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The Hidden Toll of Microstress

Small, difficult moments can zap your performance. Here's how to restore your well-being.

→ by ROB CROSS and KAREN DILLON

A FEW YEARS ago, we interviewed a pharmaceuticals executive who seemed to have built an ideal life. She was excelling at work, her personal life was rich and full, and she was able to take regular vacations, whose destinations were chosen by virtue of where she and her husband could run marathons together. In our interview, she was happy and her energy was off the charts.

Her story was great to hear but perhaps not surprising—the interview was part of our research into what makes high performers different from the rest of us. She was, we thought, a case study in having it all. But as it turned out, we didn't know the full story. This interview also led us to discover something we weren't looking to find. Something bigger.

The executive hadn't always had such a balanced life. In fact, she'd only

gotten herself together after a stern warning from her doctor, who said the way she'd been living was jeopardizing her physical health. Prior to being the high performer we interviewed, this woman was a self-described sedentary workaholic who was thriving in neither her personal nor her professional life. How had someone who was clearly goal-driven neglected her well-being so drastically? On a whim, we asked her what had thrown her off track in the first place. For a moment, she was stumped.

"It was just life, I guess."

The answer intrigued us, so we started asking other high performers if their lives were feeling out of control or had pushed them in directions not aligned with who they set out to be. In total we interviewed 300 people from 30 global companies, evenly split



between women and men, from 2019 to 2021. Many of these high performers were powder kegs of stress, and to our surprise, most of them didn't realize it. But gradually, usually deep into our interview, they began to acknowledge that they were struggling to keep up with both work and their personal lives. For some, our interviews were an inflection point, the moment they first recognized just how bad things had gotten. Some even broke down into tears, lamenting that they couldn't see a path out of barely holding it together.

After decades of research on collaboration, and specifically the effects of too much ineffective collaboration, we were familiar with the kinds of stress that high performers typically endure. This, though, was completely different. What we were hearing about was stress, yes, but in a form that neither they—nor we—had the language to articulate. As they fumbled to describe it, patterns emerged. It was never one big thing that led them to feel overwhelmed. Rather, it was the relentless accumulation of unnoticed small events—in passing moments—that was drastically affecting their well-being.

We called these small pressures *microstresses*. But being “micro” doesn't mean they don't take an enormous toll in the long run. In this article we will describe how we came to understand microstress, where it comes from, and how our bodies respond to it. We have grouped the most common sources of microstress into three categories so that you can understand how they arise in your life. And finally, we'll explain how you can push back on microstress to feel more in control, strengthen your

relationships, and improve your overall well-being.

Stress vs. Microstress

Microstress is different from the type of stress we're all familiar with. Here's how:

Stress is big, visible, and obvious. Virtually everyone can recognize, and have sympathy for, normal stress—it comes from universally recognized challenges or setbacks, and often there's a “bad guy” who is the source of it. Maybe it's caused by reporting to a mercurial boss whose daily mood permeates the entire office. Or by having survived multiple rounds of layoffs that eliminated positions in your department. Or by managing a house move, or continually being called on to help dependent parents, or enduring a grinding, two-hour commute.

By contrast, *microstress* is far less obvious. It's caused by difficult moments that we register as just another bump in the road—if we register them at all. Microstresses come at us so quickly, and we're so conditioned to just working through them, that we barely recognize anything has happened. They tend to seem fleeting, simple to deal with, or too minor to hurt us for more than a second. And even when we do register microstress, we don't necessarily think about its impact on our lives. Making it even harder to recognize is the fact that microstress is often triggered by the people we are closest to.

For example, it might be caused by feeling the need to protect an employee on your team who isn't getting recognized for their work. Or by having to

put in extra time to finish a joint project when your teammates fall short on their part. Or by your manager's suddenly changing a project after you've called in favors to get it done, wasting your and your coworkers' time. Or even by knowing that you'll have to miss your weekly tennis game with a friend (again), making you feel that you've let them down once more and that your skills are declining.

