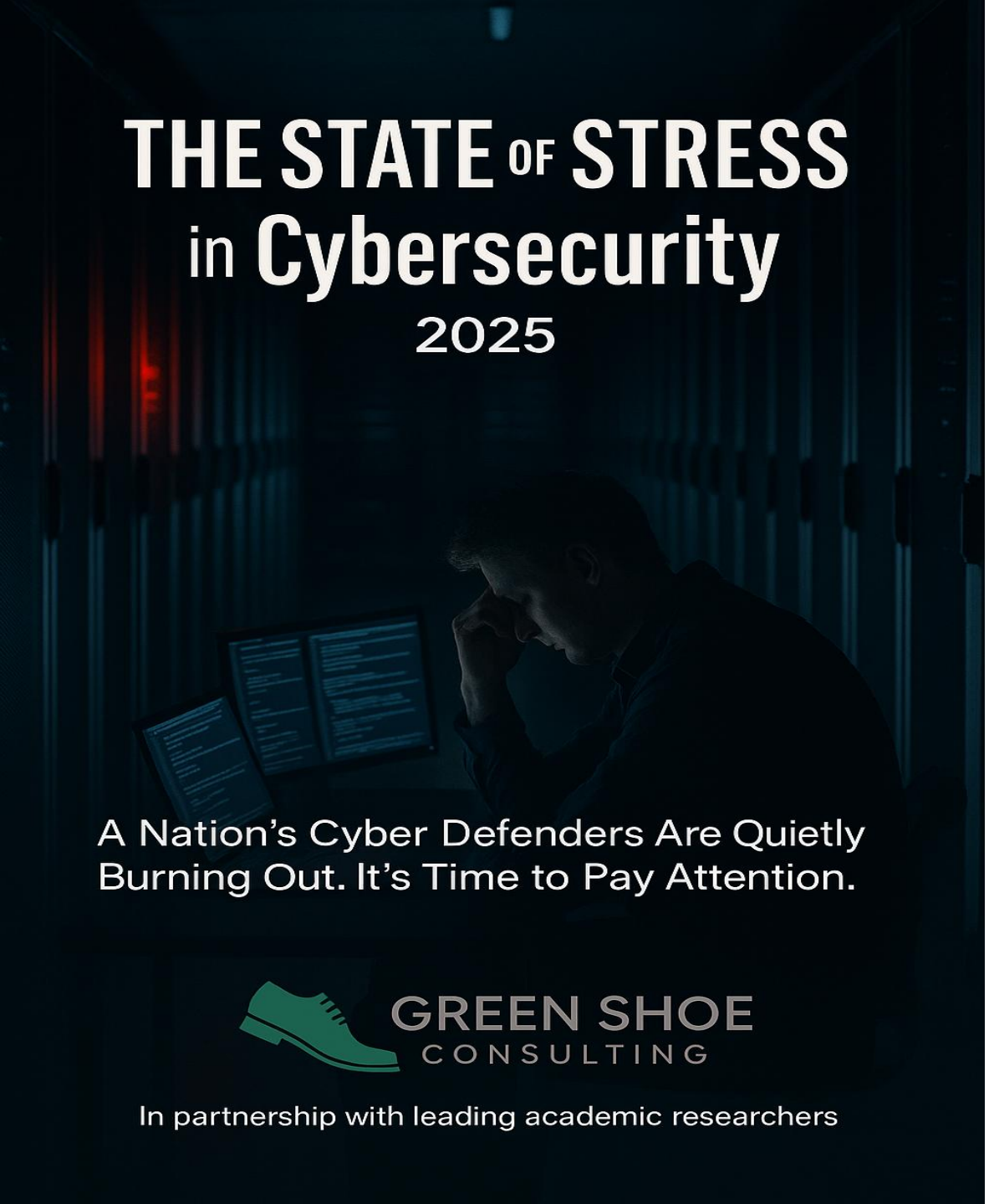


The CISO Crisis:
Inside the Industry's Silent Epidemic

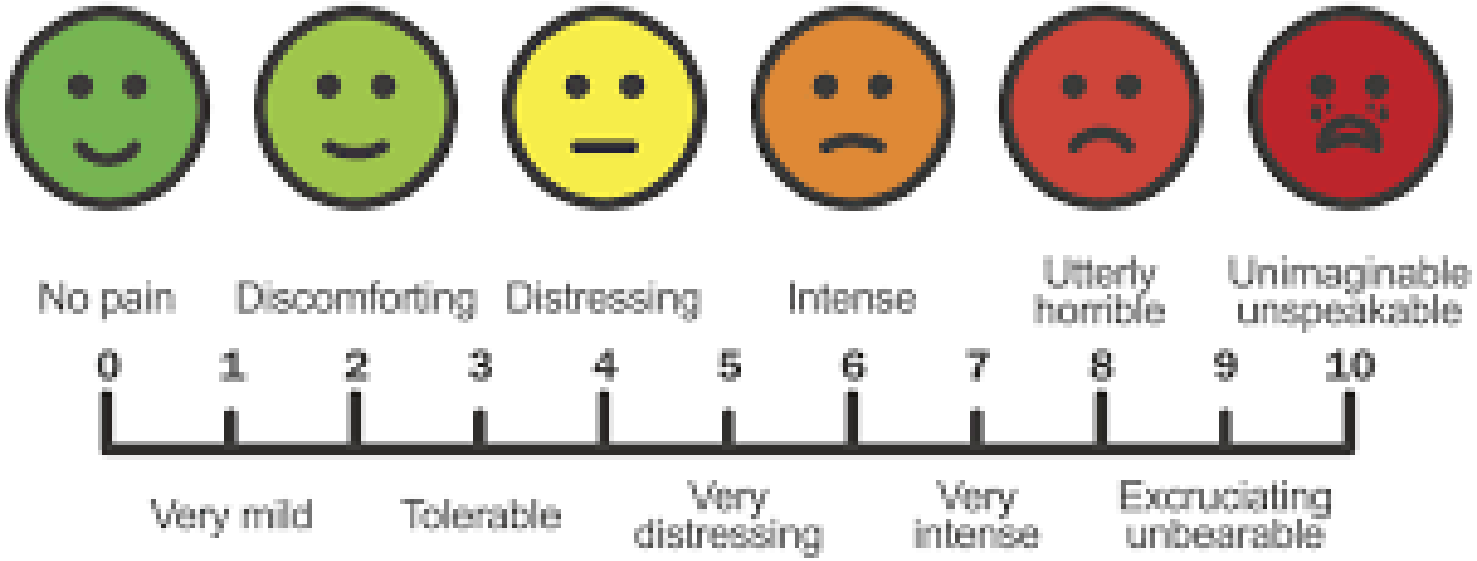
Presented by
Steve Shelton
Founder & Chief Resilience Officer

Agenda

1. Why Did We Do This Research?
2. Methodology
3. How to Use This Research
4. Key Findings
5. Forward Looking
6. What Can You Do?
7. Strategies to Improve

8 Call to Action

How Burnt Out Do You Feel?



Burnout Symptoms

Emotional & Physical Exhaustion

Cynicism
Negative response to job
Reduced concern for performance quality
Question the value/meaning of role

Professional Inefficacy
Negative self-evaluation
Decreased feelings of achievement
“no future”

Take this job and shove it

Why Did We Do This Research?

****To shine a light on the suffering in this industry*

Personal Experience

- 18 years of high pressure, cybersecurity software sales experience – my own burnout
- Witnessing the physical and mental toll experienced by cybersecurity professionals – nothing being done about it
- High regard for the critical work cybersecurity professionals do

Industry Issues

- CISO tenure – 18 to 24 months
- 69% worried about Burnout (Heidrick 2023)
- IR burnout (no empirical research here)
- CISO Liability (Uber)
- Impact of AI
- Toxic environments
- Many leaving CISO positions and industry altogether

WHY THIS MATTERS

71%
Stress

59%
Burnout

Avg CISO Tenure
18 – 24 months

Methodology

Green Shoe Consulting partnered with academic researchers from the University of Guelph to create an empirical study utilizing semi-structured interviews and an online survey.

Interview questions were developed after review of existing literature on workplace stress and burnout (Maslach and Leiter formed our grounded theory)

Disclaimer

The research conducted was based on self-reporting data. There are limitations to the accuracy and depth of information this approach provides.

Participants

Initial criteria for participation was CISOs from Fortune 1000 companies

We expanded this to include healthcare, government and technology vendors, as well as Deputy CISOs.

40 CISOs and Deputy CISOs participated.

Timeframe

Interviews were conducted between February through July 2025

How To Use This Research

The goal of this research is to shine a light on the stress and burnout challenges plaguing our cyber defenders.

This research can be used as a guide to understand the issues in this industry and how to create effective, healthy change.

