

WHITE PAPER

## Wake Up!

# The Surprising Truth about What Drives Stress and How Leaders Build Resilience



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# Overview

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This paper is part of a new series of white papers focused on the future of leadership development. The aim is to move beyond traditional approaches and look at where the field is going. Papers in the series include:

**1. Future Trends in Leadership Development.**

Explore four key trends that appear to be shaping the future of leadership development, based on research involving 30 leadership experts.

**2. Wake Up! The Surprising Truth about What Drives Stress and How Leaders Build Resilience.**

Learn about a new, proven approach for dealing with stress in the modern workplace.

**3. Vertical Leadership Development—Part I.**

Determine how to take “Future Trends” and build them into a leadership program—focusing specifically on “vertical development” and why it matters in a complex world.

**UPCOMING PAPERS:**

**4. Vertical Leadership Development—Part II.**

Take a more in-depth look at the tools and steps needed to create leadership programs that accelerate vertical growth.

**5. Culture Change: How to Move an Organization.**

Learn how to work from both the top down and the bottom up to change how your organization does business and overcome the conflict between culture and strategy.

When read together, these five papers should help you think about a new approach to developing leaders and give you a set of tools that are better suited to developing the leaders of the 21st century.



## Stress is Everywhere

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People in workplaces are experiencing high levels of stress. Workloads are increasing with no end in sight. For the past two years, I have been categorizing and tallying the challenges identified by leaders who participate in the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) leadership development programs. Consistently, among the top two categories are issues related to stress and burnout. Leaders rarely discuss these issues at work because they can't see any obvious solutions, so they just keep slogging on—until they don't.

There is a brand-new approach to dealing with stress and building resilience that a few wise people have known about for a long time; it's time more people did. Here, I am going to introduce you to the research of Dr. Derek Roger, one of the world's leading researchers on stress and resilience, and try to convince you that there is no such thing as a stressful job or a stressful boss. Instead, all stress comes down to something called rumination.<sup>1</sup> Then I really want to show you that the key to enduring resilience is to learn to do something you probably haven't fully done for a very long time—wake up. If you are ready for a new approach to dealing with the stress in your life, read on.

# The Root Cause of Your Stress

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When you ask most people about their stress, they tell you about all the stressful people and situations in their lives. But there is a problem with this approach. When I work with groups of people, I always encounter at least two people with the same boss, same job, same abilities. The only difference is, one person is completely stressed out while the other person is not. How is this possible? It's possible because the major factor that determines your stress levels is not what exists "out there" in the environment, but what is happening "in here" in your thinking. Your boss is not stressful; your reaction to him/her is.

To understand this, you first need to recognize the difference between pressure and stress. We talk about these things as if they are the same thing, but they're not. Pressure is the external demand in the environment. Everyone has pressure in their work and life: deadlines, projects, family demands. That is not stress. Stress is what people do with that pressure in their minds. Dr. Roger's 30 years of research pinpointed one factor above all others as being the key driver of a person's stress—rumination.

Rumination is the mental process of thinking over and over about something, which happened either in the past or could happen in the future, and attaching negative emotion to it. Ruminations about the future are associated with "what if this happens?" or "what if that happens?" Ruminations about the past replay, over and over, some awful experience you had and usually end with, "if only I had . . ." or "I should have done . . ."

As you will soon see, people who ruminate a lot have chronically elevated levels of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol, meaning they are constantly overactivated and on edge. Nonruminators may have plenty of pressure in their lives, but they aren't stressed by it.

The good news is that once you understand stress is something you create, then you also start to see it is not inevitable. You can learn to work in extremely high pressure situations and not feel stressed. In fact, you probably can recall times in your personal or professional life when you stayed calm and focused despite the high pressure of the situation. I want to show you how to accomplish this more often.

# Rumination Nation

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We have become a nation of ruminators. Twenty-four-hour news programs constantly regurgitate stories. We ruminate about all manner of things each day at work. What is so wrong with that? The answer is that rumination is detrimental to your health, disastrous for your productivity, and ruinous for your happiness. Otherwise, nothing is wrong with it.

Let's look at health first. When we anxiously ruminate about an upcoming speech, our body responds as if the event is really happening and puts us into a state of fight or flight. Our hypothalamus sends the signal to pump out adrenaline, which increases our heart rate and sends blood pouring through our veins. This is a good thing if we are in genuine physical danger because it gives us the energy to fight or run away. But if you are simply sitting at your desk ruminating about an imaginary conversation with your coworker, it starts to get unhealthy. To illustrate, imagine the river at right is flooded.

