

***STRESS LESS, ACHIEVE MORE: SIMPLE WAYS TO TURN PRESSURE INTO A POSITIVE FORCE IN YOUR LIFE* BY AIMEE BERNSTEIN**

reviewed by Elaine Steiner, CPT, CLP

In today's workplace, nearly everyone is under pressure. Experiencing pressure, however, does not have to mean sacrificing focus, productivity, and sleep—or, worse, suffering depression, migraines, and an ulcer.

Aimee Bernstein, executive coach, change accelerator, and author of *Stress Less, Achieve More: Simple Ways to Turn Pressure into a Positive Force in Your Life* (AMACOM; 2015) suggests that pressure can actually be a gift. Bernstein's fresh perspective on pressure teaches stressed-out professionals how to use this potent energy source to their advantage. She not only challenges the standard recommended stress-relievers—take a walk, do yoga, meditate—as sometimes unrealistic and often not enough in today's demanding business world, she challenges the very notion of attempting to escape the abundant pressure in our busy lives. Drawing on psychology, organizational development, and the principles and practices of *aikido*, a martial art, Bernstein shares her realistic approach: embrace the pressure. See it as an energy source. Merge with its flow to accomplish more while feeling calm and centered. As she tells readers upfront, "I'll show you how to expand your capacity for handling increased amounts of pressure while rediscovering the wonder of being alive."

In *Stress Less, Achieve More*, you will be introduced to an approach which will help you...

- *Handle the demands of a busy life by practicing an inner map that can be used at any time and within any activity*
- *Re-center yourself when dealing with difficult people and stressful situations*
- *Quickly shift your mood and expand your sense of well-being, confidence, and presence*
- *Energize fatigued teammates and create a culture that supports the human spirit and the bottom line*

HAVE YOU EVER felt stretched thin or buried in work? From everyday to-do's, to work deadlines, to personal responsibilities, and to our own critical self-talk, our lives are filled with pressure, and many of us are feeling stressed.

The conventional prescription for stress reduction is exercise, meditation, a good diet, and plenty of sleep. But as Aimee Bernstein asks in *Stress Less, Achieve More: Simple Ways to Turn Pressure into a Positive Force in Your Life*, who has the time for yoga poses in between back-to-back meetings? And how many of us actually get to the gym every night? Stress reduction becomes one more thing to do!

Although pressure cannot be eliminated altogether, executive coach and psychotherapist Aimee Bernstein suggests that we stop thinking about it as an enemy that must be conquered, resisted, or controlled. Instead, consider pressure as a gift that can turbocharge you into the next best version of yourself. See it as an energy source. Tap into its flow to accomplish more while feeling calm and centered. It is a counterintuitive message that frenzied professionals can actually use.

Here's how Aimee Bernstein describes how it works. Whenever there is a job or task to do, energy comes into your mind-body system in the amount needed to accomplish it. If you have ever given a presentation to a large audience or received a performance review from a boss who was not your raving fan, you have experienced the emotional and physical manifestations of this increased energy. Perhaps you may have felt nervous, your heart beat faster, and your legs shook. If you opened and aligned to the energy flow, the limiting symptoms went away and you felt alive and joyful and experienced high performance. However if you closed down or resisted the energy, you felt increased discomfort and distress and over time may have experienced illness.

Stress Less, Achieve More: Simple Ways to Turn Pressure into a Positive Force in Your Life offers a mindfulness-in-action approach based on a blend of aikido, a martial art that literally means the way of harmony, psychology, meditation, and best business practices. This approach can be used at any time and during any activity to handle the demands of a busy life. You will be given practical information and learn simple practices to prevent and reduce stress while increasing your energy. These practices will help you to spot opportunities, embrace challenges, and do outstanding things. Bernstein's approach will show you how to bypass limited self-talk and develop the mind-set to handle pressure and stress more effectively. *Stress Less, Achieve More* is targeted to career individuals, leaders, teams, and people trying to balance work and life while advancing their careers. It is applicable for all ages. For example, a human resource colleague of mine

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who did not speak her mind for fear of hurting someone learned how to use pressure as fuel for being assertive while still remaining kind. Bernstein's mind-body energy practices guided her to listen to, value, and trust her instincts. As a result, her confidence and influence with senior vice presidents with whom she worked grew.

