

# When business is personal

Running your own show sounds ideal, until it's not. **How to survive** the stress when everything is on the line

by Mary Teresa Bitti photo by Paul Orenstein

**F**OR MOST OF HIS LIFE, KARIM H. ISMAIL HAD THE MIDAS TOUCH. By age 30 he was vice-president of facilities development at Toronto's Sunnybrook Hospital, managing a \$175-million budget and thriving. In the mid-1990s, he decided to bring that golden touch to his family's business and launched a web-design division that soared along with all things technology-driven during the heady dot-com days. The business success fuelled his already 100%, all-in nature.

"I was a workaholic — I looked on it as a badge of honour," says Ismail. "I worked 80 to 100 hours a week for years. I was so focused on growing the business that I totally neglected my health, my relationships, my spirituality." When the tech boom went bust in 2001, he was 42 with a child heading off to a pricey university in the US and his family business was heading for bankruptcy because his dot-com clients were failing. "I had never failed at anything before. I was depressed. I was taking prescription narcotics for excruciating back pain that was in part caused by the stress I was under. My relationships were distant. I hit a point where it was either take my own life or find a way around what was happening."







Arlene Dickinson took time off to regroup and recharge her batteries. Today she makes sure she takes time for herself

Of course, Ismail had experienced stress in his corporate life, but this was different, more intense. “Being an entrepreneur is like having a baby: it becomes all-encompassing, you’re focused on helping it grow,” he says. “There was a lot on the line when I was working at Sunnybrook, but at the end of the day there was still a paycheck and food on the table. The worst that could happen was I’d get fired and have to find another job. Having my own business was a different kind of stress because at the end of the day, unless you are successful, there is no paycheck.”

Thankfully, Ismail came through that dark period, but suicides among entrepreneurs are not uncommon. Fashion designer L’Wren Scott and Ecomom founder Jody Sherman are high-profile examples of entrepreneurs who did not make it through the debilitating anxiety and despair that many entrepreneurs face. While it’s easy to idolize entrepreneurial success and celebrate fast-growing companies, it’s also important to recognize the pressures and stress entrepreneurs face when everything is on the line.

## HOW TO MANAGE STRESS

In 1985 David Posen gave up his medical practice to specialize full time on helping people identify and manage their stress. Today he is an international keynote speaker, author of *Is Work Killing You?: A Doctor’s Prescription for Treating Workplace Stress*, and a leading authority on stress. Here he explains what you need to know to keep calm and carry on.

**Stress** is the nonspecific response of the body to a threat or challenge. Your heart rate increases, muscles tense and blood pressure and blood sugar go up, all in an effort to give you a quick boost of energy to fight or escape danger. A certain amount of stress is good for you and helps you perform better. In fact, entrepreneurs under pressure feel the same adrenalin rush runners get when they have to push themselves to get to the finish line. Too much stress leads to problems.

**You know you’re stressed when** you experience

trouble sleeping, fatigue, headaches, backache, decreased concentration, short-term memory loss, trouble making decisions, tension, anxiety, impatience, anger, depression — and these are just the symptoms you can’t see. Stress can also manifest in behaviours such as nail-biting, jigging knee, compulsive eating, smoking, drinking, yelling, swearing and crying. It’s not a pretty picture. “We all have our own galaxy of symptoms,” says Posen. “My hands shake, some people experience abdominal cramps, others feel a heaviness in their chest. Know what your symptoms are so you can start addressing the issue.”

**Over time, the health effects of untreated stress** can lead to increased blood pressure and cholesterol. It can predispose you to heart disease and stroke. Chronic stress can lead to insulin resistance, which can predispose you to Type 2 diabetes and obesity. It may also impact your immune system and leave you vulnerable to infections. — MTB

According to a recent survey of small business owners in Canada by American Express, almost half of respondents (48%) reported having suffered from work-related stress in the past year to the point where it impacted other areas of their lives. Even though the majority recognized the importance of work-life balance, 58% reported feeling guilty whenever they took time off, and 63% checked their phones at least once or twice a day while on vacation.

Big mistake, says David Posen, a medical doctor turned stress counsellor, author and international speaker based in Oakville, Ont. “It’s easy for entrepreneurs to say they can’t afford to take time off, but the fact is you need periodic extended periods of rest to decompress and recover from the stresses of running a business. The reality is you will be more productive, creative and innovative when you give yourself permission to take a break.”

Arlene Dickinson, a venture capitalist on CBC’s *Dragons’ Den*, CEO of Venture Communications and author of *All In*, a guide to the demands and rewards of entrepreneurship, knows all too well how difficult it is for entrepreneurs to disconnect. “The struggle, the challenges of running a business and your personal life and figuring out how to do it all well is overwhelming. You really are consumed by it. And it’s not just you — it has significant impact on your family, friends, community and everyone who struggles to understand why you are so obsessed. And that is the word they will ascribe to you: obsessed. What they don’t understand is that you are just being who you are and doing the thing you feel compelled to do. I liken entrepreneurship to a calling. People don’t tell an artist, ‘Put your brush

down at five o’clock,’ yet with entrepreneurs they do.”

She also knows how necessary it is to do just that. About two years ago, she was fielding all sorts of offers for speaking engagements and more television opportunities and she found herself depleted. “I spent a year regrouping. It would not have been visible to the world, but I was turning down three-quarters of the opportunities coming my way,” says Dickinson. “I spent a lot of time at home thinking about why I was feeling stressed and whether what I was choosing to spend my time on was worthwhile. I am so grateful I was able to take that time and that I came out the other side because it could have been a downward spiral where I just became unhappy and miserable.”

