Work in the twenty-first century is like raising a baby who demands everything at this very moment. Technology cries out at us through computers, cell phones, PDAs, and other gadgets designed to make our lives easier. Our workdays have expanded into our personal lives and it seems the more productive we are, the more the work increases. We can no longer leave work at the workplace. Customers, bosses, and co-workers can contact us anywhere: at home or even in the middle of the night. The dividing line between the workplace and our personal lives has become nonexistent.

Rampant downsizing and layoffs have forced employees to take on the work of those who have left. Organizations of all types are being pushed to do more with less staff. Globalization has added pressure to “go lean.” The jobs that were lost in the last recession may never be regained because manufacturing and service jobs are being outsourced and filled with overseas workers.

When you add all of these changes to the demanding pressures of dual-career families, rising healthcare costs, the fear of terrorism, and problems in the Middle East, many people are at the breaking point. They are filled with fear,
exhaustion, and anger. More and more people need psychological help and some explode into violence. The term *going postal* has become a common term to express rage. In order to cope, many people engage in unhealthy behaviors such as overeating, smoking, drinking alcohol, and using drugs.

The Marlin Company, a North Haven, Connecticut, workplace communications firm, conducts a survey each year with Harris Interactive entitled “Attitudes in the American Workplace.” In their ninth annual survey, they found the following:

- Forty-three percent of American workers say people in their workplace express fear or anxiety about national events at least several times per week.
- Thirty-three percent say they have observed an increase in anxiety or stress-related physical ailments in their workplace (e.g., headaches and colds).
- Twenty-seven percent report an increase in emotional problems such as depression, insomnia, substance abuse, or family conflicts.
- Twenty-eight percent said the economy caused them the most stress.
- Forty-two percent reported an increase in complaints among co-workers in the last year.
- Twenty-seven percent said morale is lower than it was one year ago.
- Thirty-five percent reported an increase in the number of stressed customers.
- Thirty-one percent said there’s been an increase in the number of customers who are hard to deal with (Marlin, 2003).

Stress impacts everyone in the workplace. It does not matter what kind of work you do, or what kind of environment from which you come. Whether rich or poor, young or old, male or female, no one is immune from it. Workplace
stress greatly impacts our health and well-being as well as the quality of our home life.

The World Health Organization says stress is not just in the United States, but it is a worldwide epidemic. A United Nations report labeled job stress as “the twentieth-century disease.” The American Institute of Stress states that stress-related illness costs our economy more than $100 billion per year. The losses in worker productivity hover around $17 billion annually. Stress-related illness and injuries account for almost three-fourths of employee absenteeism. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that workers who take time off for stress-related disorders will be out for about 20 days. The Bureau of National Affairs estimates that 40 percent of all job turnover is due to stress. The estimates are that a mind-boggling 60 to 90 percent of all doctor visits are stress-related (Perkins, 1994). Stress in the workplace along with the stress at home creates a double stress cocktail that has dramatic impact on our lives. In order to live a healthy, prolonged life we have to get a grip on stress.

HOW STRESS IMPACTS THE WORKPLACE

Job-related stress may be the single most important issue affecting the American workplace today. Job stress, simply defined, is when employees cannot meet the demands or requirements of the job. There is too much to do, not enough time, and not enough people or resources to get the job done. In a recent survey of 1,400 people posted online by CareerBuilder.com, more than one-third of respondents stated they experienced an increase in their workload. They claim they are working longer hours and taking shorter lunch breaks to get the job done. As a result, employees start to experience burnout. They simply cannot cope. They
begin experiencing many physical and mental symptoms of stress. Not only does the stress take its toll on the workforce, but it also detracts from the overall health of any organization, whether it be profit or nonprofit, educational, or government.

The American Institute of Stress estimated in 2001 that stress cost organizations $300 billion in healthcare, workers compensation, absenteeism, and turnover. Healthcare costs are nearly 50 percent higher for workers who are highly stressed on the job (Goetzel et al., 1998).

