

## Remote Roundtables: Mastering Your Stress

Laura Young: Hi, I'm Laura Young and I'm the head of wellness here at Goldman Sachs.

I'm excited to share a conversation I recently held with Dr. Heidi Hanna, best-selling author and thought leader in the fields of stress mastery and brain-based health and performance.

In the session, we discuss strategies to enhance social connection, optimize one's energy, and increase emotional regulation to enhance personal and professional performance. These practices can help us optimize our physical, mental, and emotional energy as we continue to navigate this extraordinary landscape, and to refine our work-life rhythm

Dr. Hanna's deep passion for this work comes from her own personal experiences with stress, anxiety and depression. She is the Chief Energy Officer of Synergy Brain Fitness, a founding partner of the Academy of Brain Health and Performance, and a Fellow and Advisory Board member for the American Institute of Stress. She has also been named a New York Times best-selling author of several books, including *The Sharp Solution*, *Stressaholic*, and *Recharge*.

I hope you find the session as enlightening and empowering as I did – regardless of who you are or what you do, an investment in emotional and mental health can be so rewarding. So let's dive in.

It's been a challenging year for many people for a lot of reasons, probably more disruption than any of us have experienced on an ongoing basis in our daily lives. Your definition of stress is pretty simple, pretty profound. "Stress is what happens when demand exceeds capacity." How did you come up and arrive at that definition? And help us understand exactly what it means.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: The reason I came up with this really simple definition was because I would ask all of these stress experts that I really admired. And I said, "How would you define stress?" And most of the time it would take 5 to 10 minutes for them to describe it, talk about what happens. But there wasn't really a clear, universal measurement. And as I'm sure everyone knows, if we can't measure it, we can't manage it, we definitely can't master it and use it in positive ways.

So I started looking at really what's at the core of our stress experience that's universal. And so really, if you think about this capacity-versus-demand situation, we looked at this a lot from the standpoint of energy management. What happens when those two things intersect and we no longer have the capacity to meet those demands? That could be physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social, financial--we've got a lot of different resources. But essentially, that perception in

the brain that we don't have enough at this moment is going to trigger a stress reaction.

What we really see at the root of stress problems is the unmanaged chronic stress. It's the everyday stuff that, honestly, most people don't pay enough attention to because it just seems like it's part of the norm. So when I surveyed, and I think now I've surveyed over 80,000 people to figure out, "What's the one thing? Is it nutrition? Is it sleep? Is it exercise, lack of exercise?" By far, the number-one thing people report is the feeling that there's not enough time to get it all done. So if we wake up in the morning with that feeling or that thought, essentially we're kind of hijacked for the rest of the day in this chronic stress state.

But ultimately, at the core of that, if we simplify it all the way down and say that stress isn't good or bad; it's just what happens when demand exceeds capacity, then we can unpack it a little bit more and say, "Well, what is that gap? How long has that been going?" Just like training the body, are we getting enough recovery time? What resources do we have? And then, of course, I know we're going to talk about as well how does our emotional state and our perspective impact that? And it turns out in a lot of ways, our perspective of other experiences changes the whole dynamic.

Laura Young: So you mentioned some of the positive things that come from stress. But how do we change how we relate to stress and capitalize on that?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Stress is that initial sensation you get when demand exceeds capacity. And the clearer we can get on the first signs of when it's going from feeling stress to feeling stressed-out--there's a big difference there. You know, the stress that gives us excitement and some energy versus the stressed-out, where we start to move more into fatigue, overwhelm, brain fog, irritability--everybody reacts differently--the clearer we can get on that, the more we can then stop ourselves, which is why things like mindfulness are so important. If we become aware of it, we can say, "Okay, what is going on here?" And then we totally change the lens. It's what I call becoming a stress detective. So, what's going on? Why is it here? How do I really feel? And my favorite question is actually, "What value is being threatened in this moment?"

So by changing the dialogue from all of those things that make stress feel external, but now we say, "Okay, let me reflect on what's my experience. What value's being threatened?" A lot of times it's the value of, "I want better for my kids," or, "I want that social interaction." Okay, if I know that's what's being activated, is there another way I can act on that right now?

It's ultimately how do we mobilize the energy and information that stress is providing in some positive way? It doesn't mean we fix it or avoid it, necessarily, but we use the energy to mobilize positive change. And now the stress itself loosens its grasp and we can keep moving forward.

Laura Young: You do talk about your Fab Five for brain health and fitness--eat, sleep, move, rest, connect. It would be helpful if you would just give us some perspective on those five and the downtime and the recovery.