Individually

- Understand the components of peak performance psychology and learn how to integrate these strategies into your work and personal life
- Understand your stress signals and what to do before burnout occurs
- Develop the human skills needed to progress your career and lead others

Teams

- Understand the individual and workplace stressors
- Be able to spot distress before it turns to burnout (support each other)
- Provide managers and leaders with tools to motivate, engage, retain and support their team members

Organizationally

- Understand how the organization is adding stress burden to its employees
- Provide evidence-based, pragmatic strategies to empower employees
- Increase employee engagement, motivation and productivity

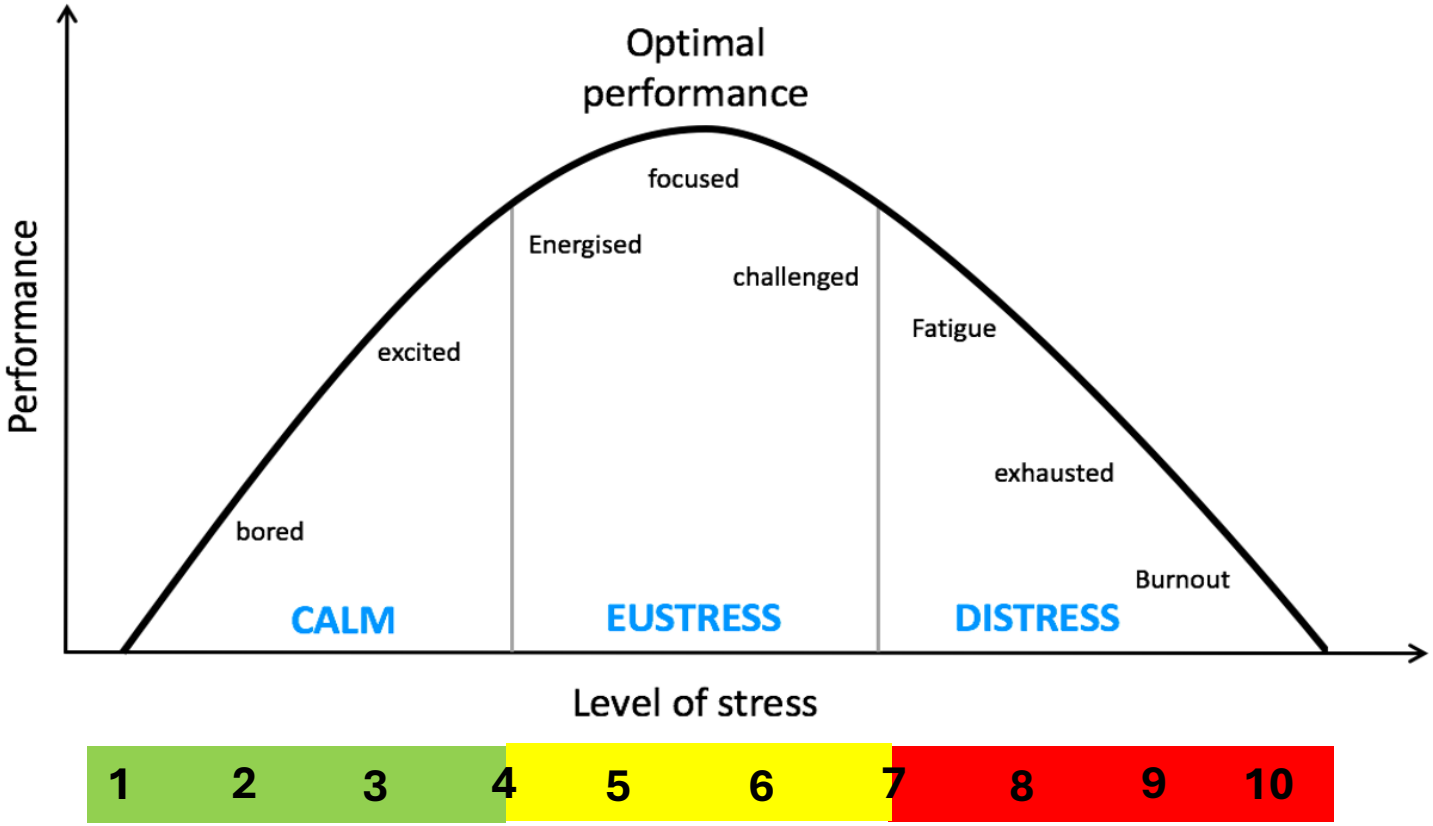
Key Findings

Majority of participants struggled to identify physical, emotional and mental signals.