The true price tag of stress is much greater than healthcare costs alone. Stress is implicated as a causal factor in: absenteeism, injuries, psychological problems, workers compensation claims, lower productivity, employee theft, low morale, poor performance, and turnover. Obviously, it has a direct impact on the bottom line. The high stress levels that are created in the workplace are not left there. They are brought home to have a negative impact on family life.

Northwestern National Life Insurance, now named ReliaStar Financial Corporation, has conducted several important studies on the impact of stress in the workplace (Northwestern National Life Insurance, 1993). Their conclusions detailed the following statistics:

- One million absences in the workplace were stress related.
- Twenty-seven percent said their job gave them the most stress in their lives.
- Forty-six percent considered the amount of job stress levels as very high or extremely high.
- One-third of workers thought about quitting strictly due to job stress.
- Seventy percent said job stress had impaired their physical and mental health.
WHY THE WORKPLACE IS STRESSING YOU OUT

There are many causes for soaring workplace stress. As you read through the following, think of which ones stress you the most, and how you handle them. If you are in a management position, determine which ones you can change or improve to alleviate the stress levels in your employees.

Physical Conditions

The physical workplace has a great impact on stress levels. Temperature, light, noise, air quality, crowding, isolation, safety, and ergonomic quality all contribute to how a person handles their day. Working in a tiny, impersonal cubicle, in an uncomfortable seat only adds to the stress of the job. Being exposed to difficult surroundings day after day takes a traumatic toll on a person’s overall energy, motivation, and health.

Job Design

If it seems we are all doing more work than ever before, it is because we are. Many employees who were downsized or laid off are not being replaced. Yet, most job descriptions are not designed to absorb another whole job. Overwhelming workloads and demands are being placed on workers who remain, and many employees cannot cope.

Most jobs are not designed with the employee’s stress levels in mind. Expectations are too high and unrealistic, with too much responsibility placed on one person. The job description includes too many chores and responsibilities, with the additional caveat that it can be updated at any time to include even more tasks. The demands are overwhelming. People are often expected to work long hours with little
or no break, doing repetitive tasks. They frequently have no autonomy in doing the job the way they see fit. They often do not have the prerequisite training to do the job right. Eventually, employees start to lose job satisfaction.

**Work Roles**

When a job is not designed properly, or too many new responsibilities are added to the design, the employees’ roles becomes perplexing. Their full role is not clearly spelled out. Employees are not sure of their total responsibilities. Their role becomes conflicted between what they think is expected, and what the boss actually expects. Their role may conflict with or duplicate the role of others, causing clashes between co-workers.

When employees are not sure what the priorities of their role are, they either do what they think is best, or work in a state of confusion. Under constant pressure, they fear that they are doing the wrong task, or doing the right task in the wrong way. Time and energy are sapped creating daily fatigue and frustration.

**Technology**

Computers, pagers, cell phones, faxes, and the Internet have increased our speed and productivity. People are expected to be more efficient and productive. But, along with new technology comes new stressors. People must constantly be learning new technology and software.

Sometimes the training is inadequate. Sometimes the technology is inadequate. When technology is not working properly, or equipment breaks down, many employees cannot get the work done, and they feel stress begin to rear its ugly head.
Toxic Management

Management style is one of the greatest contributors to stress in the workplace. The old autocratic ruler, a dinosaur of yesteryear, who relentlessly drives their employees, only serves to create stress, burnout, and turnover. Most research indicates that the number one reason for turnover is the management style of the person who is the immediate supervisor. A direct indication of this is the stress that a toxic boss needlessly creates.

Employees are looking for a leader who cares about them. They are looking for someone who asks and respects their opinions, keeps the channels of communication open in all directions, gives quality feedback, recognizes them, and enables them to feel valued.

Relationships with Co-workers

Another major reason for stress is the relationship people have with co-workers. I have had people in companies I consult with tell me that they will stay at their firm because their peers are so terrific. These people really like their co-workers. They can depend on them for help, and can go to them when they need a favor. A real camaraderie and team spirit exists among them.

Unfortunately, this contrasts greatly with the many horror stories I hear of personality clashes and lack of support. Many people think of only themselves and want to protect their own turf. The last few years in many organizations, situations have escalated further into downright rudeness, yelling, and verbal abuse. Many people complain of harassment, threats, intimidation, and actual bullying. The stress that comes from working under these conditions can only be dealt with for so long before it
takes an emotional and physical toll. Eventually people burn out or leave.

