

'TIL  
STRESS  
DO US  
PART

HOW TO HEAL THE #1 ISSUE  
IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS

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BOOK EXCERPT

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# Introduction

**W**hen I first opened my therapy practice, I purchased a small, beat-up, two-seater couch from IKEA's as-is section. It was fifty dollars and all I could afford. A friend helped me carry it up to the fifteenth-floor of a city building, shove it into my tiny office, and cover it with a brown slipcover. Since then hundreds of couples have sat on that couch as they yell, cry, laugh, and share with each other.

In those early years, the couples therapy I offered was fairly generic. Two people sitting side by side would tell me what was going on and I would coach them on how to communicate their frustrations with each other. While these skills are certainly important, the couples I was working with would come back week after week, sometimes year after year, complaining that while things had gotten better in some ways, they were still arguing in the same manner when things got difficult.

I was doing everything I had been taught to do in school and yet I was missing one key component—recognizing the role stress plays on how couples can navigate everything from intimacy to communication to decision-making.

A few years into my work, I got married following a whirlwind romance. Andrew and I met, moved in together, and got married all within two years. Everything was great until we had our first baby. Suddenly, I felt like I didn't know my husband or myself. We went from being happy and connected to angry and withdrawn.

I knew what was going wrong. We were too critical and defensive and too wrapped up in everything—our baby, our jobs, our activities—except each other.

I would tell myself exactly how to avoid the next argument, repair the ruptures, and build our connection. *Stop rage texting*, I would remind myself. *Even though I'm tired, I am going to put my damn phone down and listen when he talks to me*, I'd commit.

And yet day after day and night after night, I would behave in ways I couldn't even identify. And so would he.

One night, after a particularly bad argument, I spent time researching exactly why I was so unhappy. I came upon an answer—something called mental load disparity.

The mental load is defined as the cognitive effort involved in managing life responsibilities and decision-making. This might include planning a trip, researching which dentist your family should go to, remembering birthdays, and delegating chores, a type of labor that often falls mostly to women. As I continued to research the mental load, I became more and more shocked that not only had I never heard of it as a woman but also as a couples therapist. I knew I was letting my clients down by not pointing out this heavy burden in the relationship.

For the first year following that argument, I attributed all of our unhappiness to the way the mental load was being distributed in our family. I went on an obsessive journey to better understand how it wasn't only impacting me, but also my relationships.

But then, things with the mental load improved. My husband got better at noticing the toilet paper was low and became the only person in charge of doctor's appointments. Yet as I became less and less burdened with managing our lives, we still faced fairly challenging arguments and points of disconnect.

I was frustrated. If the communication skills I was taught in school and the mental load research I had so strongly grasped onto weren't making as big of a change in my relationship as I had hoped . . . what would? Were we doomed?

Then the pandemic hit. Everything in our lives changed drastically without notice, and my husband and I were grasping at straws to maintain our jobs, show up as loving parents, and take care of each other.

I experienced a paradigm shift. I realized it didn't matter how much I knew about relationships because if I was stressed out and overwhelmed, the "skills" I had weren't going to improve my marriage. Similarly, teaching couples communication skills in therapy wouldn't help if underneath

it all was stress and overwhelm. Having nice conversations solves nothing when you're drowning.

Our relationship was sinking in a Swiss-cheese canoe. There were many holes—one being the unfair distribution of tasks—caused by too much stress in our lives. Not only would we need to improve how we distributed tasks, we would need to consider how many tasks we took on and how we coped with our burdens.

As I met with couples during this time, I started to realize something: stress was the cause of so many of their issues. The way they argued and the way they let each other down was only the tip of the iceberg. When you looked beneath the surface, stress was fueling the behavior they detested.

In graduate school, we learned very little about how stress influences relationships. Sure, we spent some time learning how it impacts our bodies, and therefore our minds, but when it came to relationship work, we were mostly focused on “skill building.” Our classes focused on teaching couples how to speak, listen, and compromise, but not how to identify the role stress played in their inability to do any of those things.

Every week, couples come into my office blaming their relationship issues for their stress, when in reality, their stress is often to blame for their relationship issues. Again and again, couples share that they are failing; there aren't enough hours in the day to lean in at work, practice attachment parenting, show up for their Peloton ride, and take the dog for a walk, let alone take time to connect with their partner.

Prior to the pandemic, divorce rates were down. People were working to keep their marriages together and relationships were thriving. Since the pandemic, I've witnessed an unraveling in my office; couples are struggling more than ever.

They are struggling with each other, yes, but when it comes down to it, it's because they are struggling with life.

We are living through global crisis after global crisis and this has created much of our relationship crises. People are unable to connect; they feel lonely, depressed, and unfulfilled in their relationships. The last several years have caused couples to face all kinds of external stressors including health anxiety, political turmoil, financial uncertainty, working from home, childcare strains, loss of community, isolation, and more.

According to the American Psychological Association's 2022 Stress in America Poll, Americans are more stressed than ever. In particular, families are suffering, with 70 percent of parents saying that they believe they are under extreme stress when it comes to the development of their children and fears for their children's futures. We also know that families are under great financial pressure. Inflation has caused gas prices to rise 58 percent, the cost of food is up 6 percent, and housing costs continually increase, all while workplaces fail to pay salaries that keep up with rising costs.

