

The
Pragmatic
Programmers

The Stress Equation

Reduce Burnout,
Increase Happiness and Productivity



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Preface

Welcome to The Stress Equation!

If you're holding this book in your hands, I am guessing you have an interest in improving your place of work. Well, then you've come to the right place!

The Stress Equation is a model and a tool for discussing and analyzing the cause of stress in teams and organizations. By addressing stress as a systemic problem, moving focus away from the individual, the Stress Equation lowers the threshold for frank and open discussions—even providing topics and questions for group conversations on the subject.

Just to be clear, this book is not a guidebook on stress itself. Although it will be a central subject, I leave it to doctors and scientists to cover the depths and mechanics of stress as an organism's response to threats or challenges. I am, afterall, merely a nerd who likes to improve things.

This book is based on observations made during my 20 years of working in software development. I have worked on all levels of organization, starting my career as a tester of mobile phone platforms, moving on to various programming jobs, and later ending up in management and coaching—predominantly as a “full-stack” Agile Coach. I have worked with everything from one-team Scrum to LeSS Huge organizations with 50+ teams.

I dare claim that my experience provides a pretty rare holistic perspective of software companies.

Over the years I've built up a special interest in stress and sustainable pace, using the reduction of stress levels as a key factor for continuous improvement. Why stress? Well, the simple answer is that I grew tired of watching people burn out due to organizational flaws that were beyond their personal control. I also grew tired of people not reaching their full potential out of fear of overwhelming pressure and complexity caused by disorganization.

With this book I want to help people and companies better understand the causes and effects of excessive, harmful stress in their work environment,

and the factors I have observed to be in play in creating stressful situations. The book aims to help you explore the problem scope, not to provide an easy to follow formula to solve your problems. This is because every context is unique. No universal recipe exists—if it did, we wouldn't have any problems!

Who Is This Book For?

While stress is a widespread problem, and pretty much everyone is affected by it at one point or another during their career, I *would* like to say that this book is for *all the people working in software!* However, that's not the type of categorization that marketing departments like to run with. This is completely understandable, since it makes their job nearly impossible. Sooo...

The book is aimed at team leads, Scrum Masters, managers, and other roles in leadership. Since it is meant as a tool for continuous improvement, it's important that management is onboard and willing to commit. Otherwise improvement is likely to stagnate, never spreading beyond limited portions of the organizations, i.e. what's within a particular team's sphere of influence, such as the overall organizational complexity, which we will learn is a contributing factor for creating stressful situations.

With that said, if you feel you are suffering from stress, but are not in a managerial position, maybe this book can give some insights into why you are feeling stressed and find ways to address it by promoting positive change.

Though the concepts are applicable in many organizations, the examples provided are primarily targeted at software companies, since that's where my experience lies. If someone outside of software reads this book and finds it useful, don't hesitate to get in touch. I would love to hear your take on it! I am pretty easy to find on LinkedIn.¹

Given that I have a background as a Scrum Master and Agile Coach, the book is written from that perspective. I will assume the reader has some familiarity with the Agile lingo, but I doubt you need to be an expert to absorb the concepts I try to purvey.

How To Read This Book

While the different chapters and segments can be read separately, providing bite size insights to particular areas, I suggest reading the book from start to finish to get the idea of the concept behind the Stress Equation.

1. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/marcus-lagr%C3%A9/>

With that said, I am a big fan of book clubs and each chapter provides ample fodder for thought and discussions—even providing questions to discuss on each topic.

These can be used to build improvement workshops, provide inspiration for Retrospectives, or to increase the overall understanding of the stress you might be feeling in regards to your work environment.

In other words, you can pursue the book in whichever way suits you, but I have intentionally tried to keep things brief to make it a quick read.

What's In This Book

The Stress Equation is visualized as a mathematical equation to explain how different sources of stress interact—the variables being Pressure, Complexity, and Security. Each variable is given a chapter of its own.

Pressure deals with the different sources of urgency we may have, such as the influx of work items or how we set deadlines.

Complexity will essentially explain how the way we build our products and organize ourselves can reduce our ability to finish work.

Security addresses the cultural aspects of our work environment and how a sense of security is vital to lowering the overall stress levels within teams and organizations.

Interspersed with these chapters will be a story—or case study if you wish—of a team I worked with. I'll detail how we found ourselves under increasing pressure and complexity, as well as how conflicts affected our security. There will also be short anecdotes and insights that I have gathered over the years, relating to the topic at hand.

Finally, there will be a wrap up and some hands-on examples of how to use the book in your improvement work.

Stress is too big a problem in our work lives to be solved on an individual level. It's about time we talk about it as a systemic problem and the Stress Equation is a helpful tool to get you started.

So, there's no reason to wait: Let's talk about stress!