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HEALTH**March 11, 2003****MARKETS****Dow Jones WebReprint Service®****Are You Stressed Out Yet?****No Wonder: Research Shows People Handle Anxiety Wrong; the Case Against the Spa****By JANE SPENCER**

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Cathy Carr, a 42-year-old Indianapolis obstetrician, is a typical American stress case. She starts her day dashing on eyeliner, nuking oatmeal for her three kids, and dishing out their attention-deficit medication. By 7:30, she is rushing around the hospital, facing circumcisions and miscarriages.

Evenings are no better: "My purse isn't off my shoulder when I hear, 'What's for dinner?'" she says. On top of all of it, there is a war to worry about. Her sons recently lined up toy army tanks in their bedroom in case Osama bin Laden invades the house.

Dr. Carr's remedy for her mounting stress? Every few months, she checks into a hotel with her best friend and spends the weekend sopping up pink cosmopolitans and sesame-oil massages. "It's just what I need to recharge," she says.

Wrong. A growing body of research suggests that millions of Americans are managing their stress in precisely the wrong way. They compartmentalize by stressing out all day — and then push off relaxation to isolated blocks of time like evening yoga classes and weekend getaways.

But this binge-and-purge approach to stress management is coming under scrutiny. The problem: The relentless exposure to daily, chronic anxiety is the most toxic form of stress. It can actually be poisonous, wearing down the immune system and increasing the risk of everything from colds to cancer. Stress can damage neurons in the brain, causing memory problems; it can interfere with sexual performance and lead to heart attacks and premature death. Worst of all, it can make you fat.

That exposure simply isn't mitigated by dutifully scheduling in nighttime bubble baths or ducking out to watch "Joe Millionaire." Ultimately, it is how you spend your days — not your downtime — that matters. As mass layoffs, the tanking stock market, and a presidential mandate to prepare our homes for biological warfare put the nation on edge, more Americans are spending their days awash in a toxic bath of stress hormones.

The new research — which has been fueled in part by the national stresses of Sept. 11 — is exploring how some people manage to glide through stressful situations, while others wind themselves tighter as the day goes on.

It isn't that the first group is spending more time at the day spa. It isn't even that they are confronted by less stress. Researchers have pegged stress resistance to a single quality: resilience. People who handle stress well recover quickly, physically and mentally, when confronted by it. From the way they breathe at their desks to how much they laugh, they engage in a set of subtle behaviors that help them shift easily in and out of "stress mode" throughout the day.

The result is a major shift in what experts recommend for relief. The goal is to train people to deal with stress as it happens — by changing how they react — rather than trying to eliminate stress or treat its symptoms. Here are four strategies supported by the new research:

Biofeedback: Maggie Wicken, a technology instructor at Boeing Corp., has a pretty unusual way of monitoring her anxiety. She literally plugs herself in to her desktop PC and takes a reading of her stress level.

This is the latest trend in biofeedback, a field that is getting a fresh look in the battle against chronic stress. In the past, biofeedback was often shrugged off as mad science. But at some major corporations, including Boeing, Cisco Systems and Unilever, it is now being used by employees right at their desks.

Using a finger clip attached to the PC, employees at these companies regularly hook themselves up to a biofeedback software program called [Freeze-Framer](#). By measuring heart rhythms much the same way you take your temperature, it can give people a window on exactly how their body is handling stress throughout the day.

The goal is to learn to read signals from your body. Then when anxiety starts mounting, you adjust the way you breathe (the more deeply the better), sit (drop your shoulders) or even what you are thinking about (imagine yourself on the beach). The software even includes video games that you play by manipulating your own heart rate; adjust it properly and a hot-air balloon on the screen rises. This ability to bring the body back a state of calm is what stress-resistant people do naturally.

Skeptics say a lot of this is a placebo effect. But Ms. Wicken at Boeing, whose anxiety skyrocketed after massive layoffs and restructuring at her company, says she has learned to bring down her anxiety in under a minute.

The Myth of Ergonomics: Don't trust that ergonomic chair. Even if every piece of equipment is at the perfect height and angle, merely sitting at your desk produces physical reactions that can increase stress.

About 95% of people raise their shoulders the moment they sit down in front of a computer, and 30% begin breathing more shallowly, according to Erik Peper, a professor of holistic health at San Francisco State University. Dr. Peper theorizes that computers invoke a low-level fight or flight response in many people, triggering an adrenaline rush.

The American Institute of Stress offers one low-tech solution to computer overload: inhale slowly. While this hardly sounds novel, researchers are nailing down the science behind this folk remedy, and discovering that it is one of the quickest ways to trigger the body's relaxation response.

A slew of studies suggest nearly every spiritual practice, including yoga and saying

rosaries, induces relaxation simply by slowing your heart rate through breathing. Indeed, a stress coach we hired to visit our anxiety-prone New York newsroom noticed immediately that most staffers are "chest breathers." Breathing more deeply and slowly, he says, could reduce stress. And of course the old stand-bys of exercise and getting enough sleep are still crucial.

Snacking Away Stress: It's 4 p.m., and you're staring down the Cheez-Its in the office vending machine, cursing the Atkins diet.

Are you wrong to crave carbos? New research suggests you may be better off just giving in to the temptation.

What your body really wants from the vending machine is stress relief, says Massachusetts Institute of Technology research scientist Judith Wurtman. Eating carbohydrates aids the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that has a calming effect on the brain. By contrast, low-carb diets can bring down your mood.

Dr. Wurtman has found many people have the strongest need for a serotonin boost in the late afternoon. This isn't an excuse to binge on Snicker's bars. You can just as easily eat your way to a calmer state with a simple, lower-fat carbohydrate such as pretzels or popcorn. The effects kick in after 15 or 20 minutes.

But resist the urge to wash those pretzels down with a cup of coffee. A recent study at Duke University in Durham, N.C., determined that people produce more stress hormones on days they consume caffeine — and that caffeine's effects can last as long as 12 hours.

Hardiness Training: Don't think of yourself as an office drone. You're a "white-collar athlete."

Borrowing from sports psychology, a cadre of stress coaches are trying to train people to build up their stress resistance. Among the skills clients are taught to cultivate: perspective. "It's a mental ability to see things from 10 paces back," says Pam Peeke of the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

The method appeals to turbocharged executives who regard stress as an inconvenience. "The idea is to train people to handle more stress, but feel less of it," says Michael Kahn, a coach and psychologist. He works with executives in phone sessions at rates starting at \$180 an hour.

Of course, getting perspective is easier said than done. Allen Elkin, director of the Stress Management and Counseling Center in New York, has one technique. When stress hits, just rate the situation on a scale of one to 10, with 10 being a catastrophic event, like a death. It can help put inconveniences into perspective.

Shedding stress also involves cultivating a certain amount of pessimism, to avoid constant disappointments. Don't expect to find a parking place immediately, and acknowledge in advance that computers crash.

If all else fails, try laughing. It opens up the blood flow. Sometimes, "I prescribe 'Frasier,'" says Michael Miller of the University of Maryland.

The Freeze-Framer technology and product were developed by the **HeartMath**

companies. For information on the product itself or how it is being implemented in corporate and healthcare organizations please call 1-800-450-9111, email info@heartmath.com, or visit HeartMath's Web site at www.heartmath.com.

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