

Putting Heart and Humor to Work: *Transforming the Way You Think, Work, and Live*

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Time magazine's cover story for June 6, 1983 claimed stress is the "epidemic of the eighties." By 1992, the United Nations warned that stress is a world-wide epidemic. Since then, the picture has continued to worsen at an increasing rate. For many of us, the stress level has hit the ceiling. Unfortunately for too many, it even seems to be finding higher ground.

When our nervous system detects a dangerous threat, its instinctual response to that stress beckons us to fight or flight. Without that instinct, our ancestors would not have survived the sabertooth tiger. Today, however, the dangerous threat that confronts us is not the isolated encounter as our ancestors had with that tiger. Today, the dangerous threat is the incessant and relentless encounter with the anxieties, worries, and fears that occupy our minds. These contemporary "tigers" can include everything from worries about deadlines and work overload, to fear of rejection or failure.

Though these mental tigers may seem innocuous enough, the nervous system responds to them in the same way as it would to a real tiger. Hormones and chemicals shoot into our bloodstream, preparing us to react quickly and powerfully to the imagined threat. When we fight or run from a real tiger, these chemicals are burnt off by the muscles we use. However, rarely is fight or flight an appropriate response to the stress we face in our offices (obviously, such behavior—especially fighting—could get us in more trouble). So, instead of burning off the powerful hormones and chemicals streaming in our body, we end up getting burned by them. They can literally destroy our heart, arteries, and brain cells.

True, some of the stress and pressures we experience at work might have us running, but it's a different kind of running. It's the running of a rat race, and in Lily Tomlin's words, "Even if we win the rat race, we are still a rat!" This running usually gets us nowhere, it also usually gets us sick.

So what *can* we do? A clue comes from the psychotherapist Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the holocaust during WW II and author of [Man's Search for Meaning](#): "When we are no longer able to change a situation—we are challenged to change ourselves." When we take up that challenge, we can win the most important race: the human race. We become more human, meaning that we develop the best qualities that a human being can have, such as being creative, compassionate, cooperative, resilient, persevering, and having a good sense of humor. In contrast, when we are under extreme stress, our best qualities are stifled. (For example, we can become irritable and bitter, losing hope and isolating ourselves from others.)

How can we change ourselves? We can make two significant changes to how we think and approach life. First, instead of getting bitter and losing heart, we can get better and put more heart into our work. This does not entail putting more time into work. In fact, studies show that when we put our heart into our work, we get more done in less time. We also improve the quality of our work—the quality of what we produce, the quality of our relationships, and the quality of our health. (Regarding the latter, our health deteriorates when we lose heart. When we are fully engaged with a sense of purpose and intense motivation, we muster tremendous strength and stamina, and our immune systems become stronger.)

The second significant change we can make is to put more humor and fun to work. A sense of humor is a creative way of seeing, thinking, feeling, and responding that brings delight, insight, inspiration, release, and a fresh perspective. It can help us find greater harmony with ourselves, with others, and with the world around us. Laughter works faster than valium or vodka. It does not numb or damage our brain cells: it enhances the brain's function and improves our health. Fun and play? Contrary to conventional wisdom, fun and play do mix with work. As Dale Carnegie claimed, "People rarely succeed unless they are having fun at what they are doing."

Bringing more heart, humor, and fun to work will transform us, increasing our productivity, and improving our relationships and workplace. Plus, we will be more energized. Instead of returning home exhausted at the end of a hard day, we can return home with energy to spare!