Many talked about the experiences in a generalized context – “in this role, ***you*** often see…”

CISO burnout exists on a spectrum

- Military veterans expressed a higher tolerance / different relationship to stress than nonveterans
- Majority self-reported burnout level based on their own definition and changed when provided burnout definition
- Many expressed dynamic states of stress throughout the year



Understanding the Market for Silver Bullets

"Decisions often feel like guesses masked as strategy."

The Market for Goods, as described by Information and by Party	**Buyer Knows**	**Buyer Lacks**
Seller Knows	Efficient Goods	Lemons (used cars)
Seller Lacks	Limes (Insurance)	**Silver Bullets (Security)**

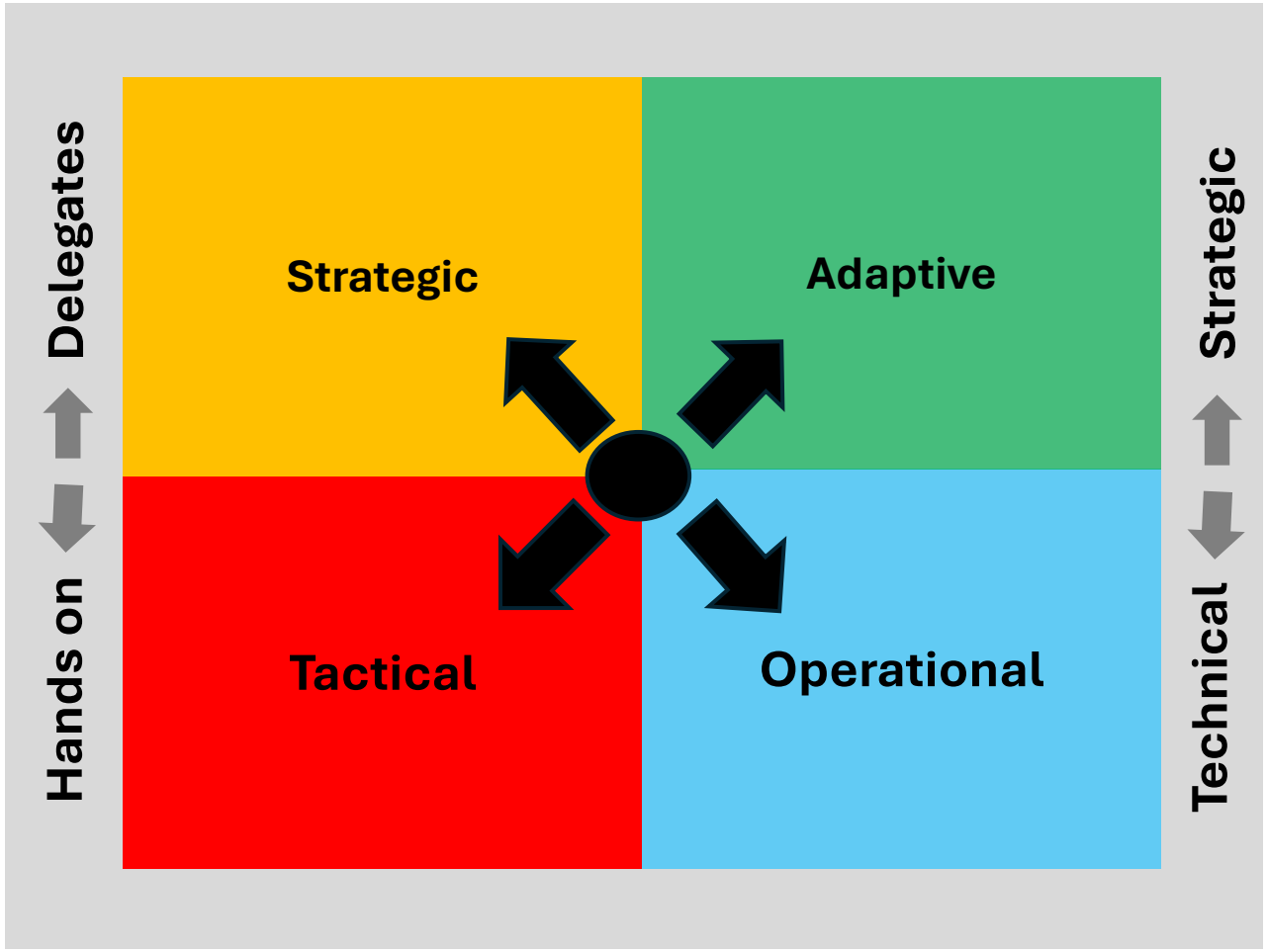
Figure 1. Security is a Symmetrically Insufficient Market

