

Introduction

While it was only a ten-mile drive away, it seemed like hours. My buddies Scott, Greg, Paul, and I piled into my '69 hot-rod red Chevy Chevelle. The day was perfect - sunny, with a light breeze, and not too hot. I felt 6-feet tall and all grown up. With each mile that odometer ticked off toward our destination, the noise grew louder and louder, and so did our excitement. I thought to myself, "Life just doesn't get better than this." There we were - perched on the sides of our seats, arms hanging out the windows, shouting enthusiastic cheers at passersby. It was a feeling of utter joy and freedom.

We simply called it "the track"; to others, it was the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (IMS), home of the world-renowned Indy 500. In reality, it didn't matter what anyone called this amazing place, or that we couldn't afford "real" tickets; to us, it was the gateway to our heroes and our dreams. And soon we would be peering out - as we would for many years to come - from behind that unmistakable fence in the IMS infield, for just a momentary glimpse of racing celebrity.

This was a world that I so desperately wanted to belong to; and little did I know at the time, the racetrack would, eventually, become my first "office" - the place that would launch my dream career, my future...and my life.

Today, forty years later, there are many more people with me at that track for this legendary race - three-hundred-thousand plus fans, in fact. The Indy 500 is the largest attended facility-based sporting event in the world; it is three times the size of the largest-ever-attended Super Bowl, and six times that of a World Cup Soccer final. And it has been this way, annually, for the past ninety-nine years. But, now, I am standing on the other side of the fence, and

not just watching the “greatest spectacle in racing” from the boxes, but making Indy 500 history with my “InnerVitals” biotelemetry monitoring system – a revolutionary proprietary system that, essentially, monitors and measures how the body handles stress.

The system, which records and reports internal physical vital signs such as heart rate, breath rate, core temperature, caloric burn, and more, made it possible for the first time in sports history for the viewer to see how an athlete’s body reacts to stress. Never before had viewers been able to see vital signs of an athlete *while they are performing* live on broadcast television, much less a racecar driver “flying by” at speeds up to 225 miles per hour, under intense pressure and in competition to win the \$14.5 million first prize and the coveted Borg-Warner Trophy. But on May 24, 2015, with help from Team Penske, especially president Tim Cidric, Chip Ganassi Racing Team and driver Sage Karam, and Schmidt Peterson drivers, James Jakes and James Hinchcliffe, as well as ABC and ESPN networks, more than 6 million viewers got a look into what could now easily become the premier diagnostic tool in medicine, sports medicine, and performance training.

As a result of our success at the Indy 500, I am currently in discussions with the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, PGA, and the Olympic Committee about adopting this innovative monitoring system as way of increasing viewer interest, and supporting athletes to ultimate performance levels. As this technology is embraced and utilized, it will forever change the way sports and athletic competition is viewed and experienced, but it will also change the way you and I look at and deal with stress each and every day.

Imagine if you possessed a technology, right here and now, that would tell you *exactly* how your body is responding to stress – whether stress from driving to work, sitting in a meeting, eating lunch, exercising, watching television, taking an afternoon nap, or talking to your spouse. Imagine that this technology would signal when your stress levels went outside of peak parameters, tell you when you need to rest and for how long, or indicate when there is a recurring pattern that could be damaging to your health. How helpful do you think this technology might be for reducing stress and operating at peak levels, never mind for reducing disease and illness?

Well, folks, that future is now. Today, with this technology, I am coaching and training people from all walks of life – people just like you. It is only a matter of time until this diagnostic tool rises to the forefront of modern medicine, making it possible for people like you and me to assess how poorly or well we are handling stress – and therefore – reducing our risk for disease. This would be a “game changer,” as they say in the business, in terms of personal health.

