

1

Combatting Chronic Seriousness

If you read the book introduction, you already know about my brief trip to the principal's office in elementary school. I swear I wasn't a troublemaker or a bad kid. In fact, I was a good student and an average kid who loved to play outside. Throughout elementary school, I wore one of two shirts every day. My red and white reversible mesh soccer jersey or my No. 81 Steve Watson Denver Broncos jersey. To accompany these fashion choices, I wore gray sweatpants with large holes in both knees surrounded by grass and dirt rings that had set into the fabric from repeated recess soccer and football games. It never occurred to me that I should or would care what other people thought of my appearance. I didn't choose my outfit for any reason other than I knew I'd be playing sports at recess, and this was the gear for an 11-year-old, 4-foot-tall, 50-pound, high-performance athlete like me.

In sixth grade, however, something happened that proved to be the launching point of my professional career . . . I ran for Glennon Heights Elementary Student Council President. To this day, I have no clue where the idea to become a politician came from as I wasn't really seen as that kid. I just don't think I put out very "presidential" vibes. I do recall having fun campaigning and knowing I wouldn't win because I was running against Shanelle, the most popular girl

in school. With no pressure to win, when it came time to give our speech to the entire school, I decided to perform a rap about why I should be student council president. Man, I wish I remembered or had kept the lyrics to it. Whatever they were, I'm sure it captured all the prepubescent angst and street cred of a Punky Brewster & Ricky Schroder after-school special. (If you were born after 1983, you can google Punky and Ricky—and after-school specials.)

Perhaps it was due to the unsophisticated political acumen of children, or because I was ahead of my time in the rap game, but somehow, I won! So, what is the first thing the Student Council President says when he gets home after being elected (see Figure 1.1)?

Just like that, I had gone from a grass-stained, sports-obsessed rapper to thinking “I'm in a leadership role now and I'm going to have to be taken seriously.” What a drama queen. Nobody told me I needed to change my appearance, but for some reason I knew. I knew nobody would take me seriously in my new role if I were dressed like a slob, and I wanted so badly to be respected and to do a good job. That day began a lifelong dilemma that all of us face—how much do I need to be serious, worry about what other people think of me, and how much can I just chill and be myself?

Realistically, to achieve goals like college, graduate school, getting a good job, having a family, and getting promotions, we do need to take things seriously and be taken seriously. But we also all still have our fun, childlike, goofy side that is unique to us, and when accessed, provides healthy perspective and stress relief. Think of it as your CEO versus your inner child. Unfortunately, when we hit age 23, our CEO slaps our inner child's juice box out of their hand, stomps on it, and puts them in “time out” . . . for 50 years. Seriously, a Gallup poll of over 1.4 million people in 166 countries found that our propensity to laugh or smile each day nosedives dramatically around the age of 23, and we don't begin to recover until our mid-seventies. That's 50 years of chronic seriousness!¹

If you have kids—or ever were a kid—it's pretty obvious that they act silly, laugh, and play more than adults do. Kids laugh at the simplest stuff too—it always blows my mind how a three-year-old can



FIGURE 1.1 Photo of me in sixth grade. “Mom, I think I’m gonna need a suit.”

laugh for a minute straight at me pretending to hit my head for the eighth time in a row. Even little babies laugh, which is insane. Every time I see a baby laughing I think, “Baby, why are you laughing? You don’t even know what funny is yet.” They laugh because it’s natural and feels good. At least, that’s what I tell myself because when a baby looks at my face and just starts laughing I think, “Yeah . . . they must just laugh because it feels good.” Either that, or I’ve met a lot of

incredibly rude babies. But from the time we're little laughing rude babies until the time we enter the workforce, we develop a fun, light-hearted, and carefree part of our personality.

Unfortunately, somewhere between college graduation day and our first new employee orientation, we feel the pressure to water down—if not completely mute—that part of who we are. Suddenly, everything we do becomes extremely important as we've gone from playground slides to PowerPoint slides and from soccer practices to best practices. Chronic seriousness begins to creep in as the culture of work demands that we showcase how confident, competent, and capable we are so we can get more leads, get more sales, and get a promotion. Even the way we talk about work has become more intense. We're sucking down quad shot lattes and wheatgrass smoothies and talking to each other like:

“I gotta jump on a call, then I have a hard stop, and gotta run to a meeting, so shoot me an email, and we'll tackle that, drill down and hammer out the details! We'll deliver the actionables and take action on the deliverables, have a tiger team do a SWOT analysis because there's a lot of balls in the air and irons in the fire, so we'll cast a wider net and run it up the flagpole, take a deep dive, and see if we can move the needle, so keep grinding, hustling, crushing, and killing it and we'll all circle back while we Zoom!”

