

The Work/Home Collision: Understanding the Impact of Chronic Stress on Life During Lockdown

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Ask anyone who has ever been a consultant and they will undoubtedly agree that with the many rewards of the job comes a frequently relentless, hectic travel schedule. On any given day in typical Chicago traffic, my commute to O'Hare International Airport (a multiple times per month activity), could take anywhere between one and two hours – this for a trip that should, under ordinary conditions, take a mere forty minutes, tops, door-to-door. After arriving at the airport and depending on the day and time, the trek from curb to gate could easily mean an additional hour's time. That said, during the many bumper-to-bumper taxi rides, waits in overcrowded TSA lines and respites in the comfort of the Admirals Club, I was usually always able to complete some work, enjoy a glass of my favorite Cabernet (an always-welcome reward to myself for my travel efforts) and, most importantly, think.

Like many frequent business travelers, I have grounded myself due to Covid-19 since March 13th of last year. The day seemed ordinary enough at the time but now seems like a major turning point, and one when I was on my last, eerily empty flight from New York's just as eerily empty Laganardia Airport. It was an experience I will likely never forget, akin to traveling the empty highways of Chicago on the evening of 9/11/2001.

Over the past ten months, as many of us have been locked behind our doors and Zooming from our living room sofas, we've grown accustomed to a new way of living – rolling out of bed, logging on, solving the problems of the day, logging off, eating dinner, logging on again to solve more problems and then going to sleep. While I might have cursed the congested bottlenecks of I-90 West in Chicago on those hectic travel days of what now seems like my former life, I now find myself cursing the intrusion of a constant, steady stream of work...in my dining room. Drawing what few lines still exist between business and personal time and activities is becoming an increasingly difficult task, and more importantly, a progressively stressful one.

In retrospect, while my commute to O'Hare certainly felt inconvenient, it did give me one thing I took for granted: moments of much-needed escape from the more pressing responsibilities of my day. Yet now, with the formalization of "work from home" in the literal sense and the elimination of such important quiet moments, it can often feel that there is simply nowhere to run from the stream of emails, meetings and deliverables. They are never not there.

In sharing my thoughts on this topic with both colleagues and clients, we also identified a shared increase in chronic stress, which many of us attribute to the inability to log off. A few of the afflictions related to this pandemic-driven video conference fatigue that we were collectively experiencing included:

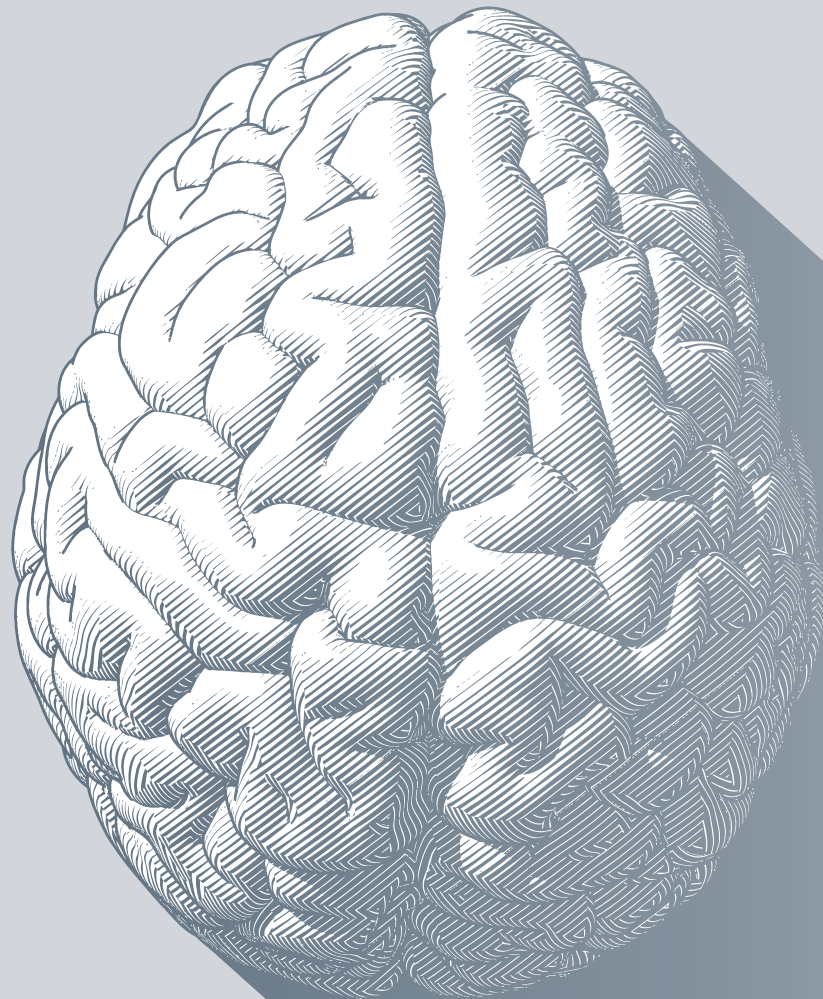
- Blurred vision and dry eye
- Anxiety and other related mood disorders
- Increased blood pressure and cholesterol
- Difficulty with concentration and focus
- Gastrointestinal issues