As a young teenager who resisted homework and chores, spent more time thinking about sports and girls than what I was going “to be” when I grew up, and skipped school to go to the track, I – nor anyone else who knew me back then, for that matter – never would have imagined that today I would be training USAF pilots, Space Command, Pentagon, and Veterans Affairs personnel, and rescue workers at some of the world’s most devastating disasters. Whether at Ground Zero in NYC, Hurricane Katrina, the Asian tsunami that claimed 175,000 lives, or the Haiti earthquake, I am frequently called upon by the media, the military, emergency personnel, and humanitarian organizations to train the world’s best and bravest first responders so that they aren’t just *coping* or *dealing with* stress, but, instead, using it to strengthen themselves and to help others be the very best they can be under extremely demanding, often traumatic, situations.

Disaster scenes involving human lives are some of the most stressful and grueling situations to handle: They are complex, excruciatingly frustrating, and distressing, at times; they are also highly unpredictable from day to day. These disasters are my training ground for what I do today and serve as the inspiration for my work, which is to help as many people as possible master the art of utilizing stress for positive change. The countless heroes that I have met through these events inspire me daily to press forward with the crucial and valuable work of cracking the stress code. I wanted you to have a look into this world before we move on, as it is fundamental for a broader understanding of stress and our ability to handle it. First, let’s travel to Thailand. ...

The island of Phuket is most likely worlds away from the kind of world where you and I live – the one with more creature comforts than most can even imagine. Yet, when I heard the news

on December 26, 2004, I knew I had to go there. Startlingly, and unimaginably, a crack in the ocean floor had opened up, causing a tsunami wave nearly 40 feet high, 180 miles wide (the driving distance from New York City to Baltimore, MD), and traveling at a speed of 500 miles per hour to crash into three continents. Within minutes, this tsunami became the fourth largest natural disaster (since the year 1900), wiping out hundreds of villages and the lives of 175,000 people from Indonesia, India, and Thailand, and Christmas vacationers from around the globe.

I got up from my desk, and as I walked outside my office, I began contemplating all of the logistics necessary for me to get to the tsunami-torn region to offer my skills in stress recovery training. For more than a decade, I had been helping people cope with trauma and disaster relief: I had personally witnessed the devastating effects of countless hurricanes in my home state of Florida and elsewhere, had spent more than a month at Ground Zero in New York City, and would be assisting – less than a year later – with recovery efforts from Hurricane Katrina.

As I paced and paced, stunned by the horrific images I'd seen on TV, my phone began to ring. Friends and colleagues wanted to put a plan in action to help the victims of this tragedy. My New Jersey business associate and friend, Chris Galli, with whom I had done much crisis planning after the 9/11 disaster and spent subsequent months training and counseling victims and their families, encouraged me to place my other commitments on hold so I could travel to the far side of the world to offer my services in Emergency Training and Stress Recovery. I knew that recovery would be a massive and exhaustive job, and, fortunately, what I had to offer would be extremely valuable to rescue-workers and survivors alike.

I arrived by car, jet plane, boat, and finally, island taxi, over the winding dusty Thai roads, all the way to a scene of unprecedented devastation. There I was, smack dab in the middle of the most chaotic disaster zone I had ever encountered. Unlike 9/11, there were no borders to this devastation; it stretched in every direction and as far as my eyes could see. There was the 70-foot fishing boat lodged between two houses, the hotel chandeliers of a 25-foot

ceilinged lobby now awash with seaweed, and miles upon miles of stuff - everything from clothing to beached, decaying sea life. Then there was, worst of all, the human carnage; it was unprecedented - unlike I, or most who were assisting, for that matter, had ever seen.

You can imagine my shock, then, when a Red Cross worker told me that Thailand was doing fine and was in no need of assistance. I asked a second time to make sure that we weren't just having a language problem and that I'd heard him correctly. Perhaps his words to me were lost in translation. Again, he affirmed that no assistance was needed.

I could only assume by his response that he was in as much shock as the rest of the survivors on this wave-ravaged coast. Flying halfway around the world only to be told that things were "okay" after the worst natural disaster in modern history simply confirmed the need for my work. I knew that this man's response, indeed, was a typical *stress response* - for the purposes of reassuring ourselves during difficult times. I became even more inspired to apply my unique background experience and skills in stress recovery to help the Thai people.