Today there is an ongoing realization that being a mindful, inspirational person and effective and efficient leader who develops honest relationships is essential to success. Mindful leaders align what they value, say, and do. Although this is nothing new for truly good leaders, in today's uncertain, highly pressured world, this mindfulness-in-action approach is more relevant and accepted than ever. The book is a result of Bernstein's personal experiences along with her experiences working with individuals and teams in many settings to turn pressure into a positive force. She assisted executives of a bank in developing an empowering culture based on trust, authenticity, and caring. Her work with trauma surgeons and ER doctors in building a collaborative working relationship helped them save their trauma center. And in my own company, she consulted and coached the senior vice president of R&D, assisting him in developing an emotionally intelligent, collaborative senior-level team and in applying the collaborative approach throughout their department. This led to a significant increase in innovation, an increase in employee engagement in which everyone including administrators became idea generators, the breaking down of silos between the R&D and operations departments, and a culture based on shared ownership for change.

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OVERVIEW

I wish I had this guidance, information, skills, and mindset 35 years ago when I started my career and family. Instead of keeping stress inside and allowing pressure to negatively affect me, I now know how to use the everyday simple exercises to manage stress and pressure. In addition, I am also able to help others. The sooner you read the book, practice the simple techniques, practice again, use them in different situations, and remind yourself when to use them, they will become second nature and you will *stress less* and *achieve more*. The book helps you learn how to succeed under pressure by introducing you to an inner map for handling the multiple demands of a busy life. You will learn to shift your attention from your limiting thoughts to your mind-body to access your sensations, feelings, and intuitions. You will discover how to re-center yourself when faced with difficult people or situations. And you will learn how to shift your mood, expand your capability to handle pressure, and step into the flow to experience high performance and creativity. As you let go of your self-consciousness and need to understand, please, and control, you will begin to feel centered and grounded in your body. This book will change the way you perceive and react to stressful circumstances, helping you focus on mindful leadership and relationship building better than you have before. Following the tips and exercises you will not only learn to soar beyond your limitations, you will discover how to de-stress your team and create an organizational culture built on kindness, shared ownership for change, and well-being.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The following list gives a chapter-by-chapter description of the book's contents, presented as a series of imperatives.

- Make friends with pressure by following the clues and learn how it will empower you by providing an inner map to “stresslessness.”
- Understand pressure, differentiate it from stress, and compare the conventional and 21st-century approaches to stress reduction. Learn a formula for self-mastery.
- Understand and move beyond the limitations of your personality type to be a better you. Identify your personality and specific worldview among the nine enneagram types: *perfectionist*, *giver*, *performer*, *romantic*, *observer*, *trooper*, *epicure*, *boss*, or *mediator*. Understand how and why you handle pressure the way you do, while learning to make better, more objective, and well-balanced decisions and reducing stress.
- Understand the influences of Western culture and your particular habits of paying attention to your ability to handle pressure. Recognize the difference between when your attention is inside yourself so you know what you think, feel, need, and want, and when it is focused on another person or situation. Become more emotionally intelligent by learning to expand your attention from inside yourself to include others.
- Centering and grounding your energy is essential to leading, building relationships, expanding your perceptions, and empowering yourself. Explore how centering is linked to the mind-body system. Identify typical reactions when you are under pressure. Learn to re-center when difficult people or situations throw you off balance.
- Extend your energy for high performance and creativity and discover the energy principles for meeting challenges, the flow state, and the power of presence.
- Become as big as the job you have or desire to achieve. Recognize your state of mind as opposed to the reality. Observe the many versions of yourself and their connection to different levels of consciousness. Identify your personality's particular stress triggers, and use techniques to enhance your skills in handling challenges.
- Resolve conflicts harmoniously and excel at and encourage collaboration. Follow the model of conflict resolution based on aikido and find the core issue within the conflict.
- Bring your heart to work to develop relationships, create engagement, and reduce stress. Learn the five transformational ways to spread kindness through your organization, such as learning the different languages of the heart, asking for what you need, and becoming comfortable with being vulnerable.
- Discover creative solutions through increasing your brain-wave vibration, developing your intuition; stop doing and start listening.

