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AUTHOR Gmelch, Walter H.  
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ABSTRACT

University department chairs need to manage stress to their advantage. Myths pertaining to stress include: (1) stress is harmful; (2) stress should be avoided; (3) stress correlates with level of responsibility; (4) stress is predominantly a male phenomenon; and (5) there is one appropriate coping method. The Chair Stress Cycle provides a broad perspective on stress and introduces a framework for action. Identifying Stress Traps, Stage I, is the key to managing stress. It discloses five sources of stress: administrative tasks; the tension in serving in an additional faculty role; role ambiguity; hierarchical authority; and perceived high expectations. Stage II, The Perception of Stress, reveals that managing perceptions provides the greatest opportunity for effective stress management. Chairs should plan personal time each day, compartmentalize chair and non-chair activities, perform one task at a time, strive to enrich themselves, have a private retreat, and live by the calendar and not the clock. Stage III, Coping, entails specific stress management strategies. From Illness to Wellness--Consequences, Stage IV, suggests that the effective implementation of the three stages will provide the chair with optimal stress levels, allowing for personal health while managing unavoidable levels of stress in such a way as to optimize job performance. (Contains 15 references.) (TEJ)

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**Walter H. Gmelch, Ph.D.**  
**Chair, Department of Educational Administration**  
**Director, Center for Study of Department Chair**  
**Washington State University**  
**Pullman, WA 99164-2136**

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## **Strategies for Dealing with Stress: Taking Care of Yourself\***

This paper focuses on strategies for coping with stress. First, you will explore the nature of stress and dispel the common myths which cloud the issues of stress control. Next, the chair stress cycle introduces you to a four stage model which provides a framework for managing your stress. Finally, you will explore each stage of the stress cycle and identify techniques to master the stresses of chairing a department.

### **Common Myths About Stress**

To help clarify some the misconceptions and misuses surrounding the concept of stress over the past few decades, focus your attention on the following myths.

**Myth #1: *Stress is harmful.*** While the popular connotation portrays an image that stress is unpleasant or negative, it can be positive as well. The Chinese, for example, represent stress with two characters, one signalling *danger* and the other *opportunity*. Like the Chinese representation, stress today actually encompasses both distress (bad or unpleasant events) and eustress (good or pleasant events). Through slurring, the old French and Middle English word distress came into common English usage as stress, with its sole negative connotation in the Western world. Failure is stressful, but so is success.

**Myth #2: *Stress should be avoided.*** Stress is a natural part of life and helps individuals respond to threat or rise to challenge. In essence, it cannot and should not be avoided, for without stress you could not live. What "under stress" actually means is that you are under "excessive" stress or distress. An analogous condition is that of "running a temperature," meaning above normal. Body temperature itself is essential to life, just as is stress. Stress cannot be avoided, other than by death. Therefore, chairs should not always seek to avoid stress: *it can be the spice of life, when handled right.*

**Myth #3: *The higher up in the organization the greater the stress.*** It is popularly believed that high-level executives lead the list of heart disease patients. However, a Metropolitan Life Insurance Company study challenged this assumption when it found that presidents and vice-presidents of the 500 largest industrial corporations suffered 40% fewer heart attack deaths than

\*Adapted from W.H. Gmelch and V.D. Miskin, Leadership Skills for Department Chairs (in press), Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co.

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middle managers of the same companies. Similar data support the conclusion that middle managers have a higher peptic ulcer rate than chief executive officers. Results in academe are mixed on who suffers the most from stress: one study found that department chairs reported greater stress than all other classifications of faculty (resident instructional faculty, librarians, student services, and cooperative extension) as well as other academic administrators (Gmelch and Wilke, 1991). In a comparative study of 23 occupations, professors in administrative posts ranked first, ahead of professors (ranked sixth) in reported stresses and strains (Caplan, et al., 1980). In addition, professors reported more satisfaction with their jobs than professors serving as administrators.