For the next three weeks, I would be working in temperatures approaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the middle of Wat Yan Yao temple, which had been converted to a makeshift mortuary. There, several *thousand* bodies awaited identification and transportation to their grieving families around the world. Just stop and think about this for a moment...*several thousand*.

There, I would be helping the disaster victims, as well as the relief operations personnel dealing with the event, learn how to process this enormous stress effectively, but also how to manage the very deep and, at times, paralyzing sorrow and grief that inevitably comes with these situations.

Cracking the Stress Code: Eliminate Harmful Stress and Achieve Life Mastery in 4 Simple Steps is now my fourth book on stress. It is the culmination of more than twenty years of work with people of all ages, economic groups, and nationalities, with one common aspect and one wildcard aspect. *Life stress* is what we all have in common; however, some of us have more than others, depending on circumstances, either in our control or not, as the Asian tsunami illustrates. The wildcard factor, what I call the "*human*

factor," amounts to a person's ability (either learned or intrinsic) to not only navigate life stress, but also to gain mastery of it.

What does it mean to have *mastery* over something? Mastery essentially requires two things: *to know and understand* something inside and out, and *to have proficiency* with this knowledge through practice and experience. What I aim to accomplish in this book is to give you insight into both - knowledge about stress, in general, but also specific knowledge of how stress affects *you*. I will also be giving you tools, tips, and exercises that, when *practiced* consistently, will help you build proficiency and improve and even transform your relationship to stress and to life-challenges, in general.

The potential human responses in the face of stress, including the widespread loss and devastation that accompany natural disasters, are many; they run from states of hysteria to catatonia. Sometimes there are warnings, but other times there are meltdowns, which often result from a combination of the physical stress involved in recovery efforts in combination with the overwhelming sorrow and grief inherent to witnessing vast amounts of pain and suffering in fellow human beings.

Chronic stress has been implicated - either as a cause of or for worsening symptoms - in high blood pressure and coronary heart disease, as well as autoimmune disorders, such as chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia. It is also a factor in diseases such as diabetes, obesity, anxiety and depression, gastrointestinal problems, asthma, migraines, and Alzheimer's disease.

While natural disasters are some of the most trying for humans to process, changing social and political environments cause stress, as do ordinary events over the course of a lifetime - marrying, having and raising a child, meeting deadlines, moving to a new home, and changing careers, to name a few. Even though these are not necessarily crises, they require the exact same skill set and methods for handling stress. In both cases, but in particular the former, support from trained professionals shortens our stress recovery time and paves the way for much better outcomes.

One thing is certain to me after all my years in the field: *Humans are far more capable of handling stress than we think we are*; we are very resilient. Let me explain....

From the very beginning of time, stress has been a part of human existence. We are designed to handle stress: Not only are we genetically programmed for it, we **actually cannot survive without it!** When I tell people this, I often see a look of confusion – if not shock – on their faces. “Huh?” you ask. “I thought stress was something that was ‘bad,’ that I needed to get rid of or, worse yet, manage?” Like you need something else to do! (It is no wonder that “stress management” gets a bad rap.)

No! Stress is NOT something that you could get rid of, *even if you wanted to*; it’s built into the reality of human existence. Think about the cycle of life: We are born (creation), we grow (and create even more) – families, careers, friendships, enterprises, even diseases, etc.), then we decline, and eventually die. Then, there is humanity’s constant striving for a *better* existence; this causes us to create all sorts of new inventions, like cellphones, computers, new medicines, and other technologies. While all of these things can enhance quality of life and solve problems, they also bring complexity and, yes, stress. In fact, invention is motivated by *stress*. There is the stress of having to walk miles for water; the stress of being cold in the winter because there is no heating; the stress of illness due to food spoilage because there is no refrigeration; the stress of having a tooth extracted without Novocain; or, the stress of having a child in your own home with no medical assistance, because there is no hospital or birthing center nearby. So, stress is *far* from something to be thought of as “bad.” It has been and continues to be the catalyst for better living, and it is an integral part of our creative lives. If you have any doubt about this, ask your mother!

