



CAREERS: ARE YOU STRESSED TO THE GILLS?

Fish gills are organs that allow fish to breathe underwater¹—do you need a pair of gills to survive your life right now? Wondering why you’re feeling that way? Here are three reasons (and there are many more, unfortunately):

- ❖ The long-running University of Michigan *Index of Consumer Sentiment*² declined to its lowest level ever, with responses exhibiting the same decline across all demographics, regardless of political affiliation, income, age, or education with expectations by the majority that business conditions will continue to deteriorate for both the short and long term.
- ❖ According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the US Consumer Price Index CPI averaged 128 points from 1950 until 2026, reaching an all time high of 330 points in March 2026.³
- ❖ Deloitte’s *2026 Global Human Capital Trends* survey discovered that “one-third of workers experienced 15 major changes in the past year, from evolving customer expectations to shifts in strategy or business models. Almost half stated that the work itself changed in the past year, requiring AI or other tech systems/automation and over quarter said that the strategy or business model also changed.”⁴

The bottom-line impact of these and many other recent changes is that life and work-related psychosocial risk factors result in individuals experiencing both within and outside of their workplaces feelings of overwork, burnout, stress, disengagement, low morale⁵—i.e., stressed to the gills.

A certain amount of stress is actually good for a person as it is what makes us humans grow mentally and emotionally.⁶ However, if the stress you’re feeling is starting to impact your mental or physical health, it’s time to take steps to minimize those stressors before reaching a state of exhaustion. Dr. Tanzi⁷ has a catchword acronym that is an effective way to remember what daily activities will protect your mental and physical health, which is **SHIELD**: the S is for **SLEEP**—7-8 hours/day; the H is for **HARMONY**—manage expectations/utilize stress relievers (meditation, music, etc.); the I is for **INTERACTION**—with friends, family, new people; the E is for **EXERCISE**—whatever you enjoy that moves you; the L is for **LEARNING**—be a life-long learner!; and the D is for **DIET**—whatever keeps your body and mind in its best physical health.

In addition to physical/mental activities, the following are proven ways to reduce negative workplace experience side effects:

1. **Adapt to the stress: If you can’t beat it, join it.** You can adapt because the Work Adjustment Theory⁸ has proven that a “person-in-the-[workplace] environment is actually two-way: people adapt (i.e., “reactive adjustment”) to the workplace that their initial personality traits fit AND an active adjustment by the workplace to the person’s personal traits also occurs and continues as workflow/skills change and extrinsic motivation (more money/rewards) is added.
 - ✓ In other words, over time—while still remaining authentically yourself—you’ll start talking/acting, etc. more like the other employees and the company bosses/more senior/junior/peer workers start adjusting to your traits. Job function changes are also added/alterd to fit everyone’s natural skills/interests and, frequently, everyone gets used to yours/theirs idiosyncrasies.
2. **Avoid the stress: If it’s going to kill you, run!** Leave that job/field to go work elsewhere where you feel a better alignment and are performing more intrinsically motivating work.⁹ Do remember that even in serious recessions, great jobs/careers are waiting for you to discover them. You just need to know how and where to find them. How to find those jobs/careers are detailed in my article, [Career: Staying, Moving Elsewhere, Or Reinventing](#).
3. **Buffer the stress: Have a laugh...or two.** Humor is one of the most effective stress-buffering techniques. It worked for Industrial-Organizational psychologist Munsterberg in the early 1900s at knitting mills where women worked 12-hour days. When he introduced kittens playing with yarn on the mill floor, laughter increased, stress decreased, and productivity soared.¹⁰
 - ✓ Shared laughter significantly decreases cortisol and epinephrine, leaving less of these stress hormones to fuel burnout.
 - ✓ *Employing Humor, Seriously: Why Humor is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life*¹¹ is a great book that demonstrates how you can learn to be humorous at work without being offensive.

Not convinced yet that you can reduce your stress levels through humor and kittens? Please click [HERE](#) for a demonstration.¹²

References

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