Conceptual Insight	Impact on CISO Stress
Market for silver bullets → No reliable signal	Mental strain from ambiguous tool decisions
Reliance on proxies (VCs, logos)	Pressure to keep up, regardless of real security impact
Evaluation workload under uncertainty	Deepened workload and fatigue
Lack of clear success metrics	Moral distress and erosion of control
Isolation in decision-making	Heightened burnout, eroded work–life boundaries

Key Findings – CISO Personas

Tactical

- Takes mistakes, incidents, failures personally
- Perfectionism was high
- No boundaries between work and personal life
- Challenges delegating, empowering team
- Defaults to hands on due to competency
- Highly reactive



Key Findings

Badge of Honor

- Historically, cybersecurity professionals have exhibited a **willingness to accept the stress burden put on them** by the organization as they perceive the work as more important and critical
- Individual **identity is tied to this role**
- Majority of respondents exhibited this trait
- This may indicate mental rigidity **creating additional distress**

Key Findings – Is Cyber Unpredictable?

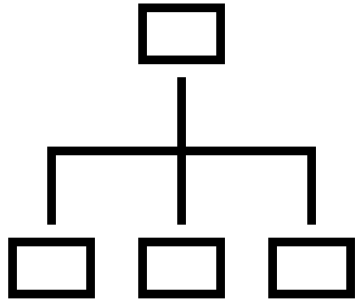
96% Yes →

They had a plan for the year and had 60% unplanned things come up – lack of control makes it unpredictable

Mike Tyson Rule

4% No → **Low burnout**

Key Findings – Reporting Structure



The reporting lines for CISOs are diverse

Ranging from CIO (most common), to CEO, CFO, CTO, CPO, Chief of Staff, Founder/CEO, Global CIO, and even “Global CISO“

High Burnout Group (8-10)

Tend to report to CIO, CISO, CIO/CTO, Global CIO.

This might suggest a more operational or siloed reporting structure that contributes to burnout

Key Findings: Burnout Recovery

“You can’t manage what you don’t measure.”
- Peter Drucker

Majority struggled to articulate and identify how long it took them to recover from burnout and high stress.

Recovery times vary drastically

- 30 minutes to an hour
- Days to Months
- Few Months
- 90-120 Days
- even "physical acute - mental months.“

longest recovery times (e.g., "90-120 Days", "physical acute - mental months") appear in the high burnout group, which is expected as prolonged incidents inherently increase stress.

Forward Looking - Implications

- This research is the tip of the iceberg. No prior empirical research had been conducted on cybersecurity stress and burnout. We started with the smallest, addressable segment.

- There is a need to gain deeper insights into biopsychosocial aspects of the CISO role. The ability to cross reference biometrics (heartbeat, breath rates, etc), mental load (its impact on decision making, team cohesion, etc) and other areas would create a more cohesive view of the issues and efficacy of interventions.

- We did not get into AI's impact on stress and burnout as AI adoption had been ramping up during the interview period.

- Burnout is high in areas like Incident Response and Security Operations. These groups would greatly benefit from research and applied performance psychology strategies.

- Other deeper findings will be shared in the State of Stress Report. Some findings will be held and offered privately due to the confidential and IP related aspects.

What Can You Do?

WHAT YOU CAN DO AS A LEADER

INDIVIDUAL

- Model recovery practices.
- Set cognitive boundaries (e.g., meeting hygiene).

TEAM

- Normalize stress conversations.
- Conduct stress-check standups.

ORGANIZATIONAL

- Align workloads with capacity (Maslach's "Areas of Worklife").
- Prioritize control, fairness, and recognition.

Individually

Executive Presence and Human Skills

- Develop self-awareness
- Strengthen communication and storytelling
- Foster interpersonal empathy and listening skills.
- Lead with authenticity—recognizing that showing vulnerability is a ***strength***, not a weakness.

Micro-Recovery Practices

- Incorporate brief resets into the day.
- Protect cognitive bandwidth by scheduling device-free breaks and digital detox intervals.

Boundaries & Detachment

- Establish non-negotiable off-hours and communicate them clearly.
- Use “shutdown rituals” at the end of each workday.

Self-Efficacy & Reframing

- Replace the “I carry all the risk” mindset with “I influence outcomes through strategy and leadership.”
- Reframe failures as data and learning opportunities.