Dr. Heidi Hanna:

Sure. So when we think about that, it's interesting, because my journey started really with energy management and peak performance and training professional athletes as well as lead executives in this idea of energy management. And then I actually, while I was doing that, I became really fascinated about the brain and brain health and performance. And the connection between the two was profound. It's like if we manage our energy more effectively, we actually have more of the protective factors for cognitive decline and we minimize the risk factors, so it's really a win-win.

So what's interesting about that is that the core always comes back to the same things. It's common-sense strategies that are not common practice for most people. So how we eat, how we move, and how we sleep, I think everyone knows those are the core three things that we need to be healthy. Eat real food, eat in a way that keeps your body fueled, probably about every 3 to 4 hours during the day. Make sure you're not going long periods of time. So, eating fruits and vegetables and healthy proteins--again, it's common-sense stuff. But making that investment and really making the time so that you're not rushing during the day and minimizing that.

Movement and exercise-- To me, exercise is truly medicine, should be something we do every single day, at least 30 minutes. But if anyone's dealing with anxiety, the studies show that it's more of a 45- to 60-minute commitment. It doesn't have to be high intensity. And you can definitely break up movement throughout the day. The more we move in general, it's probably the number-one circuit-break strategy for stress, is to get up and move, even if it's just a short timeframe, because it actually registers in the brain as making forward progress in your life. So there's a kick of all sorts of beneficial chemicals in the brain when you just move, even if it's literally walking laps around your apartment, which I can say I have done many times.

Sleep, of course, 7 to 8 hours of sleep. And I'm telling you, if you get 6 or less across the board, you are compromising your brain function. For most people, it's that we can't turn our brain off at night. And most of that is because our patterns during the day are flat-lining instead of oscillating.

So if there's one overarching strategy I always say is just remember that the human system is designed to oscillate. Heartbeats, brain waves, blood pressure--everything is supposed to go up and down. If you get up in the morning and you have your coffee and you go and go and go and go and go and go, you are flat-lining. Your hormones change, your cortisol's too high at night, your melatonin's too low, and it's almost impossible to sleep.

So the key is, then, how do we build in more oscillation? Take more breaks, get more movement, really build in that rest and recovery time. It's like switching off the part of your brain that's logical and analytical and problem-solving and all of that into anything that's restorative, creative, curious, funny, playful, purposeful, connecting with other people about things other than work-related. Whether it's now or later, at some point that energy crisis is going to hit unless we really start building in that oscillation.

So those are the four, and then the last one is connecting--socially connecting, but also connecting with purpose and what matters to us. And this also should

be, just like the other four, a strategy that goes into your schedule that's proactively part of your everyday routine and I know if you're engaging with people, it could feel like that's enough. But if our engagement with people is about getting tasks accomplished, it's really not registering the same way as connection about things that are more life-oriented. And again, it's why just even asking a simple question of, "What are you feeling grateful today, Laura?" and I could ask you that, too. "What do you feel grateful for right now?" It just changes the dynamic, and now it's like we're sharing something with each other about who we are as human beings.

Laura Young:

We don't really talk about emotions a lot in the professional setting. I think it would be helpful if you could speak to the importance of emotions as they relate to energy and performance, both on and off the desk.

Dr. Heidi Hanna:

We process energy and information in the brain from the bottom to the top from a timing perspective. So we actually sense information in the base of the brain and throughout our nervous system first before we have feelings, which a lot of people think feelings and emotions are the same. They're actually a little bit different. Feelings are where we start to label the sensory experience of the emotion. And then we have thoughts within about a half of a second. So it's fast.

And so those emotional reactions, most of the time we're not aware of them, and yet they're shaping literally the lens through which we see things. And oftentimes, they're how we're reacting as opposed to responding. And I think those two things are really different as well.

Our reactions are knee-jerk reactions. And what's really interesting is that the studies seem to really emphasize that when this becomes most dangerous or most counterproductive is when there's time urgency. And so it goes back to how many of us feel like there's not enough time. When there's time urgency or a perception of time urgency, we get very emotional, reactive, knee-jerk experiences. We tend to do things the way we've always done them. We tend to have a negativity bias, where we pay more attention to possible threats than possible rewards--again, all how we're hard-wired to function. It doesn't make us bad, and in fact, it's really helpful if there's truly an emergency. The challenge is if those emotions are getting activated by other things, and they can be activated by not eating well, not moving often enough, not sleeping well. So the energy depletion can trigger that emotional experience, as can too much news, too much noise, sitting for too long, all those types of things. Then we're really moving through life from a different place than we would if we were more logical, rational, taking our time problem-solving, being creative, being collaborative.

And so I think where this really comes into play, then, is when we connect with other people or we're working with other people, because those emotions are incredibly contagious. They will impact other people, and they're expressed sometimes in ways we wouldn't expect. So yes, of course, if we're face to face, we can kind of feel the emotion of the other person. A lot of that is through nonverbal cues and things.