The word ruminate comes from the noun ruminant. This is the term used to describe cows who chew on their cud. First they swallow their food. Then they regurgitate it to chew over again before swallowing it anew. Six times, the cycle of rumination repeats itself. Get the idea?



As the water hits the riverbank, it erodes the river walls. Now, substitute the word water for blood and riverbank for arteries in your heart. When you ruminate, the increased blood supply floods your arteries and crashes into the arterial walls of your heart. Luckily the arteries can repair this damage by creating a layer of plaque over the damaged walls. However, if people keep ruminating and allow no chance for recovery, the plaque gets thicker and thicker until eventually the artery becomes blocked.<sup>2</sup> The result could be a heart attack, which is clearly bad news.

The second response during rumination is that cortisol is pumped out to restrict inflammation and release energy for physical fight or flight. The downside, however, is that in order to produce cortisol the body must put white blood cell production on hold, i.e. your immune system. The result is chronic ruminators are more likely to have suppressed immune functioning, and this makes them more likely to get sick.

In addition to the negative health effects, ruminators tend to be less productive because they are not mentally present enough to actually get anything done. They spend much of their time trapped in endless rumination loops inside their head, and while they are busy replaying these stories in their head, what are they not doing? Work!

There is no benefit to rumination. All it gives you is a short, miserable, unproductive life. If rumination were useful, we would run rumination courses. It doesn't work and it doesn't help. It's time to let it go.

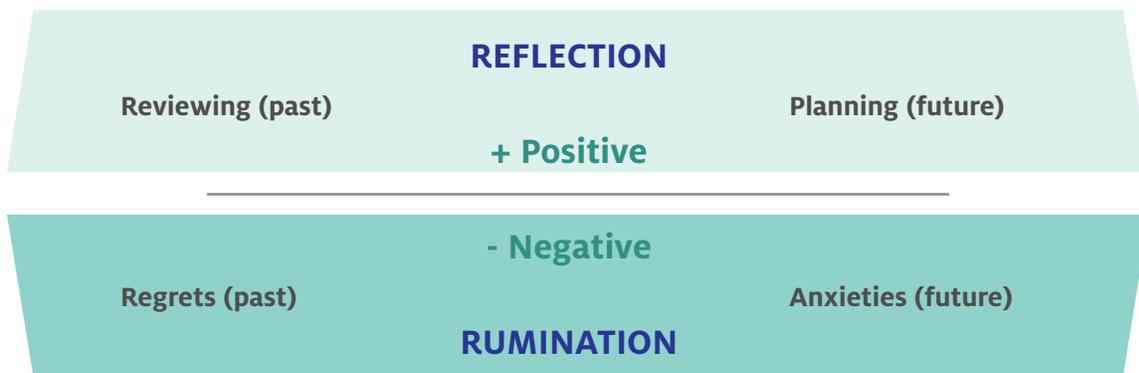


At this stage people often ask two questions:

### 1. Is planning for the future considered rumination?

Planning for the future, or reviewing the past without negative emotion, is what we call reflection. It is a positive and important thing to do. If we didn't plan, we would not be able to function well or achieve very much. The key questions, though, are: Do you consciously plan and then come back into the present, or is your planning really a series of rumination loops, worrying about upcoming events? That is the difference between reflection and rumination.

Visually you might look at your thinking like this:



To be effective you want to spend most of your time above the line, consciously doing some planning and reviewing, but then bringing your attention back to the present so you can live and work in a wakeful state.

### 2. Does “good” stress motivate you to perform?

That is simply pressure. Some demand in your environment can help motivate you to perform. Just don't let that demand turn into rumination. Sports psychologists know that picturing the bad outcomes you don't want, such as striking out or missing the putt, puts you on a path to failure, not to peak performance. The same goes for leaders; be aware of the demands, but don't ruminate on them.

So, Step 1 for reducing your stress and becoming more resilient is to recognize how much time you now spend ruminating about things that produce no useful outcomes. Once you realize this, you are ready for a new way of living and working. It's called wakefulness.

## Your Wake-Up Call

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Has this ever happened to you? You are driving along a straight road in the country. You remember leaving one town, and before you know it, you have arrived at the next town, but you can't remember how you got from one to the other. Where were you? Or when reading a book, you get to the end of the page but then realize that you can't remember anything you've read in the last two pages? Once again, where were you?

