Positive Renewal
Can you even keep going?

by Richard E. Boyatzis and Melvin Smith

Leadership is hard, but can be very rewarding. Stress is a part of our lives and essential to our survival and adaptation. But if stress becomes chronic, it causes rifts in our awareness, and eventually erodes our cognitive, perceptual, and emotional openness and performance. Fortunately, the human body and mind have a built mechanism for renewal in the experiences of hope, mindfulness, compassion and playfulness.

For many of us in leadership, our lives—and work—are full, perhaps too full. We’re involved in many relationships and activities that use our energy and demand our attention. These arouse stress, perhaps not acute stress (causing us to pull our hair out), but milder stress that creeps up on us in frequent doses, resulting in a chronic condition. While we need stress to function and adapt, too much of it causes our body to defend itself by closing down. We become cognitively, perceptually, and emotionally impaired.

Participating in an event or activity, or merely thinking about it, can arouse this low-level, yet potent, stress—if any of four conditions are present: 1) the outcome or activity is important to you; 2) the outcome or consequence is uncertain; 3) you are being observed or evaluated; 4) you anticipate any of these conditions; someone or something angered or upset you. Leaders have an extra dose of power stress that comes from being responsible for people, organizations, or outcomes.

While we’re expanding our responsibilities and being promoted into bigger and bigger jobs and roles, stress builds—but we aren’t given equal time or adequate preparation in practices that reverse its chronic effects. We are not taught how to renew. Our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits can rebuild themselves, but they might not. The difference is our intentionality in using activity and experience to invoke the neurological networks and endocrine systems that enable our body and mind to heal itself—to renew.

If you are not aware of how much of this annoying stress—and how many moments of renewal—you experience each day, take these two inventories:

Stress Inventory
Review your activities of last week.
If you were so stressed you can’t remember anything that happened, give yourself a score of 100. For each Activity/Time listed, count each moment or event on a day that aroused tension, stress, or had one of the four conditions:
- Waking up, did you think of what you had to do, a problem, or trouble?
- Difficulty getting ready for the day
- Traffic or delays in getting to work
- A subordinate, colleague, or client
who frustrated you or caused a problem
- Delays or obstacles to an activity
- Pressure surrounding a report, task, project, performance goal, or deadline
- Having to work later than planned
- Traffic or delays in getting home
- Conversations, phone calls, or emails that aroused any of the stressors
Now, total the number and calculate your Stress Score for the week:

Renewal Inventory
Review your activities of last week. If you can’t remember anything, give yourself a score of 0 to reflect that you likely didn’t experience any renewal. For each Activity/Time, count moments or events, lasting 15 minutes or more, characterized by 1) a sense of inner peace and calm; 2) a feeling of excitement and eagerness in anticipating an activity or the future; 3) a sense of being in the present, not thinking about the past or future; 4) a pause or time out from what you were doing or feeling.
- Meditation or prayer
- Yoga, tai chi, or martial arts practice
- A loving moment with your spouse, partner, or significant other
- Playing with your spouse, partner, or significant other
- Doing something for another person to help him or her
- Coaching or mentoring someone (formally or informally)
- Helping a friend with a compassionate approach (not trying to fix them)
- Modest exercise that you do regularly
- Thinking about values or purpose
- Talking with others about your shared values or purpose

Now, total the number and calculate your Renewal Score:

Calculate your Renewal Ratio by dividing your Renewal Score by your Stress Score, (as follows):

$$\text{Renewal Ratio} = \frac{\text{Renewal Score}}{\text{Stress Score}}$$

If your Renewal Ratio is greater than 1, you may be experiencing the benefit of periodic renewal moments to reverse the damage from chronic stress. Now spread the joy to others! If your Renewal Ratio is less than 1, you may be experiencing more chronic stress than renewal. Engage in recommended pursuits:

Reflect on one thing you could do each day to change the balance (you might work on these plans for renewal with another person or personal coach). Build these conversations about renewal into your relationships; without intentionality, renewal will be unsustainable. Stress will happen, but renewal will only occur if you make it happen.

Four experiences contribute to building closer, more productive resonant relationships: hope, mindfulness, compassion, and playfulness. These experiences also invoke the renewal processes in the body. Without periodic doses of renewal, even those of us with effective, resonant relationships will be reduced to unsustainable performance, and ineffectiveness. We simply burn up.

In Leadership Deep Dive, we work with executives who wrestle with this issue and seek ways to escape this downward spiral. Although natural, this slide is not inevitable. We can, with support from others, including coaches, reorient our work and lives to engage in sufficient renewal each day to keep ourselves excited, effective, and engaged.

The challenge remains maintaining intentionality in our daily dose of renewal to enjoy a healthier life and to sustain or increase our effectiveness at work.