For many, these and other issues are on the rise, and as we continue to focus on our deadlines and project plans, what we are not focusing on enough (or even acknowledging) is the impact of this rising chronic stress on our daily lives and health.

So what exactly is chronic stress? To best understand this, we must examine how our physiological and psychological responses to stress are interrelated. Our natural stress response, as mammals, was built for one thing only: acute stress. Acute stress is the short-term stress process and response associated with, for example, being chased by a lion. Our ancestors had only a few missions in life, and one of them was to simply survive. When confronted by the lion, a “fight-or-flight” response is triggered, and in that moment your body decides the course of action. If you manage to flee or to fight the lion, and are victorious, your body finds its way back to homeostasis. Homeostasis, by the way, is the brain’s ideal. It is what our brain and body are constantly working to achieve and will do so if the right conditions are met. It is the purest form of balance our bodies and minds can achieve. And in today’s world, it is a rarity.

Now, we as humans in the modern age are far more evolved (or would like to think so), and consequently have taken that acute stress response and stretched it beyond its intended purpose: we agonize for days over Board presentations, suffer from financial worries and are regularly concerned about the state of our relationships. We are in a perpetual, hyper vigilant mode, one for which our bodies were not built to sustain. It is like being chased by an axe murderer for days on end, but looking positively upbeat, engaged and optimistic while doing it. Hence, chronic stress.





While most of us might be well-versed in our circulatory, digestive or skeletal systems, what we might not have learned enough about in school is the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. Sound complicated, right? Otherwise known as our stress response system, it connects a number of systems in the body to each other. In our brains, a small area known as the hypothalamus (which regulates a number of activities like body temperature and signals for eating and drinking), perceives a stressor and sends a message through our blood to our pituitary gland. In turn, the pituitary sends a signal to our adrenals which directs the adrenals to secrete the stress hormone cortisol. Cortisol is exceptionally beneficial to helping us navigate stressful situations and other biological functions by attaching itself to any number of receptors throughout our body. As an essential chemical, it gives us energy, helps to boost the immune system and regulates fight-or-flight instincts. Ideally, resting basal cortisol levels are optimal for everyday functioning. But all too often, many of us suffering from chronic stress are operating with increased and prolonged reactive cortisol levels, which can be permanently damaging to our bodies and minds.

How damaging, you ask? A few of these include:

- Issues of mental health, such as mood disorders (depression and anxiety), and certain personality disorders
- Issues with memory and impact on cognitive ability
- Heart disease, high blood pressure, strokes and heart attacks
- Obesity, anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders
- Sexual dysfunction and loss of libido
- Skin and hair problems, such as acne, psoriasis, eczema and permanent hair loss
- Gastrointestinal problems, including gastritis, ulcerative colitis and issues related to the colon

If these issues sound very severe to you, you're right. There are major consequences, some untreatable, associated with not paying attention to chronic stress levels on the human body. We can no longer accept chronic stress as a "regular" part of our daily lives, especially for those who are consistently operating within high pressure environments. The risk is too great, and the impact too dire.