**Time Pressures**

People are constantly facing deadlines on tasks, reports, and projects. There is too much work and too little time to do it. It is a continual race against time trying to meet unreasonable deadlines. Some people never get the important tasks accomplished because they are too busy doing what is urgent and putting out fires. Their boss reprimands them for not getting the work done.

As a result, they live from crisis to crisis. This impairs their ability to think clearly and make the right decisions, thus making more mistakes and becoming accident prone. Some people become like pressure cookers, ready to explode. A sign of our times are the new terms *desk rage* and *phone rage*. At the end of the day, many workers are a physical and mental wreck. Symptoms of working under time pressure are: tight stomach and neck muscles, indigestion, pounding heart, nervousness, weakness, anxiety, anger, hostility, insomnia, headaches, and exhaustion.

**Job Insecurity**

Constant seismic changes in the workplace have created constant stress and insecurity for a lot of employees. Mergers, acquisitions, downsizing, and job outsourcing have made almost unthinkable demands on workers. With so many jobs disappearing over the last few years, a major stressor that impacts employees now is the fear of losing their job. In my seminars, I often ask people what their number one job concern is. Job security always ranks within the top three worries.
A Ladder with No Steps

Those that are secure in their jobs are often concerned that there is no opportunity for training and development. They have no career ladder or path. There are no chances for promotions. When their job becomes a dead end, people become dissatisfied because they cannot fulfill their aspirations. The quality of their work begins to erode; they become frustrated and stressed. Sometimes they withdraw from their co-workers. They eventually begin to look for another job to fulfill their dreams and ambitions.

WHAT IS STRESS?

The term stress has been used since the early 1900s to define situations that cause a physiological and psychological change in us. It is difficult to define because it appears in so many forms. Everyone perceives stress differently. Stress can be either harmful or helpful, depending on the circumstances involved. Some stress is beneficial, because it motivates us to improve performance and make changes in our lives. If we had no stress it would prevent us from functioning at all.

In my seminars, I often ask participants to define the term stress, and tell me their number one stressor at work. The definitions are all very unique and different. Rarely do two participants mention the same stressor as being the one that impacts them the most. Everyone perceives and reacts to a different stressor in a distinct manner.

No matter which definition we use, it seems that all stress can be separated into two categories: a stimulus or a response (Matteson & Ivancevich, 1987). Stress can be a stimulus, such as a situation or event that happens to us.
The event can be physical or emotional, such as a car accident, an argument at work, the loss of a job, or the loss of a loved one.

Stress can also be the physiological and psychological response we have to that event. It can even be a response to a perceived or unrealistic threat that we worry may happen, such as not getting a promotion at work. In some cases, perception has more influence on us than reality. It does not matter that the event will never happen; just the threat of it is enough to create a stress response.

Stress can come from the demands that we put on ourselves internally, such as trying to be a perfectionist or being liked by everyone. Nothing we do is good enough so we constantly repeat or revise certain tasks to get it exact. Some people spend their entire lives trying to please everyone or win them over. They put tremendous pressure and demands on themselves to achieve an impossible level of perfection and acceptance.

Stress can also be a response to a positive situation, such as moving to a new house, getting a promotion, or a child’s upcoming wedding. In some cases, people exhibit fear and anxiety, and some can barely cope. Stress puts an extra demand on bodies, both physically and mentally. I use the term stressor to define the situations and events that create a response, and the term stress as the body’s reaction to that stressor.

**The Stress Response**

Two people can react differently to the same stressor. What may cause stress to one person can cause excitement and be challenging to another. Some would think nothing of jumping out of an airplane with a parachute and free-falling
thousands of feet, while others cringe at the thought. People’s personalities and coping styles determine how they will react. This reaction is also influenced by genetic factors, upbringing, lifestyle, overall physical condition, and the stressors and conditions experienced every day.

