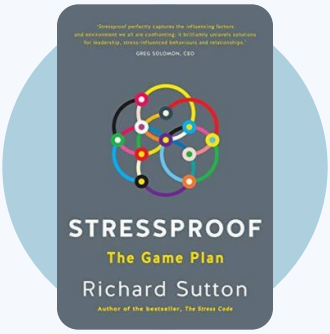


BOOK

Stressproof

The Game Plan

Richard Sutton | Pan Macmillan © 2021 | 304 pages

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getAbstract Rating

★ 8 | Analytical | Scientific | Applicable

What You Will Learn

- How stress evolved as a survival tool but now threatens health when chronic.
- Why chronic stress undermines productivity, innovation, and workplace well-being.
- How rapid change, job insecurity, and the gig economy fuel widespread stress.
- How leaders can assess, reduce, and manage stress to foster healthy organizations.

Supported Skills

Manage Stress | Support Employees' Well-being | Leadership | Improve Your Mental Health

About the Author

Richard Sutton is a health and performance educator and consultant. He has lectured at a postgraduate level in the areas of pain management, health and athletic development, and consults to leading companies on stress resilience, employee engagement and productivity. He is the author of *The Stress Code: From Surviving to Thriving.*

Recommendation

People can realize their full potential only when they are mentally and physically healthy, and connect with others. Many people today suffer from chronic physical and mental illnesses, however, which negatively affects both their professional and personal lives. In this practical book, health and performance educator Richard Sutton identifies the barriers – particularly chronic stress – that keep people from thriving. He offers an action plan to help leaders create a work environment that supports employees' well-being.

Take-Aways

- Stress is an emotional response to challenging situations.
- Chronic stress can affect people's overall health.
- Chronic stress is a challenge in the workplace.
- Productivity is the key to growth and the future, but businesses are falling behind.
- Changes like market instability, high demands and job insecurities have negative health implications for employees.
- The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic changed people's relationship to work.
- Chronic stress is epidemic today.
- Leaders can bring about change and cultivate healthy employees.
- Leaders must assess the stressors employees face, and mitigate their effects.

Summary

Stress is an emotional response to challenging situations.

Human beings have always experienced stress. Stress essentially springs from fear: historically, fear of a predator; nowadays fear of an attack by a criminal, or fear of losing a loved one, your home, or your job.

> *"This biological shift known as the stress response offers us protection from every manner of threat and challenges we are confronted with today."*

Distressing circumstances affect your brain's amygdala, which sends a warning signal to the hypothalamus – the brain's command center. Your brain floods your body with adrenaline and places you on high alert. The stress response prepares you for immediate, emergency action. It directs resources to the brain, the heart and the muscles, and shuts down other bodily functions. Vision improves, sensations intensify and thinking accelerates. Acute stress can even lead to an increased pain threshold and an improved immune system.

In certain ways, therefore, people can benefit from a stress response. The natural response to stress is probably one of the reasons humans survived in the remote past, when they faced frequent threats from predators. In today's world, a small amount of short-term stress can help you reach your full potential, both physically and mentally. A professional sports player who feels nervous before a game is more likely to play well than one who feels nonchalant – and the same rule applies in business settings. However, when your body activates its stress response regularly or chronically, it can damage your physical and mental health.

Chronic stress can affect people's overall health.

People in the 21st century experience various kinds of stress, including financial stress, career stress and relationship stress. In a world shaped by inequality and injustice, many don't feel valued, and they worry about the uncertain future. This constant stress affects people's health and well-being.

> *"Placed into overdrive, the stress response can do a complete about-turn, and the system that once protected and helped us overcome the most hostile of circumstances can transform into a response that ultimately destroys us."*

People who experience chronic stress are prone to a variety of digestive problems, such as ulcers, food intolerances and irritable bowel syndrome. Chronic, sustained stress can also suppress the immune system, making people more vulnerable to disease.Suffering from chronic stress, or related conditions like PTSD, makes people prone to autoimmune disorders.

Chronic stress also affects the brain. Evidence suggests that chronic stress is responsible for a global uptick in psychiatric and brain disorders. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 25% of people worldwide will suffer from such a disorder over the course of their lives.

Chronic stress not only causes anxiety and depression, but also reduces the effectiveness of regions of the brain responsible for intellectual activity, self-control and motivation. Chronic stress can change parts of the brain's physical volume, structure, composition and function.

Chronic stress is a challenge in the workplace.

The way prolonged stress affects mental and physical health poses a problem for individuals and their personal lives. But the prevalence of chronic stress is also a great challenge for businesses and their leaders.

> *"If it is not held on a very tight leash, stress can turn out to be highly destructive, undermining the entire framework of the organization and its members."*

Chronic stress can damage a company when it leads to increased employee absenteeism. On the other hand, when stressed out employees do come to work, they're often in poor mental and physical shape.Moreover, extended stress can affect employees' relationships with one another, decrease their work engagement, and diminish creativity and innovation. Businesses can't afford to have employees buckle under the weight of stress.Therefore, leaders need to create work environments that help prevent stress from crushing employees.

Productivity is the key to growth and the future, but businesses are falling behind.

The world today is undergoing huge shifts on every level: New ways of working, socializing, doing business, learning and interacting are emerging and evolving at a breakneck pace. At the same time, constrained economic growth, diminished personal financial resources and rising poverty generate stress which can compromise people's physical and mental health – and even shorten life spans.

Productivity is the key to long-term, global economic growth, but worker productivity has been declining for decades.