It's exhausting, and ultimately, our day-to-day life begins to feel more like a suspenseful drama than a comedy. Every decision feels burdensome, and every adversity catastrophic.

I call it chronic seriousness; you may call it stress. Most of us have a pretty good idea what stress is, and everyone has experienced it—literally from the day we're born. Seriously, that must be one of the most stressful days of our lives. One minute you're cozy and warm, then the next minute everything is cold, bright, and people are up in your grill trying to get a selfie with you.

From delivery-room selfies to boardroom downsizing, we've all encountered plenty of stress in our post-womb experience. Not surprisingly, the workplace seems to be a major culprit. Some industries

or companies believe they thrive on the intense, high-pressure, and fast-paced environment. While pressing people to produce better, faster, and longer may heed short-term results, there are hidden costs for those organizations.

Stress: The Hidden Costs to Show Your Boss

- High-pressure companies spend almost 50% more on healthcare costs than other organizations.²
- Workplace stress costs the U.S. economy 550 million workdays and more than \$500 billion per year.³
- 60–80% of workplace accidents are attributed to stress, and it's estimated that more than 80% of doctor visits are due to stress.⁴
- A study of over 3,000 employees showed a significant link between leadership behavior and stress leading to heart disease in employees.⁵ (Be careful how you share this one with your boss).



Leadership behavior can lead to heart disease in employees

18 Combatting Chronic Seriousness

- Stress leads to nearly a 50% increase in employee turnover, which is about twice the U.S. national average and the cost to replace those employees is conservatively estimated at one half to two times their annual salary.^{6,7}

What's insane is that most of the preceding stressful stats were from before the global Covid-19 pandemic, and unfortunately, it seems to have gotten worse. In North America, workplace stress is a scourge. In Gallup's State of the Global Workplace Report, U.S. and Canadian workers ranked highest for daily stress levels of all groups surveyed. Some 57% of U.S. and Canadian workers reported feeling stress daily, up by 8% from the year prior. Still, 43% of people worldwide are feeling workplace stress and 41% worry daily.⁸ The Harris Poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association (APA) found that 3 in 5 (60%) say the number of issues America faces is overwhelming to them.⁹ So unless you're still in the womb (in which case—great job learning to read!), you can probably relate to some of this data.

Whether it's a freak-out, stress, compassion fatigue, or burnout, you know the feeling when you have nothing left. My niece had a specific term for her threshold. I was at my sister's house when my niece, who was in high school, got a phone call around 10 p.m. Her friend reminded her of a homework assignment she forgot about that was due the next day. Her face got red, she let out a big sigh and said, "Oh, my god, I can't even . . ." I asked, "What's wrong? Can't even what?" She replied in her best teenage girl stereotype "Ugh, nothing Uncle Paul, I just can't even!" and stomped away. Her mom asked me, "What's wrong with her?" and I said, "I don't know. But whatever it is, it's affected her ability to complete a sentence." Ultimately, the goal is to combat chronic seriousness in order to prevent and manage stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, or the real danger zone where you could be suffering from all three (Figure 1.2).

But seriously, as you make your way through the book learning about how to enhance your sense of humor and use it more intentionally, just remember Figure 1.2, and think about it as a tool to lower your stress load by increasing your capacity to . . . even.



FIGURE 1.2 The stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue danger zone—“Literally Can’t Even!”

I’m not going to preach throughout this book that you should just act goofy at work and carry a rubber chicken around or just laugh it off when your kid is misbehaving. We still have to balance being seen as credible versus comical, serious versus silly, professional versus playful, an authority versus . . . an alliteration addict. For real, how many of those did we need there? You get the point. It isn’t about just acting like a kid or a clown. It’s about the ability to tap into a different mindset more often to break the pattern of overthinking, worry, perfectionism, and planning going on in the prefrontal cortex of your brain.