**Myth #4: *Stress is a male-dominated phenomena.*** Until the 1980s, the literature commonly referred to "men under stress." While this male pronoun myth or misguided reference no longer prevails, it is a well-known fact that men suffer higher rates of alcoholism, ulcers, lung cancer, suicide and heart disease than women. However, as the number of women in male-dominated professions increases, so do the incidences of stress and stress-related diseases. In a national study of professorial stress, women reported more stress than men, and married women experienced even more stress than single women professors (Gmelch, Lovrich and Wilke, 1984).

**Myth #5: *There is one right way to cope with stress.*** Researchers have addressed popular and academic concerns as well as conceptual, theoretical, and empirical investigations on coping and the answer to effective coping processes remains elusive. Given the recent interest in educator stress, it is surprising to find little attention is given to the precise ways educators cope with stress.

### **The Chair Stress Cycle**

As a department chair, rather than avoiding stress, you need to control it and use it to your advantage. The four-stage Chair Stress Cycle provides a broad perspective and clear understanding of stress and introduces a framework for action. The process begins with Stage I, **stressors**, a set of specific demands. Excessive meetings, interruptions, and confrontations represent some of common chair stressors. How much stress is produced by these stressors depends on Stage II, the department chair's **perception** of these demands. If you do not have the physical or mental resources to meet the demand, you perceive the demand as a stress trap. Stress created by this discrepancy between *demand* and *personal resources* results in a specific stress response -- Stage III. The fourth and final stage, **consequences**, pertains to the intensity and long-range negative effects of stress.

This paper focuses on all four stages of the stress cycle: identify stressors in Stage I; investigate your proneness to stressful personality types in Stage II; broaden your repertoire of effective coping responses in Stage III; and convert the possible negative consequences in Stage IV from illness to wellness through a stress absorbers plan. If the stressors can be identified, negative

perceptions turned into positive ones, and a variety of responses utilized in numerous ways, then the consequence will be a healthy and productive department chair.

**Stress Traps: Stage I.** You can begin to control your four-stage stress cycle by examining the demands of your current situation. What are your stress traps as department chair. Meetings, interruptions, staff conflicts, drop-in visitors, and rules and regulations all represent potential stressors. While a single telephone interruption may not cause a great deal of difficulty, couple the interruption with unexpected and unwanted drop-in visitors, irate faculty members, or a backlog of paperwork, and you're likely to find some prime, personal stress traps. The key to stress reduction rests with identifying your stress traps. It may help to understand the more common stressors of department chairs. Another method of reviewing and analyzing your stressors is to find themes of department chair stress. A factor analysis of the chair stressors discloses five themes: **administrative tasks, faculty role, role ambiguity, hierarchical authority, and perceived expectations** (Burns, 1992; Burns & Gmelch, 1992).

**Administrative tasks** deals with three areas of managerial roles and responsibilities: *administrative details* in terms of meetings, workload, paperwork, deadlines, and budgets and financial support; *personnel administration* including handling student conflicts, evaluating staff and faculty, supervising and coordinating personnel, and having to make decisions that affect the lives of faculty, staff and students; and *organizational constraints* highlighting the frustrations of complying with college and university regulations and seeking compatibility among institutional, departmental and individual goals.

Secondly, department chairs seem to be caught between the previous common administrative stresses and those of the regular **faculty role**: keeping current in their discipline, preparing manuscripts, searching for money for their research, and making presentations. In addition, they feel that their academic career progress is not what it should be, possibly due to serving as department chair. Thus, chairs are trapped between the pressures and demands of performing not only as an administrator, but also as a productive faculty member.

From this Janus position emerges the **role ambiguity** factor. Chairs basically experience stress from the uncertainties, inadequacies, and performance cues of the chair position. These uncertainties reflect the typical research descriptions of role ambiguity (Kahn et al., 1964). This reoccurring "academic administrator" Janus theme (chair as faculty; chair as administrator) emerges again when comparing the most serious stressors of chairs with those of faculty. Two national stress studies, one of chairs (Gmelch & Burns, in press) and the other of college faculty (Gmelch, Wilke & Lovrich, 1984) found that not only do chairs identify seven of the professors' most serious stressors as their own, but the percent of chairs suffering from these stressors is higher in each case except for *excessively high self-expectations* (typically more troublesome for faculty

than administrative positions). This paradoxical situation of trying to fill a "swivel" position causes department chairs to feel double pressure to be an effective manager and productive faculty member (Gmelch, 1992).