Instead, she came out revitalized and sure about how she was going to expend her energy. Today she is purposeful about taking time for herself in order to be at full capacity at work. One of the key outcomes of her self-imposed break was the launch of YouInc.com, an online hub for entrepreneurs. “There isn’t enough help for entrepreneurs in navigating what it means to be an entrepreneur. This is a place where they can learn from each other.”

Having the support of her peers has been a critical tool in managing stress for Diane Lee Sousa, CMA and founding partner of Winnipeg-based Prophet Business Group Ltd. “I joined Entrepreneurs’ Organization nine years ago and it has become an important network for me to manage stress.” With chapters across Canada and the US, the organization hosts educational events throughout the year and entrepreneurs also have the opportunity to connect with each other in small, monthly confidential forums where they help each other



Diane Lee Sousa manages stress through a network of entrepreneurs, where she connects with others in similar situations

Ian McCausland

through personal, professional and family issues. “These forums are effective because you can’t give advice. Instead, you share your experience and how you dealt with a specific problem,” says Lee Sousa.

Having that kind of support is essential for all entrepreneurs, whether they work from home or run large organizations, because as entrepreneurs they share the same stresses and attributes. Dickinson encapsulates it nicely: “I was always a really driven person. If I was going to bake, I was going to bake everything. I was definitely 100% into whatever I did. That was as true before I became an entrepreneur as it was after. It’s the same characteristic. I always question the status quo and find it hard to understand why people didn’t see the same opportunities I do. It’s who you are.”

That all-consuming drive is why it’s important entrepreneurs learn to let go and delegate. For Lee Sousa that task is made easier knowing she has surrounded herself with a highly capable team. “I used to think I was needed at work all the time,

## STRATEGIES FOR ENTREPRENEURS:

**Start as you intend to continue.** When you are launching your business, decide what kind of lifestyle you want and how many hours a week you want to work. Be realistic. You can’t work 12 hours a day, seven days a week for long, but if that’s what your clients see, they will come to expect it. Set boundaries.

**Pace yourself and take a break.** For entrepreneurs who are used to wearing many hats and are 100% invested in driving success, this is particularly difficult. It doesn’t have to be if you start small and build. David Posen, a leading authority on stress, says there are three kinds of time-out: mini-breaks during the day (five to 20 minutes to have a healthy snack, to breathe, stretch or think, for example); midi-breaks are weekly leisure activities such as a tennis match, book-club meeting, golf game or movie night; maxi-breaks are vacations throughout the year. Posen recommends at least one week away every three to four months, if possible. He also recommends one day a week totally work-free.

**Develop healthy habits.** Entrepreneurs will tell you there is more to do in a day than they have time for. As a result, something’s got to give and it’s usually their well-being, says Posen. Good nutrition (cut out foods high in fat and avoid caffeine because it creates stress in the body by raising adrenalin and cortisol and blocking a natural relaxant in the brain), adequate sleep and regular exercise (30 minutes, four to five times a week) are all critical stress busters. — MTB

but I’ve come to realize when you have the right team [members] in place they will do what needs to get done. It’s also important for them to know you have confidence in their abilities.”

One lesson Dickinson learned early — and it has helped her manage stress and pressure — is to use setbacks to drive future success. “I know so many entrepreneurs who’ve gone bankrupt several times and have gone on to be extremely successful because they took lessons from their failures to propel them to the next level.”

That is exactly what Ismail did and it helped him reposition his web-design business, grow it and negotiate its sale to his biggest US competitor in 2009. That same year, he launched his latest venture, BlueprintPal Inc., which helps individuals and organizations advance their careers and businesses. He has also shared his insights in a book, *Keep Any Promise: A Blueprint for Designing Your Future*, and in webinars hosted by CPA Canada. “In this stage of my career I want to help others unlock potential and avoid what I went through.”

In fact, it was in saving himself that he was able to save his business and create the formula to help others. His formula is simple: create a vision for what you want to achieve. Create a blueprint to make it happen and put the right people in place to help you. Create a process for review to ensure you’re on track.

“Before you can be a great leader of others, you need to embrace self-leadership and that means taking care of yourself. When I made the decision to fix my health, it was the first step in fixing the business,” says Ismail. “This includes getting enough sleep, exercise, good nutrition, drinking plenty of water and building time into your day for reflection — even just 10 minutes. I schedule ‘me’ time in my calendar. This can include body movement breaks like a brisk walk. There are lots of little things you can do during the day to alleviate stress.”

He also recommends taking time away from the office to unwind. “My best ideas never come to me at the office. I may be busy and productive, but it is not the strategic, breakthrough thinking that will allow the business to leap forward. I find those ideas come when I’m on a walk, at the beach, even on a plane.”

Another critical strategy: look at the business as a marathon, not a sprint. This gives you space and time to grow, says Ismail. “Successful companies are rarely a success overnight. And if it is a marathon, your health and relationships should be priorities.”

It’s been 12 years since Ismail had what he describes as his meltdown and he is running that marathon successfully, a little bit at a time and on his terms. Long gone are the 100-hour workweeks and the debilitating stress. “I’m more productive than I have ever been. I think more clearly. I’m able to say no to things that are not in line with my personal and business goals, which means I’m able to say yes to activities that have purpose. It’s counterintuitive to think the less time you spend at the business the more you can achieve, but it is true because all the other needs that drive us as human beings are also getting met. I had to learn that lesson the hard way.”

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