Microstresses, as their name implies, are small—often invisible to us. Yet they also sometimes seem like positives or easy-to-justify decisions that, in the moment, appear harmless. After all, you're stepping up in some way to help others. How can it be bad to feel poorly for a minute about unintentionally wasting your friends' time? Why not pick up the slack for your lax coworker? It's only an extra 15 minutes of work for you that will help the whole team.

But that's exactly what is so pernicious about microstress. Individual stressors seem manageable in the moment, but they accrue, and they can create ripple effects of secondary and sometimes tertiary consequences that can last for hours or days—and even trigger microstress in others. For example, if your teammates fail to complete a key task, you'll have to clean up their underdelivery and have an uncomfortable conversation about what happened. In addition, you'll have to ask your partner to take your child to the dentist, even though it's your turn and the child likes that you always remember to pack their favorite toy. And beyond that, you might not have time to work on a professional development project as you'd planned to.

Microstresses may be hard to spot individually, but cumulatively they pack an enormous punch.

Microstress also involves emotional baggage that's not easy to unpack. That's because the source of microstress is seldom a classic antagonist, such as a spectacularly demanding client or a jerk boss. Rather, it comes from the people with whom we are closest: our friends, family members, and colleagues. For example, we may harbor feelings of guilt or failure that we've let down someone we care about, or find ourselves in situations where we're concerned for their well-being. If you're a manager responsible for a team of employees, you might worry constantly about whether you're mentoring them well enough, or whether you need to supervise them closely so that they don't screw up in front of colleagues. The emotion in the relationship—positive or negative—magnifies the impact of the stressor.

Of course, you're never coping with just one or two microstresses. You're likely facing dozens a day—and you've probably come to accept that this hectic way of living is nothing special. "Just let me survive this one week," you promise yourself, planning to get through any rough patches with a little bit of willpower. "Then I'll be OK." Unfortunately, too many of us have fallen into a reactive posture by accepting that we now live in a hyperconnected, 24/7 world, with everyone a simple text, call, or video chat away. As a result, we're on call around the clock; the interconnect- edness of our work and home lives is staggering.

Except *every* week becomes yet another week you just have to survive—

and the cycle continues for months on end. We find ourselves teetering on the edge of burnout almost all the time, and we can't quite put our finger on why.

There's a biological reason for that.

The Biology of Microstress

Microstress is pernicious because it is part of our everyday lives at a greater volume, intensity, and pace than we have ever experienced before, and that's only increasing with technology and ubiquitous connectivity. And our bodies don't quite know what to make of it.

The process by which we respond to normal stress is called *allostasis*, the biologic mechanism that protects the body from it. Allostasis helps us maintain internal homeostasis, or internal balance. Our brains know how to register conventional forms of stress, so they can identify the threat and use the extra oomph of the fight-or-flight mechanisms that kick in to deal with it.

But microstressors can fly under the radar of our fight-or-flight vigilance systems while still taking a significant toll, says Joel Salinas, a behavioral neurologist and researcher at the New York University Grossman School of Medicine and the chief medical officer at Isaac Health, which provides online brain-health services. "Imagine wind eroding a mountain," Salinas told us. "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 whittle the entire mountain down to a nub."

We may not be consciously aware of microstressors, but like plain old stress they, too, can increase our blood



Idea in Brief

THE PROBLEM

Microstressors are small moments of stress that seem manageable on their own—sometimes barely even noticeable. But because our bodies don't respond the way they would to normal stress, the relentless accumulation can take an enormous toll on our well-being.

WHERE IT COMES FROM

Microstress comes from sources that fall into three broad categories: those that drain our capacity to get things done, those that deplete our emotional reserves, and those that challenge our identity. And most of us experience multiple microstresses on a daily basis, each of which can ripple out and cause further microstress to ourselves and others.

TAKE CONTROL

Push back by trying to remove some of the microstresses, rather than simply enduring them. Find concrete, practical ways to *counter microstressors*, such as learning to say no to small asks. *Tune in to the microstress you cause others*—to help them, and to avoid a boomerang back on you. And *keep things in perspective* by taking part in meaningful activities outside of work, cultivating authentic connections with diverse people. You will feel more in control, strengthen your relationships, and improve your overall well-being.



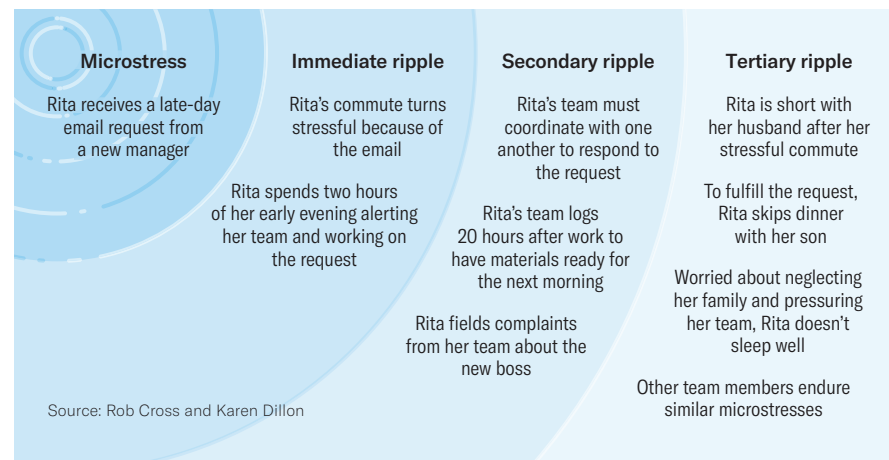
pressure and our heart rate, or trigger hormonal or metabolic changes. “While microstressors are damaging our bodies, our brains are not fully registering them as a threat,” Salinas explained. “Therefore, our brains are not triggering the same kind of protective higher-order mechanisms that might occur in the face of more obvious stress.”

This dynamic is due in part to how the brain processes information. Our “working memory,” which lives in the frontal lobe, is where we keep mental notes—it’s a kind of mental “scratch pad,” as Salinas puts it. But under continual stress, the scratch pad tends to shrink, making it harder to keep track of things that require our response or attention. That explains why so many of us felt “brain fog” during the pandemic, whether we had Covid-19 or not: Our brains were slowly taken up with microstressors, so the bandwidth we would typically have for paying attention to an activity or solving a problem was simply not available. Additionally, when the scratch pad shrinks, we literally may not remember why we’re feeling out of sorts—which helps microstresses slip past our defenses. “This is arguably worse than threats that cross the fight-or-flight threshold,” Salinas told us. “Not only are you not noticing [microstress], but it can also have more-severe consequences.”

You may be quicker to dismiss microstress than more macro forms of stress because you think you can just manage it in the moment. The thing is, your brain *isn’t* managing it, because your normal stress response didn’t fire. So microstresses accrue, one on top of another.

The Ripple Effect of Microstress

One small, seemingly inconsequential moment can play out long beyond the original instant of microstress—sometimes even for days.



In fact, the human brain doesn’t seem to distinguish between different sources of chronic stress, according to neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett, a distinguished professor of psychology at Northeastern University and the author of *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain*. That’s because our brains are constantly trying to coordinate all our systems—cardiovascular, respiratory, immune, endocrine, gastrointestinal, and others—in the most metabolically efficient way. The coordination is a brain-body transaction that we end up feeling as *mood* (which, Barrett explains, is a simple accounting of how you are feeling, such as comfortable, tired, or wired—and is distinct from emotions like sadness and happiness).

For the transaction, Barrett says, our brains do a “body budgeting” to assess

the cumulative effect of the stressors we experience on a day-to-day basis. Importantly, while individual microstresses—say, a misalignment with your teammates at work—may feel small, “when they add together, they can have a massive impact,” she says. “If your body budget is already depleted by the circumstances of life—like physical illness, financial hardship, hormone surges, or simply not sleeping or exercising enough—your brain becomes more vulnerable to stress of all kinds. You may end up feeling ground down into a pulp.”