One brief exercise I do with clients to get them into a less serious mindset during workshops and presentations is something I call “Guilty Pleasure.” I simply ask participants to share “a guilty pleasure you have that you don’t tell many others about, something weird about you that you love, or something weird that makes you happy.” For example, something weird that makes me happy is that I love the smell of my dogs’ feet. I know, it’s gross and weird—but they smell like Fritos corn chips, I swear! Plus, that smell reminds me of comfort. If I’m smelling that, it probably means I’m cozy on the

couch watching a movie or something. The best part of this activity is that it's pretty low risk and even the most serious corporate crowds will participate. Inevitably, what happens is people will slowly and quietly begin to share, and within minutes, the room is alive with conversation and laughter. The responses people share are incredible. From hidden talents to guilty-pleasure TV shows like *Dr. Pimple Popper*, everyone has their thing. While I was speaking at a health-care symposium, one surgeon said that when she passed her Boards exam, she poured a bath and then grabbed a bag of chocolate chips. She put the chocolate chips in a line all around her bathtub and sat there eating them one by one. Then she reflected on it and said, "It's kind of gross now that I say it out loud. I don't know why I don't just use a bowl." But she said that to this day that's how she rewards herself. Her fellow healthcare colleagues found it hilarious.

An activity like this isn't just to break the ice or to take up time in a long workshop. In fact, a study shared from *Harvard Business Review* highlights how an activity like this can actually boost productivity and performance. The study randomly assigned 93 managers from a variety of industries to teams and asked them to produce creative solutions to a problem. Half the teams were given a warm-up exercise prompt to share about a time they felt pride, while the other half's warm-up exercise was to share embarrassing stories. The "embarrassing story" teams generated 26% more ideas spanning 15% more use categories than their counterparts.¹⁰ There's something magical that happens when we can get into a different mindset, breaking the serious professional barrier just a little, showing more of our true selves. Chances are I'm not going to be as shy about sharing my "outside the box" creative solution with the team after I've just shared that I smell my dogs' feet or eat chocolate chips off the side of my bathtub.

The good news about combatting chronic seriousness is: you're already doing it. Right now you could be planning the weekly grocery list, preparing that work presentation for next week, or reading a more "serious" book. Simply by choosing to read this book as opposed to many other important things you could be doing, you've

chosen a less serious and (hopefully) more fun alternative. Think of this book as something fun you're doing for yourself. You know, the whole "putting on your own oxygen mask first before you can be of help to others" metaphor. It's an overused but easily forgotten concept that actually becomes clearer through a kid's mind. I was on a flight to Baltimore sitting next to a little girl and her mom when the captain made the announcement, "If we lose cabin pressure, place the oxygen mask on yourself first before assisting small children." The little girl asked her mom, "Why do they say to put your mask on first?" The patient mom responded, "Why do you think?" The little girl pauses and then just matter-of-factly looks at her mom and says "Cuz you can't help me if you're dead!" The mom and I both chuckled, but this little girl got the concept that we so often forget! I was on a Southwest flight once and the captain said "If you're traveling with a small child, secure your mask first. If you're traveling with more than one child, decide which kid you love most and assist that one first." I'm glad I wasn't sitting next to that family.

To be honest, I don't even believe 100% in this mask metaphor. You don't need to set the bar that high. I don't think it's realistic to always take care of yourself first. There are times when friends, colleagues, pressing work projects, or even the kid we love second most, needs to come first. The problem is that many of us forget to put our mask on at all. The most important thing is to remember to put your own mask on at some point.

Finding ways to combat the chronic seriousness we get so caught up in is crucial to our overall well-being and happiness, but don't just take my word for it. Let's hear from the experts . . . old people. In her book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*, palliative care nurse Bronnie Ware interviewed people in hospice within the final three months of their lives. After compiling all the interviews, she found these five common themes emerged as the top five regrets of the dying:¹¹

I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

22 Combatting Chronic Seriousness

I wish I had the courage to express my feelings.

I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.

I wish that I had let myself be happier.

Which of these hits closest to home for you? “I wish I’d let myself be happier,” sticks out for me. I don’t want to get to the end and find out that most of my happiness had been a choice and I simply chose to be stuck in old patterns. Ware said that this was surprisingly common and that “Fear of change had them pretending to others, and to their selves, that they were content, when deep within, they longed to **laugh properly and have silliness in their life again.**”¹² We pay a lot of attention to and attempt to develop parts of our personalities like our intellect, drive, ambition, productivity, confidence, empathy, and independence. It’s crucial not to take the goofy, funny, silly, childlike part of us—our sense of humor—for granted.

