



# DON'T BE A SUPERHERO: RECOGNISING STRESS AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

## KEY POINTS

- **'Change'** is among the top underlying reasons for stress in the workplace, along with workload pressure, interpersonal relationships and changes at work, and managerial support.
- Early signs of stress are often overlooked: The **'Stress-APGAR'** concept outlines five dimensions of early signs of stress.
- **Manage your energy, not your time.**



Change is the 'new normal'. As an air traffic controller or a senior executive, we all face stress and need to find ways of handling stress and building resilience. **Thomas Hellwig**, Professor of leadership at the INSEAD Business School and a medical doctor, shares some of his research findings and reflects on a high-profile business case.

António Horta-Osório is one of those 'magicians' working in the financial district known as 'The City of London', an environment full of strong personalities working constantly under high stress. After his education in a top school and an impressive career at Bank Santander, he became the CEO of Lloyd's Bank. He had an impressive track record: Whatever he touched on his way to the top, he turned into a success story. If you want someone in the cockpit of your organisation, it should probably be someone with a track record like him.

However, in the midst of the financial crisis, pressure was mounting. He ignored this for a long time. His doctors finally diagnosed extreme fatigue and stress due to overload at work. One billion pounds of shareholder value was wiped off the books overnight when he had to stop working in November 2011. The unthinkable happened even to this overachiever. The untouchable became a victim of one of the biggest challenges of the modern world of work: extreme stress and burnout.

Employees at all levels in organisations often feel overloaded and out of control. In this article I focus on two areas:

- How to recognise early signs of stress in ourselves and others.
- How to build resilience, an antidote stress.

## Stress

When analysing this high-profile business case, certain dynamics can be seen in many stressful professions such as doctors, teachers, emergency services, as well as air traffic controllers and professional pilots: pressure, change, relationships and management support are key. These factors are common to large scale surveys (e.g., the UK Labour Force Survey) and studies involving general practitioner doctors (see Health and Safety Executive, 2018).

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From a neuroscience point of view, change can trigger in us the same kind of fight-or-flight reaction as physical pain. So we should question whether all change initiatives are really necessary within organisations, including changes to working patterns.

In the leadership centre at INSEAD, one of the top-ranked business schools in the world, we have investigated and interviewed many people in different industries and at different hierarchical levels. We also tested our initial findings with experienced executive coaches.

It appears that there are often similar patterns of early signs of stress that we tend to overlook.

After an in-depth analysis we have identified the following five dimensions which we regrouped and published as 'Stress-APGAR'. Stress-APGAR is based on the original APGAR, as used in neonatal medicine to assess the vital symptoms of new-born babies. We have adapted the APGAR concept to stress research. The following five dimensions help to identify early signs of stress:

- 1. Appearance:** Any form of physical appearance of stress, such as sleep deprivation, extreme weight loss/gain, chronic pain, etc.
- 2. Performance:** A drop in performance can be a sign of stress.
- 3. Growth:** When we strive to achieve and grow, we can handle more challenge. But the opposite is also true: when employees stagnate and stop growing, this could be a sign of overload and stress.
- 4. Affect control:** Psychologists have recognised for a long time that stress is often related to a loss of control over one's emotions, both in professional and private contexts.
- 5. Relationships:** Stress can be associated with a decrease in the quality of relationships in the workplace. Before going into chronic stress – or burnout – we often observe some form of social isolation.

Although there might be other symptoms to diagnose stress, we recommend managers in certain at-risk professions to look out for these five dimensions in the work context in order to pick-up early signs of stress in the workplace.

## Resilience

It is essential to counteract stress, especially in professions like air traffic control and piloting. One important way is to design out sources of inappropriate stress and manage organisations so that stress is not excessive. This is the duty of the organisation and mostly under management control. Another way is by building resilience in individuals and teams. This needs management support, but is also in control of staff. Over the recent years, a simple framework has gained huge popularity focusing on energy: *manage your energy, not your time* (see Schwartz and McCarthy, 2007). Whereas many

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According to this framework, we have four resources of energy available to us:

- IQ (mental)
- EQ (emotional)
- PhQ (physical)
- SpQ (spiritual).

We all have our preference within these four elements, but a balance in the four dimensions is helpful for surviving and thriving in high-stress professions. From our experience in INSEAD, the mental and physical dimension are often the unique focus when under stress, while the emotional and spiritual dimensions are often overlooked.

So here are two simple pieces of advice for high-stress professions to build your resilience and your energy. Focus on your sleeping pattern and start to practice relaxation. Even 10 minutes of relaxation (e.g., mindfulness meditation) three times a week could


change your brain structurally and functionally after only 8 weeks. If this were a drug, we would call it a 'blockbuster'.

## It's good to talk

The trouble with high-stress professionals is that, often, they don't talk about stress. But it is increasingly recognised that talking is not only a good thing, it is essential. António Horta-Osório, recently wrote an article in *The Guardian* newspaper entitled, "It's time to end the workplace taboo around mental health". He acknowledged "*fundamental changes to our working lives during the past decade – flexible working, the end of the nine-to-five working day, an 'always on' culture and the rapid evolution of technology.*"

António has written openly about his

personal experience and mentions the need for a new mindset that recognises that we all have mental health just as we all have physical health. We can experience physical and mental ill-health and need treatment and support for both. He admitted that, "*I thought I was Superman. I felt I could do everything.*" He was not used to asking for advice or showing emotion. But in the end, he learned: "*I was not Superman. And I became a better person, more patient, more understanding and more considerate. It was humbling but you learn.*"

António is still the CEO of Lloyds, where he helps to spread good practice to try to ensure that employees don't have to learn the hard way. Here are perhaps three key lessons to learn from his case for all of us: Firstly, we need to break the taboo around stress and talk about it not naively, but openly. Secondly, the risk of extreme stress and burnout is shared by all professionals, even – or especially – those that seem 'superhuman'. Thirdly, we can make it to full recovery, and help others to do the same. 



"Now remember, you're not Superman."  
 "Superman? Pah! I'm an Air Traffic Controller!"

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Dr Thomas Hellwig works as a professor, programme director and coach for INSEAD in the field of organisational behaviour. He is a trained medical doctor with 20 years of experience (emergency, cardiology, and cancer medicine) in hospitals in three European countries. He has a doctorate in psychotherapy and an MBA from INSEAD. His special interests are in the areas of executive teams, leading change, organisational culture, and health and stress.

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