> *"In theory, business growth should be well-served by the rapid advancements in technology and innovation. After all, technology can, and should, translate into greater organizational efficiencies, promoting growth opportunities and ultimately the creation of new wealth."*

Economists are puzzled that technological advances and innovation have failed to increase productivity.Many people today find it difficult to function without high-speed internet, their smartphone and social media platforms. They believe that immediate, global connectedness increases efficiency and thereby productivity, but it doesn't.

One reason technology can, in fact, hinder productivity, is that constant interruptions keep people from focusing on the main task they are performing. You can't suddenly shift gears and then return smoothly to the task you were doing. Thus, interruptions dramatically increase the likelihood of making errors while working. People also waste a lot of time checking social media, and their productivity drops accordingly.

Since productivity is lagging, companies that want to grow tend to put more pressure on individual employees. They create "high-performance" environments within their companies. Such an approach might work in the short run, but high-performance environments induce stress, which, ultimately, harms employees' mental and physical health.

When the author interviewed employees at one bank that prided itself on its high-pressure work environment, he found that more than 6% planned to resign, more than 70% felt burned out and 44% were suffering a mental health crisis. In the end, companies that want to increase their productivity and grow will have to do so through innovation, not by creating stress.

Changes like market instability, high demands and job insecurities have negative health implications for employees.

Work's future is uncertain. Jobs are unstable and insecure, and that means people are likely to work more and for less compensation. Under these circumstances, people's mental and physical health is at risk. They will be more prone to addiction and other self-destructive behaviors.

> *"Even jobs in the professional 'safe zone,' – i.e. a profession that has a low perceived risk of automation such as a role in communications, coordination, development, management, as well as reasoning and decision-making – are not entirely safe."*

According to a recent study, within the next few years, robots will perform close to half of all professional work. As a consequence, a significant portion of the world's workers will need upskilling. Many organizations are hesitant to spend their money on employee training, but if they don't, they risk losing their competitiveness, which threatens their survival.

One law firm dealt with the swift socioeconomic changes underway by becoming "people-centric": prioritizing diversity, inclusiveness and skill development, and making employee mental and physical health their core values. When the COVID-19 pandemic swept the country, the organization continued to invest in its people, and business continued to improve, despite the crisis. Another firm, of equal size and standing, focused on cost-cutting and restructuring: When it put more work in the hands of fewer people, it saw a sharp decline in revenue when the world entered lockdown.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic changed people's relationship to work.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Fourth Industrial Revolution have given businesses incentives to look for alternatives to full-time staff to fulfill operational needs. According to one study, in 2018 alone, digital work platforms involved around $126 billion around the world.The gig economy as a whole, that year, was worth $4.5 trillion worldwide.

> *"The human cloud is an emerging set of online/digital marketplaces where talent, and those looking to hire talent or services, can find and engage one another in a work arrangement."*

For workers, the gig economy provides a way of earning money that allows considerable personal flexibility. But the gig economy has downsides as well. Some people find it financially stressful and socially isolating. Moreover, it does not provide workers any economic protections or employer-sponsored opportunities for skill development.

Nowadays, many top universities – including Harvard – make online courses available for free, so upgrading your education doesn't have to be expensive. But not everyone will feel

driven to upskill of their own volition – and those facing chronic stress may lack the physical and emotional wherewithal to do so.

Chronic stress is epidemic today.

The WHO called stress the "health epidemic of the 21st century" – and that was before the pandemic. A study by the American Psychological Association determined that 77% of people suffering from chronic stress develop associated physical symptoms and 73% develop associated mental problems.

> *"Within the last decade, the spotlight has been placed on stress in the workplace due to the immense human cost and financial burden on the world economy."*

A wide array of debilitating mental and physical conditions have, effectively, become the new normal for many employees. Given their extended work hours and the demands they face, burnout is common. The WHO now classifies burnout as an illness that consists of weariness, reduced productivity, and a mental detachment from and negative attitude toward work.

Companies can address the effects of stress in four broad ways. First, the organization can acquire the knowledge necessary to address and help employees manage stress. Second, it can help reduce the effects of additional stressors. Third, leaders can encourage people to exhibit personal agency and responsibility over their lives. Finally, the company can cultivate a trusting relationship with its employees.

Leaders can bring about change and cultivate healthy employees.

Twenty-first-century leaders have more responsibilities than leaders of previous generations. While managers can maintain their existing systems and practices, leaders are the agents of change and transformation.

> *"With exponential change being the only certainty in life, the need for leadership is becoming increasingly more apparent within every business or institution."*

People want business leaders to address inequality and discrimination, for instance, and to promote diversity in the workplace. A company's internal inequalities, and the way it

deals with its employees, is a source of stress that affects productivity. Employees want their leaders to eliminate sexual harassment, and offer training that will provide job security in the future.Employees will expect the business leaders of the future to deal with health and environmental issues.

In these uncertain times, companies aren't going to promise job security. But education and skill development lessen job insecurity's negative emotional effects. Leaders can reduce employee stress by emphasizing skill training, making sure employees are invested participants in company decisions, and promoting justice and fairness in company policies and practices.

Leaders must assess the stressors employees face, and mitigate their effects.

Leaders need to address the effects of stress on employees.The first step is to assess the company's chief stress sources, its employees' overall health and resilience, and the effects of stress on the organization's overall performance. Leaders should play a key role in mitigating employee stress, and companies should provide caring, emotional support. Finally, the company needs to teach its people how to cope with stress when it arises.

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