Peer Support & Mentoring

- Join or create CISO peer groups for safe, confidential sharing.
- Invest in mentoring relationships—both as a mentor and mentee—to normalize the struggles of leadership.

Teams

Collective Human Skills

•Build team-level executive presence through workshops.

•Create shared language for stress, conflict, and recovery to reduce stigma.

•Train deputies and direct reports to present to executives, improving resilience and distributing leadership load.

Psychological Safety & Communication

Create a culture where team members can speak openly about risks, mistakes, or workload without fear of blame.

Micro-Recovery Practices

•Normalize short pauses in meetings.

•Encourage “meeting-free zones” in the calendar.

Shared Workload & Redundancy

Build deputy and secondary leadership roles to prevent over-reliance on one individual.

Resilience Drills & Training

Incorporate stress inoculation strategies.

Recognition & Reward

Normalize recognition not only for “heroic firefighting” but also for sustained prevention, early risk detection, and strong team culture.

Organizationally

Leadership Engagement

Boards and executives should treat CISO well-being as a **business risk issue**.

Normalize Micro-Recovery at Scale

Policy Integration: Bake short recovery breaks into daily workflows by setting default calendar templates

Infrastructure: Design physical and digital workspaces that encourage pause — wellness rooms, “no-meeting Fridays,” or structured rotations in SOCs.

Cultural Permission: Train managers to model micro-breaks so employees see recovery as performance maintenance, not slacking.

Administrative Burden Reduction

Cut unnecessary reporting, redundant meetings, and conflicting priorities.

Resilience by Design

Embed resilience programs into professional development pipelines.

