

# Let's Be Careful



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How many of you remember the much loved Sergeant Phil Esterhaus from the 80s cult US cop show Hill Street Blues and his daily warning at roll call, “Let’s be careful out there”?

Looking at the latest figures his catch phrase is even more appropriate today for UK workers as they face an even more insidious enemy than the criminals around the Hill Street precinct – namely work-related stress.

Over two-thirds of patients treated by doctors in the UK are suffering from stress-related symptoms, which can include:

- Anxiety / panic attacks
- Sleep problems
- Fatigue / low energy
- Poor concentration
- Migraine / headaches
- Irritable bowel syndrome

Most people feel stress every day and in small doses it can help you cope with life’s daily problems in a positive way.

When stress builds up, becomes unrelenting or even overwhelming it can start to affect your physical and emotional health and well-being, and this is when action needs to be taken.

Work-induced stress is a significant problem in the UK, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimates that in 2009 and 2010 9.8 million working days were lost through work-related stress.

For each person experiencing work-related stress, an estimated 22.6 days of work was lost – that is equal to 0.42 days per worker.

Mind, the mental health charity, reports that stress in the workplace is thought to be the second biggest occupational health problem in the UK after back pain.

Stress, depression or anxiety-related sick days are three times more likely to be taken by women than men. Analysis by Legal & General shows that women made 74% of stress-related absences. Maybe this is because women feel more able to accept that they might have a problem whilst men might try to soldier on?

In a recent survey 77% of small business owners reported suffering ailments in the workplace, including a lack of energy (31%), anxious thoughts (31%), headaches (26%) and back pain (26%).

A combination of long hours and working harder to service new businesses could be what has driven 45% of small business owners to say they feel more stressed now than they did a year ago.

# Out There...

Last year, close to 7 million prescriptions were issued by the NHS for anti-anxiety drugs. As economic woes have worsened, and job and mortgage worries become rife, the numbers being treated in hospital for such disorders have soared – with more than 17,000 outpatients' appointments last year, four times as many as in 2007.

For many years I had run my own successful marketing and sponsorship consultancy and had thrived on and taken great satisfaction from the relentless pressure of gaining and keeping clients, doing good work on their behalf and keeping my head above water.

Suddenly, a few short years ago everything changed and I started to develop an ever-increasing range of worrying symptoms:

I couldn't sleep well and kept waking up in the middle of the night turning problems around in my head. I became grumpy, snappy and much quicker to lose my temper with those around me and, far more worryingly, I stopped looking forward to going to work and started looking for excuses not to do so.

I wasn't sure what to do and tried to get through what I felt was just a difficult phase but the more I worried, the worse I felt and it became a vicious circle.

Clearly I needed to get some help but it took me a few weeks to get my head around things and accept the fact as I felt that this was my own problem and that I could sort it out on my own.

I didn't tell anyone until I woke up early one morning and had a full-blown panic attack, which terrified me – the cat was well and truly out of the bag!

My wife was wonderfully supportive and I felt a massive relief that I had finally shared my problem with somebody.

I knew that I needed to do something and started to read up about stress in the workplace and found out how common it was.

Accepting that I had a problem with stress and its unpleasant associated medical side effects was the easy part.

Knowing what to do about it was far more difficult and I thrashed around for several weeks in a state of confusion without any real understanding of how best to combat my problem.

Without diminishing how bad I felt, I understood that I was really a member of the "worried well" brigade rather than someone with deep-set psychological or mental health issues.

All I succeeded in doing was making myself feel worse but eventually a friend of my wife told me that she had suffered in a similar way to me and had greatly benefited from a course of Autogenic Therapy (AT) and she recommended her therapist to me.

I was totally bemused as I had never heard of AT and didn't have a clue what it was or what it entailed.

Once I had done a bit of due diligence, in other words, Googled the words "Autogenic Therapy" and then had a good look at the British Autogenic Society website, I thought that I might as well give it a try, particularly as my wife offered to pay for the course – obviously she was desperate that I tried to sort myself out given how difficult and unbearable I was becoming to live with!

I really had no idea what to expect from Autogenic Therapy and the entire AT experience and was surprised when, before we started, I was sent a very detailed form to fill in by the therapist that asked for a lot of detail regarding my life, childhood, operations, illnesses, family situation and my current issues.

It took me a while to fill it in properly and also gave me quite a bit of food for thought about my life and how I lived it.

When we met to go through the form the therapist explained that filling in the form was the first part of the self-examination process and that it was also important for him to know about my medical history in case I was contra-indicated for AT.

Thankfully I passed the test and was accepted!

It was explained that we would meet for nine weekly sessions each lasting about an hour and I would be asked to practice the AT mental Exercises that I learned in the weekly sessions at home, ideally three times per day.

What came through straight away was how calm the atmosphere was and how easy everything felt.

My therapist explained about stress and how it can work in a positive manner and how it can also overwhelm you and that Autogenic Therapy could help switch off the "fight and flight" response and turn on the body's "relaxation response".

Could it really be as easy as that?

Well yes it could. Each week I learned a fresh mental exercise that I would practice for about ten minutes every day in a neutral, balanced and symmetrical position – generally flat on my back in bed, and slowly things started to happen.

I just felt calmer and more serene and my problems didn't seem so insurmountable. I also started to sleep better. I just felt more in control of my life again.

Interestingly enough, I was also shown how to offload emotions that had got stuck inside me and was able to get rid of lots of repressed feelings of anger and anxiety.

I was given a brief tick-box test before we started which measured my levels of anxiety and depression and I was pleased and relieved to learn that by the end of the course they had significantly diminished.

I didn't really need this confirmation as I already knew that I had got over the hump and was now far better equipped to deal with the stresses of everyday life and was further boosted by the fact that AT had provided me with a toolkit that I continue to use for no more than ten minutes everyday to ensure that I continue to cope.

**If any of the above touches a cord or if you want to find out more about the benefits of Autogenic Therapy how it works and how you can take a course, then please visit my website at [www.howtobeatstress.co.uk](http://www.howtobeatstress.co.uk) or call me on 07812 057 753.**

***"AT has proved to be an essential investment for me as opposed to an unnecessary luxury"***

***Graham Thomas,  
GE Partner***