

A person is lying in a light-colored hammock, suspended between two tall, slender pine trees. The hammock is strung across a gap, and the person is relaxed, with their legs crossed. The background features a large, calm lake, likely a reservoir, with rolling hills in the distance under a clear sky. The foreground shows some greenery and the base of the trees.

Rest the Stress Away

IT CAN HIT YOU LIKE A TON OF BRICKS. EVERYTHING SUDDENLY
BECOMES TOO MUCH AND YOU FIND YOURSELF HEADING FOR A
BURNOUT. ANNEKE BOTS FOLLOWS ARCHITECT LISA IN HER SEARCH
FOR A SOLUTION AND DISCOVERS SOME SURPRISING INSIGHTS.

On September 5 at 11 a.m., the lights went out for 27-year-old architect Lisa. It was her first day back at the office after a vacation in Bali. She had begun working at this small architecture firm eighteen months earlier. It was her first job and she had thrown herself into her work with enthusiasm, never saying 'no' to anything, and feeling like she should be able to do it all. She preferred not to ask for help—if she didn't know something, she figured it out on her own or taught herself.

Her plan had been to relax on the tropical island and recharge her batteries. But she hadn't succeeded. Quite the contrary. "I was having panic attacks," she says. "My memory was like a sieve, and I wasn't in the mood for *anything*." In short: it was a terrible vacation. She longed to be home, but when she was welcomed by her family at the airport, she wasn't even happy to see them. "I was empty. I couldn't feel anything anymore. All of my emotions were gone, everything felt flat and dull."

Two days later, on that fateful September 5, she went back to work. After first attending a meeting, she turned her computer on and that's when it happened. "My fingers started tingling," she recalls. "I felt lightheaded and had trouble breathing. I wanted to go outside, but it seemed like I couldn't even do that. After a lot of effort, I finally managed to make it outside, and all I could do was cry. After that I didn't go back to work for six months. It was the deepest hole I had ever been in."

TOTAL CHAOS

Lisa was completely exhausted. In the first week, she couldn't even take a shower standing up. In the first month, she couldn't face going out to shop, so others did it for

her. "When you're in the midst of a burnout, your body is completely depleted and your brain is in a state of total chaos," she says.

Carolien Hamming, director at the Chronic Stress Reversal Center—a Dutch knowledge center founded by psychotherapist and psychologist Sonja van Zweden, that helps people recover from stress and burnout—explains. "When you work constantly and do not relax enough, you end up exhausting your body's resources and deregulating your hormonal system," Hamming says. "Once you become aware of this, it becomes clear that you need to change your behavior. Psychological treatment alone is not enough." That's why she doesn't agree with the advice usually given to someone who is stranded with a burnout, which is to start working on solving their problems immediately, or to visit a therapist to hash out their childhood. Such advice is based on the premise that the stress is caused by the mind. "Which is understandable, because there are often psychological problems too, but first of all your body has to recover and your brain has to be functioning a bit better," she explains. "Once your body regains its balance, the depressed feelings and panic attacks usually also subside."

LONG-TERM OVEREXTENSION

Psychologist and mindfulness teacher Karin Rekveld coaches people who have already tried out many different forms of therapy without finding a solution to their problems. She, too, has noticed that many therapists focus too much on the mind. As a result, patients often learn a lot of valuable things, such as the fact that it's good to try to be less of a perfectionist, to say 'no' more often or to set realistic goals for themselves, but they're

still stuck in a negative spiral and feeling more and more unhappy, despite the therapy. "It's essential to also gain insight into what stress does to your body and what happens when your body has become deregulated by long-term overextension," Rekveld says. "The physical component is so important, because you can be aware of the stress factors in your life, like the pressures of work for example, but it's crucial to understand that it's the incorrect response to these stress factors that's draining your body."

Lisa also saw Rekveld, but not before visiting a psychologist that her GP had referred her to. "Right from the get-go, when I was still feeling so very unreal, the psychologist started digging around for the psychological causes of my problems," she says. "I wasn't able to see anything in perspective. I couldn't handle those kind of conversations at all." Lisa didn't go back after that first session and after asking around, ended up going to Rekveld instead. She always experienced her burnout in an emphatically physical way, Lisa says. "So for me, the explanation that my body was overextended and therefore lost its balance made a lot of sense. I couldn't actually relate to my negative thoughts at all; I had never felt depressed before. Now I know I had simply made it impossible to rest, I was 'on' all the time. Actually resting became more and more unnatural; it had become a trigger for feeling restless. As I started recovering, my somber thoughts vanished. Learning to do nothing was the most important thing for me."

STRESS MECHANISM

There's nothing wrong with working hard; it's the working hard without giving your body the rest it deserves that's the >

'LEARN TO SIMPLY DO NOTHING WITHOUT FEELING EMBARRASSED'

problem. "It's all about striking a healthy balance between expending energy and recharging again," Hamming says. "The stress mechanism is an activation system that ensures we have enough energy to get out of bed and be alert and active. The stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol play a big part in this. If you are under stress or when you're playing a sport, you need more energy and the stress mechanism steps up its efforts. When you are resting, your body recovers, especially when you're sleeping: you need that time to recharge so you wake up ready for the next day. If you don't allow this to happen, you're overextending your body's resources and exhausting yourself."