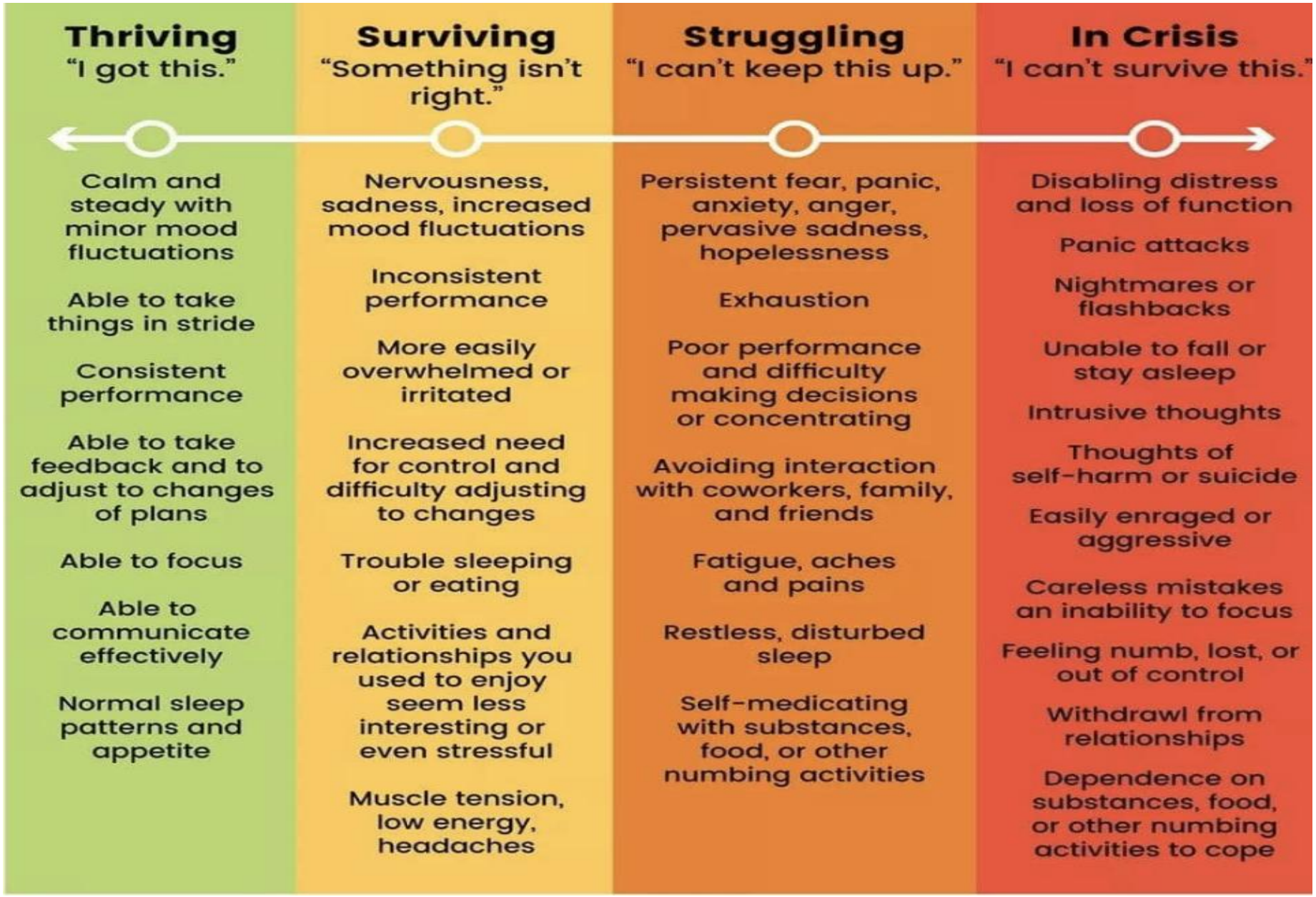
Structural Fairness

Ensure CISOs have the resources and authority to match their accountability.

