

*New York Times* bestselling author of *The Sharp Solution*

**HEIDI HANNA**

**5 STEPS TO TRANSFORM  
YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH STRESS**



# STRESSAHOLIC



**WILEY**



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*With deep gratitude to my family, friends, and clients who  
continue to inspire and encourage me on this journey.  
May we all commit to taking better care of ourselves each day  
so we can continue to give our best to one another.*



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## Foreword

**S***tressaholic* is the human owner's manual we have all been waiting for. As she did in her last book, *The SHARP Solution: A Brain-Based Approach for Optimal Performance*, Dr. Heidi Hanna has made it easy for us to understand and implement simple changes to our daily routine that will result in profound changes to our lives. We can all be so much healthier and happier if we take her advice.

There's no denying it: We are all stressed. We naturally crave novel information—but when is enough, enough? Most of us are inundated with more information in one day than someone would have been exposed to throughout their lifetime just a few centuries ago. We must work to evolve into being able to handle all the pressing needs that we face in modern times.

As a result, we tend to easily fall into lifestyle routines in which we experience the same symptoms as in any other addiction. We can avoid drugs, but overindulgence in food is an addiction that requires daily management. Likewise, stress is unavoidable in modern life. We don't all suffer from it; some of us handle it better than others, and some thrive on it. But as Dr. Hanna points out, unless we balance it with rest and repair breaks, we eventually succumb to symptoms and diseases caused by running on the energy we derive from our addiction to stress.

To recharge your phone, you need to plug it in. But to recharge your brain, you need to unplug it. Although this is not the first book to explain how to do so, it may provide the easiest path yet to a more rewarding and energetic life.

You might feel that Dr. Hanna is talking directly to you when reading *Stressaholic*. She identifies the reasons we are as stressed

and exhausted as we are. Yet she does not let those reasons become excuses for not taking the time to balance our brain with rest periods.

Dr. Hanna explains how all our biological processes, both body and mind, undergo natural oscillation. She discusses how some of us are stepping on our body's gas and brake pedals at the same time and what we can do about that. She warns us that we have to expend energy to create energy.

This book can save your life. It provides gentle reminders to make the right choices at mealtime; to start today, not tomorrow; and to exercise a little throughout the day. It explains why you are living off the wrong stimulants, both external and internal, and how you can recharge your energy in a positive and productive way.

Dr. Hanna does not let you get away with procrastination. She is compelling and knowledgeable about stress. Throughout the book, she offers pearls of wisdom culled from scientific studies and reliable facts derived from many sources. Her wisdom and advice are easy to understand and incorporate. Undertaking new life rituals can seem daunting, but Dr. Hanna makes them seem easy—because she explains why you need to change these things before she guides you on how to do just that. Her own fears and symptoms have taken her on a quest to learn more. How lucky for us she found the answers and is now, through *Stressaholic*, sharing them enthusiastically yet firmly with us so that we too can make the adjustments to create the life we desire and deserve.

All of us can benefit from this book. In addition to those who are addicted to the stress that is a regular part of work or home life, the five steps detailed herein can be a lifesaver for military service members and veterans—and should be required reading for all who wear this nation's uniforms. Our prolonged wars and the economic uncertainty that affects us all have made posttraumatic stress ubiquitous in America these days. You cannot be too stressed to benefit from this book. In fact, the more stressed you are, the more you need to make *Stressaholic* your personal owner's manual.

Take a deep breath now, turn the page, and begin your step-by-step guided journey to a new, more relaxed, and resilient you.

—Dr. Daniel L. Kirsch  
President, The American Institute of Stress



## Preface

# Monkey Business

It has been said that you don't need much to catch a monkey— simply a container, tied down to something secure, with a hole cut out just large enough for the monkey to slip its hand inside. Place a banana inside the container and wait patiently. When the monkey reaches in to grab the banana, he quickly realizes that he is stuck, because his banana-grasping fist no longer fits through the original hole. All he needs to do to free himself of the trap is let go of the banana. But monkeys cling to the prize and try to force their way out of the trap. They tire themselves out, making them even easier to catch.

Silly monkey, right? After all, the monkey didn't need to be stuck in that trap. But he didn't know better. We humans would never do something like that.

Or would we?

How many times do we cling to the notion that life should be enjoyed as we destroy our health with high-calorie processed food and a sedentary lifestyle? How much can we enjoy life when we are sick—or worse, dead?

How many times must we catch ourselves just before getting into a serious accident as we multitask while driving or even walking because we crave being constantly connected to what else might be going on in the world?

How many stress symptoms, illnesses, or injuries do we need to suffer through before we recognize that our obsession with perfectionism enslaves us to crave more—despite wearing ourselves out to the point of exhaustion?

Learning to let go and creating healthy balance are constant challenges that everyone faces. The good news is that it isn't impossible to find freedom from the traps of life's tests. We simply need to retrain our bodies and brains to be more aware of the severity of unmanaged stress. We do this by learning how to become more flexible with what life throws at us—specifically, by becoming more resilient to the ups and downs and establishing a work-life rhythm that enables us to perform at our best without compromising our health and happiness.

It's a simple process, but that doesn't mean it will be easy. Take a deep breath, and know that if you follow the steps outlined in this book, you will be able to transform your relationship with stress. You'll let go of the traps that seduced you in the past and finally be free to find some branches to swing on.