The simple answer is that you were daydreaming. You were off in your head thinking about some event in the past or future. We are all familiar with experiences like this because they happen to us every day. What we are less aware of is just how much of our day, or dare I say our lives, is spent in this semiconscious state. The truth is, you weren't just daydreaming; you were in a state of "sleep." And it's not just that moment in the car when you were asleep; it is most of your life.

In this state, waking sleep, people are neither fully awake nor fully asleep. The person is in the room with you but unaware of what is going on. They may be able to communicate with you, but they are flashing back to their daydreams continually (think of your drive in the country or the conversations you zone out of). Dr. Roger estimates that people spend as much as 70% of their daytime hours in this state. Why does this matter? Because this is the state in which all of your rumination, and therefore all of your stress, is generated. If all rumination and stress is created in the state of waking sleep, the first step in getting out of it is simple—wake up!



# The Four Steps to Building Resilience

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There are only four steps required to become less stressed and more resilient:

- 1. Wake up (and stay awake)**
- 2. Control your attention**
- 3. Detach**
- 4. Let go**

The four steps are simple to understand but take work to enact. They take practice but soon start to pay off in unexpected ways. The steps have been tested in workplaces using controlled trials and shown to decrease stress and increase resilience. For many people, myself included, the steps start off as a way to decrease stress but lead to a better, more mindful way to live. Whatever it is for you, I hope these words spark some sense of recognition within you to wake up.

The key to making wakeful attention your way of being is realizing that the four steps are a skill. Repetition is key. As you repeat these steps over and over, your brain creates a new neural pathway—a new habit.<sup>3</sup> Soon you don't have to consciously do this. It starts to become your way of being.

## 1. Wake up (and stay awake)

The first step is very simple—wake up. Be present. Be aware of where you are and what you are doing right now. Stop dreaming so much about the past and the future. Wake up to the only moment you have ever been in—now. To do this, you simply need to come to your senses. Begin by giving yourself permission to slow down for 30 seconds (and perhaps notice your thinking mind’s resistance to this idea).

Listen to the sounds that are in your environment right now. Hear the sounds that are close to you and the quieter ones in the background. Next, pay attention to the sensations under the soles of your feet. Feel the temperature on your face. Finally, see the shapes and colors of the objects in front of you: the screen, the keyboard, the paper. As you do this, notice that you can only connect to your senses when you are in the present. When you do this with 100% attention, you are wide awake.

Your ability to be present also matters greatly to your performance. Athletes, surgeons, or artists all talk about a state of mind they enter when they are at their best. They talk about how time slows down; they are completely present to the task and their mind stops wandering. Everything just seems to happen naturally and many report that they are simply watching themselves do the task. Psychologists call it “the zone” or a “state of flow.”<sup>4</sup> These high performers find it hard to explain, but they know exactly how it feels. If you have experienced it, then you also know how it feels. It feels like being wide awake.

The only moment you have ever been in is the present moment. You have never been in the past moment, and you will never be in the future moment; you have only ever been in the present. Twenty years ago you were in the present, and in 15 years’ time you will be in the present. You cannot get out of the present moment even if you try. You can think about the future, but that’s all you can do. **Consider for a moment if you have ever been outside of the present moment.**

“I was already on pole, [ . . . ] and I just kept going. Suddenly I was nearly two seconds faster than anybody else, including my teammate with the same car. And suddenly I realized that I was no longer driving the car consciously. I was driving it by a kind of instinct, only I was in a different dimension. It was like I was in a tunnel.”

—Formula One driver, Ayrton Senna<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Control your attention

As little control as we have over our level of wakefulness, most of us have even less control over our attention.

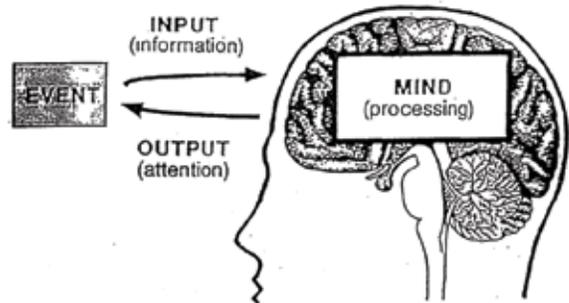
Picture you are having a conversation with someone who mentions an upcoming medical exam. “Exam,” you think. “Gee, I really hope I don’t fail my math exam next week . . . Man, this exam is going to be a disaster because . . .”