Over two million women left the workforce during the pandemic, meaning that many dual-earning households significantly reduced their income at a time when inflation and housing costs were getting out of control.

More people than ever are unhappy with their jobs. Whether you call it the Great Resignation or Quiet Quitting, it's clear that people are leaving their workplaces in droves, only to find themselves more uncertain about where to go next to find the financial stability they crave. And on top of collective grief, instability, and workplace stress, people continue to navigate common personal stressors like parenting, health, domestic duties, and managing daily life.

People are drowning, and at the same time they are being told they should be thriving. Despite all this increased stress, pressures have never been higher—to be the perfect employee, parent, and fully actualized self. This is all leading to a crisis of shame. “I’m not a good enough mother.” “I’m not a good enough ally.” “I’m not a good enough partner.” “I’m just plain not good enough.”

This stress-shame cycle is having a disastrous effect on our ability to connect. And yet, no one is talking about the source of our biggest relationship issue directly. Although most might think stress is merely just a blip on the trajectory toward relationship fallout, I’m here to tell you it’s actually the cause and our reactions to it are the blips.

When we are stressed, we begin to lose access to important tools like affection, humor, and problem-solving, which can have disastrous effects on our relationships over time. Although the messages from books like the *Year of Yes* and *Lean In* are powerful, they can actually lead people to take on more and more in order to believe they are doing

something “valuable” with their lives. Meanwhile, the most valuable part of life—our relationships—are being neglected.

I want to teach you how to create a life that includes a mix of “yeses” and “noes” by leveraging the science behind good stress and bad stress. I hope couples can understand how to better protect themselves and their relationships from distress so that it’s no longer wreaking havoc on their connection.

This might sound daunting, but I promise, you can do something about it.

I’ve organized this book in a unique way. Not only will I use my own stressful life experiences (having a baby, living through a pandemic, navigating terminal cancer in a family member, and job changes), but we’ll also be following the progress of specific couples (an amalgamation of the real-life stories clients have shared with me over the years) as I work with them to alleviate stress in their lives. It’ll be as if you’re sitting in on a therapy session as I walk you through a relatable account of how stress can fracture your relationship and what you can do to heal it. I’ll end each chapter with Session Notes, recapping the lessons we learned and outlining exercises to put them into practice in real time.

Over the course of the book, I’ll reassure you that it’s likely you aren’t bad parents, bad employees, or bad partners. Rather, you’re being put under undue life pressures that make it nearly impossible to feel good about yourself in these arenas, which heightens conflict, resentment, and disconnect in our relationships. The book will identify gender issues (such as the mental load and roles), sky-high parenting expectations, and our society’s boundary problems (like constant access and low compensation). I’ll also discuss the unavoidable facts of life that cause us stress, like finances, illness, loss, aging, and an unpredictable world landscape.

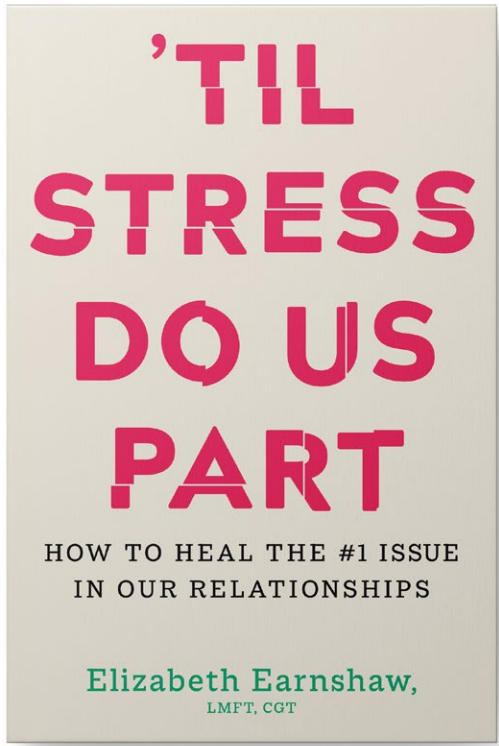
You’ll be able to identify the type of stress you’re experiencing—from acute stress to chronic stress, distress, and even eustress (the positive type of stress we need in our lives)—in order to better understand your circumstances and why you feel the way you do. My goal is to offer you hope through science, which has taught us a lot about how to keep our brains and bodies safe from stress. The first step is identifying stressors and how they are impacting oneself and one’s relationships.

I'll also help you start seeing the aha moments in the unexpected ways in which you're actually playing a role in your own stress. You might not even realize it, but the time and energy you put into finishing that project or not setting correct boundaries are all fanning the flames of the stress fire. Our high-stress society is impacting our emotional, sexual, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional intimacy, and I'm going to show you how to let go of all the pressures and expectations and do less in order to save what's most important . . . our relationships.

I'll share solutions to protect you and your relationships from stress. You'll learn how to self-soothe, recognize when your body's reactions are flooding you, and understand why boundaries are critical in protecting our relationships. I'll even share communication strategies you can use in real time to start advocating for yourself and navigating your differences.

Stress is inevitable, but it doesn't have to consume your life or your relationships. If you're feeling defeated and unsure what to do to save your relationship, this book will give you the tools to take action now.



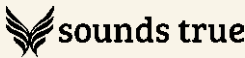


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