

Giving stress a voice

Stress is a fact of life and sometimes just managing it seems like a full-time job. Add the holidays and things can get out of control. Gift shopping, cooking and family events, not to mention welcoming out-of-town guests who crowd your house and disrupt family routines, all combine to wreak havoc with your stress levels.

We go to our mechanic when the car makes that weird sound every time we turn left. We schedule a visit to our family doctor when that annoying pain just won't go away. But what do we do when we feel stressed out? Chalk it up to a busy week or blame it on a lack of sleep.

It's really too easy to dismiss stress, but not dealing with it can have serious consequences.

Airo Health in Waterloo has a tool called the Airo band that helps give your body a voice when it comes to stress.

Maryam Jahed, a University of Waterloo alumnus and Airo Health's chief operating officer, says the band was conceived at Silicon Valley's Y Combinator for startups in summer 2016, but the final version really started to come together this past January in the UW Velocity Garage.

"I've always been interested in mental health and, as a founder, you're put under a lot of stress," she says.

The Airo band is worn on your wrist and is smaller than your average smartwatch. The band tracks your heart rate, exercise through movement and sleep through observing your circadian rhythm – your



Alex Kinsella

24-hour daily cycle of sleep and activity.

The band connects to your phone and gives you a real-time view of how your nervous system is responding to everything happening around you. "Let's say you're sitting at your desk for five hours, which happens too often. You'll get a notification on your wrist letting you know your body and your mind need a break."

The first week of using the band is used to determine your personal baseline. Everyone has a different value, Jahed says. Once you know your baseline, the Airo app on your smartphone can help you identify when you're stressed and work with you to get back to your baseline.

"Counsellors talk about mindfulness for stress management," Jahed says. "We spoke with psychologists and psychiatrists and the best way to get back to your baseline is with breathing exercises."

The Airo band's smartphone app guides you through the process to help you reduce stress. Over time you can learn the exercises and use them whenever your Airo band vibrates. The app's daily, weekly and monthly view shows you how you're managing stress.

"The Airo band helps you validate your

feelings," Jahed says. "It can help you to recognize how you feel and give you tools to do something about it."

"It's hard to find that time for yourself before you get to a place where you need major steps," added Jahed. "Three to five minutes in your day can be what makes all the difference in the long run."

The Airo band is available through their website www.getairo.com

Beating my midlife crisis

Speaking of stress, I'm having a sort of midlife crisis. I haven't purchased a convertible or a motorcycle, but the crisis does have wheels. I'm talking about four wheels made of polyurethane that sit underneath seven layers of maple veneer. Does a skateboard come to mind?

Am I planning on pulling off some dope frontside heelflips or backside 180s? I don't even know what those are. I had to search for them on Google. I haven't used a skateboard since I was 12 and, to be honest, I was terrible at it. But now that I'm 41, it's time to give it a try again.

One of the things I love about skateboards is the deck artwork. I recently saw that local graphic artist Blake Stevenson (jetpacksandrollerskates.com) has partnered with GRMPY Skateboards in the United States (grmpyskateboards.com) – and it inspired me to look into blank decks. That led me to a veritable black hole of YouTube videos – and finally to the bright light that is Toronto-based Roarocket.

Roarocket's patented technology lets anyone produce their own skateboard deck

at home. The Roarocket is a thin air-press kit that consists of a single-sided, high-density foam mould and a 20-millimetre vacuum bag.

Your skateboard starts with seven layers of Canadian-sourced maple or birch veneer. You glue the layers together and then place them into the bag with the foam mould. Once in, you seal up the open end with tape and then remove the air with the manual hand pump. It only takes about a minute for all the air to be removed. The vacuum acts as a clamp against the foam and bends the wood into the shape of the mould.

The origin of Roarocket is every bit as interesting as the kit itself. Co-founder Norah Jackson and her husband, Ted Hunter, were on a windsurfing holiday on Maui. Hunter, a professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto who uses wood in his sculptures, was volunteering at a visual arts centre. He was asked to teach a class of teens in the woodshop and Jackson, a graphic designer, suggested skateboards. It wasn't something either of them had done



Create your own skateboard with this kit from Roarocket.

before.

They came up with the idea to use a vacuum bag and mould and then refined and patented the technology once they were back in Toronto.

Today, Roarocket ships kits and veneer around the world. In addition to home skateboard builders, the kits are popular with larger skateboard manufacturers who use them for rapid prototyping of new designs. Roarocket also sells classroom

kits for use in schools and community programs.

"The kits are very popular in programs dealing with at-risk youth," Jackson says. "It lets them form something that they can actually use and be proud of."

Roarocket has kits for everything from street decks to long boards. There are pre-made moulds or you can choose to design and carve your own. Their most popular kit – and the one on my holiday wish list – is the Street Deck Double Kit. It's available for purchase at roarocket.com for \$174.95.

You might choose to monitor your stress levels and take simple steps to get back to your baseline or to work out the stress by creating something that makes you happy. Either way, enjoy the holiday season with family and friends and don't let the stress grinch spoil your fun. 🍷

Alex Kinsella has been part of Waterloo Region's tech community since 2004 and is always looking for the next great gadget (or tacos, if it's Tuesday). Find him on Twitter at @alexkinsella

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