In order to build resilience you need to wake up and take back control of your attention. Charismatic leaders understand the power of attention. Bill Clinton is famous for his ability to deeply connect with people within seconds due to his determination to give them his full, undivided attention. He is said to have the ability to make each person feel like he/she is the only person in the room.<sup>6</sup>

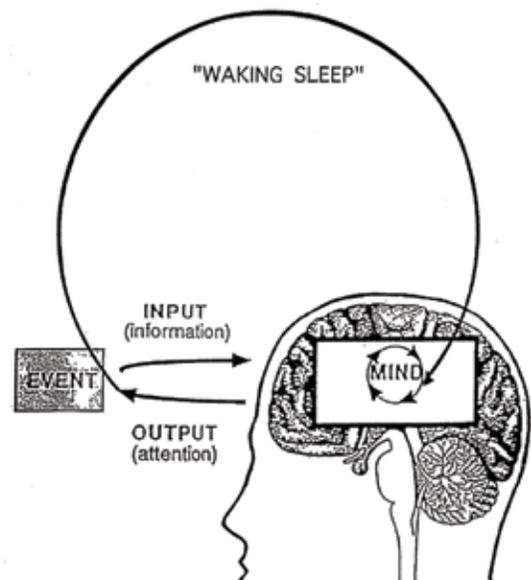
The key to controlling your attention is to practice consciously putting your attention where you want it to be and holding it there. Once you notice that ruminating thoughts are snatching it away, simply acknowledge that your mind has wandered, e.g. thinking about tomorrow’s meeting. Then bring your mind back to the present moment. Practice this again and again. Don’t get discouraged or frustrated with yourself. Training your mind takes time. First, practice on simple tasks like preparing your breakfast or cleaning your car. Then practice in higher-pressure situations, such as giving a speech or having a tense conversation with your boss or a colleague.

Keep your attention directed in the present on what your senses can see, hear, or feel. Later, compare how much that experience differs from what you get with your waking sleep state of mind.

### Wide Awake—Attention



### Waking Sleep



### 3. Detach

Detachment is the ability to get appropriate distance from the situations you are facing. In my experience, people who score highest on detachment do two things extremely well. First, they maintain perspective. They don't turn molehills into mountains, meaning they don't let situations overwhelm them. An outstanding leader for whom I once worked, responded to a lost sale by saying, "Oh well, we did our best." I'll never forget this because he was the owner of the company!

Secondly, they only focus on what they can control. Ruminators spend much of their time focusing on things over which they have no control. Detached people seem universally to focus their time on issues they can actually influence. When I ask them about this, they almost all say, "Why worry about things that I can't control?" (Like we all say, but they actually live it!) Resilient people are very clear about the difference between care and worry. They see caring as essential to high performance and worry as a waste of time. Can you see the difference?

### 4. Let go

At the core of why we continue to ruminate about things long after they have happened is that we refuse to let go. The leaders who are best at letting go are those who ask themselves a simple question: Will continuing to focus on this help me, my people, or my organization? If the answer is no, they let it go. A classic example of letting go is Nelson Mandela, who when asked why he was not angrier about spending half his life in jail replied, "If I thought it would be useful, I would be."<sup>7</sup>

Too often we become fixated on things that don't really help us. Consider the metaphor of how to catch a monkey in the forest. First, you

build a small cage and put some peanuts in the middle of it. Then you create a hole that is big enough for a monkey to put its hand through but small enough that once it takes a peanut and makes a fist, it cannot pull its hand out. As the monkey struggles with the peanut, you run up and capture it. Had the monkey looked around, it would have seen the forest is full of food. Yet it gave up its whole life for a peanut.

Most of the stuff we spend our lives ruminating about is just peanuts. It's almost never about life and death issues. Don't give up your life for peanuts. Decide to let it go.