Chairs' responsibility as a representative of the department to the dean and higher administration is encompassed in the **hierarchical authority** stress factor. This theme contains six stressors involving relationships with the dean and higher authorities. Additional frustrations from this area include the elements of inadequate recognition, rewards and career progression.

Finally, and probably most problematic for department chairs, is the fifth factor, **perceived expectations**, which reflects the commitments and obligations chairs perceive as necessary to fulfill the expectations of their positions, such as travel, social commitments, and volunteer work. The most notable and powerful stressor in this factor is self-imposed "excessively high expectations." In other words, it may not be the influence of an oppressive hierarchy or demanding dean that causes the greatest concern as much as the stress one causes within one self from expecting more than what can be delivered.

To what extent do each of these chair stress traps cause you concern? The Chair Stress Inventory in the Conference session will allow you to identify your most bothersome stressors.

**The Perception of Stress: Stage II.** While demands surrounding the chair position cannot always be diminished, our perception, attitude and approach is under our control and is, after all, the deciding factor in whether or not these demands become stress traps. Nervous, tense and uptight feelings are usually attributed to outside conditions rather than looking within ourselves. Professors and chairs alike typically blame the upper college or university administration, state or corporate funding, regents or other demanding clientele for placing pressures to perform beyond one's capabilities. In actuality much of the stress experienced by academics is self-imposed. In fact, individual personalities play an important role in determining how stressful academic conditions are. Stressors, by themselves, represent objective demands which only become stress traps when one subjectively perceives them to be troublesome.

Consider the following definition of stress: "The anticipation (which could be real or imaginary) of your inability (the degree to which you feel prepared to perform the role of department chair) to respond adequately to a **perceived demand** (the critical element of whether stress exists or not), accompanied by your anticipation (again anticipation could be real or imaginary) of negative consequences for an inadequate response (Gmelch, 1982)." This definition is based on your **perception** of your ability to meet the challenges of chairing a department. Thus, it is how you approach your job and life that causes most of your stress. Perception plays the major role in your resilience to, or acceptance of, stress in your job. Of particular importance and deserving of your attention is the "coronary heart disease" personality (Type A behavior)



(Friedman and Rosenman, 1974). Since heart disease remains the number one killer in America, managing your "Type A behavior" through perceptual awareness may save a life, even your own.

Type A's approach their jobs with intensity and impatience. So much so that they are attacked by heart disease at triple the rate of more relaxed and easy-going Type B's. But what exactly is Type A behavior and to what extent do department chairs exhibit it? A Type A chair can be characterized as an overly competitive achiever, aggressive, fast worker, impatient, restless, hyperalert, explosive in speech, tense, always feeling under pressure, insecure and unaware of his/her own limitations. In contrast, Type B behavior is the mirror opposite: relaxed, easy going, seldom impatient, takes more time to enjoy things in life besides work, not easily irritated, works steadily, seldom lacks time, not preoccupied with social achievement, and moves and speaks more slowly.

But who are the Type A's? Are chairs more prone than faculty members? Are you Type A? A major study entitled *Job Demands and Worker Health* investigated the extent of Type A personality characteristics in 23 occupations, including professors and academic administrators (Caplan, et al., 1980). First the bad news: two occupations had by far the highest scores on the Type A index, academic administrators and family physicians. Academic administrators (e.g. department chairs and directors) ranked first in Type A behavior, and professors, ranked sixth. Note that the professors' scores were one-third lower on the index than academic administrators. In addition, 12% of the academic administrators in this study suffered from coronary heart disease: three times greater heart disease rate than professors (4%).

What might be some of the contributors to this higher incidence of heart disease and Type A behavior? Could it be the overtime administrators seem to put into their jobs? Not at first glance. Professors and academic administrators report working 12 and 16 hours, respectively, beyond the traditional forty hour week. Nevertheless, professors report only 31 percent (3.6 hours) of their 12 hours as overtime they didn't want to work whereas academic administrators report 70 percent (11.4 hours) of their overtime hours as unwanted. In other words, the extra hours beyond the forty hour work week are seen in a more positive light by professors and in a less positive light by administrators. As a study of university professors points out, many professors consider the hours beyond a forty hour week as not overtime but simply as part of the time they need to perform their duties as they desire (French and Caplan, 1973). "I would work the hours anyway even if no one asked me," commented one professor summing up this viewpoint. The administrative professor, however, views those extra hours as *busy work* (Caplan et al., 1980, p. 124). All in all, academic administrators put in more unwanted overtime than any other occupation (professors are about average).

However, here's the good news for chairs. Compared to the other 22 professions, academic administrators ranked second on personal flexibility, and first in the level of participation

with others in decisions, social support from others at work and spouse, friends and relatives. Chairs were also highest in job fit and lowest in job boredom. In essence, they have built in some resistance and resilience to stress attacks, and can never be accused of being bored!

But, you are still wondering if you are Type A, right? Answers to this will be found in Conference session. Since coping is an individual art, some of the following techniques will work for you and others will not. Test them and others until you develop your own approach to a more positive perceptual focus (Stage II).

1. *Plan some personal time each day.* Don't operate from a crisis position. Schedule your day to encourage a more positive attitude. Plan a little idleness in each day; morning, noon and night. Each morning arrive at the office a little early to set the stage for the day before the onslaught of interruptions, demands and conflicts. At noon, make sure you take a mid-day break and have lunch with a colleague or engage in vigorous exercise to cut the *eight to five* stress cycle. Although this may sound unrealistic, leave the office a half hour late in the evening in order to plan the next day and possibly avoid rush-hour traffic.

2. *Compartmentalize chair and non-chair activities.* One of the most difficult tasks for chairs to perform is separating administrative and scholarly activities. A more open approach to work demands is facilitated by compartmentalizing or separating your administrative and your academic duties and it is essential that you make this distinction. Similarly you should separate work (professional) from non-work (personal) activities in order to have higher quality, guilt free evenings and weekends.

3. *Do one task at a time.* A typical Type A chair eats, walks, works and talks, all at the same time, engaging in what has been termed polyphasic behavior -- that is, doing two or more things simultaneously. You can effectively only do one thing at a time, so select the most important task, whether it be administrative, academic or personal and do it first.

4. *Strive to enrich yourself: physically, socially, mentally and emotionally.* A survey of 4,000 executives found that less than 40 percent have any meaningful activity outside of work. Changing your perceptual focus requires activity and interest in more than one single area. Therefore you need to take a holistic approach toward personal enrichment: through selected combinations of physical exercise, social interaction, mental stimulation and emotional stability.

5. *Have a retreat away from the office.* Every chair should have some place where he or she can be alone. You need to be able to get away, close the door and think without interruption -- without faculty and staff making demands on your time and attention.

6. *Live by your calendar, not your watch.* Of the stressors faced by chairs, none is as pervasive as time. Break into your fragmented administrative life by setting time aside daily for organizing and planning. Rather than rushing around by the minute hand of your watch, let your weekly calendar dictate your pace.

The stress of being a department chair is what you make of it. That can be the difference between coping and collapsing. The secret of success is not avoiding stressors in Stage I but challenging them with a more positive perceptual response in Stage II. Whether you are exhausted or relaxed under constant pressure depends on how you approach the stress of crisis. Your personality, outlook, perception can all work to either resist or intensify your stress. Are you thriving in your position, or is your personality killing you? Only you can tell.

**The Coping Response: Stage III.** While the general literature on coping is significant in volume and diverse in attention, the exact coping process is elusive. Researchers from the disciplines of medicine, psychiatry, clinical psychology, behavior science and education have undertaken studies to understand the phenomenon of stress and the coping responses.

