

How to be a Genius at Stress Release

*5 fun strategies to turn stress, burnout and
exhaustion into energy, resilience and insight*



by Pat McHenry Sullivan

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You're a Genius at Stress Release is based on a continuing legal education presented by Pat McHenry Sullivan for the State Bar of California, "From Stress, Burnout and Exhaustion, to Energy, Resilience and Insight"; excerpts from Pat's "Vision and Values" columns for the *San Francisco Chronicle's* career section (now available as a Visionary Resources collection, "*Finding Spirit at Work*"), and Pat's forthcoming book, *You're a Genius: how to reclaim childhood brilliance*.

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You can see more of her work at <http://www.klinarts.blogspot.com>*

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www.visionary-resources.com

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WHICH OF THESE KEY STRATEGIES SPEAKS MOST TO YOU?

Yes, You Can Be a Stress Release Genius



How closely does this drawing illustrate your stressful situations? Are you also overloaded with work, scarce on time, workspace and other resources? Are you equally unappreciated? Does your workplace also encourage you to deny and stuff stress?

Whatever your situation, you can truly become your own best stress release expert.

After all, you are the only person who really can know your stresses and how they affect you. Only you can choose to pay attention to them and to take prompt action.

I developed the strategies in this special report between 1990 and 1995, when I worked for a highly competitive law firm that went through three downsizings. My husband was out of work, and three family members were dying on the other side of the country. By getting creative with stress, I learned how to work more efficiently (so I could keep my job), have more energy to do overtime (so I could afford more visits home; and have more vitality and energy.

Since then I've taught these strategies to thousands of attorneys, hospital workers and others in high-stress jobs. People find them simple and fun to learn, fast and easy to use, and sometimes a bit shocking at first:

1. Act Like a Child
2. Speak and Hear The Truth
3. Stop Stuffing Stress – Revision It
4. Get Creative!
5. Create a Workplace Oasis

Use these strategies well and they can help you

- work more efficiently to protect your job, your health, your relationships;
- have plenty of energy and time at the end of the day for fun, service, and friendships.

These strategies are unique because they tap and exercise your natural genius. This gives you three special benefits.

First, your natural genius includes imagination, intuition, instincts, curiosity, a drive to explore the world and other gifts. Using these

gifts as you work will alert you to stress faster and give you better ways to deal with it.

Second, when you use your natural genius, it's easier to be clear about who you are, what matters to you, and what you are called to do for life and work. When life and work feel purposeful and meaningful, stress tends to melt. You may get tired, but you don't burn out. You can see how to be guided by your own dreams, not someone else's timetable.

Third, you get out of the limited mode of just trying to manage stress and into a creative mode, where everything you do helps create a more excellent life.

Even though school, family, faith community and our own fears probably may have quashed much of your natural genius, it's still in you, ready to be retrieved. Stay tuned to my newsletter and [website](#) for a wealth of tips on how to do this.

Before we begin, some tips: Keep an open mind. Select what's useful. Disregard or adapt the rest.

Be sure to check with your health or mental health professionals about any conditions that can exacerbate stress.

And above all, have fun! Life's way too long to live in misery.

Very best wishes for stress-free, vibrant, purposeful life and work!

Pat McHenry Sullivan
Oakland, CA 2013

Genius Stress Release Practice 1: Act Like a Child



When you were little, you rested easily and completely, so you didn't become exhausted as many adult bodies and minds do. Though you didn't know the word "resilience," you had it, big-time.

When you were very young, life was an adventure! You didn't yet know how to talk yourself out of trying new things or how to hold tension in your body.

As a child you also instinctively used some brilliant stress strategies you may have lost on the way to adulthood:

- **Express.** A good cry or a temper tantrum dissolved stress quicker than summer rain can wash away sticky heat.

- **Relish the moment.** You lived in the moment, not yet burdened with guilt, grudges, blame, fear and other exhausting stagnant emotions.
- **Have fun.** Play and laughter constantly enlivened and revitalized you. Fun kept you relaxed, fed your immune system and protected your health.

Wouldn't your natural childhood gifts be useful now? Problem is, you were probably most expert at using these gifts when you were about three to five years old. You hadn't learned yet how to drive, hold down a job or balance a checkbook.

As you learned grownup skills, you probably learned to quash natural genius: curiosity, creativity, clarity about what you like and don't like, instincts and intuition, and your ability to be present to the moment.

So many things can help you bring back these gifts, like good therapy, medical help for sleep issues, a great vacation, meditation practice, or any kind of arts.

