

# Keeping stress from causing a BLEVE

By Larry L Pierson, Carolina Fire Rescue Journal, Summer 2008

I am human, therefore I know stress. Our emergency service jobs tend to make us more aware of critical incident stress from loss of life, the stress of rapid decision making, responsibility for safety of other human beings and other normal aspects that any employee in any workplace would have. While we recognize stress as a normal part of life, how do we reach a boiling point of dramatic negative reaction or lean towards unhappiness? When does the buildup of stress become a BLEVE? It is an acronym stretch for a Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion but the best I could come up with is a "Bad Life Experience, Venting Extremely." Without management of stress we will become less effective in any facet of life.

A few years ago I studied some material on stress which recommended spouses could place small notes on a board. These notes were individual issues such as bills, work, quality time or anything related to a stress. As each potential issue was experienced, the note was moved into an "I have this stress now" location on the board. This is a way to communicate stress to each other without saying anything or it may spawn needed conversation more comfortably. Becoming aware of what all is stressing you out can even reduce some of the stress. Maybe that exact method isn't for everyone but it did bring about other ideas for managing stress.

## The basics of "Stress Blocks"

The above concept evolved into what I refer to as stress blocks. Blocks representing different stresses are stacked on top of one another. If they build high enough you will eventually reach the "reaction line" and the "BLEVE" will occur. The BLEVE can be a sudden outburst of "#\$^\*#&^@%#&&!" that quickly goes away or a long lasting critical stress that affects everything including your physical well being. In any manner, each type of reaction also has affect on others. Here are some examples we'll call "the crowd's reaction".

- "He just blew his lid" or "She just blew up"
- "He just lost it" or "He just bit my head off"
- "She just lost her marbles" or "He snapped"
- "He went off the deep end" or "Bazerk"

As well as many other creative phrases

Several years ago I took an in depth course on interview and interrogation. During the course we learned common phrases that exemplified possible deception or missing information. The phrase that stuck with me most was "... and the next thing I knew," it's kind of like skipping from Chapter 3 to 7. The phrase doesn't mean a person is lying, just that an information gap exists. For example: "I heard the tornado warning.. and the next thing I knew, my house was gone." Obviously something happened between that time such as the house rumbled, windows broke, they went to take shelter and then the roof came off. If you are surprised by a stress reaction then most likely you took the above phrase "... and the next thing I knew" and added one of the "crowd's reaction" phrases to it.

If you pay attention to other's lives then there are few such surprises. Some people do not talk about their personal life at work so it is hard to recognize any stress blocks that have been stacked from their home life. Some talk about their personal life too much and create stress blocks on coworkers. If you have a sudden reaction at the BLEVE level it may initially surprise you but with a little retracing you will recognize the blocks that were there all along. When you are aware ahead of time you can limit the reaction and on occasion have the ability to laugh at the amount of stress.

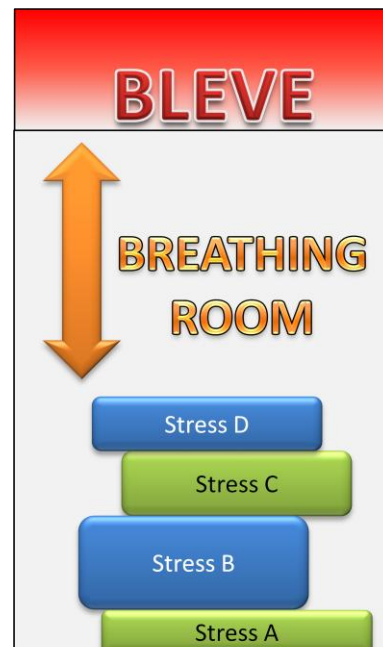


Fig 1 – Goal for normal life

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When stress blocks are not stacked very high, stress is manageable and everything feels normal (Fig 1). The breathing room allows some other stresses to be piled on without hitting the BLEVE line. This is the best option because things suddenly happen and with no gap, every day may hit the line. As you start to assess your own blocks keep these points in mind:

- Bigger stress, taller block
- Some blocks are work, some are personal
- Some you can do something about, some you can't
- Some you can't do anything about right now
- Some blocks expand & contract within seconds
- Some blocks last for 30 years (Mortgage)
- Some blocks last an entire life
- Blocks can change size or disappear
- Each person has a different "BLEVE" Point
- The "BLEVE" point changes throughout your life
- It doesn't matter their order, just that they are there
- The closer to the line brings sense of impending doom
- Right or wrong, the last block gets blamed

## Poor focus on the last block

It is common to blame the last block for the reason you had a BLEVE. This block caused you to cross the stress threshold and all the reaction is taken out on that block. As an example, take the scenario in Fig 2 and include everything except for the last block of the phone ringing again. This time add a block back that is a small issue from your spouse or a close friend and guess who has to deal with your BLEVE reaction. Whether they understand all your blocks or not, the most important people may see an overreaction and gain a stress block of their own.