The foremost authority on stress, Hans Selye, pointed out that despite everything that has been written and said about stress and coping, there is not ready-made formula that will suit everyone (1974). Since no one technique will suit everyone, how can department chairs positively respond to the stress traps identified in Stage I of the Stress Cycle? The first step, of course, is to develop a more positive "perceptual awareness" to drive the search for effective coping techniques. When faced with such a dilemma, academic chairs might attempt to conceive a technology to control it. Once enough information about a stressor is generated, the tendency is to transform it into a prescription and control it. However, a prescriptive approach may not be an appropriate technology for coping. Blueprints for exact techniques are not available to chairs. One could even assert that coping is an art, not a science, and therefore should be personalized.

Some researchers have attempted to prescribe effective and ineffective techniques which has resulted in misleading conclusions and advice. Others approach coping with singular trend techniques such as relaxation, aerobics, biofeedback, or other such stress interventions. When developing a coping strategy, consider the following propositions as a basis for your response to stress.

1. The individual is the most important variable; no one coping technique is effective for all department chairs in all colleges and universities. Therefore, coping techniques must be sensitive to cultural, social, psychological, and environmental differences in individuals.
2. Individuals can't change the world around them, and chairs cannot change all the barriers in higher education, but they can change how they relate to them.
3. Individuals who cope best develop a repertoire of techniques to counteract different stressors in different situations. Their repertoire of techniques, hence, should represent a holistic approach toward coping.

### **How Chairs Cope With Stress**

Notwithstanding, are there identifiable categories of coping, which, if used holistically, can help department chairs systematically address the stress of academic administration? In answer to



this question we asked 800 department chairs (Center for the Study of Department Chair, 1990): "Recognizing that being a chair is demanding, what ways have you found useful in handling the pressures of your job?" The majority of chairs cited more than one response. In all, they identified over 887 coping responses. Content analysis of these responses revealed coping techniques which can be grouped into seven coping categories: social support, physical activities, intellectual stimulation, entertainment, personal interests (e.g. hobbies) self-management and supportive attitudes. While not one of the responses taken separately presents the answer to coping, taken collectively chairs can view this as a coping taxonomy from which to seek their own stress reduction.

Since coping with stress is a holistic and polytechnic proposition, it is much like weight loss, if one were to exercise more, but eat more too, the results may not be as beneficial as exercising more while cutting back or stabilizing one's diet. In much the same way, effective coping consists of building a repertoire of techniques equally balanced in the social, physical, intellectual, entertainment, managerial, personal and attitudinal categories. Your goal is to reduce your stress by adding some of these techniques to your present repertoire of stress response. It is not the chair who masters one technique that copes most effectively and creatively. but the one who possesses the flexibility to call upon any number of techniques from various sources -- physical activity, managerial skills, social support, and so on.

The holistic coping effect becomes synergistic, providing physical, emotional and intellectual benefits. Only you can make the final decision. Each chair has his or her own tastes, time schedules and preferences. Some chairs find certain techniques like luncheon therapy sessions once a week with other chairs more helpful than dining alone. The authors of this book realized that their sedentary administrative practices added not only stress to their lives but weight onto their frames so they pledged to get involved in racquetball three times a week. Not only do we now report less stress, but have trimmed off a few pounds and benefitted from sharper mental acuity. You must discover for yourself the activities most agreeable to you in each of the coping categories -- but remember, the answer is in the holistic approach to stress reduction. No matter what the activities, take it slow and easy. Just go quietly, keep it personal, and you will have a good chance of success.

**From Illness to Wellness -- Consequences: Stage IV.** Behind the achievements of many great academics lie the factor of stress. A study of 1200 faculty members shows how stress interacted with their productivity (Wilke, Gmelch & Lovrich, 1985). A moderate amount of stress helped them reach peak performance, however when stress reached "excessive" proportions (burnout), their performance significantly declined. Note also that without sufficient stress (lack of motivation or challenge -- rustout), their performance also declined.