Need a quick fix for grownup stress? Here are three tips:

1. **Do something fun every day that involves your body.** Jump rope while making up silly rhymes. Dance wildly. Be guided by videos on laughter yoga on the web, or just start laughing for no reason until you break into laughter. Doctors say it's good for you!
2. **Work out your anger in a grownup way.** Don't have a task like chopping wood or beating rugs like our grandparents did? Stomp on a carpeted floor or whack a tennis racket onto the bed to unleash physical and emotional tension. In a parked car with the windows rolled up, scream out the words you have to hold back at work or home.
3. **Play with your stressful problems.** With practice, I've learned to take an imaginary retreat for just two minutes, then come back to my problems more refreshed and efficient. For instructions, see Strategy 5.

Genius Stress Practice 2

Speak and Hear the Truth



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To create a genius approach to stress, you need to know five truths:

1. Just how bad are things: money, work or people issues, emotional or spiritual worries?

2. How do you now respond to stress? E.g., do you tend to tighten up physically and drive yourself crazy? What do you say to yourself?

3. Does your current stress response reduce or increase your stress?

4. Which stressors can you change? What must you accept?

5. What and who can help you, from internet resources to allies and role models (living, dead or imaginary)?

Unfortunately, most of us have been well trained to deny stress and ignore resources.

- “We’re not supposed to talk about how stressful it is to work here. That’s considered disloyal,” says a staff member at a huge hospital. Almost everyone else in the workshop agreed.
- “My stresses seem so small and normal that I either ignore them or tell myself that they’re inconsequential. Then I realize that’s like the proverbial death by a thousand small cuts,” says a business owner.
- “If I’d started meditating and doing fun artwork years ago, I’d have been a better lawyer and happier dad much sooner,” says a litigator.

Fortunately, seeing problems more clearly can also help you see options for stress release. These practices can help you be more attentive to stress *and* relieve it at the same time!

1. **Mindfulness meditation** is now taught by many medical and law schools because it is so effective. Two resources: [Jon Kabat Zinn’s overview of mindfulness](#) and [Laura Patriquin’s body scan](#).

2. [Desktop yoga](#) offers quick stretches you can do anywhere for almost instant relaxation and focus.

3. [Bates eye work exercises](#) can quickly clear brain fog, eye strain and help relax the head and neck area.

Genius Stress Release Practice 3

STOP STUFFING STRESS – REVISION IT



Vision is one of our most powerful gifts. With vision, we let go of puny notions that all we can expect is “a little bit” of stress management. As we expand our notion of what’s possible, we liberate creativity.

I help my clients create a vision for *work-life excellence*, in which excellent life leads to effective, satisfying work which leads to an even better life. After naming the challenges (see strategy 2), we focus on a vision of what we truly want. Sometimes we plan strategy; often strategies arise naturally from just holding onto the vision of resilience, energy and insight. Here are some examples of stress-free visions, with possible strategies in parentheses:

I awake refreshed from a great night’s sleep (after assessing what’s keeping me from sleeping well and making appropriate changes).

I enjoy the transition from sleep to active mode. (I take a moment or two to relax and stretch in bed, then I do a few minutes of yoga or meditation. Note: this simple step helped one client’s day turn from frantic to fabulous.)

I commit to a wonderful day of serving myself and others. (Many use an affirmation, such as my dad's favorite, "in the morning I set my good purpose.")

From the moment I get up until I go to sleep, I take care of myself first. (This covers all the things you need to do to get proper nutrition, have fun time and relaxation. Can't do it all at once? Take on one challenge at a time, like taking healthy, nutritious snacks to work, so you can avoid sugary or processed foods that debilitate you.)

I make the most of my commute time. (On public transportation, read something inspiring or fun, listen to music, or meditating. If driving, stay alert and attentive, honoring other drivers as fellow journeyers.)

While I work, I notice and release stress as it happens. (Mindfulness meditation, desktop yoga and other strategies help with this.)