For example, Barrett continues, one study found that if you’re exposed to social stress within two hours of a meal, your body metabolizes the food in a way that adds 104 calories to the meal. “If this happens daily, that’s 11 pounds

■ ■ As we face the microstress of negative interactions, our body budgets are being depleted even if we barely register the negativity in the moment. These momentary “withdrawals” add up.

gained per year! Not only that, but if you eat healthful, unsaturated fats—such as those found in nuts—within one day of being stressed, your body metabolizes these foods as if they were filled with bad fats.” Further, Barrett adds, in her research she has been able to stimulate a cortisol surge in test subjects by subtly implying, through her tone of voice or behavior, that they are being evaluated negatively (in effect, creating microstress). In our everyday lives, then, as we face the microstress of negative interactions with other people, our body budgets are being depleted even if we barely register the negativity in the moment. These momentary “withdrawals” add up.

“When your body budget is continually burdened, momentary stressors pile up, even the kind that you’d normally bounce back from quickly. It’s like children jumping on a bed,” says Barrett. “The bed might withstand 10 kids bouncing at the same time, but the 11th one snaps the bed frame.”

The Sources and Effects of Microstress

Where is all this microstress that we hardly notice coming from? Our research has identified 14 sources, in three broad categories:

Microstresses that drain your capacity to get things done. These are why so many of us feel that we’re failing at work and in our personal lives: We can barely get through our daily responsibilities. The sources are:

- Misalignment between collaborators on their roles or priorities
- Uncertainty about others’ reliability

- Unpredictable behavior from a person in a position of authority
- Collaborative demands that are diverse and high in volume
- Surges in responsibilities at work or home

Microstresses that deplete your emotional reserves. These are disruptions to the internal “well” of peace, fortitude, and resilience that helps you focus, prioritize, and manage conflict. The sources are:

- Managing and feeling responsible for the success and well-being of others
- Confrontational conversations
- Lack of trust in your network
- People who spread stress
- Political maneuvering

Microstresses that challenge your identity. These trigger the uncomfortable feeling that you’re not the person you really want to be, which can chip away at your motivation and sense of purpose. The sources are:

- Pressure to pursue goals out of sync with your personal values
- Attacks on your sense of self-confidence, worth, or control
- Draining or otherwise negative interactions with family or friends
- Disruptions to your network

Most of us experience several of these microstresses in our day-to-day lives. For example, as the director of the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Laboratory at Northeastern, Barrett may understand the toll microstress takes on her brain, but that doesn’t make her immune to it. “When I’m overwhelmed by the number of things I have to do, and

someone else’s outcomes are depending on my doing something, my husband will say, ‘Well, that’s the mark of a successful person,’” she says. “And maybe that’s true, but it only goes so far. I run a lab of 25 young scientists, and every single one of those people depends on me for something. I have an impact on their outcomes. We don’t just make deposits and withdrawals in our own body budgets. We are also the caretakers of other people’s body budgets.”

For example, Kunal, a senior leader in the automotive industry, shared the frustration he felt when he had to redo the work of a subordinate who turned in a substandard product. “It creates a sort of seething bitterness and stress, because I’m now spending time on something I shouldn’t have to,” he told us. “Doing their work displaces other things and contributes to an environment where I don’t have the energy and time to develop my team.” Beyond redoing the project, Kunal also had to find time to address the performance issue—which added a whole other layer of microstress to his day. “That requires extra energy because you have to be understanding and then follow almost a Socratic process that walks someone through the preparation they should have done.”

And those were just the immediate consequences. Over time the situation built resentment, caused Kunal to call in favors from other team members, and meant that he often brought his frustration home at night. He was aware that he was doing it, but he couldn’t seem to shake off the day.

Kunal’s story is merely one example of the toll of one employee’s falling



What's Driving Your Microstress?

Microstresses infiltrate our lives in ways we often don't realize. Here are the 14 types of microstress, broken down into three categories. Which resonate with your daily experiences?

You can download a diagnostic at hbr.org/microstress-diagnostic to identify and track the drivers of your microstress.