Emotions are nonconscious cues that we exchange with each other for safety or threat. And so it's why those things are so important, especially during difficult times. And it could be done through voice, through words, through facial

expressions and all those types of things. So it's important to think about how our emotion or our energy is coming across, but also being aware that we can pick up the emotion and energy of others and be kind of clear on that so we're not just absorbing the negativity from the people around us, but being protective of our own emotional states the best that we can.

Laura Young: You talked a little bit around the idea of threats, and obviously, we're living in extraordinary times right now. And there are likely for many people a fear response associated with that. What adaptive coping strategies can people utilize to better manage and leverage this response?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Yes, so fear is fundamental. So it goes back to that our emotions are cues of safety or threat. And we have a lot of cues of threat that are going to activate a fear response. I think it's important again to look at that, and this is where the idea of stress can be helpful, is that the fear response itself is not bad. It's not good or bad. It is designed to help us to take some sort of action.

So if we're aware of that, then we can, hopefully, acknowledge that it's there, especially during times like these. It's been interesting, because I've been really keeping an eye on how people are having conversations about this. And we can look at social media as an example, but some people are really saying, "Hey, times are tough. We're all in this together," and almost emphasizing how hard things are. And then you have another camp that's saying, "Let's not focus on how hard things are. Let's focus on how positive things are in the midst of the difficulty." And I feel like both, in some ways, are minimizing the full experience, and what we want is the full experience, like it's okay to feel afraid. That's a very rational reaction to what's going on. What's difficult is staying stuck in the fear.

I know for me, the number-one thing is physical exercise. So physical exercise is mobilizing the energy of something that feels threatening that I don't have control of and moving it into a situation where I'm taking some action that's good for me in a situation I can control. I'm not running away from what's causing the fear, but my body and my brain are seeing that there is something I can control. And ultimately, that's what we want to get to, is to say, "Yes, I'm afraid, or whatever that feels like for me, and that's normal, and I can look at what I can control in these circumstances and take some action," Because if we take a small, purposeful action, it actually triggers dopamine and serotonin and all these great chemicals in the brain that say, "Yes, we've got this. Yes, we can do this." And so it starts to create a better balance of fear and possibility.

Can we hold the space between both? Even if just the uncertainty and vulnerability is there, can we have that and possibility, opportunity? Instead of just saying, "Hey, let's not worry about that. Let's just focus on the positive," I think the "Yes, and," is really a better opportunity, and it helps us to develop more resilience and more adaptability. And I just want to emphasize this because there's a difference.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back to where you were before, and that's really important, especially right after something like a crisis. Adaptability is the ability to become better than you were before. And so if we just minimize the experience and move straight into focusing on the positive, we're resilient but we're not actually learning and growing to be better than we were before. That

actually requires a little bit of getting comfortable with both. And I think it's really interesting, because that's where things like post-traumatic growth happen, is it happens when you allow yourself to feel a little bit of the struggle and then make different choices as a result instead of just trying to skip through them more quickly.

Laura Young: Can you speak to the importance of mindfulness as it relates to enhancing personal and professional performance?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: I think mindfulness, because it's everywhere, and a lot of people are talking about it, but it still feels like this lofty idea. And honestly, if you are anxious or depressed and you practice mindfulness, you might feel more anxious or more depressed, because the idea behind mindfulness is becoming really aware of your present moment experiences without judgment. The "without judgment" part is really important.

In any sort of meditation or mindfulness, you're going to do some breathing, some relaxation, get into an open state. So I think just clarifying that, that mindfulness is more of an open awareness of present experience. Meditation is more focused, usually, towards some sort of outcome.

Mindfulness is still really important because we spend so much of our life just going and going and going and not really aware of our experiences. I just think some people don't have the best first experience, especially if they're struggling and then they're wondering, "Why is mindfulness making me feel worse?" Well, you're just becoming really aware of that. And the reality is, again, just like stress, the best thing we can do is become aware and then learn from it and then use it and mobilize it in some way. If we just keep pushing it down, it actually stays there and it grows, it manifests, it causes inflammation. So the releasing of that is actually incredibly helpful. And the more we practice that, then the more we can be fully present with other people when we're in an exchange with them.

It does take some time, and that's why these types of apps and trainings can be really helpful. I just want to encourage everybody that if you try one way and it doesn't work for you, don't give up, because there's a lot of different styles and techniques out there. And especially something even that just helps you connect to your breath and slowing down your breathing and really turning off that stress reaction, even for a few minutes at a time, is going to really, really be an effective tool for people to recharge quickly in the moment when they need to.