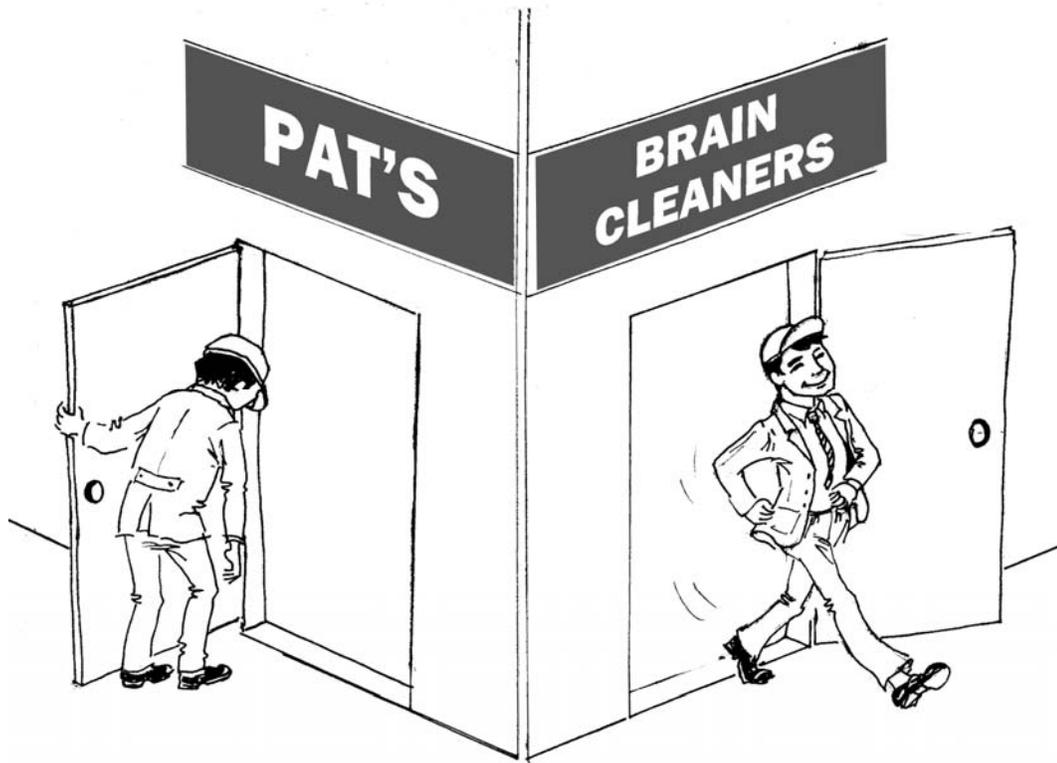
Throughout the day, I am grateful for my life and work, even when it is hard. (As the mystic Meister Eckhart has said, "if the only prayer you can say is 'thank you,' that is enough." Even if the only gratitude you feel is gratitude for the clarity of how awful you feel. (This happened almost every day during the hard times I described earlier.) That can then lead to gratitude that you are equipped with resourcefulness and the brains to tackle your problems.)

When I leave work, I release the workday and all its concerns. (Simple rituals for working with meaning and joy all day then letting go the work day and preparing for the reverse commute are best.)

My good work supports my good life and vice versa. (A powerful affirmation. Say it often, act as if it's true, and make it happen!)

Genius Stress Tip 4

Get Creative



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There's probably no better stressbuster than imagination. It's free, fun and easy to use, and it's something you always have with you. It can help lower blood pressure, enhance your immune system, reverse heart disease and cancer, and relax computer-fogged eyes. Plus, it can generate resourcefulness and efficiency, which means you can get more done, faster and better.

The idea of taking my brain to the cleaners popped into my mind one overstressed, mistake-prone day when my brain literally felt like it had turned into a mushy mess filled with cobwebs and fog. I imagined what was supposed to be my intelligence center as an IT department where my computer geeks had been tied up and some horrible gremlins had taken over. Here's how I reclaimed my brain:

1. After laughing at the absurd truth of this visualization, I took a deep breath.

2. Next, I imagined my own personal Navy SEAL team kicking out the gremlins and helping my computer geeks get back to work.

3. As my imaginary computer geeks returned to their stations, I imagined a cheerful army of cleaners vacuuming away the cobwebs, chasing out the fog, and fixing frayed wiring until my brain was humming again.

If I'd had the time, I'd have followed the visualization with a break to sit by a nearby fountain and really let my head clear. But because I'm well practiced in visualization, just imagining myself sitting by the water works wonders when time is tight.

Result: in less than five minutes, brain fogginess was gone. So were neck and head tension. I became efficient again. Work became fun and meaningful. My clients have had similar results.

How can you adapt this creative visualization for yourself? The key is to imagine exactly your stresses, then playfully work with them.

For more creative tips, see the next chapter.

Genius Stress Tip 5

CREATE A WORKPLACE OASIS



What's your biggest source of "Ahh!" after a hard day? A relaxing bath? A rollicking Zumba class? A massage?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could have some of that "Ahh!" feeling *while* you're in the midst of stressful situations? Actually, you can. Here are my favorite ways to have lots of small "ahh!" moments throughout the day:

1. **Organize and beautify.** Keep nearby only the projects, tools and materials you actually need. Store everything else in clearly labeled folders or boxes.

Choose colors and decor that suit you. Flowers or a plant always enliven your space. Mindfully practice paying attention to necessary

sounds (like your boss calling or real danger), while shutting down background noise.