All the research that has been done on the body’s response to stress indicates the same conclusion: The overall human response to stress seems to be universal. The stressors may be different and the stress levels and consequences may vary in individuals, but the response is generally the same when the stressor has a negative impact. Walter Cannon, a Harvard medical doctor, first described the biological response to stress in the 1920s as the fight-or-flight response (Cannon, 1929).

When cave people came in contact with dangers like wild beasts, fire, or floods, they had two choices: fight or flee. Their body’s biochemistry changed to help them cope with the choice they made. This was an excellent adaptation for survival.

During this fight-or-flight response, the adrenal glands pump adrenaline into the bloodstream to prepare the body for the threat. Other hormones, such as corticosteroids are also released into the bloodstream to mobilize the body and increase energy levels. The heart speeds up and increases the blood supply and flow of oxygen to our muscles. Our blood pressure surges. Our breathing rate snowballs, but each breath may actually be shallower. Our digestive rate diminishes to slow food absorption, so the body can divert the needed sugars and fats to the muscles for energy. We increase our muscular strength as the body prepares to spring into action. Our perspiration increases in order to keep our core body temperature within its normal range.
This physical response has been genetically passed down to us over the centuries and has helped us survive. Although the same biochemical response is still with us, it is not as useful today. It does not fit in our lives. It is ineffective in dealing with our everyday situations, challenges, and hassles. Of course, there are times when we would like to run away or fight back, but unless we are in a life-threatening situation, it would not be appropriate or acceptable. But, our body is still preparing itself for a state of physical readiness just as it did with our early ancestors thousands of years ago.

Reflect for a moment on the number of stressors the cave people had compared to the number of stressors we experience during these frenzied and turbulent times. We are more frequently stressed for longer periods of time than ever before. Plus, many stressors that impact us today are more emotional and psychological, rather than physical. But, our body has a limit on how much stress it can accept and still function normally. The body and mind cannot accept chronic stress over long periods of time and remain healthy. If we do not do something with that stress, the result can lead to sickness, chronic disease, and death. That is why we must get a grip on stress.

The General Adaptation Syndrome

Dr. Hans Selye, an endocrinologist, is known as the founder of stress research and education. Selye spent his career at McGill University, in Montreal, studying and writing about stress from the 1930s to the late 1970s. He left us with hundreds of research articles and over 30 books on the topic. Selye’s research indicated that the body goes through a specific patterned response to this extra demand placed on
it. He labeled it the general adaptation syndrome or GAS (Selye, 1976).

According to Selye, this physical and mental response has three specific stages: alarm reaction, resistance, and exhaustion. In the alarm reaction stage, the body is exposed to the stressor. People become confused and disoriented. The body prepares itself to fight off the stress by sending powerful hormones into the bloodstream. This results in an elevated heart rate and breathing, plus increased muscle tension as the body prepares to spring into action. This defensive move helps us survive the stressor.

In the resistance stage, the hormones in the blood stay at a high level. The body adapts itself to fight off the stress. This adaptation may be in just an isolated organ or a whole organ system. If a high-stress level is continuous, this often can lead to disease in an organ or system. This high level can cause people to also become nervous, fatigued, and often angry.

The final stage is one of exhaustion, where if the stress is ongoing, the organ tissues and the systems may break down. Over a prolonged period this can lead to illness or death. Selye concluded that each person only has a certain amount of adaptation energy to expend on stress. Once this is depleted, we must find a way to replenish the energy, or exhaustion and death set in (Selye, 1976).

The more frequently we are in the fight-or-flight response and go through the three stages, the more wear and tear stress puts on our bodies. The more often the body mobilizes itself for action and depletes its adaptation energy, the greater the toll it takes. At some point, the body can no longer function in a normal manner. If we do not find a way to replenish the energy, the exhaustion reaps havoc on the mind and body, and we become more susceptible to
weakness, debility, aging, and eventually death. It is critical that we find a way to restore ourselves back to our normal energy level each and every day. We must get back to a state of balance and equilibrium.