Microstresses That Drain Your Capacity to Get Things Done

- Misalignment between collaborators on their roles or priorities
- Uncertainty about others' reliability
- Unpredictable behavior from a person in a position of authority
- Collaborative demands that are diverse and high in volume
- Surges in responsibilities at work or home

Microstresses That Deplete Your Emotional Reserves

- Managing and feeling responsible for the success and well-being of others
- Confrontational conversations
- Lack of trust in your network
- People who spread stress
- Political maneuvering

Microstresses That Challenge Your Identity

- Pressure to pursue goals out of sync with your personal values
- Attacks on your sense of self-confidence, worth, or control
- Draining or otherwise negative interactions with family or friends
- Disruptions to your network

just a bit short. Multiply the consequences by the endless interactions we have—whether we find ourselves misaligned with coworkers, juggling ever-increasing responsibilities, or even feeling uncomfortable with our boss's request to use high-pressure sales tactics on customers. For most of us, every day is a minefield of microstresses.

Making matters more complicated is the fact that one of the primary sources of microstress is the people we are closest to. Marriage, for instance, is one of the most salient sources of support—but can also be a trigger for microstress. Consider the ripple effects

when we exchange curt words with our spouses about some inconsequential chore or task before work, then spend all day thinking about the interaction. Once we get home that night, all may be forgiven, but the worrying has already impacted our day in ways that don't disappear quickly. We may be distracted at work, leading us to perform worse or let our colleagues down, which will almost surely ricochet back at us.

Fighting Microstress

So, what can we do about the battering of microstress in our daily lives?

Conventional advice for improving our well-being tends to focus on steeling yourself against stress (macro or micro), such as through mindfulness, meditation, or gratitude. Yes, these approaches help refresh your mind. But in a way, they also hurt, as they build your ability to *endure* more microstress.

Wouldn't it be better if you were able to remove some of the microstress in your life instead? From decades of social science research, we know that a negative interaction is up to *five times* more impactful than a positive one. That means finding ways to eliminate even just a few microstresses in your life can make a significant difference. Our research suggests that most people can find three to five obvious opportunities to make a notable difference in their microstress level, using three strategies:

Push back on microstress in concrete, practical ways. You can find small but effective ways to counter microstressors that will have an outsize impact in your daily life. These range from learning how to say no to small asks, to managing technology and how it notifies and interrupts you, to readjusting relationships to prevent others from putting microstress on you.

Be attuned to the microstress you are causing others. This won't just help them—it will help you too. When we create microstress for others, it inevitably boomerangs in one form or another. (A simple example is when microstress causes you to snap at your partner, which inevitably leads to anger or resentment that swings back on you.)

■ While people are the cause of the microstress in your life, they're part of the solution too.

Emitting less means we'll receive less in return.

Rise above. One reason some microstressors affect us is simply because we allow them to. You can learn to keep some of them in perspective and let things that bother you just roll off your back. This is not a call to be a Pollyanna—we found that the happiest people in our research were able to put some of the microstress in their lives in perspective. In part, that was because they tended to belong to two or three groups in their lives—outside of their professions—that were meaningful to them. The dimensionality these activities and groups brought to their lives served a very real purpose of helping them recognize when minutiae was minutiae. In contrast, those people who allowed their lives to become too unidimensional often swam in a sea of microstress that they helped create. And they couldn't rise above any of it.

That is, of course, just a quick summary of the approaches our most successful interviewees used to keep microstress in check. Reducing the microstress in your life requires identifying where it's coming from (recognizing that the sources may not be obvious), tracking and understanding the ripple effects, and devising effective ways to push back. What it *doesn't* require is overhauling your life.

To kick off the process, we created a diagnostic to help you identify which of the 14 microstress sources have the greatest impact on your life. It will also help you discover where you might be causing microstress for others and which stresses you think you can

rise above. The diagnostic contains a glossary that goes into additional detail about each source. (See the exhibit "What's Driving Your Microstress?")

The Power of Other People

One of the most interesting insights from our research was that, while people are the cause of the microstress in your life, they're part of the solution too. As neuroscientist Barrett explains, the worst thing for your nervous system is another human—but the best thing for your nervous system is also another human.

In our research, the people who were the best at coping with microstress didn't just find ways to push back, minimize what they caused in others, or rise above. They also made a conscious effort to shape their lives to have more diverse connections with people. They pursued activities, common interests, and group experiences that helped create a rich, multidimensional life to "inoculate" them from microstress's effects. For example, something as simple as meeting friends for a weekly basketball game, or maintaining a group chat to share silly memes that only your closest friends from college will understand, can offer moments of authentic connection that soften the blow of microstresses.

