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PHOTOS BY Andrew van Tilborgh



IT'S NO SECRET THAT STRESS

levels are at an all-time high. From big-picture issues like equality and the environment to everyday headaches like getting by in a tough economy, there are many challenges that can make our blood pressure rise—affecting not only our emotional well-being but our physical health. Unchecked, ongoing stress can contribute to illnesses like cancer, diabetes and heart disease.


With all the problems around, it's perhaps not surprising that, according to stress specialist Dr. Modupe Akinola, people aren't as happy as they used to be: the number of happy people in the United States peaked in 1957. "They had so much less than than we have now and we are so much more stressed," she says. "But that just means we need to do more to kind of make sure that stress isn't killing us."

As a respected expert on the topic of stress—which she defines as “when the demands of a situation exceed your resources to cope”—Akinola's research into how it impacts the corporate world has been widely reported and acknowledged. However, she may be better known for a recent, less academic role: helping *Thor* actor Chris Hemsworth overcome his fears to walk on a 900-foot-high crane in his new documentary series, *Limitless* (see sidebar).

In the first episode in the series exploring longevity and health, Akinola prepares Hemsworth for the high-rise challenge by helping him explore his fears and develop practices to overcome them. The program has takeaway lessons for anyone dealing with stress that Akinola talks about more in a conversation with *WayMaker Journal*.



While there are common practices that can help reduce stress, there's no one right way to embrace them all because people are different, she says. For some, exercise might be just what they need. "There's something about working out that distracts your mind because you're doing something physical." Others may need to do the exact opposite and sit and be still or read a book.



“We need to do more to kind of make sure that stress isn’t killing us.”

Knowing what works best for you requires what Akinola calls “dating your stress,” getting to know first what triggers it and then digging down to look at what may be some of the root causes. This can change the way you look at stress, she says. “There’s usually something deeper, and when someone can get to the underlying reason why, it then shifts the perspective.”

For example, you may realize that you’re feeling stressed because you want to be able to provide for your family and see them thrive. “So, this stress has a purpose and a meaning,” says Akinola. With that in mind, “what do you need to do to be present with it in a way that you can achieve what you want for your family?”

Mindset matters

Akinola encourages people to remember that, in one way, stress is an affirmation of their unique value. “You have been put on this earth for a reason,” she says. “There is a purpose for your existence, there is a purpose behind what you’re experiencing, and so it’s on you to figure out what that purpose is and to figure out what you’re supposed to be solving in this world. And yes, sometimes that might come

with stress because this world is really messed up and needs you.”

Personally, Akinola finds meditation a great help, though it has been a learning curve. “When I started, I could not meditate for five minutes,” she admits. “I learned that I need to still my mind and just be present and feel my bodily sensations.” Slowing her mind down can be challenging because “I’m a thinker: I do it for my profession.”

As an exerciser, she likes walking and being out in nature. “When I am stressed, that fresh air, and experiencing and hearing and even feeling (if you’re in cold weather) that breath, that just calms me down.” Finally, she also believes in picking up the phone. “Sometimes you just need to vent and you need to call on somebody and say, ‘Hey, this is going on.’”

What about helping other people with their stress when they call you like that? Akinola recommends asking someone who is venting what they need from you rather than offering unsolicited advice. Many times we are way too quick to jump in with a fix, she says. Instead, ask: “Do you need me to agree and co-sign on the things you’re venting [about]? Do you need me to be the positive voice? Do you need me to help solve the problem? Do you need me to just shut up and just listen?”

Without downplaying the negative consequences of unrelieved stress, Akinola is careful to underscore that not all stress is necessarily bad. “The dominant model is, ‘Get rid of it. Avoid it. Run away from it,’” she

acknowledges. “But most of us can think of times when we have really thrived under it . . . I know I have had situations where the stress I was feeling gave me energy, gave me the motivation to really keep pushing, and that ends up being an extremely beneficial experience.”

Rather than focus on whether the stress you are dealing with is good or bad, concentrate on your mindset, she says. This doesn’t mean pretending the stress isn’t real, it’s about learning how to channel it and use it to your benefit. “We can train our minds to say, ‘Oh, I’m stressed. Why am I stressed? What do I care about that is stressing me out? Now, what can I do to make sure that my best self shines in light of this stress?’”

That’s the process we need to go through, she says, instead of, “I’m stressed, can I have some potato chips and can I dump my trauma on other people and can I drink extra wine and then yell at people and be reactive?”

Rather, she advises people to welcome stress as an opportunity for them to develop resilience and then recall all the times they thrived under pressure in the past. “I call them monuments—where you really climbed and made it under stress.”

Opening doors

Akinola herself has dealt with the additional stressor shared by many from minority communities—code-switching. Though she grew up in a Black neighborhood in New York City’s Spanish Harlem, her parents sent her

and her sisters to a private, mostly white all-girls school.

“You go to school and you moake sure that you are speaking proper English and all that, which my parents made sure was the case,” she remembers. “Then you go back to Spanish Harlem and you need to be like, ‘Hey girl,’ because you don’t want to be called the Oreo or the white girl or whatever. So code-switching is something that is a part of who I am.”

Having said that, she’s now at a place in life where she can be her authentic self professionally, “but that comes with time, that comes with getting to a particular level, in some ways. But it’s always on my mind: Is this an environment where I feel psychologically safe to be my true self?”

