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TO IDEAS

HIGH-STATUS STRESS

BY JUDITH WARNER



Photograph by Jamie Chung for TIME
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WHAT IF THE GOOD LIFE ISN'T really...all that good?

What if the very things so many of us strive for—a high-paying, powerful job; a beautiful house; a wardrobe of nice clothes in desirably small sizes; and a fancy education for our children to prep them for carrying on this way of life—turn out to be more trouble than they're worth?

It's long been believed that the psychological burdens associated with being a "low-status individual"—i.e., poor—grow lighter as people move up the social ladder. It turns out that's true only to a point. Once you get high enough, the mental and physical health benefits associated with greater affluence fade away. In fact, research indicates that as you near the top, life stress increases so dramatically that its toxic effects essentially cancel out many positive aspects of succeeding.

Scott Schieman, a professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, has a phrase for this: "the stress of high status." In 2005 and again in 2007, he surveyed 1,800 Americans of all income levels and is now extending his research to more than 6,000 Canadians. What he found turns received sociological wisdom on its ear: "People with higher levels of education and in

higher-status occupations and mid-to-higher income brackets are experiencing higher levels of stressors," he says.

Why? The very trappings of success can make life harder if you're the sort of driven, work-devoted person that high-status individuals tend to be. Take being able to set your own hours or work from home on occasion: it can be a dream for many but a nightmare for the hard chargers who feel compelled to answer every single e-mail, text or phone message, no matter when it comes or where they happen to be, says Mary Blair-Loy, founding director of the Center for Research on Gender in the Professions at the University of California at San Diego, who is currently researching workaholic men.

Another supposed perk that can be punishing: power. Having authority over others binds



Younger workers in high-achieving occupations are often less stressed than their older colleagues, who remember the days when answering work e-mails and texts was not a 24/7 obligation

people to all sorts of interpersonal conflicts and management turmoil, leading to “off the charts” stress, Schieman says. “This is the stuff that literally keeps people up at night.”

And then there are all the small details sociologists call “micro-impression-management activities”: getting the right clothes, the right haircut and the big-enough house, as well as raising the attractive, athletic, community-serving kids who will get into Harvard. In high-status communities, this can feel less like a choice than a requirement—part of what’s needed to retain credibility. “You have to wear the right suit to work. You have to live in the right neighborhood, or else people won’t take you seriously,” says Blair-Loy.

Millions of Americans struggling to make ends meet would

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probably be glad to trade—yet, sociologists say, there’s a moral here: Be careful what you wish for. “It takes a lot of energy to keep your weight down and your house looking nice and still be working all those hours,” says Marybeth Mattingly, a sociologist and director of research at the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire. “Of course, the working poor have stressors too—they’re just different kinds of stressors.”

It was thought at its start that the recession might recenter people on friends and family instead

of status. But sociologists say the fear of loss and failure has just made the drive for status more intense. Being on call 24/7 now isn’t a lifestyle choice; it’s a survival strategy. Interestingly, the younger workers in Schieman’s ongoing Canadian study report being considerably less stressed than their middle-aged and older colleagues. Having been habituated to today’s all-demanding professional culture and having no memories of a time when work generally stayed at the office, they’re desensitized, Schieman believes. “In the future, a lot of this actually may just be a normative part of everyday life, so it’ll be less stressful, less disruptive and less problematic,” he says.

Warner is a columnist for TIME Ideas and the author of Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety