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Channel pressure into energy at work, local author says

By [Marcia Heroux Pounds](#) Sun Sentinel

Stressed-out workers can use the pressure they feel at work to benefit themselves and their employers, according to South Florida psychotherapist and organizational consultant Aimee Bernstein.

Bernstein, who has worked with many South Florida companies, including the Ritz-Carlton hotel and Microsoft Latin America, details ways to turn pressure into a positive force in her book, *Stress Less, Achieve More*, recently published by Amacom, a division of the American Management Association.

In a recent interview, Bernstein talked about how she teaches workers to transform pressure from an enemy into an ally and what some local companies are doing to reduce worker stress.

Q: What level of stress do you often see among workers?

A: Between global competition, technology that keeps on changing, 24/7 availability and the information glut, people are experiencing overwhelming pressure.

A friend of mine told me her young daughter who is a manager calls her and cries. A senior vice president of human resources disclosed to me that she's under such pressure [that] she's thinking about retiring early. Her job is ruining her personal relationship.

Yet, there's a hidden gift to it — it forces you to confront the questions: Are you running faster but not deeper? Are you going from one to-do item to the next, and losing contact with yourself and the meaning of your work?

Or, are you living according to your own rhythm no matter how many demands are on you, so you can feel happy, empowered, and engaged at work?

Q: What's the difference between pressure and stress?

A: Stress is not good. Pressure — which is power and energy — can be good depending on how you relate to it. Consider that whenever there's a job or task to do, energy comes into your system to do the job. If you've ever given a speech, you may have felt this rush of energy coming into you. You have a choice: If you close down and resist the pressure, you're going to feel discomfort and stress. But if you open up and align to it, you will feel excitement and joy, and your performance is enhanced.

Q: What are some techniques people can use to manage their everyday stress from work or life?

A: Keep a journal, and read back what you write. Over time, you'll notice there are patterns; certain things which trigger your stress and anger. Once you are aware of these, you can change them. The simplest technique is to breathe. For a moment hold your breath, then let go and then let the breath take over. You'll notice your body relaxing.

Move. Instead of emailing the person in the next office, get up and walk there. As you walk, feel the way your body moves. Movement plus awareness will help alleviate your tensions.

Switch channels. When you hear yourself saying the same old story in your head, focus your attention on anything else, like the blueberries you ate at breakfast. It's about distracting yourself and cutting the link to the debilitating story.

Think of something positive. By uplifting yourself, you begin to spread that throughout your organization.

Q: In your book, you quote executive Scott Barrett who says he learned a lot about handling stress from South Florida entrepreneur H. Wayne Huizenga when he worked with him. What's the lesson here?

A: Many CEOs create friction in their organizations. They get uptight and pass their stress down the ladder. Scott calls Wayne "frictionless."

(He says) Huizenga was able to go from meeting to meeting dealing with a broad range of issues in a fast-paced manner without being restricted or bothered. Wayne remained pleasant because he wasn't worn down by the pressure. He knew how to use it. That's inspiring, particularly when you look at Huizenga's successful business track record.

Q: What do you think about companies that offer their employees mind/body stress reduction training or telecommuting, aimed at reducing stress?

A: Research shows that these approaches are very helpful and cost-effective.

Many progressive companies don't talk about work-life balance anymore. They now talk about work-life integration. For example, at Novartis Latin America (health care technology company) in Miami, people are encouraged to negotiate work/life strategies with their managers and are often offered time off to pursue an interest or schooling, so they don't have to leave the job. For example, one finance manager in Argentina, who is a competitive wind surfer, was allowed to take days off when the wind was good as long as it didn't conflict with his work obligations.

Citrix Systems (in Fort Lauderdale) reduced conflicts for resources and enhanced collaboration by changing the work environment. They tore down the office walls, removed the cubicles and created an open floor plan. Then they created town squares with coffee and snack bars where people could work. These shared spaces and encouraged sharing ideas and building relationships across departments. Or, if they choose, associates can work at home, where they don't have to get dressed and deal with gridlock on I-95. People are appreciative of that.

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