We all know that, as times change, so do the situations that cause stress. Our past ancestors were worried about being chased down and eaten by a tiger. With all our modern inventions, it is highly unlikely that we will be eaten by a tiger. However, today, we have different types of “tigers” to reckon with: work stress, financial hardship, addiction, pollution, obesity, and other health challenges like heart disease and cancer, to name a few. This is a fact of life on planet Earth: Conditions change, but stress is always there.

Today, technology is creating a new stressor that most of us are still trying to understand, let alone navigate. One of the key reasons

I chose to write this book at this time is to promote awareness of this new stressor that I call *Technostress* and to assist people in navigating the overload related to this growing factor. As with any stressful situation, it is critical to first understand what is causing the problem. In this case, our unregulated use of and attachment - *if not addiction* - to technology is on the table.

We will explore the extent of our electronic appetite, the associated stress and health risks, and specific actions that you can begin taking to reduce and regulate your stress related to it. Just like food, we now must learn how to self-regulate technology; if not, a new disease - a type of electronic "obesity" - will continue to threaten us and worsen with time. "Electronic obesity?" you ask. Here's just one example: I recently saw a mother standing while feeding dinner to her ten-year-old son as he was glued to a computer game. She said it's the only way to make sure that he eats in the evening.

Technology generally causes a numbing of the senses - glazed-over eyes or eye stress, frequent headaches, chronic backache, poor attention span, and a loss of interest in engaging with nature or being active. Don't get me wrong, I love my technology and use it daily just like everyone else, but I use technology rather than allowing technology to use me. Often, I hear stories of how individuals are stressing out and even burning out with few logical solutions in place; we will aim to fix that here. In reality, people have become so tethered to technology that they are more focused on their machines than on themselves or other human beings.

We are all tethered to our mobile devices; it's like having a chip embedded in our bodies similar to another bodily organ. Wait, don't laugh - mobile technology, called *nanotechnology*, is quickly coming our way. Nanotechnology allows for large amounts of computing capacity and data on a chip the size of a pinhead. Many pets already have GPS devices implanted, for retrieval and convenience. Can you imagine thinking about making a phone call or sending a text or email and the Bluetooth chip (embedded in your body) transmits your thoughts at will? With enough mobile circuitry network connections, the mind could entertain a thought, and the electronic action would obey, much like the

neurotransmitter signal sent from your brain to your eyes that allows you to read this page.

One thing is for sure, technological developments are occurring at warp speed, and we are likely not going back to the quiet and secluded days of the past. Ironically, just the very thought of *that* may cause stress for some of you.

There is no doubt that technostress is a recent and new field of study; but the facts that I will share with you in that section of the book are alarming, and little is being done to bring awareness to this rapidly growing problem. While not the primary subject of this book, and for the sake of this conversation, suffice it to say that technostress may very well become a leading health risk. I hear countless anecdotal stories of technology overload affecting people's mind/body balance. So, dealing with technostress is essential for life mastery.

I consider awareness an aspect of self-care, which is the antidote to our current stress-related healthcare crisis. I mean, if we take better care of ourselves, including how technology affects us, we would need less medical treatment and fewer prescriptions to treat the symptoms of these diseases. Instead, we would be treating the cause of the *diseases*, including stress.

I hope that you can now see how stress is an inherent part of being human in our ever-changing world. I've spent my career educating people about the realities of stress and teaching them how to *build a better relationship with it*. This is why I'm telling you that it's fruitless – and a HUGE waste of time and energy – to spend effort to *reduce* or *try to get rid of* stress.

The first step in cracking the stress code is to realize that you've been playing the wrong game when it comes to stress. Trying to *get rid of* something that is impossible to eliminate is frustrating at best, disabling at worst; it's like adding fuel to a fire. Instead, we need to learn how to see the value of stress and use it to our advantage. In truth, we have been at war with stress for decades now, and this has to stop if we desire real change in relation to life stress and the diseases that it causes.

