

Developing Personal Renewal¹
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My Personal Sustainability

Our lives are filled with stressful events. Most of them are small but annoying hassles, not major events. When the human body reacts to a stressful event, we stimulate a hormonal system called the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS). It is our body's way of preparing to defend itself. The dilemma is that in today's world, we are bombarded with more stressors than occurred thousands of years ago. And yet, our bodies react the same way to a post saying mean things about us or the possibility that someone will not like us at work as if a lion was approaching our village.

There are four types of experiences that stimulate the SNS. When something is important to us, our stress increases. The more important, the greater the stress. When something is uncertain, our stress increased. The more I uncertain, the greater the stress. When we think others are watching or observing and evaluating us, our stress increases. The more people or greater possible threat from evaluation, the greater the stress. Uniquely human, when we anticipate any of the three causes of stress, our stress increases.

The hormonal systems aroused when experiencing the SNS can have a cumulative effect. When the stress events (even the mildly annoying ones) build up, they are said to create a state of chronic stress. This increases the strain on a person's body, mind and spirit which results in cognitive, emotional and perceptual impairment.

We need the SNS and stress. It helps us wake up in the morning. It helps us focus our attention. It helps us defend ourselves and our families and organizations. But the same hormones that are part of the SNS and help us, also create deleterious effects. Increased blood pressure, pulse rate, rapid breathing, reduction in the functioning of our immune system (and the resulting increased vulnerability to disease) and the cessation of neurogenesis (I.e., the conversion of neural stem cells into new neurons).

Activities meant to help us can become a source of stress. Social media, for example, has been shown to keep us on an alert status. People who text, Twitter, use Facebook or any other social media remain alert for the next event or message. This requires a neural network that helps us focus but co-activates the SNS. In other words, frequent use of social media can become a source of stress instead of only helping us feel socially connected.

Our body, mind and spirit have one major way to alleviate the damage from chronic stress – arousal of the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS). The hormones released in activation of the PNS reverse the effects of the SNS. They help our blood pressure drop, pulse rate slows, breathing slows and gets deeper, our immune system engages to its maximum and

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neurogenesis occurs. We are at our cognitive best in the PNS (i.e., most complex thinking, most creative, most open to new ideas).

While we cannot eliminate stress in our lives, nor do we want to, professionals and executives should create more balance to enable their personal sustainability. Without regular stimulation of the PNS, we literally wear out and slowly reduce our ability to function, adapt, be pleasant, enjoy life and so on. There are many ways to activate the PNS shown to work for everyone consistently in medical and behavioral research. We tabulated a set of activities and events that often occur in professionals and executives lives that are stressful and those that are renewing (I.e., stimulate the PNS).

Personal Sustainability Index (PSI)²

Reflecting on *last week* (refer to your calendar or planner if it helps), indicate how many times you had the experience or did the activity listed below on the left hand column. Write the number in the right hand column. If last week was not typical or out of the ordinary for you, consider using the prior week for your reflection. If you leave a box blank, it will be assumed that means you did not experience or do that activity that day.

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Activity	Number of times
Waking up- did I think of what I had to do, a problem, something troubling or worrying me	3
Difficulty getting myself or my family ready for the day	
Traffic or delays in getting to or returning from work	
Someone at work frustrated me or caused a problem	
Someone at home frustrated me or caused a problem	
Pressure about a report, task, project, performance goal, or deadline	
My cell phone dropped an important call	
Was angry at a specific person	
Had an argument with my spouse or partner	
Someone cut me off in traffic	
My computer or the internet was slow	
Someone yelled at me	
I was late for a meeting, appointment or meal	
Ate a meal with family that was tense	
Had an auto accident	
Felt ill	
Worried about something important to me that would not turn out well	
Others in power were observing or evaluating me	
STRESS ACTIVITY: sum all of the numbers listed in the boxes for each column	
STRESS VARIETY: sum of the number of different activities or experiences for the week (1 for each activity or experience regardless of the number of time sit occurred.)	