WHAT STRESS IS DOING TO YOU

In order to get a grip on stress, it is important to understand the consequences of negative stressors and the way we react to them. Stress has been implicated as a causal factor in heart disease, stroke, cancer, respiratory disease, arthritis, gastrointestinal disorders, insomnia, psychological disorders (depression, suicide), psychosomatic illness, skin disorders, chronic aches, and pain. (See Figure 1.1.) It is not my purpose to link the onset of all these diseases with stress, or to state that stress is the sole cause of their existence. I strongly feel it is useful to give a brief description of some of the diseases and the significant role that links stress to them. It may motivate you to work to eliminate some of the stress in your life through the methods discussed later.

The Circulatory System

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. According to the American Heart Association, just under 13 million Americans have coronary artery disease. About a half million people die from heart attacks every year. There is a dramatic amount of evidence showing that our psychological state has a significant impact on heart disease. When people are filled with worry, fear, and rage, they are more prone to heart disease. Since the workplace often
creates these emotions, unless we deal with stress, the chances of developing heart disease increase.

As our heart beats its normal rhythms, transporting our blood, it exerts pressure on the walls of our blood vessels. Our brain works with the heart to keep the rate and blood pressure as low as possible. When we anticipate a negative situation (fear, worry, anxiety), or actually encounter a negative stressor, hormones speed up our heart rate, and our blood pressure is automatically elevated. The heart

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<th>Physical Symptoms</th>
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<tr>
<td>Negative attitude</td>
<td>Muscle tightness/soreness</td>
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<td>Worry</td>
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<td>Sadness</td>
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<td>Irritability</td>
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<td>Anger/rage</td>
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<td>Constant forgetfulness</td>
<td>Constipation</td>
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<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Diarrhea</td>
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<td>Lack of concentration</td>
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<td>Depression</td>
<td>Shallow, rapid breathing</td>
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<td>Suicide</td>
<td>Accident prone</td>
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rushes more blood to vital organs in preparation for fight or flight. We do not realize our blood pressure is rising, because we cannot feel it. In most experiences, the blood pressure returns to its normal range. The dilemma arises when we are constantly raising our blood pressure, due to stress over prolonged periods of time. When the blood pressure continues to stay elevated, it creates a condition known as hypertension. The heart has to work harder to circulate the blood, which increases our risk for heart attack or stroke.

One recent Swiss study by Dr. Georg Noll and his associates showed a clear link between stress and hardening of the arteries, which precedes a heart attack. When patients were subjected to stress tests, their blood vessels would undergo constriction, impeding the blood flow, raising the blood pressure and heart rate (Noll et al., 2002).

The circulatory system transports all the energy to the cells that they need to live, grow, and multiply. In turn, it picks up all the wastes from the cells for elimination. This movement is critical to your survival and as such should not be blocked. Stress forces our brain to send messages to the endocrine and cardiovascular systems, directing the heart and blood vessels to increase their activity. The extra stress-related hormones released into the blood stay there, circulating throughout the body. Fats that are being sent to the muscles for extra energy circulate throughout our blood vessels and can lodge inside them and build up plaque. Over time this leads to narrowing of the blood vessels, blockage, and a condition known as arteriosclerosis. If this blockage is in a coronary artery, it results in a heart attack. The blockage can also occur in other organs such as the brain and kidneys. The risk is always greater when blood pressure is higher.
Stroke

According to the American Heart Association, every minute a person in the United States suffers a stroke. The only diseases that cause more deaths are heart attacks and cancer. The most common type of stroke is a blockage of a blood vessel in the brain. This occurs when a piece of plaque breaks off the inside of a blood vessel somewhere in the body and is transported to the brain. This blockage disrupts the needed flow of blood to the brain.

Researchers at the University of Michigan, along with doctors in Finland, studied 2,300 men in Finland. The researchers subjected the men to various stressors, measured their blood pressure before and after, and monitored them for 11 years. The men whose blood pressure rose from the stressors had a staggering 72 percent greater chance of developing a stroke than those whose blood pressure was lower from the same stress (Everson et al., 2001). The message is clear: Stress is linked to increased blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke.