## Work & Home

Fig 2 shows all the work and personal issues stacked on top of one another. If they remain stacked together all the time, work and home are going to remain closer to the line than needed. Bringing too much of the divorce issue to work effects work performance and coworkers. Bringing the disagreement with your supervisor home effects your spouse, children and that comfortable feeling a cozy home is supposed to have.

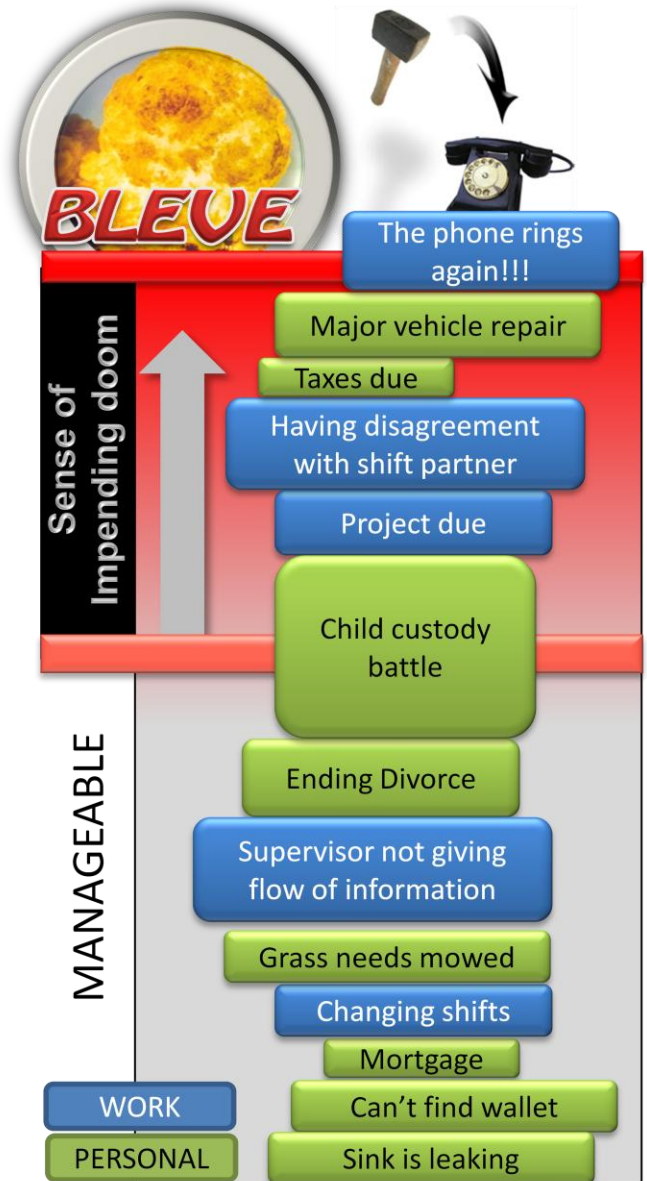


Fig 2 The telephone takes the brunt

Leaving 100% of stresses at the other location is quite difficult but the other location may prove useful to help manage stress. You may speak to your spouse about a work issue or have a little conversation with a coworker about all the repairs you are making on the house. As are many things in life, moderation of frequency and severity would be prudent. The coworker probably doesn't want to hear every week about the grief of losing a family member 7 years ago. The spouse or parent doesn't want to hear every other week about the Critical Incident you were part of 15-20 years ago. Although many people around us are supportive and

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share our grief you may be adding a huge stress block onto their stack. At some point, someone is going to say "get over it."

## Abuse and excuse

Being there for someone or providing resources such as an Employee Assistance Network ([www.eannc.com](http://www.eannc.com) or a similar program) can help people manage stress but how do you know when someone is abusing support and understanding from others? It can be quite complex yet obvious at times. A person may take a real stress block and add some height to it to give a false perception that it is larger. The action could be a result of personal insecurities, wanting attention or to get out of completing work or meeting expectations. These people can be a problem solving nightmare because while we want to be sensitive and understand where they are coming from we must eventually make decisions on their validity. Regardless of the cause and severity, acceptable job performance will eventually be demanded as a firefighter, officer, friend, husband, wife or whatever people are affected by the action.

## The irony and summary

CFRJ has a thing called a deadline. Add that fact to me forgetting my portable hard drive at work so I couldn't work on the article when I got home. The irony is by writing an article on building stress blocks, I actually added a block to my own stack. Because of a higher awareness of the concept at the moment of realizing I forgot the drive, I just had to laugh after having a quick small scale BLEVE.

Live your life with some breathing room. Have situational awareness for your stress blocks and BLEVE line. You may not have control of all blocks placed on your stack but YOU have the most control over how big they become and how you get rid of them. A few quotes to leave you with:

*Is everything as urgent as your stress would imply?*

~Carrie Latet

*Stress is the trash of modern life - we all generate it but if you don't dispose of it properly, it will pile up and overtake your life.*

~Danzae Pace

*For fast-acting relief, try slowing down.*

~Lily Tomlin

*I try to take one day at a time, but sometimes several days attack me at once.*

~Jennifer Yane



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