

ON THE JOB

Stressed at work? Re-wire your brain!

By Chris Colin, Special to SF Gate

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This column is due tomorrow morning and I'm still on the first sentence.

This procrastination was an experiment. I wanted to breed a little stress in myself, create a walking petri dish for a man named Don Goewey.

All his professional life, Goewey has gone where it's stressful. He was in Croatia from 1992 to 1995, as part of a State Department-funded mission, working with war refugees suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. He has served as director of emergency medical services and then as an executive in the mental health department in the San Mateo County Health Department. And from 1992 until just a couple years ago, he was executive director of the International Center for Attitudinal Healing in Sausalito, which provides free support to adults and children going through bereavement, illness and other highly stressful crises.



But it's Goewey's current position that might have the most far-reaching implications for the average person. Toward the end of his tenure at the center, he was challenged by his friend Larry Stupski, former president and chief operating officer of Charles Schwab, to import those healing strategies to the work world. Goewey appreciated the idea that some of the cognitive elements of a personal trauma might be at play in our professional lives. [ProAttitude](#) was spun off in 2005. The business, headquartered in Napa, attempts to facilitate "peak performance" by reducing stress endemic to the workplace.

Central to ProAttitude's work is recognizing stress as fear, and fear as a component of the survival instinct. A little can come in handy. Too much and the brain starts

shutting down systems it deems nonessential. Given how few of our problems involve saber-tooth tigers these days, the brain's response isn't always appropriate to the situation. But it can be rewired. The ProAttitude method is rooted in research on neuroplasticity, the brain's capacity to change its own structure as a result of experience. Clients — which have included Stanford University and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department — learn practices that essentially re-program the way stressful situations are processed.

How does it happen? Via guided imagery, the ProAttitude workshops have attendees vividly recreate a recent stress reaction. Once in the thick of it, they're brought to dissect it — a process that, over time, actually slows the brain's stress response to a given situation. The next phase involves shifting the thinking about how to act in those situations. Drawing on cognitive behavioral therapy, humanistic psychology, positive psychology and a form of learned optimism, ProAttitude is able to help clients connect stress to fear, to dismantle that fear, and to develop a habit of responding more appropriately to external events.

The buzzwords of ProAttitude — peace, acceptance, negative self-talk — can sound worrisomely New Agey at times, but the company appears to deliver measurable results. Len Brutoco, president of Brutoco Engineering and Construction, says his company reduced its workers' compensation claims from \$500,000 to \$20,000 after implementing the practices taught by ProAttitude. He attributes the dramatic change to his employees' ability to manage stress.

Indeed, there are plenty of non-squishy reasons for a business to mellow its workers out. One in every three dollars spent on workers' compensation claims is attributable to stress, according to a Business Insurance article cited in a ProAttitude white paper. Heart patients who attend stress management programs have 42 percent lower health care costs, according to a [Duke University and American Psychological Association study](#) in 2002. Meanwhile a [survey](#) of human resources executives at U.S. companies found that 12 percent of work absences are traced to stress. The American Institute of Stress [estimates](#) that stress and related illnesses keep a million people out of work each day.

Me, I'm a little stressed. It's 3 p.m. and I want to finish this column before picking up a friend who's visiting from New York. Got to clean the house, so we don't appear to live as animals. Also have some e-mails and phone calls to return, and I promised I'd help my wife copy edit her magazine, and I need to work on my nephew's birthday present, and I've got a handful of other assignments to get cracking on.

This is all small stuff, needless to say — the minor, daily piling-on of pressure that keeps ibuprofen bottlers in business. Like many people Goewey encounters, I tend to assume my tensed shoulders and occasional headaches are inevitable. Pursuit by the hounds of worry seems an unfortunate but unavoidable part of life.

A calm, soothing presence, Goewey gets excited when you say things like that — he's about to use neuroscience to show that you're wrong. Chronic stress degrades higher mental activity, he explains — memory, attention span, decision-making. In impairing the production of serotonin, it diminishes the brain's ability to regulate mood. He speaks of dendritic arbors and the neocortex and serotonin transporter sites. He cites research on monks, with whom brain imaging has revealed actual alterations in physical structure.