It's not like it happens all at once of course, but there are plenty of signs on the road there: tiredness, headaches, somber feelings,

anxiety attacks, worrying, sleepless nights, not being in the mood to do anything (even fun things) and physical ailments that won't go away. These are all warning signals of a system about to hit a burnout. Most people will then stop working. If you keep working, you tire your body out even more, until it reaches a point where it simply says, 'Stop, I can't take it anymore'. You could be overcome by a panic attack in the middle of the street, freezing you on the spot. The tiniest setback could make you fall apart. An appointment being canceled, a sneer from a co-worker, something trivial, can make you burst out crying and not be able to stop.

"You can keep going for a very long time on willpower and last reserves," says Hamming, "but the moment comes when your body gives up. It's like a telephone that keeps

managing to charge its battery only a little bit at a time, and some functionalities don't work properly anymore. You have barely any energy left, and slowly gaps appear in your mind. You can't think clearly anymore and can't remember things. All kinds of substances in your brain are out of whack, which makes you unstable and emotional, and you probably even have trouble recognizing yourself at times. Once you've reached this point, it won't matter if you remove the stress factors. Your body won't be able to recover with a good weekend of rest or a few weeks of vacation." Once you've crossed this line, recovery takes a long time: Count on six to nine months to come back from a nervous breakdown and between six months and two years for a burnout.

WHERE'S THE 'OFF' BUTTON?

The key to healing from a stress overload is first of all learning how to rest. After that, you can work on self-management, which will prevent you from reaching this state again. Resting isn't easy if you feel super stressed at the smallest provocation and can't find the 'off' button. "It's quite a challenge to find out what helps you personally the most, but it's generally a good starting point to accept that it's okay that you're not okay and not to feel guilty about that," Hamming says. "Rest up, and learn to simply do nothing without feeling embarrassed, but keep some structure in your day. Loaf about, but try not to worry a lot. Being out in fresh air, taking a walk, visiting a spa, getting a massage—those things usually do a world of good. But for people with a burnout, sports are actually not a good idea. When you're physically active, your body creates extra stress

TIPS FROM THE COACH

What can you do when you're stressed out or hovering on the edge of a nervous breakdown? Here are some tips from Karin Rekvelt:

- * Accept that stress is a natural part of life. When you feel tired, edgy and depleted: give that feeling some space.
- * Only do what you have to. Cut all non-essential activities from your agenda, in work as well as in your private life. Cancel social appointments too; especially those that seem like a lot of fun—it might seem to be a leisure activity but in reality it costs more energy than you realize.
- * Make sure you sleep well. Slowing down in the evening helps you fall asleep: listen to calm music, read a book, and teach yourself to do relaxing exercises before you go to bed.
- * Consider doing a mindfulness or yoga class.
- * Don't think of stress as your enemy, but as a fascinating process that engages you to listen to your mind and body. You might also benefit from having someone else around who can help you to see it that way.

hormones and that's exactly what you don't need. To recover, the repair system in your body needs to be dominant. So it's the opposite of what you've been doing in the previous years, when the activating stress system was dominant all that time. Seek out social support; talking to friends can be really good. But also remember, when you're in the midst of a burnout even that can generate stress, so don't do it then. Listen carefully to your body and see what works for you."

"Take your body seriously when it tells you it's tired, and take a nap," adds doctor and burnout coach Gijs Schraa. "You shouldn't worry you won't be able to sleep at night afterwards. It's a good thing to let your body get used to sleeping again. Rest is very important to build up stores of energy." Schraa recommends you take a bit of distance in order to keep stress down to a healthy low level. "Make sure you think about what you're doing and how you're doing it on a regular basis and before things derail. Put your affairs in order and most importantly also plan moments of rest."

WIND IN YOUR HAIR

But being this relaxed—resting and taking naps—is easier said than done when you're used to always going that extra mile. For Lisa, it took a long time before she could activate the relaxation mode. "I knew I was supposed to take it easy, but I was still caught up in an activity vortex," she says. "I couldn't stop thinking and my body was stuck in overdrive, which created a lot of anxiety and kept me from sleeping full nights. It was a vicious circle, and I wasn't managing to break out of it on my own. I thought of myself as a pretty insightful



person but now I was clearly in need of help. I needed someone to tell me, 'It's okay, let it go, let go of it all'. Rekveld was a tremendous help: she used an anatomy book to show me what was wrong with my body. That was perfect for me—I always like to know how things work in practical terms. Starting from the 'off mode', in which I wasn't able to do any little thing, I slowly rebuilt my life. Very slowly. It took five months before I was able to relax again and sometimes sleep an entire night. I watched TV series endlessly, read books and tried to write about what I was going through. Every day I took a walk. I started with ten-minute walks, in the end I was walking three miles [ca. five kilometers] every day."

Rekveld also advises you to always listen to your body, whether you're recovering from a burnout or feel like you're at risk. "Listen carefully to it and take it seriously, no matter what the people around you tell you," she says. "This is essential. Take the time to observe the world with your senses:

let the wind blow through your hair, feel the sun on your skin, walk in the sand with bare feet. Be conscious of all your senses: What do I smell? What do I taste? Get back in touch with your body."

Lisa's recovery process continued with ups and downs. For a while she was scared she was never going to be her old self again, but she has since regained confidence in her body. She feels energized again and is back at her job, with a twenty-hour workweek. "I now have a more relaxed attitude to myself," she says. "I've learned to listen to my body and to take a timeout when my body tells me I need it." ●