So, about the “Humor Homework”

At the end of most chapters in the book, you’ll have homework/activities/exercises/prompts/tasks/projects/whatever name you want to give them that will make you feel accomplished. The book and the Humor Homework are designed to go in a general order:

1. Get yourself into a less serious mindset.
2. Immerse yourself in humor.
3. Train your brain to have a “funny focus” and see humor more often.
4. Use humor at work or in leadership.
5. Use humor to build resilience and cope with adversity.

If you’re a high achiever and/or a rule follower, you may feel compelled to complete each activity prior to moving on to the next chapter. That works great. It also works to complete one or two, move on to the next chapter, and come back later to work on other prompts.

This is your book now. No rules. You're an adult and you can do whatever you want. Seriously, you can put whip cream on your coffee this morning—no one is checking.

Humor Homework

Combatting Chronic Seriousness

Your first opportunity to combat chronic seriousness is to take a completely made-up assessment where the answers and scores mean nothing and don't affect your grade or performance review.

How Much Can You "Even"?

Circle the answer that best describes you. Go with your gut and don't overthink it—that's something someone who couldn't "even" would do.

At bedtime I:

- A. Sleep like a baby
- B. Sleep like a baby spider monkey
- C. Lie there analyzing the two-minute conversation I had with the barista this morning and wondering if they thought I was awkward. Then overanalyze the rest of my day.
- D. Bedtime? Your privilege is showing.


I would rate my level of focus as:

- A. A bald eagle eyeing a trout
- B. A bald senior searching for their hat
- C. A field mouse on Sudafed
- D. When do we get to the humor chapters?

I would say I feel overwhelmed . . .

- A. Rarely.
- B. A couple of times a month
- C. Just on the days that end in y
- D. Dude, how long is this quiz? I've got crap to do!

How often do you turn to unhealthy food indulgences or drinking excessively when you're overwhelmed?

- A. I'll admit, I sneak an occasional cookie
- B. Seriously, who brought this person? 
- C. I already told you . . . the days that end in y
- D. I'm drunk right now

Do you feel like withdrawing from family and friends, and isolating?

- A. I need some occasional alone time
- B. Have you met my family?
- C. It's hard to read this under my blanket in the closet.
- D. You think I'm going to answer that and let you get to know me?

Do you feel irritable, angry, or annoyed over trivial issues?

- A. I rarely get angry
- B. Again, have you met my family?
- C. It's ridiculous that some of these quiz answers have punctuation and others don't. Seriously, get it together.
- D. What the hell type of question is that? COME AT ME, BRO!

How Much Can You “Even”?

Self-Score Sheet

When you’ve finished the assessment, simply add up your answers using the following scoring:

For all *A* answers: 1 point

For all *B* answers: 2 points

For all *C* answers: 3 points

For all *D* answers: 4 points

If you scored
6–9

Either you’re not being honest with yourself, you’re being held captive and need to appear fine (blink twice if that’s correct), or . . . Congratulations, you can actually “even”!

10–14

You’re white knuckling it at times, but surviving. You can “even” on even days, but you can’t “even” on odd days. Some activities in this book should help you even the odds.

15–18

Oh. My. Gawd . . . You. Literally. Can’t. Even.

19–24

You’re odd.

Thanks for having a little fun and taking the **“How Much Can You ‘Even’” Assessment**. If you scored as *“Literally Can’t ‘Even’”* or *“Odd,”* then you’ll have plenty of material to draw from in future chapters of this book as we talk about finding humor in the difficult parts of life.

If you thought, *“This is a waste of time”* and skipped the assessment, I get it. Why waste your time with ridiculous nonsense when you can get straight to the substance like

26 Combatting Chronic Seriousness

tips and strategies? My brain does that to me too. When I take a yoga class, at the end when we're in *savasana* (rest pose) and supposed to let ourselves relax for a few minutes, all I can think is, *"If I get up now, I can get a head start out of here and get a few things done before work."* My yoga instructor told me *"If you don't have time to simply relax for two minutes, then you should make it four."* I don't have another ridiculous assessment for you, but you can always complete this one twice.