And, we don't stop here. Not only are we going to stop trying to get rid of stress, we are going to make a choice to learn to see stress

as GOOD. Yes, you heard me correctly. As you will see, perceiving stress as *good* is essential for living younger longer, which is the direct, and most desired result, of cracking the stress code.

By now, some of you must really be thinking that I'm off my rocker, and saying, even if silently, "First, you tell me that stress is natural and it is not going away, that I am programmed for handling stress, and that I need to see it as good? That's crazy!" You might even say, "I'm not sure that I can do all this."

Well, guess what? Here's the thing that I know from working closely with people from all walks of life over the years: Not only are you wired to handle stress, but you are also wired for *success*. This means that it will only take a small adjustment over a mere *thirty days* to break through and begin living a happier and more contented life.

I hope this comes as good news.

There were a number of reasons I chose to write this book at this time. *Cracking the Stress Code: Eliminate Harmful Stress and Achieve Life Mastery in 4 Simple Steps* came about because of my desire to share the secrets of mastering stress. I have proven time and again that what I just told you above is true: Humans are actually *wired* for success. With dedication and proper support, which you will get in this book, it *is* possible for you to finally have the success that you want in life, and perhaps have been craving for some time.

As I counsel, 75% of our longevity is determined by lifestyle choices, including exercise, movement, eating habits, how we love, receive love, and our overall life-discovery fulfillment. Most of us know what to do within reason to be healthy, but the overwhelming majority of us simply *don't do* what we know we should do.

This is why life balance is such an important discussion for those interested in *cracking the stress code*. As much as it is in our DNA to handle stress well, homeostasis or equilibrium is also firmly rooted in our genes. As organisms on this planet, we are continuously adapting to the external environment and establishing new levels of "normal," which in terms of human development, I often jokingly call "some kind of strange." Nevertheless, the point is, if we overdo technology, or something else, and lose sight of life balance, we will have fallout in some other area of life; it is inevitable.

In part, the idea for this book and title came to me and my publisher and his team after reflecting upon the chronic nature of our *maladaptation* to stress. If that weren't bad enough, we are now - thanks to the rapidly growing technological age - being forced to adapt to an entirely *new* level of proficiency when we haven't even mastered the previous. It's like a double whammy of stress. So, this message is not only timely, it is urgent.

While this might sound scary at first, in fact, this has been happening throughout the entire history of humanity - particularly during times of great leaps in learning. For example, the industrial age of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created a tremendous shift away from agricultural work into manufacturing. While the birth of this new age came with extraordinary stress and pain, the leap forward in terms of the quality of life for humans was remarkable. So, I would call this *good* stress, which essentially means that we seized an opportunity to create positive change out of stressful situations.

These shifts are not without fallout, however. Today, we are facing serious issues as a result of the industrial age: pollution, global warming, food shortages due to drought, natural disasters, and severe human and animal rights violations. Further, we are experiencing and/or witnessing new levels of stress related to increasing economic pressures in the form of insolvency, job loss, escalating costs of living, stagnant salaries, and a lack of affordable housing. All of these challenges, and more, are presenting themselves as opportunities in our new technological age to continue to put stress to work for positive change.

The final reason that we chose this title for the book is that we wanted to convey one additional crucial piece, and that is that you can *permanently* improve your relationship to stress. And, you can do it to the point of wondering why you ever thought of stress the way you did in the first place!

Studies abound today about the effect of thoughts and beliefs on physical and emotional health. As you will learn, it is possible to change neuro-pathways in your brain, essentially creating new "wiring" that becomes the default wiring, causing old thought patterns or behavioral patterns to die out. This is an essential

aspect of cracking your personal stress code. If you think about this, some people are already doing this, for example, when they quit smoking, or stop gambling. For some, once an addiction is handled completely – meaning new behaviors are practiced – there is no desire to return to old ways.