## My Name Is Heidi, and I Am a Stressaholic

I hate to admit it, but I am not naturally a happy person. I'm not an Energizer bunny, and I am certainly not calm amid chaos. I have struggled with anxiety and depression since childhood, and I am hypersensitive to stress and any stimulation. I hate bright lights, loud noises, and loud people. Crowded rooms make me uncomfortable, and I'm claustrophobic. I have a terrible fear of flying and public speaking; yet I make my living traveling as a professional speaker. I'm not a people person and consider myself to be a good wallflower at social events. I am a multitasker and a daydreamer, and like most other people I've met along my travels, I have self-diagnosed attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

I am a work in progress. Although I've struggled to deal with my stress addiction at times, I have trained my brain to focus on the positive, creating a more optimistic lens through which to look at life. As a result, I have built a more resilient operating system—body, mind, and spirit—to help me experience and even

welcome stress into my life without letting it break me down or burn me out. In the following pages, I share with you what I have learned through my experience as a stress addict, as well as from thousands of my clients who share my affliction. If you think you might be a stress addict, know that you are not alone. Also know that you can find peace from the constant battles to be everywhere at all times and to be everything to everyone. You can finally allow yourself the rest you need to create a healthy pulse for your life.



# Introduction

## The Crash

**A**nother exhausting day, another sleepless night. As your head crashes onto the pillow (or couch cushion), you can't possibly fathom how someone could be so physically tired and mentally wired at the same time. You begin a conversation with yourself—the same one that took place the night before, and the night before that one, promising that tomorrow will be different. That you will finally get a decent night's sleep, wake up rested, and make better choices for yourself. You'll go to the gym. Start eating better. Take more breaks. Pick up that meditation practice you've been meaning to start. Go to yoga. Drink more water. Stop the coffee habit—well, maybe reduce it a bit.

Suddenly, the thoughts of all the things that need to get done tomorrow start to beat at your busy brain. Chaotic chatter. Mental gymnastics. To-do lists, timelines, *deadlines*—the worry begins to flood your body as your temperature rises, your heartbeat increases, and you feel like someone is sitting on top of your chest. Panic sets in.

Did you turn the lights off? Set the coffeepot to start in the morning? Hear back from your boss about that proposal? Speaking of proposals, don't forget to buy a gift for your cousin's shindig this weekend. Oh crud, did you make those hotel reservations? Don't forget to check in 24 hours early to get your seats. Seats . . . did you RSVP for the networking event tomorrow night? It's last minute; you'd better do that right now.

You get up to turn on the computer, and your already overwhelmed brain is now being stimulated by the notion that

there is some critical emergency (you'd hate to piss off the executive director of the networking group, again) while the glare of your computer screen lights it up with neural noise. You try not to read anything while checking your e-mail but can't help glancing at the long list of communications that have arrived since you shut it down only an hour earlier. You convince yourself that if you do a couple of quick e-mails now you'll save yourself time in the morning. Before you know it, the clock strikes 1:00 AM and you realize you won't get those 8 hours you'd promised yourself earlier in the evening. You haven't gotten a minute of shut-eye, and you're already telling yourself you'll start tomorrow night. The cycle continues.

But is it that bad? I mean, you've likely been operating this way for some time now. Although you don't enjoy the hobbies you used to, find it nearly impossible to make quality time for friends and family, and feel drained and distracted all day, you're able to make it work. You've enjoyed plenty of success, and it's not like you have more stress than anyone else these days. So who are you to make taking care of yourself a priority?

Welcome to the human energy crisis—the epidemic of our time. We're running on empty, and the problem is not that we don't know what to do; it's that we don't have the energy to put any of the practices into place. We know we should eat better. We know we should move our body more regularly. We know we should get more sleep, should take more breaks, and would feel better if we had a greater depth of social connections. It's certainly not rocket science. But what I've learned in over a decade of consulting with organizations about health and performance initiatives is that common sense does not mean common practice.

There is not enough time in the day to get it all done. There never will be. This perception of not having enough—whether it be time, money, food, energy, or love—sends a message to the brain that there is a potential emergency. This immediately triggers our innate stress response, which is designed to motivate

us to get more of what we need. The problem is, if we never sense that we have enough, we will always be in a state of chronic stress, whether we recognize it or not.

The current human energy crisis is causing us to repeatedly beat up our operating systems. This not only damages our productivity and performance, but it also chips away at our health and happiness. What's worse, the lack of real energy has created a deficit that only seems to be filled by false sources of energy, whether it's coffee and energy drinks to get up or alcohol and sleeping pills to come back down. Like a credit card purchase, we are able to ignore the ever-increasing energy deficit building up at a cellular level in ways such as chronic inflammation, yo-yo metabolism, and cortisol buildup as long as we don't take time to open the bill.

Everything about the human operating system is designed to oscillate—from heartbeats to brain waves to blood sugar fluctuations. Yet most of us live our lives like a flatline. We put the pedal to the metal from the moment our alarm jolts us out of bed, just as we feel like we've finally drifted to sleep. The problem is not only that we're constantly on the go but that our stress response also causes us to have one foot simultaneously on the brake, grinding our gears. The constant perception that we don't have enough—time, money, energy, and so on—prompts the brain to trigger a neurochemical cascade that puts our entire system on high alert 24/7. The results of this are deadly.

Although we know that stress kills (and if you didn't already, you certainly will by the end of this book), we haven't been able to find a solution that works. There are three main reasons for this. First, change, even positive change, requires energy. Although we know stress is bad for us and wastes precious energy resources, trying to change our thoughts and behavioral patterns may cost even more energy. So the brain quickly talks us out of making the effort. If we're already operating in survival mode by conserving energy, the last thing the brain wants to do is spend more energy trying to change what seems to be working.