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# A Survival Guide For Our Return To America's Dangerous Stress Obsession

It's late April and spring is blooming across America. Not just the season of spring - the spring of us emerging from the pandemic. The world is starting to open up again slowly but surely. But as we prepare to enter this new world, we can expect for our stress levels and emotions to fluctuate widely. April is Stress Awareness Month and there has never been a more fitting time for us to examine what stress is, how it presents in our lives and culture, its problematic impacts, and some ways to proactively prepare for it and respond to it so we recognize the symptoms of burnout and address them sooner.



The COVID-19 pandemic has been a collective trauma for all of us, especially healthcare workers and BIPOC that have consistently been hit hard by the virus and subject to disparities in treatment

and vaccination access. But for many of us, it might've also provided some reprieve from America's beloved toxic Hustle Culture. There has been a temporary greater collective understanding and empathy towards each other as we all worked to survive the pandemic. Even our workplaces took stress off by keeping work from home measures or being flexible with deadlines. But as the world opens up again and many people go back to the office, find new work, or just begin to exist again as a post-pandemic human being, we can expect to see that temporary grace disappear and for our collective stress to return in full force.

Stress is not always bad. There are two main kinds of stress. Healthy stress, or eustress, adds to the quality of our lives. Good stress is what you can experience when embarking on something new or working through a big project - promotions, marriage, buying a home, or engaging in a new challenge. [These types of stress exist just outside of our main comfort zone.](#) We're able to stretch ourselves a little past our limits and can still pretty easily return to our comfort base - just like you might train your muscles by doing a new workout class a few times a week. You may be sore, but that soreness passes quickly and does not injure you, rather helps build you up.

Unhealthy stress, on the other hand, is the result of acutely intense or continuous stressors that lessen the quality of life. If good stress exists just outside of and around our comfort zone, unhealthy stress exists in yet another circle after that. This is not a healthy or productive zone. In this tumultuous sector, we often feel emotions and difficulties to extremes - feeling extremely heightened and amped, or extremely depleted and panicked.



America's obsession and exaltation of "hustle culture" encourages unhealthy stress and legitimizes it as a status symbol. People brag about working 60 hour work-weeks or not sleeping for days. It's seen as a desirable life. We equate unhealthy stress with traits like leadership, motivation, and hard work - even though those things can and should exist in our zones of good stress instead. We tell people that they have to "stay on the grind," that they'll miss out if they stop working. Self-regulation in a sea of a culture that praises

such unhealthy stress is often read as dangerous or outright weak. Not only does our obsession with “hustle culture” widely impact people of all backgrounds, it particularly impacts BIPOC and Black women specifically. Though we all experience stress and the pull of that “hustle culture,” Black women have the “invisible stressors” of systemic racism and misogynoir to shoulder at the getgo. “Invisible stressors” can also show up in the lives of other marginalized communities – disabled people have invisible stressors, people suffering from poverty have invisible stressors.

But Black people, especially Black women, are not given outlets to identify, name, or find resources to deal with their invisible stressors. That leads to many of us existing permanently past our limits of tolerance without even realizing it. You can take the Black Women’s Health Imperative’s [Stress Test](#) to see just how much stress is running on autopilot. How could Black people not be stressed when we are constantly worried that we’re going to be killed driving to the grocery store in our cars or sleeping in our own beds? It is dangerous to be alive in America – and if systemic racism does not kill us, its toxic offspring of unhealthy stress certainly can.

What happens as a result of this unhealthy stress? Our bodies and minds take the hit. Unhealthy stress floods our systems with cortisol – a steroid stress hormone in our bodies that normally functions as a temporary adrenaline boost but can stay activated indefinitely when you’re under unhealthy stress. With this hormone flooding your system, your physical and mental health suffers incredibly badly. It forces your body to stay in fight-or-flight survival mode. Cortisol is associated with anxiety, depression, heart disease, blood pressure issues, and insomnia. We already know that over 85% of Black women have sought out medical treatment to address high blood pressure. [Cortisol stops our body from protecting our DNA from stress-related damage](#), leading to higher rates of cancer and diabetes. I believe that this silent epidemic of stress is the number one killer of Black people in America if we are willing to be honest with ourselves.

In addition to the physical impacts of unhealthy stress, *burnout* is often one of the most common consequences. We become so exhausted of situations that produce unhealthy stress that we entirely deplete our ability to engage with them. Burnout causes increases in absenteeism and job dissatisfaction, decreased productivity, and lowered morale across the board. These things are very much tied with cortisol’s impacts – anxiety, depression, insomnia – and unhealthy coping mechanisms like self-

medication or feelings of imposter syndrome. In people who are burned out, we commonly see family issues, relationships challenges, and even spiritual depletion.

Like a boat adrift at sea, the further into the zone of unhealthy stress that you are, the harder it can be to come back to shore from it. People want to know how to cope with this unhealthy stress. While I think that coping is an important part of our response to unhealthy stress, it isn't the gold-standard. It implies we're only reacting to unhealthy stress instead of proactively preparing ourselves for it. Coping skills like [distress tolerance](#) ideas, stress relieving teas, exercise, and therapy or coaching, are important ways for us to reach people who are in the midst of toxic stress, but we should be building reserves to draw on in the first place - a spare motor for our boats.

Even if you're not feeling stressed in the moment, you should be practicing self-regulation and stress reduction in your daily life. It helps cultivate a reserve to back you up when you *do* get stressed - like when you've been working back in the office for two months and are starting to get burned out. To build our reserves, we can:

1. **Build support networks in our lives to focus on community & accountability.** Find friends and family that you can collaboratively vent to and brainstorm supportive ideas with. See a therapist or a coach regularly. By building these networks, you center community and accountability, which will help keep you in check during times of stress.
2. **Take care of your body.** Set yourself up for success by doing yoga and meditation, especially **restorative yoga**. Drink *lots* of water. Take vitamin D supplements and make sure that you're getting outside for fresh air and exercise. Make sure that you're well-rested, even if that means taking naps.
3. **Find healthy ways to lift yourself out of stress.** Stress-relieving teas, baths, and weighted blankets are all fantastic ideas. You should regularly get in the practice of imagining a safe place for yourself to mentally retreat to. Imagine a place that is life-giving for you and let your senses envision the sounds, smells, and feelings of that place to ground yourself.

As this world prepares to enter the post-pandemic phase we've all been waiting for, the ways that we experience stress are going to fluctuate and change. People will try to pull you back to the burnout of hustle culture. You have survived this entire past year, so

boldly and courageously remind yourself that it is your earned right to protect your body and your mind from being undone by unhealthy stress.

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