A loving moment with your spouse, partner, or significant other	
Having fun with your spouse, partner, or significant other	
Coaching or mentoring someone (formally or informally)	
Helping a friend or colleague with compassionate approach (as opposed to trying to "fix" them)	
Thinking about your values or purpose	
Talking with others about your shared values or purpose	
Meditated	
Practice yoga, tai chi or similar martial arts	
Prayed	
Physical exercise	
Played with a pet (dog, cat, horse, monkey)	
Walked or exercised a pet	
Volunteered or provided care for someone in need	
Ate a meal with family that was pleasant or fun	
Walked in nature	
Laughed with others	
Played with a small child	
RENEWAL ACTIVITY: sum all of the numbers listed in the boxes for each column	
RENEWAL VARIETY: sum of the number of different activities or experiences for the week. (1 for each activity or experience regardless of the number of time sit occurred.)	

Interpreting My PSI Scores

You have calculated two scores of possible relevance.

Intensity of Sustainability Score = Renewal Activity – Stress Activity = ____ - ____ = ____

Variety of Sustainability = Renewal Variety – Stress Variety = ____ - ____ = ____

Your Intensity Score shows how many renewal activities you do in a week minus the number of stressful events or activities. More renewal than stress will indicate greater sense of well-being, less anxiety and depressing thoughts, less damages from chronic stress, and more energy.

Your Variety Score shows how many different types of renewal activities you do in a week minus the number of different stressful activities you experience. The more variety of renewal activities, the better. It allows a person a wider menu from which to choose which renewal activity will work best in a given moment or day, and variety which helps alleviate boredom. Even doing something you love and enjoy can become stressful if done too often or so repetitively that it becomes routine.

PSI: Intensity of Sustainability Score

To determine how your score compares to a sample of 1,716 other professionals and executives find your number below and circle the corresponding percentile. These percentile norms are based on a sample of professionals and managers from various English speaking countries. The overall statistics are: mean = 22; median = 14; standard deviation = 45; skew = 1.3; kurtosis = 13.9; range = -424 to 334).

PSI: Intensity Score	Percentile	PSI: Intensity Score	Percentile
-27 or less	5%ile	15-18	55%ile
-26 to -16	10%ile	19-22	60%ile
-15 to -10	15%ile	23-26	65%ile
-9 to -6	20%ile	27-31	70%ile
-5 to -1	25%ile	32-37	75%ile
0 to 2	30%ile	38-43	80%ile
3-5	35%ile	44-52	85%ile
6-8	40%ile	53-66	90%ile
9-11	45%ile	67+	95%ile
12-14	50%ile		

PSI: Variety of Sustainability Score

To determine how your score compares to a sample of 1,716 other professionals and executives find your number below and circle the corresponding percentile. These percentile norms are based on a sample of professionals and managers from various English speaking countries. The overall statistics are: mean = .35; median = 0; standard deviation = 4; skew = .30; kurtosis = .09; range = -11 to 13).

PSI: VARIETY Score	Percentile	PSI: Variety Score	Percentile
-5 or less	5%ile	1	55%ile
-4	10%ile	1	60%ile
-3	15%ile	2	65%ile
-3	20%ile	2	70%ile
-2	25%ile	3	75%ile
-2	30%ile	3	80%ile
-2 to -1	35%ile	4	85%ile
-1	40%ile	5	90%ile
0	45%ile	6+	95%ile
0	50%ile		

What To Do About It

A strategy to improve your personal sustainability, energy and enjoyment in life and work is to increase the relative amount of renewal to stress activities AND to increase the variety of renewal activities. The dosage is most important. Having four 15 minutes of renewal during a day is more beneficial to you than spending one intense hour in a renewal activity. If the four 15 minute periods are made up of two or three different activities, all the better.

Some of the renewal activities are made easier by taking a class, like learning to meditate or do yoga. Once you get into a habit like meditating or practicing yoga, the class is less crucial. Such classes are available at health clubs, community centers, or an organization's wellness program. Sometimes, it is as easy "Just do it." Spending more time with your children, spouse or partner having fun is as simple as putting it into your weekly calendar. But what you do together needs to be fun for everyone; the best sign is if you are laughing at some point during the activity.

Begin by choosing renewal activities that appeal to you- that seem to be engaging and fun. Choose activities that rate easy to incorporate into your schedule rather than squeeze more things into any day and there you create more stress.

It also may be helpful to identify a number of renewal activities you wish to do more of each week and some new ones you wish to try. Stagger the implementation of these efforts and experiments so as not to defer at the purpose and increase the stress of frenzied activity.