There's a physiological foundation for why. "Engaging with other people... trains your brain—like training a coordinated group of muscles—to develop brain circuits for managing your own reactions, responses, and emotions," says neurologist Salinas. There's also a healthy distraction component, because

emotional burdens don't weigh on you as much when you're immersed in a multidimensional life. "You tend not to ruminate on your problems when you are around other people who engage your full attention in a positive way," Salinas explains.

Engaging with others also helps you get a better sense of how to frame an issue, especially if you can zoom out to see it in context. You're more likely to be able to say, "I'm not the only person who has had this experience," or, "Other people have it much worse than I do." That kind of perspective can help rightsize microstress.

Additionally, having a multidimensional life means that our identities aren't overly tied to one activity—such as work. Research suggests that high achievers in their twenties and early thirties are often vulnerable to burnout because they haven't developed other dimensions, Salinas says. "Their identities become more and more anchored on their jobs. That means the positive things at work can bring extreme highs, but the negative things can bring extreme lows." The mere act of connecting with others, having informal conversations, sharing mutual interests, or seeing the world from another perspective is a powerful antidote to the daily toll of microstress. But as we go through life, we are pulled in so many directions that we tend to let go of the activities and relationships we once enjoyed.

The percentage of people who say they don't have a single close friend has quadrupled in the past 30 years, according to the Survey Center on American Life. Nearly half of those surveyed said they've lost touch with friends



over the past year, while nearly one in 10 report having lost touch with most of their friends. That disconnection matters profoundly. Salinas's research demonstrates that having someone who will listen to you when you need to talk is associated with greater cognitive resilience—meaning your brain can function better than it's expected to, relative to the changes it has undergone from physical aging or disease.

Our research suggests that you need a variety of relationships (not only close friends) to help you get through the reality of living with microstress. The most significant effects come from being connected to people who unite around some interest—poetry, religion, singing, tennis, or activism, for example—but who come from different professional, socioeconomic, educational, or age groups. The shared interests tend to create authentic and trusted interactions, and the diversity of perspectives helps expand the way we see the world and our places in it. We are shaped by the people and experiences, and our lives become multidimensional. And yet in spite of how important relationships are to our happiness, many of us let them slip as the years roll by.

People who told us positive life stories, as we mentioned above when introducing the “Rise above” strategy, invariably described having authentic connections with two, three, or four groups outside of work: athletic activities, volunteer work, civic or religious communities, book or dinner clubs, and so on. Often, one of the groups supported physical health through nutrition, mindfulness, and exercise practices. The relationships formed through

these groups tended to be surprising connections that might, on paper, seem a mismatch. But they provided something meaningful.

For example, Rob is an avid cyclist and spends long hours pedaling the countryside with like-minded friends. He benefits from the physical health impacts of the exercise and the meditative nature of rhythmic pedaling. But another huge benefit lies in the friendships he has forged with people who would not normally be in his life: an IT executive, a mail carrier, a cardiologist, and a plumber are now among his closest friends. “I have confided in and felt friendship and laughter from these people in a range of ways that of course reduces the experience of stress,” he says. “But the interactions also create perspective, because many of the things I get spun up about seem inconsequential when you look at them through the eyes of a plumber or a cardiologist.” Research affirms the experiences Rob has cataloged in his work: The right activities bring a diversity to your social world that not only generates the instrumental benefit of close relationships but also helps you develop the ability to avoid getting caught up in small stresses, and keep them in perspective.

NO ONE IS immune to microstress, and our interviews with high performers make its toll clear. But they also shed light on a better path forward. The insights we gained from hundreds of interviews, as well as from Rob's long-term research on collaboration, show us that it's possible to structure your life in ways that not only reduce microstress

but also improve your overall well-being and your relationships with friends, family members, and colleagues. You can foster a diverse set of authentic connections that add dimensionality to your life, which, in turn, helps mitigate the effects of microstress. It's a virtuous cycle. ☺

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