As an expert in leadership development and with an emphasis on executive stress, I have worked with a number of clients this year to help with what I call Team Upsides, or opportunities to come together and discuss individual and collective stress, the biological functions associated, how to help others on their teams manage it and conducting work around gratitude and team/individual fulfillment. In a 24-hour Zoom workday, many executives and their teams are losing "themselves" — and the things they love — to the copious amount of work that never seem to have an endpoint.

Darline Scelzo, Chief Human Resources Officer for Lasalle Investment Management, has this to say about stress and the impact of it both on herself and her team: “What I’ve learned about being ‘stress aware’ from the pandemic is a better understanding of the profound effects it has across both mental and physical wellbeing. As leaders, understanding how acute stress can change behaviors and interactions of otherwise high-performing people is important. By taking time to self-reflect on my own struggles with stress--professional, family and the community--it has reminded me to lead with patience and a supportive perspective. If you don’t take stock of your own struggles, it makes it hard to lead compassionately.”

What we must not lose sight of, especially as leaders of organizations, is that the stress impacting high performers often affects the entire organization. In the years to come, businesses will need to focus on how to better support employee mental health as much as they do physical health. This will include increased medical benefits, flexible work schedules, sabbaticals, KPIs for employee self-care and greater organizational acceptance and storytelling related to the effects of chronic stress. The notion that our lives are divided into separate, distinguishable spheres of the work and the personal can no longer be accepted because it is no longer true: the lines have been redrawn, in some cases erased or are now officially blurred.

Darline discusses why it’s so important to have conversations about stress and stress-related illness in the workplace: “For roles that focus on supporting the business, the weight of issues can seem even heavier when blending expectations to be the point of resolution in both your professional and personal life. By defining specific time, providing a safe space and giving permission to focus inwardly, that seemed to help transport people away from the stress. That time to focus on more personal issues while in a business setting created a short, but much needed release valve. Also, knowing that others feel vulnerable and have similar concerns somehow makes the feelings of stress a little less lonely.”

In my research and the application of my consulting, I have helped CEOs and their teams come together and discuss the science of the stress response, its impact on them and their people, and the strategies they can utilize to better build a resilient workforce. Through this work I have found that the organizations willing to take this step will be far better suited to overcome the challenges we will all face in the world over the next decade. We have much to do, but one thing is for certain: it will take sound leadership, and the vulnerability of leaders, to truly make meaningful strides in the overall health of employees and stakeholders alike.

For more information about our executive and team stress offering, contact Dominic Cottone at dcottone@fergusonpartners.com.



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Dominic is Senior Managing Director of the Leadership Consulting group at Ferguson Partners, based in the firm's Chicago office. His primary functional emphasis is CEO Advisory, and he currently works with numerous CEOs and Board Chairs on issues related to leadership development; talent strategy; executive team effectiveness; organizational design; and culture and diversity. He is also involved in the CHRO, Hospitality/Gaming and PE/REIM Practices at Ferguson Partners.

Dominic's approach to leadership development is underpinned by his experience managing Fortune clients, operating in multiple industries with C-Suite executives and developing internal and external talent. He has assessed over 1,000 senior leaders and coached more than 200 executives around the world. In addition to his executive development experience, Dominic has led internal learning and development programs for corporations and professional services firms, founded academic and leadership programs for institutions of higher education and lectured on crisis management and executive communication.

Prior to co-founding the Leadership Consulting group at Ferguson Partners, Dominic worked as a Managing Consultant in a global, boutique consulting firm, and before then he founded a leadership consultancy specializing in strategic thinking; group decision-making; ethical leadership; inclusion and diversity; and presentation and persuasion. He earned his Master's degree in Organizational Communication, Learning and Design and his Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Legal Studies from Ithaca College, which recognized him as one of its "Most Outstanding Alumni." Dominic also earned the Illinois Board of Higher Education's "Administrator of the Year" honor and has been publicly acknowledged by the CEOs he has coached for his contributions to their firms.

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