Department chairs do experience excessive stress. After all, they can only put out so many brush fires before eventually burning out. It is at this point that stress becomes a most powerful and elusive enemy, playing a major role in a variety of illnesses. By proper management of the Chair Stress Cycle, the end result of stress should not be illness but wellness. Your stress cycle can be a positive, upward spiral toward wellness if you are able to manage your stressors in Stage I, reinforce your resilient personality in Stage II, and develop a repertoire of positive coping techniques in Stage III. You can then step up to wellness. That is, you are free of signs, symptoms, and disabilities of illness-- and you must go beyond, into the preventative, holistic medicine and build up your strength through a variety of stress-reduction practices.

The Chair Action Plan introduced in the Conference will suggest dividing stressors into two categories: (1) those internally controlled and (2) those externally beyond one's control. Those within the individual's control should be managed at the cause level by self-management techniques. Those beyond one's control should be attacked at the symptom level with stress absorbers such as relaxation, nutrition, exercise and coping attitudes.

### **Coping with Chair Stress Traps**

No amount of research can provide the solitary answer on how to cope with chair stress problems. However, the following suggestions reinforce strategies which are also helpful in attacking the general sources of department chair stress.

**Managing Management Time.** The paperwork, meetings, deadlines and workload represent not the ends of managerial and academic productivity but the means to important goals in higher education. Therefore, you should incorporate and practice a few other time management principles.

1. Identify high pay-off (HIPOS) activities (most important, not urgent) which will help attain excellence in both management and faculty responsibilities. For example, budget, personnel, and personal productivity activities should take precedence over the administrivia details of unimportant meetings, filing unread reports, and answering meaningless correspondence.

2. Reduce the involvement of chairs in less meaningful, low pay-off (LOPOS) processes. This is the corollary of the first principle. You can find more time for HIPOS if you delegate or eliminate your LOPOS. The key for chairs, however is to identify the LOPOS so they can be ignored -- a difficult task for most managers since everything they do seems so important -- otherwise they wouldn't be doing it, right?

3. Develop a more efficient working environment so that routine paperwork can be handled by office assistants; telephone calls can be screened; time can be blocked into uninterrupted periods for productive, thoughtful work; and when possible, a HIPO hideout can be used as a retreat to prepare manuscripts and keep up with the academic discipline.

**Productive Conflict Resolution.** Chairs most frequent and serious conflict arises in confronting peers, and on occasion, the dean. A few reminders may be helpful in working with your colleagues and dean:

1. The power of the chair does not rest as much in the position (power of reward and punishment) as it does in the person (influence by referent, expertise, and collegiality). Therefore, use your position power sparingly and build a solid personal power base with your dean and faculty members by working with them in an open, honest and professional manner.

2. When caught between the demands of administration and the needs of faculty, explore common interests that transcend and satisfy both parties.

3. Work on getting faculty involved and having them buy into the solutions -- your role is more to facilitate than direct.

**Enabling Constraints.** While rules and regulations restrict chairs' flexibility and cause unwanted stress, do not be discouraged by rules alone. They merely represent boundaries around a *pasture* within which you and the department can operate. Understand the boundaries and be creative about how to reach goals and objectives while staying within the pasture.

**Academic Productivity.** Have you become a role prisoner of faculty productivity pressures and administrative challenges? The study of department chairs reveals that their number one stressor is trying to keep current in their discipline. In addition, preparing manuscripts for publication and maintaining academic career progress also rank in the top ten chair stress traps. In essence, department chairs have become role prisoners of both faculty productivity pressures and administrative leadership challenges. If you follow the same pattern, protect your time and resources by maintaining an Academic Protection Plan.

1. Block uninterrupted periods of time to engage in thoughtful scholarly activities.

2. Maintain another office on campus or at home to ensure that an equivalent of a half-to-a-full day a week can be devoted to your academic endeavors.

3. Establish a research or writing team of faculty members or graduate students to work with on research.

4. Negotiate a sabbatical between terms or at the end of the term to regain currency in the discipline.

Any approach to reducing chair stress rests both with the chair's willingness to seek creative solutions and the university's responsiveness to develop effective and productive leadership. While the future for academic leadership may appear plagued with stress, it is also replete with challenges and creative opportunities.

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