Short of joining a monastery, the trick is recognizing the onset of stress symptoms, and understanding that stress happens in us, rather than to us. Next comes the practice, in which the individual learns techniques for converting stress to calm. Last is extension, where these changes are brought into interpersonal relationships, which will also help transform the stress environment of a workplace. In all of this, Goewey explains, new neural networks are forming, causing the brain's actual hard wiring to change.

But we know that stuff, don't we? On an intuitive level, anyway, we understand that stress has a physiological component, and we know that counting to 10 is somehow supposed to help. But I suspect many of us also tell ourselves the same thing: This might work for some people — but in my case, with my job, it's just not possible.

Here, ProAttitude couldn't have a better leader. Years back, the mild-mannered Goewey was a whirlpool of stress. Foreseeing failure and doom around every corner was a way of life — and then all of a sudden the picture really did get bleak. At the age of 38, Goewey found himself facing a level of stress most of us will never know.

He lost his prestigious job at Stanford's medical school. Nine days later he was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

"I do not think I have ever felt more alone or more lost," he writes in a new book, "Mystic Cool: The Neuroscience of Success," adding that his marriage, too, was on the rocks. "My mental state oscillated between abject terror and complete numbness. I was beginning to lose faith in life."

One day, in the midst of this misery, he stepped out of his house and onto the deck for a cigarette, hoping to calm his nerves. Instead they only began to spiral out of control. Nightmarish images of the future flashed in his mind as panic overtook him. He describes a dark cavern swallowing him, his entire being surrendering to the terror. It continued to grow worse. Later, he would speculate this was a psychotic break. He describes his conscious mind receding inward until it reached some sort of vanishing point. With nowhere left to go, he blacked out.

When he came to, everything was calm. How long had he been unconscious? It felt like a lifetime, he said, but when he looked down at his cigarette, it was still burning. And yet he was a different person — someone for whom everything was OK.

He couldn't get his mind around this miracle, and performed a reality check: Did he still have a brain tumor? Yes. Had he still been fired? Yes. Was his marriage still crumbling? Yes. But the calm persisted. To hear him describe it, he knew he could handle any turn of events, as long as he could maintain this feeling. His feelings of terror were just that — feelings. Stress was something that happened within him, rather than to him, and somehow his blackout there on the deck had given him the perspective to reframe his thinking.

Goewey stops before crediting his newfound calm with the events that followed. He had brain surgery not long after, and it was a complete success — despite warnings to expect horrific consequences, he came away with nothing more than diminished hearing in one ear. What's more, he'd received a phone call the day he was heading to the hospital: He'd been offered another job at Stanford.

It's not that life has been perfect since then, Goewey says. His marriage did not last. Job stresses and strains cannot be avoided. What's different is his ability to handle these things. It's this radical transformation that drives him to help others find something similar.

"There's no greater change in the brain than moving from fear to peace," he says. "I'm not talking about withdrawing from the world, either. You become dynamically peaceful."

Goewey adds that this is not the stuff of happy little aphorisms; it takes work to alter one's neural networks. Having experimented with a stress-awareness technique he taught me recently — forcing myself, at the onset of symptoms, to dissect the underlying fear associated with my stress — I can vouch for that. But new brains

aren't built in a day, so I'm going to keep at it. And just to be safe, I'm going to start my next column a little earlier. Goewey, I'm pretty sure, would endorse that. (But even if he wouldn't, I'm not going to stress about it.)

ProAttitude is hosting a [one-day workshop](#) on April 11, in Mill Valley.

Chris Colin has worked as a writer-editor at Salon, and before that a busboy, a bread deliverer and a bike messenger, among other things. He's the author of "What Really Happened to the Class of '93," about the lives of his former high school classmates, and co-author of "The Blue Pages," a directory of companies rated by their politics and social practices. His writing has appeared in the New York Times, Mother Jones, the New York Observer, McSweeney's Quarterly and several anthologies. He lives in San Francisco.