- Learn the four-step method to maintain your well-being in the midst of uncertainty and while waiting for your destiny to be revealed by (1) keeping the faith, (2) feeling where you are, (3) reflecting on your choices, and (4) following the clues.

Throughout the book you will find seeds-of-truth quotations, reflective questions, and mind-body practices that will expand your wisdom, self-awareness, and self-mastery under pressure. You will also find tips, techniques, and exercises you can use with your team to help them reduce stress along with case examples of companies that have progressive approaches for developing organizational cultures that support well-being and engagement. You'll read how Tim Arnst, senior vice president international from Universal Studios Parks and Resorts, increases employee engagement by helping people in his division understand and focus on what is critical. You will discover innovative approaches from Mindvalley that include awesome reports, company-wide gratitude logs and meditations, and you will learn about the firm's undercover department, whose mission is to do something outrageous when the tension gets too great. And you will learn how Novartis Latin America has changed the work-life balance paradigm to work-life integration.

APPLICATION TO PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

Whether looking to advance your career or succeed in your current position, handling highly pressured situations is key to being an inspirational, focused, and effective leader. In *Stress Less, Achieve More*, Aimee Bernstein provides an approach to high performance under pressure, which she calls mindfulness in action, that is aligned with recent scientific thinking. Increasingly, scientists recognize that to simply study physical structure is not enough; we must also study the patterns and flow of intrinsic energy that give rise to the physical structure. Thus, to be able to use pressure to enhance our performance and well-being, Bernstein examines the physical, emotional, behavioral, and energetic aspects of who we are.

As an individual you will learn easy, timeless mind-body practices to keep you grounded and centered when in the midst of challenging decisions or situations. You will learn to bypass limited reactions and manifest more appropriate and skillful responses. Like a seasoned athlete or musician, these practices, when imprinted in your muscles and nervous system, will best position you

to enter the flow, generate break-through thinking, and turbocharge your performance. This embodied approach will help you shift from energy-depleting self-talk to listen beyond reactivity and become a more open-minded yet decisive leader.

If you are an individual contributor, leader, performance technologist, organizational development specialist, trainer, or coach, the book will increase your capacity to understand behavior change and how to embrace and sustain it for performance improvement at all levels. I can personally tell you that I witnessed the skills, exercises, and mind-set as well as receiving Aimee Bernstein's help prior to her writing the book. People learned to let go of their own insecurities and the stress they received from others or that they put on themselves by learning and using the techniques. I watched as she worked with an entire team of research and development individuals and their leader, operations personnel, and human resource professionals. I saw individuals shift from being reactive to becoming more calm, kind, and collaborative. I saw the senior vice president transform from a benevolent patriarch to a centered champion of shared ownership for change. And as the smaller teams learned to handle the pressures of the marketplace, political considerations, and differences among themselves, they evolved into a consistently high-performing, collaborative team, one that sparked the curiosity of other leaders within the organization.

We all have stress, and we internalize and handle it differently, often without making any significant improvement in our stress level. I was fortunate to have Aimee Bernstein work with me and my clients to learn the skills and techniques she uses in her book. Her feedback as we practiced the exercises was extraordinarily helpful. Because you will not have her to personally guide and encourage you to make significant change, you must want it and be willing to transform. Transformation requires practice. As quoted in the book, Bruce Lee once said, "Under duress we do not rise to our level of expectation, we fall to our level of training" (p. 106). As you read the book, do the exercises, be honest with yourself, get feedback from others, and put into practice what you are learning. There is a lot to absorb, and do not expect immediate results as it is a step-by-step process. Use a specific situation to practice one of the skills, and be aware of what you did, how it worked, and what you did not do well. Continue to use the book as your guide and be patient. To your delight you just might realize that pressure is a gift that has turbocharged you into a better version of yourself. 🌞

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