments.

A much better way is to bring people together by using a large group process and let them voice their concerns out loud. Often when people have an opportunity to get the pop

the blister so to speak, a healing naturally occurs which leads them to recognize what is working in their organizations and how they can build on it to reduce the stress. Furthermore, when it is the people's solution, employees become more invested and want to get involved. And as we all know, when companies genuinely show concern for their workforce, turnover rate decreases productivity and innovation increases, and it is easier to recruit. A perfect win win win!



[We want to hear from you!](#)

What is your technique to lower your stress?

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LIM News is published by LIM LLC

Editor: Isabel Rimanoczy

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