Health & Medicine

A Columbia Professor Helps Chris Hemsworth Stress-Proof His Life

In *Limitless With Chris Hemsworth*, organizational psychologist Modupe Akinola offers practical tips for the *Thor* actor — and for everyone else.

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|
Spring/Summer 2023



Modupe Akinola and Chris Hemsworth. (National Geographic for Disney+ / Craig Parry)

Thor, Norse god of thunder, could do worse with his trusty hammer than try to vanquish chronic stress. But no weapon, mythical or real, can strike down this silent

killer, and so when Chris Hemsworth, the Australian actor who plays Thor in the Marvel movie franchise, decided to undertake a quest to live a longer, healthier life, he sought advice not from the mighty Odin but from a professor of management at Columbia Business School.

Modupe Akinola, an organizational psychologist who studies the mental and physiological effects of workplace stress, appears on the first episode of *Limitless with Chris Hemsworth* (currently streaming on Disney+), a six-part series co-created by Darren Aronofsky in which Hemsworth explores ways to realize the full potential of the human body. Akinola points out that everyday stressors — around work, money, relationships, health, societal issues — can increase the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, accelerated cellular aging, digestive problems, and cancer. As Hemsworth's "stress coach," she encourages the thirty-nine-year-old father of three to confront the foe head on.

Akinola puts Hemsworth through a harrowing series of high-stress trials, on the premise that if he can learn to control his stress in extreme conditions, he'll be better able to handle the quotidian stuff (fatherhood, Hollywood). The first test is a Special Forces drill in which Hemsworth must perform underwater tasks with his hands and feet bound. The next day, at a firefighter training facility, he must enter a burning building to rescue a dummy. All of this leads up to the ultimate test for Hemsworth, who has a fear of heights: to walk out onto the arm of a crane projecting from the roof of a skyscraper, nine hundred feet above Sydney Harbor.



Hemsworth has his hands and feet bound for an underwater task. (National Geographic for Disney+ / Craig Parry)

Months later and ten thousand miles away, Akinola, who joined the B-school in 2009, sits in her third-floor office in Kravis Hall on the Manhattanville campus and reflects on the experience, which she calls “incredible and amazing.” She notes that stress, which she defines as “a situation where the demands exceed your resources to cope,” is, in itself, a good thing: “Our stress is designed to help us in life-threatening situations,” she says. “The brain releases the hormones cortisol and adrenaline, preparing the body for fight or flight.” But when the stress circuit doesn’t shut down, and the cortisol continues to flow uncontrolled, our health takes the hit.



Hemsworth prepares to walk on the arm of a crane that will project from the roof of a skyscraper. (National Geographic for Disney+ / Craig Parry)

So what can we do, short of practicing staying calm under the extreme pressure of what Hemsworth likens to “medieval torture”? On *Limitless*, Akinola provides a toolkit of stress-reducing techniques, such as “box breathing” (inhale for four seconds; hold for four seconds; exhale for four seconds; hold for four seconds; repeat), which slows a runaway heartbeat. Then there is “positive self-talk”: “If you take on a challenging situation and begin to regret it, tell yourself you’re being courageous or building resilience.” Akinola also recommends “mindful meditation”: focusing on the moment and the sensations of your body. “We all face emotional stressors that we suppress,” Akinola says. “To be mindful is to let these emotions come to the fore and acknowledge them. When we are present and aware of our stress, we create an opportunity to use it as it was designed to be used: to help us rise to the occasion.”

Akinola, who was raised in East Harlem and has a BA, an MA in social psychology, an MBA, and a PhD in organizational behavior, all from Harvard, says she thrives in intense situations: “I’ve always liked competition and pressure.” At the same time, she understands the need to unplug. She meditates every morning, and each December she does a ten-day silent meditation retreat. No phone, no laptop, no

work. Each time she goes, she is seized with doubt — *will I really be able to do this for ten days?* — but by the end, she says, “I feel I can’t imagine life without it.”

When Hemsworth was finally teetering high above Sydney, secured by cables but scared witless, Akinola’s methods helped get him across the beam and back. Later, in New York, for a promotional event in which the *Limitless* team invited reporters to scale the upper incline of the 1,300-foot skyscraper at 30 Hudson Yards, Akinola was there to offer support.

“One thing I reminded them,” she says, “is that when your heart starts racing, that’s your body telling you there’s something life-threatening that’s about to happen. But sometimes your mind needs to say: ‘Thank you for letting me know there’s some danger here. I’ve got this.’”

This article appears in the Spring/Summer 2023 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title "Talking Thor off the Ledge."*

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