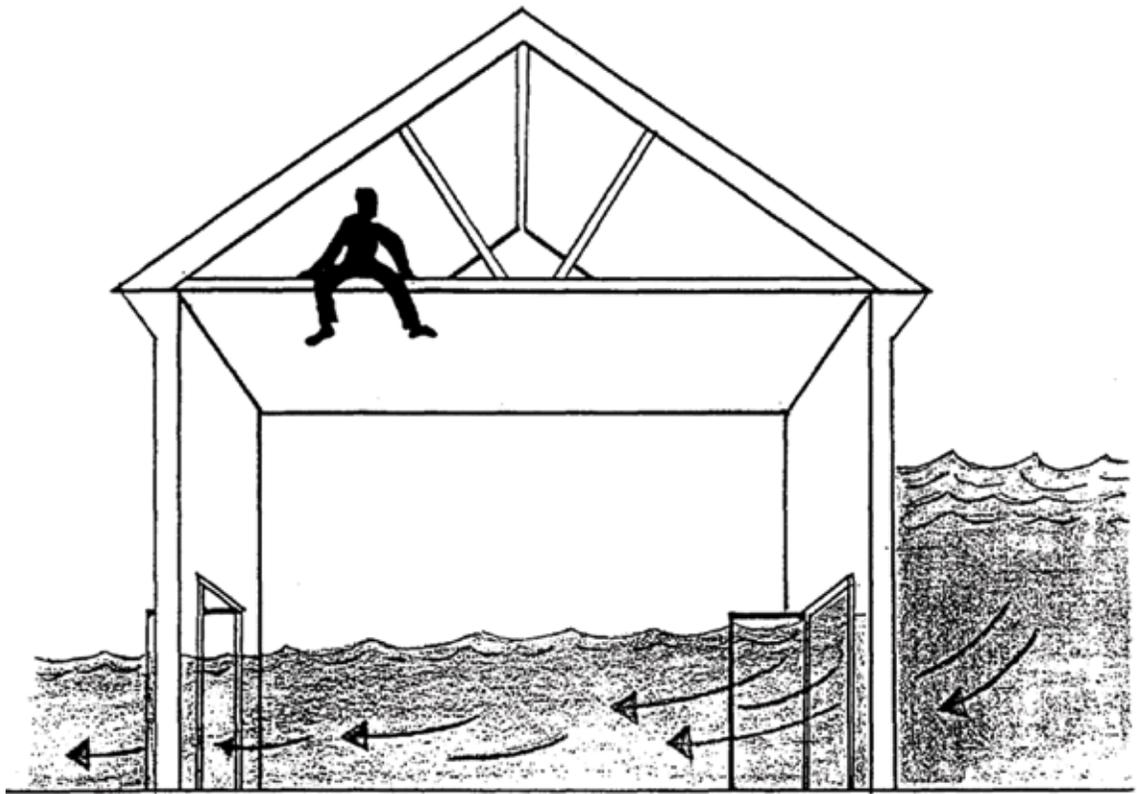
# Three Actions to Increase Your Resilience

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Next, I want to offer actions you can take to start building this approach into a new mental habit. Each action is short, practical, and builds on the others. Experiment with all three and identify the actions that you find most helpful.

## 1. Look from the Loft

This action will help you pull all of the ideas from this paper together under one roof. The house below offers a visual metaphor for how to bring all four resilience steps together in one place: Wake Up, Control your Attention, Detach, and Let Go.<sup>8</sup>



Imagine that the house is your mind and the flood water outside is all the pressures, thoughts, and emotions you face each day.

You have three options for how to respond.

### **Denial:**

Try to hold the front door shut and pretend none of those thoughts or feelings exists. Eventually the door will blow open and you will be swept away.

### **Rumination:**

Open the door, jump into the water, and start swimming in the thoughts and feelings. This will leave you frantic, exhausted, and overwhelmed.

### **Letting Go:**

Notice that as well as a front door, there is also a back door and a loft. Open the front and back doors so thoughts and stories can flow through; then go up to the loft. From there, you stay detached and observe the thoughts and feelings as they pass through. Don't get down and get tangled up with them, and don't try to hold them out. Simply let them come and let them go.

When you take this approach, you are applying all four steps at once. When you practice this, you may start to notice that you feel more grounded and present. You might still face the same challenges as before, but you start to look at them in a new, more detached way. Furthermore, you may discover that some of what you saw as your biggest problems aren't really problems at all. They are, in the end, just your thoughts.

## 2. Find Your Flow Activity

A powerful way to become more wakeful and present is to identify and engage in activities that bring you into a state of flow. Flow activities help you become very focused on the present moment, absorb yourself in the task, and lose track of time. Choosing activities that bring you into this state is a powerful way to deepen and broaden your attention in the present. As you experience more

time in this state, it becomes easier for you transfer it to other activities or other areas of your life. Because people's personalities and dispositions are so different, it is important to find activities that are uniquely absorbing for you. I have asked leadership training participants over several years about activities that get them into this state. Here are some of the more common ones:



A word cloud of activities in various colors and sizes. The words are: PLAYING A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT (dark blue), Writing (teal), Cooking (dark blue), PAINTING (teal), Gardening (teal), MOTORCYCLING (dark blue), DOWNHILL MOUNTAIN SPORTS (dark blue), Building (anything) (teal), BIKING (dark blue), and Long-distance Running (teal).

To identify your own flow activities, look back at times when you have been at your most absorbed or most attentive. What activities most quickly got you into that state? Start to plan your week in a way that you can engage in that activity more frequently and deeply. The more you give yourself the chance to get into a state of flow, the more you will find that state carries over into different parts of your life.

### 3. Meditation

Of all the activities that you can try to increase your level of resilience, meditation is perhaps the most powerful. This is because it is a focused practice of the four steps.

There are two main types of meditation that are particularly impactful when it comes to resilience and staying present:

#### **Single-pointed:**

This type of meditation involves focusing the mind on a single word, phrase, or the breath. This is very powerful for improving control of your attention (Step 2) and letting go (Step 4).

#### **Mindfulness Meditation:**

In this form, you simply close your eyes and observe whatever thoughts, feelings, or sensations come into your awareness. Regardless of what enters your mind, you simply stay present, stay detached, and let it go. You will notice that your thoughts are very enticing, and you will want to start engaging with them and following the stories that enter your mind. But by coming back to the present and controlling your attention, you will build the mental muscles to stay strong and resilient in more and more situations.



## Concluding Thoughts—A Personal Note

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One question that always comes up when teaching people about rumination is—“Well, what if you get cancer? How can you not ruminate about dying!”

Dr. Roger’s perspective is pretty clear on this—the four steps are designed to deal with everyday ordinary stress. They are not the solution to traumas. For traumatic experiences like the death of someone close to you, or a serious accident, counseling and other methods may be needed.

I would, however, like to add a personal note since a CCL colleague recently asked me the “what if you get cancer?” question. I personally have had plenty of chance to think about this, so I will share with you what I shared with him.

I did get cancer. In my 20s, doctors found that I had cancer all through my abdomen. I had surgery to remove it and within months I physically recovered. Mentally and emotionally, however, my response was complete denial. I shut the door of the house on any thoughts or feelings about my situation and tried to resume life as normal. One year later, the tumors came back, this time in my liver. The situation was overwhelming. The door to my house blew open and I was swept away. Every day I ruminated about what I was facing and what was going to happen to me.

It was about this time that I met Derek Roger. I learned about rumination, waking sleep, the four steps, and started practicing them. I couldn’t say the rumination stopped, but I was able to calm down a little and gained more perspective and distance from the thoughts in my head. It wasn’t a cure, but it certainly helped. Over the next few years the tumors came and went at different intervals, and I continued to practice the four steps in all areas of my life.

Then one day I realized that I had spent the full previous day without thinking about cancer once. After having it dominate my thoughts and existence for so long, it felt like a miracle. How could I be facing my own death, yet not even think about it?

As time progressed it became less and less an issue to the present point, where it is something I am fully aware of in my body, but not something I ever ruminate about. When I do ruminate, it is about far more minuscule things that I’ve blown out of proportion.

Whether you choose to apply this method as a way to reduce your stress at work or as a lens to apply to your whole life is up to you. I chose the latter. And for me, that choice made all the difference.

# Appendices

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For organizations interested in helping groups of people increase their resilience, CCL has workshops and keynote speeches that show people how to apply the four steps in both work and life. As part of the process, participants receive their resilience psychometric profile, which shows them how resilient they currently are and where they could focus to improve.

The profile is based on Dr. Roger's research over the past 30 years. Eight scales determine your resilience, with each scale taking between six and seven years to develop. Some 12,000 people were used for validation and the results have been published in 120 papers.

To learn more about the assessment and for further resources on resilience, go online to [www.nicholaspetrie.com](http://www.nicholaspetrie.com) and <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/community/speakers/stress.aspx>

# Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Roger, D. (1997). *Managing stress: The challenge of change*. Maidenhead: Chartered Institute of Marketing.
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- <sup>3</sup> Duhigg, C. *The power of habit: Why we do what we do in life and business*. New York: Random House, 2012.
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- <sup>7</sup> Dowd, M. (June 1, 2013). "She's getting her boots dirty." *New York Times*. Web.
- <sup>8</sup> Roger, D. (1997). *Managing stress: The challenge of change*. Maidenhead: Chartered Institute of Marketing.

## About the Author

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**Nick Petrie** is a senior faculty member at the Center for Creative Leadership's Colorado Springs, CO campus, where he facilitates customized programs for senior-level executives and writes extensively about future trends in leadership development. His current focus is working with CEOs and their teams to transform organizational cultures. A New Zealander with significant interna-

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