Muscles and Bones

Because of the fight-or-flight syndrome, stress makes our muscles tense as the body gets ready to spring into action. The body responds this way whether the threat is real or perceived. Muscles that are chronically tensed will contract and become shortened. When this happens, they pull on ligaments, tendons, and joints, creating pain. Muscles also become weak and fatigued, creating headaches (including migraines), backaches, and pain in various areas of the body such as the neck, shoulder blades, and knees.
The Gastrointestinal System

Stress is brutal on the gastrointestinal (GI) system. When we are under great stress, the salivary glands can stop the flow of saliva, or in other cases, make too much. The stomach increases its secretions of acids creating excess acid, nausea, and ulcers. Another result of stress, and maybe the most common, is diarrhea. Many people also complain about the muscle tightening that takes place in the stomach area.

The Immune System

The immune system functions as a defense that detects invading microbes and destroys them. When the system is under stress, our immunity becomes compromised, and we are more susceptible to colds, the flu, and other types of infection. Julie Kiecolt-Glaser and Ronald Glaser reviewed a number of studies that demonstrated the link between stress and the immune system. Many people in the studies were under severely stressful events such as sleep deprivation and being recently widowed. Some were under less severe stress for a shorter duration. All showed evidence of a decrease in the specific cells that fight disease, such as T-cells and other antibodies (Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1993).

In another widely reported experiment, first published in the New England Journal of Medicine, a link was established between stress and the common cold. Subjects under stress were exposed to the common cold virus by use of a nasal spray. Another group, not under stress, was exposed to the same virus. The group under stress was more than twice as likely to contract the cold. Apparently, people
not under stress have a greater ability to fight off cold germs than those who are under stress (Cohen, Tyrell, & Smith, 1991).

**Asthma**

When we breathe under normal resting conditions, our breathing fits a regulated pattern. The muscles in the chest are relaxed, and the lungs allow the air to flow in and out freely as the diaphragm rises up and down. Bronchial tubes divide into small balloonlike sacs, or alveoli that circulate air throughout the lungs.

Asthma is most often precipitated by specific allergens. However, asthma can also be caused by nonallergic triggers such as stress, fear, fatigue, and anxiety. There are many cases of highly stressful situations precipitating an asthma attack. Such events as a death in the family, a car accident, or even a visit to the dentist can set off a severe asthma attack.

In a typical attack, the chest muscles begin to tighten, breathing becomes faster, and at the same time, shallower. Cases of extreme stress may tighten the bronchial tubes. The alveoli constrict, cutting down the regular flow of oxygen. The linings of the bronchial tubes swell and become inflamed. They may fill with thick mucus, creating a wheezing sound. These changes make breathing difficult. Each breath takes in less air, putting stress on the entire body.

**Cancer**

Stress by itself does not cause cancer. Many factors determine the link between stress and cancer. However, under
certain conditions, stress can lower the ability of our immune system to fight off the growth of abnormal cells. Much research is now being conducted to determine the conditions of how and when stress lowers our immunity.

Cancer occurs when normal cells in our body change into abnormal or malignant cells. They grow in an uncontrolled fashion and take over the normal cells. With enough white blood cells, we can usually fight off this abnormal growth. When people are constantly exposed to severe stress, certain hormones decrease in our bloodstream. This causes the white blood cells to begin to diminish in number, preventing them from destroying the cancer cells. This greatly increases the possibility that the cancerous cells will continue to grow and create a tumor.

**Depression**

It is not clear whether depression is caused solely by stress, as some depression seems to also be related to a chemical imbalance and can be hereditary in nature. But, it cannot be disputed that depression seems to be a frequent symptom of stress. Depression is characterized by a chronic sense of feeling down or sad. The body feels weak, nervous, and the mind is unable to concentrate. There is a total lack of energy and interest in doing anything. Depressed people want to stay in bed and sleep. Depression is often related to certain events at work such as lost sales, lost promotion, constant conflict with other people, and constant changes in the work environment.

**Psychosomatic Illness**

Psychosomatic illness is one in which the body is directly influenced by the negative thought processes of the mind.
A person’s negative state of mind lessens their ability to ward off disease, and enables it to gain a foothold in the body. As you react to everyday stressors, what you tell yourself has a great impact on your body’s reaction. It is not so much what happens to you, as it is how you react with your mind, and what you do about it. The subject of the mind-body connection will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.