The purpose of this book, therefore, is to help you make a *permanent shift* in your relationship with stress, so that you can realize new levels of personal health – *physically, mentally, spiritually,* and *emotionally*. As this occurs, rather than showing up as a burden, stress becomes the fuel for creating the no-holds-barred life that most people only dream about. Sound impossible? It's not: I'm already seeing it happen in my work with all the people I work with, not just elite athletes and high-ranking corporate executives.

People who have cracked the stress code don't necessarily have less stress than the rest of us; they just see stress differently. They are fully engaged with whatever situation comes up in life, and addressing these situations with openness and focused attention to the best of their ability. They act and feel alive! So, in this book, we are going to explore exactly what practices you will need to adopt in order to create this transition – once and for all – and how to be actively creating your “better” life now.

The reason why stress is literally “killing us” is because we haven't yet made the evolutionary leap to not see stress as a problem, and to learn how to use it as a catalyst for the life that we want to create. But I am going to help you change this. Every day, I see more and more people graduating from a “life” of struggle, where they are preoccupied by stresses and working hard to eliminate them, to a life where they are fully engaged and participating – *for the first time in their life*. You see, when we don't view stress as a problem and something that we need to get rid of, we don't have resistance to what is happening. Without resistance, we have curiosity, and feel excitement about whatever life brings. Then, we just handle life's speed bumps, with greater ease and more enjoyment.

Isn't it refreshing to know that there is a happier, more fulfilling life, and that it is within your reach? As you progress through the pages of this book, you will soon discover that anything is possible *with* and *because of* stress, including the life of your dreams. In the

first two sections of the book, Part I and Part II, we take a look at the nature of stress, with the intent to reshape our ideas of it to match the realities of life as a human being. Within these early chapters, we take a look at what stress is and why it benefits us to improve our relationship to it. I also share with you some basic tools that you can begin practicing right away to start effecting some positive changes in how you are living, day to day. I know this will sound humorous, but we are also going to explore the stress related to *being* human. Yes, the mere fact that we exist, that we must provide for our own survival, and that we must learn how to co-exist with others in order to survive and thrive brings stress. In these sections, you have the opportunity to discover various aspects of your personal (human) development that cause stress and that may affect your ability to achieve mastery in life. This is where you get insight into your own personal stress code, and what will be required to crack it. As we begin to understand how to work with these aspects, we position ourselves for greater success in all that we do.

In Part III, I am going to help you find your thrive and learn how to perform well in life under stress, which is a constant companion for most of us. I will teach you how to overcome resistance to stress and to the self-defeating practices that keep us stuck and locked in negative cycles. Since each of us has a different stress code, in this section you will gain information and insight into integrating stress into your life in ways that will allow you to move from survive to thrive. You will also learn valuable tools and practices that, when implemented, make it easier for cracking the stress code on an ongoing basis. Throughout the book, I will share new discoveries and practices for relating to stress, including stories and anecdotes from my own and my clients' experiences.

Lastly, in Part IV, we will take a look at some of the critical roles we assume in life and how to navigate some of the stresses associated with these. Stress is present in every area of life; so, mastering your personal stress code results in improvements across the board – whether occupational, personal, or relational. In this section, I share stories related to my own experience and successes, but also narratives from a few of the thousands of people with whom I've had a chance to journey with over the years.

One thing is for sure: Cracking the stress code is doable. As I tell everyone I coach and train, this work is not just for the few who have stressful professions, it is, rather, for *each one of us* - that is, anyone who endeavors to actually *live* life. The other option, which must be less desirable to you, since you are here reading this right now, is to wither or give in to the strain of life pressures. This response typically leads to various forms of "managing" life stress, which essentially means "managing" life *downward* toward a more comfortable position, even if less desirable. I call this survival. This is *not* cracking the stress code, and it will not get you what you came here for.

Twentieth-century writer William Arthur Ward said, "The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails." *Cracking The Stress Code* is a book about life as a realist; I am simply going to show you how to adjust your sails. If you take the time to understand the tools and lessons contained within this book, and practice them *because* your dreams and your life matter, you will not only achieve greater peace and harmony, but will have the rich and fulfilling life that you desire.