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# Tiny stressors, major impact: how to keep ‘microstress’ from wrecking your health and happiness

BY BARBARA BRODY

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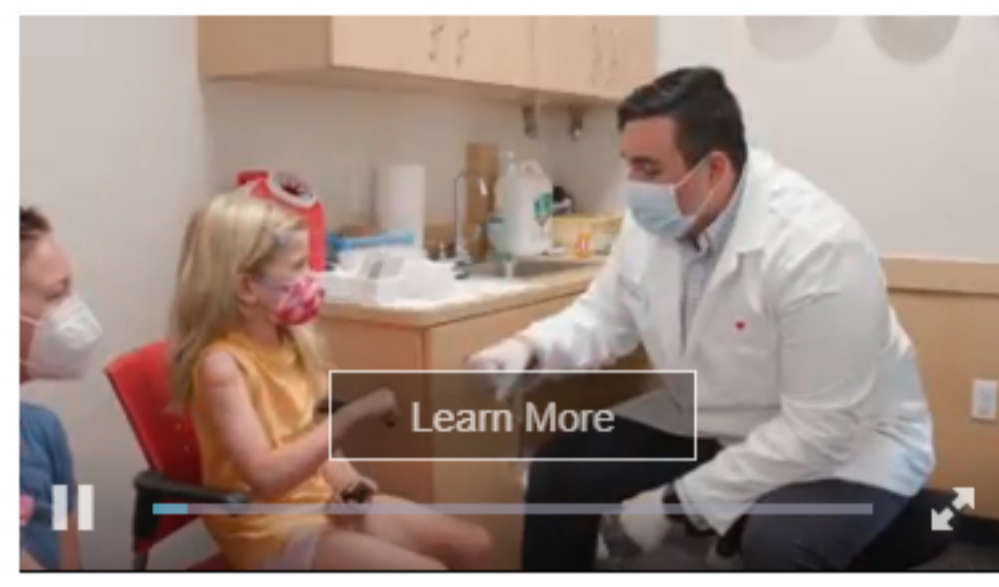


If you're experiencing dozens of microstressors per day, the cumulative impact can be catastrophic. GETTY IMAGES

If you're reeling after the death of a loved one, going through a messy divorce, or being treated for a serious illness, the fact that you're under a lot of stress will surprise absolutely no one. If, during such a time, you get frequent headaches or stomach aches, have trouble sleeping, or end up gaining or losing a lot of weight, the root cause will be pretty evident as well.

Yet many people who feel like they're under immense pressure aren't facing any big, obvious culprit. They might not even be able to pinpoint why they're so stressed, despite an unshakeable feeling that they're barely holding things together. What's going on?

In their new book, *The Microstress Effect*, Rob Cross and Karen Dillon argue that tiny aggravations can take a major toll on your mental and physical well-being. Such stressors are—by definition—micro, so they typically go unnoticed or are rapidly dismissed. But if you're experiencing dozens of microstressors per day, the cumulative impact can be catastrophic.



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“Imagine wind eroding on a mountain,” Joel Salinas, a behavioral neurologist and researcher at the New York University Grossman School of Medicine, explains in *The Microstress Effect*. “It’s not the same as a big TNT explosion that punches a hole in a mountain. But over time—if the wind never stops—it has the potential to slowly wear an entire mountain down to a nub.”

While microstress is pervasive and dangerous, it’s hardly insurmountable, say Cross and Dillon. *Fortune* spoke with Dillon to learn more about why microstress matters and how to fortify yourself against it.

*This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

## Fortune: What exactly is microstress, and why is it important?

**Karen Dillon:** Microstresses are tiny moments of stress that are caused by routine interactions with other people in your personal and professional life that are so routine you barely notice them. I think a good metaphor is a teacup that you keep adding a little more to. You add a little more, a little more, and it’s sort of holding on at the top—until you add one extra drop, and it spills over. That’s the effect of microstress.

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In researching our book, we spoke to neuroscientists and learned that because these moments are so fast and routine, they almost don’t imprint on the frontal lobe of your brain, so you don’t focus on them and you might not remember them later. Yet they still have the potential to cause physiological changes, such as increases in heart rate and respiration. You may get to the end of the day and be really fried, but you can’t pinpoint any one reason.

## Who is susceptible to microstress?

Everyone faces microstresses, but the idea for our book specifically stemmed from interviews Rob (Cross) had with high performers, who were identified as top achievers by their organizations. We ultimately spoke with hundreds of them, and we learned that a lot of these people were kind of hanging on by a thread, but it was almost never because a macro stressor had derailed them. Instead, it was the accumulation of these tiny little things that they didn’t even think about.

## Where does microstress come from?

Microstress, as we define it, is caused by people that you’re close to personally and professionally. It’s not that these are bad, toxic people; it’s just that you’re having so many interactions with them throughout the course of your day and that the relationship is of some importance to you.

The second you engage with your colleagues or your family, there’s the opportunity for microstress. It might start as soon as you wake up: You turn on your phone, and there’s an email somebody sent late last night asking you to do something, and you panic because you wish you had read the email and addressed the matter last night. Meanwhile, you’re hurrying to get out the door, and you have kids who are going to be late for school, so you exchange some curt words with them. Next, you’re at work, and you get a confusing note from your manager.

Nothing terrible has happened, but it’s all eating away at you. And by the end of the day, your cup is brimming with microstress. You might snap at someone—even those you respect and love—because you’ve been pushed over the edge. Or you feel so wiped that you can’t muster the energy to do something you would have otherwise enjoyed.

## You noted that most people don’t notice individual microstressors. Should they? And if so, how?

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In our book we discuss 14 different types of microstress, and we offer different suggestions for identifying and mitigating each kind. One thing you can try is being attentive to your inner voice. If you have an interaction with someone and you immediately have a bunch of questions that you don’t express, or you walk away feeling vaguely annoyed, that’s an indication that something’s not quite right.

In the workplace, one common source of microstress is misaligned priorities. In the old days, you would work with the same group of people for a long time, and you got to know them pretty well. Now, we’re apt to collaborate on many different projects and teams, which means you might not know or trust your colleagues fully. You don’t know yet how much you can rely on them, so you work kind of defensively.

One way to manage that lack of trust is by making an effort to improve communication. At a minimum, I’d recommend taking five minutes before a meeting ends to recap what was agreed and write it down on a white board or type it into an email that you send to everybody. Just being very clear—I’m going to do this by this date—can relieve some of the pressure.

## What about meditation, yoga, or other stress-relieving techniques? Do they combat microstress?

Those are good things, but they’re just making you stronger to deal with more and more. We identified a small sub-set of the high achievers we interviewed who we deemed the 10-percenters. These people had as much microstress in their life as any of the other high performers, but they seemed to manage better than the rest because they were able to rise above it; they had decided not to let certain things under their skin.

They were also really good at finding purpose and connection. Some carved out specific time for their interests and friendships; an older neurosurgeon told us he started playing in a rock band on weekends with 20-somethings. Others found purpose in the smallest of moments. One woman told us about standing in line at a drugstore during the height of the pandemic near an elderly man who didn’t know how to make a vaccine appointment online. She sat with him for 10 minutes and helped him make the appointment. Just taking a few minutes out of her day to connect with another human being in a kind and meaningful way had a big impact on her.

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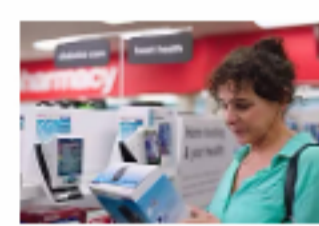
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