2. Support your sense of meaning, purpose and joy. Since 1990 I've been collecting pictures and stories of symbols, objects and practices that help people remember what matters most while they work. Examples: photos of family may remind you *why* you work and help you feel more connected. Stones from a retreat setting can help you re-anchor into your purpose.

Many people pray or meditate at work. Many also bring in inspirational reading and quotes.

Because of business practice and labor laws, workplace objects and practices need to be discreet. For more on how to bring more meaning, purpose and joy into all your work, see the [Inspired Work](#) section of my website.

3. Take an imaginary mini-vacation. Have fun creating the perfect imaginary retreat. In your imagination, you can be both high on a mountaintop enjoying the view *and* next to a tropical ocean beach. There, you can enjoy a relaxing massage from Colin Firth followed by a vigorous workout led by Tina Turner. You can have total quiet or a private concert by your favorite artist. You can safely act out or scream in sound-proof rooms.

Imagine staying in your retreat long enough for the tension to drain out of your bones. Imagine watching your zombie-like stare turn to alertness. Imagine hearing your voice change from crabby to cheerful, your muscles become alive and strong again. Imagine compassion for yourself and others flowing through your body, mind and spirit.

While still in your imaginary retreat, see your life from a fresh perspective. With practice, you can go on your retreat, then come back to reality refreshed and revitalized in less than five minutes. Caution: don't try this while you are driving!

Ready for More?

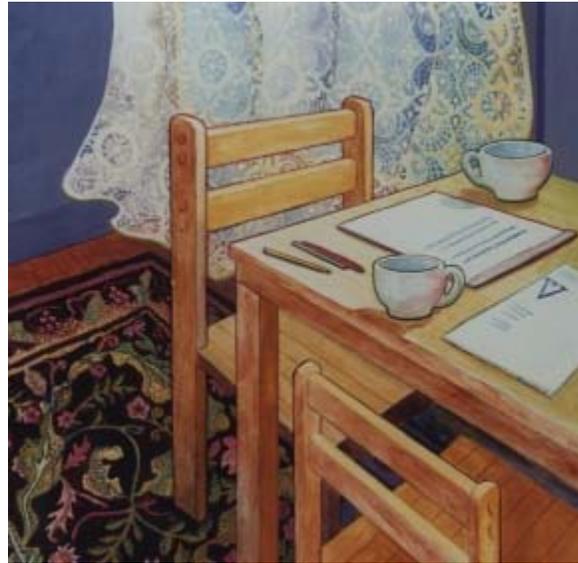
Ready to blow more fresh winds of your genius into your work and life?

Want focused help from my years of helping lawyers and other stressed-out people find meaning and joy?

I'm ready to serve you!

Option one: Step into my visioning parlor (literally or by phone) to identify your challenges, your allies and resources. See clearly how to turn each challenge into an opportunity. Focus a vision and practical plan. Brainstorm innovative strategy.

Call 510-530-0284 or write pat@visionary-resources.com for a free consult.



Pat's visioning table by Marcia Alpert

Option two: bring me into your workplace or group for a powerful, fun and effective talk or workshop. Call 510-530-0284 or write pat@visionary-resources.com to discover how I can best help you.

Pat's continuing education program for the California State Bar on "From Stress, Burnout and Exhaustion to Energy, Resilience and Insight" has been one of the most popular continuing education programs. Pat is a fabulous educator and she certainly knows how to connect with her audience. Connie Madera Voos, Litigation Program Attorney at Continuing Education of the Bar

Thank you very much for your delightful presentation on "Spirit Breaks and Stress Busters." The critical care staff at Alta Bates Medical Center put some of the ideas you suggested to work very soon after. ...Before you spoke, overtime had been extreme and tempers flaring. Your suggestions for taking Spirit Breaks in the

midst of chaos have been fruitful in helping us keep our energy up and centered. Amy D. Nichols, RN, BSN, Critical Care Manager, Alta Bates Hospital

“Pat truly is a visionary. She helps people see their own visions clearly, make specific plans to manifest those visions in their lives and work, and bring their own sense of spirit into tangible reality. People come away feeling more innovative and resourceful themselves, because of how Pat serves them.” Carol Costello, author of *The Soul of Selling*

Pat Sullivan is brilliant at turning negatives into positives! Jenny Kassan, co-founder, Cutting Edge Capital and K-2 Legal Corporation

Pat Sullivan is an amazing inspirational speaker with a great sense of humor. She has the ability to take the mundane tasks that each of us does and to give us a more meaningful context for them. I have seen her speak to a group of overly busy lawyers and watched her bring out quickly their thoughtfulness and purpose. J. Kim Wright, founder, Cutting Edge Law, author of the ABA’s best selling *Lawyers as Peacemakers*