She references Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask,” noting the need to do that at times so that people don’t stereotype you and so treat you differently. “But then, when you get your foot in the door, the way you counteract stereotypes is being a counter-stereotypical example,” she says. “So your presence changes those stereotypes of people so that hopefully generations after can come into these environments not having to code-switch all the time, because we have paved the way.”

Growing up, Akinola was aware of her African heritage—“I was raised with a lot of love, a lot of African traditions even though we were in the U.S., and a big belief that it takes a village . . . more aunts and uncles than one could ever imagine.”

Immigrating from Ghana to give Akinola and her sisters “the lives they couldn’t have,” her parents (Dad originally from Nigeria, Mom from Togo) emphasized the importance of education to their daughters as “the key to open many doors.”

Akinola embraced the message, setting her sights on going to Harvard. “Coming from a family of immigrants, this idea of striving for [something] that high was unheard of in my



“Sometimes you just need to vent and you need to call on somebody.”



HANDLING STRESS LIKE A SUPERHERO

Dr. Modupe Akinola helps the *Thor* star overcome stress to attempt a crane walk 900 feet above Sydney, Australia, for the first episode of his National Geographic/Disney+ series *Limitless with Chris Hemsworth*. Here's what she trains him to do in "Stress-Proof" (above and right):

Reframe. "We experience situations where we are not prepared and we tell ourselves, 'Oh, I'm a loser. I can't do this,'" she says. "Use positive self-talk; this is about reframing how you think when you think negatively . . . 'What will I gain out of this experience?' Our fight or flight system doesn't just respond to the outside world; our own thoughts and emotions can also influence that circuit."

Breathe. In the midst of a stressful situation our breathing rate can increase, decreasing the blood flow to our brain and our muscles. Practice box breathing, she advises: imagine a four-sided box in your mind and trace its outline as you inhale for four seconds, hold it for four seconds, exhale for four seconds, hold it for four seconds.

Repeat. "This simple breathing technique demonstrates that the stress signals connecting our brain and body aren't just one way; the body can send signals back."

Meditate. "Not only does it make us feel less stressed in the moment, if we do it regularly it can alter our stress response," she says. As little as 15 minutes can make a difference. And "what if you add to that over time or it just becomes a practice that's a regular thing that . . . helps you in . . . living longer."



PHOTOS: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC FOR DISNEY+/CRIG PARRY

family," she recalls. "It was a reminder that when you set your sights high, great things can happen."

Akinola didn't only get a place at Harvard—she went on to earn four degrees there (bachelor's and master's in psychology and a doctorate in organizational behavior from the university and an MBA from the business school). Her time there was "a gift," she says, helping her develop the leadership and entrepreneurial skills she'd first exercised as a teen, selling handmade friendship bracelets for \$25 a pop. Harvard was "a dream place for me, not to mention I met some of the most amazing people that to this day are my closest friends."

Solving problems

Initially considering a career in business, Akinola kind of stumbled into her calling as a stress expert. While at Harvard she got to explore her African heritage. In her junior year

she secured some grants to work on a UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) project in Benin. After graduating, she spent some time in Ghana developing a group of nurseries and literacy centers to help the underprivileged: "I wanted to give back some of the education I had been blessed with." Working in the nonprofit sector, she recognized her need to strengthen her business skills to be more effective.

During a spell with management consultants Bain & Co. she realized "one of the things I loved about consulting was, yes, solving business problems



"Sometimes we need to expose ourselves to extremely physical challenges, partly because our bodies were designed so that when we're under that type of physical stress, we get the resources, the adrenaline, the hormones, to be able to fight or flee from that stressful situation," Akinola explains. "So, in order to know that you can overcome stress, you need to put yourself into extremely stressful situations."

She's not advocating going out and doing something dangerous just for the sake of it. "This is under supervision," she says of Hemsworth's extreme

"What can I do to make sure that my best self shines in light of this stress?"

for our clients, but also the organizational dynamic—understanding why some people buckled under stress and others didn't. Understanding why some of our clients accepted some of our recommendations and others didn't."

That led her to getting her Ph.D. in organizational behavior and a teaching position at Columbia Business School, where she became the first tenured Black professor in the institution's history. Now as the Barbara and David Zalaznick Professor of Business there, she also directs the Sanford C. Bernstein & Co. Center for Leadership and Ethics.

She describes her role teaching first-year MBA students as guiding

them in becoming "inspiring, ethical, thoughtful leaders of the 21st century who know how to motivate others to do good . . . to be good decision-makers, to be able to influence and persuade." That journey begins with "reminding them of the things that matter most and especially about how to be self-aware and how not to be the poor leaders that many of them have had." She also hosts the *TED Business* podcast.

In preparing Hemsworth for his crane walk, Akinola coaches him as he trains with Australia's special forces, swimming in a pool with his hands and feet tied, and attempts a rescue from a burning building at a firefighter training center.

preparation, intended to create an experience in which he overcomes something that seems hard which then gives him the tools and confidence to take on an even bigger challenge. "But what I wanted to design was something that he would think that he could not fully overcome and give him the tools to overcome it."

While facing some stress to mine riches from it, it's also important not to allow yourself to be stressed over the little things "that aren't as meaningful," she says. "That's the problem, that we're stressed out about little, meaningless things, and that's what's continuing to kill us." ❖

From an interview with Louis Carr