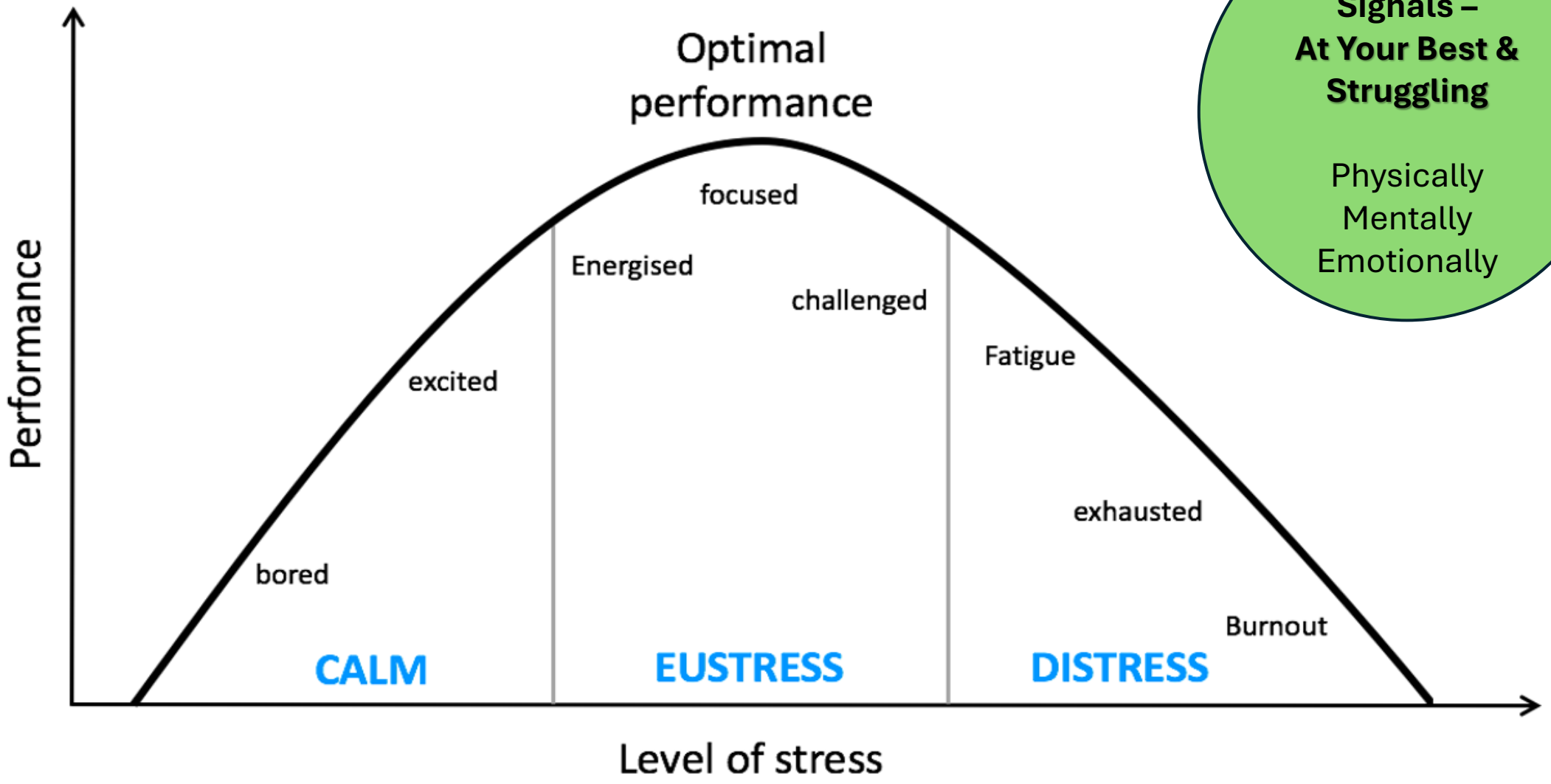
Cultural Change

Move away from a “crisis-as-normal” mindset toward a culture that values sustainability, recovery, and human resilience as much as technical resilience. This requires reframing success not only as preventing breaches, but as maintaining a sustainable security leadership pipeline.

Burnout Symptoms



Impacts of Stress



Know Your Signals – At Your Best & Struggling

Physically
Mentally
Emotionally

The Self-Resilience Check-In

Daily Check-In (3 questions each morning):

- How energized am I (1–5)?
- What one main energy drainer will I avoid today?
- What one quick win or boost can I plan?

Weekly Audit (5 deeper questions on Fridays):

1. What went well this week?
2. What drained my energy?
3. What restored my energy?
4. Who supported my resilience?
5. What's my one improvement goal for next week?

Leader Check-in Routine

Three-Question Check-In

- “How energized are you, 1–5?”
- “What’s blocking you right now?”
- “How can I help?”

Resilience Toolkit & Commitments

Mini-breaks = More energy

5-Minute Walking Break—step away from screens and stretch your legs.	**Mindful Pause**—close your eyes for 60 seconds of silent focus
Deep-Breathing Reset—perform three full diaphragmatic breaths.	**Power Pose**—stand tall for 30 seconds to increase confidence
Hydration Boost—drink a full glass of water with intention.	**Gratitude Note**—jot down one thing you're grateful for today
Nutritious Snack—have a handful of nuts or fresh fruit.	**Visual Escape**—look at a nature photo or window scene for 1 minute
Micro-Social Break—send a quick "thank you" message to a colleague	**Task Reframe**—write down one positive aspect of your current task
Desk Stretches—simple neck and shoulder rolls	**Stand-Up Reminder**—set an hourly alert to stand and move
Mini-Meditation—use a 2-minute guided audio or app prompt	**Progress Check**—mark off a completed item to boost momentum
Temperature Reset—splash cool water on your face or wrists.	**Reflective Journaling**—write one sentence about how you feel now
Breathing with Visualization—inhale calm for 4 seconds, exhale stress for 6.	**Laugh Break**—watch a short, funny video clip or meme

Micro-Recovery Practice

60 Second Cognitive Reset

Stress Management Strategies (Toolbox)

Train Your Mind
- Create a stress management plan
- Develop resilience
- Identify your stressors
- Develop coping mechanisms for stressful situations
- Identify Negative Thought Patterns and challenge them

Time Management
- Prioritize tasks: Focus on high-impact tasks and delegate or eliminate less important ones.
- Time blocking: Allocate specific time blocks for different activities, including breaks.
- Set boundaries: Establish clear work hours and avoid overworking.

Sleep
- Prioritize quality sleep by establishing a consistent sleep schedule.
- Create a relaxing bedtime routine.
- Limit screen time before bed.

Community
- Maintain strong social relationships for emotional support.
- Spend quality time with loved ones.
- Join professional or social groups.

Mindfulness
- Mindfulness involves being present and focused on the current moment.
- Regular meditation can reduce stress, improve focus, and enhance emotional regulation.
- Apps like Headspace or Calm can provide guided meditations.

Nutrition
- Eat a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Limit caffeine and alcohol consumption.
- Stay hydrated.

Physical Activity
- Regular exercise helps reduce stress hormones and boosts mood.
- Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week.

Relaxation Techniques
- Body scans
- Progressive relaxation
- Meditation
- Breathwork
- Visualization
- Imagery

Switch off
- Read fiction
- Spend time in nature
- Find a hobby
- Watch tv / movies

Call to Action

Spread the word

- If you know a cybersecurity professional or team struggling with stress and burnout, let them know about us
- Share the State of Stress report with your leadership and team (s)

Bring Us In

- We are available to talk with your team and staff, workshops, etc.

Join our 2026 Research Study

www.greenshoeconsulting.com/2026-research

Join Us

Dinner @ Prime & Provisions

May 20

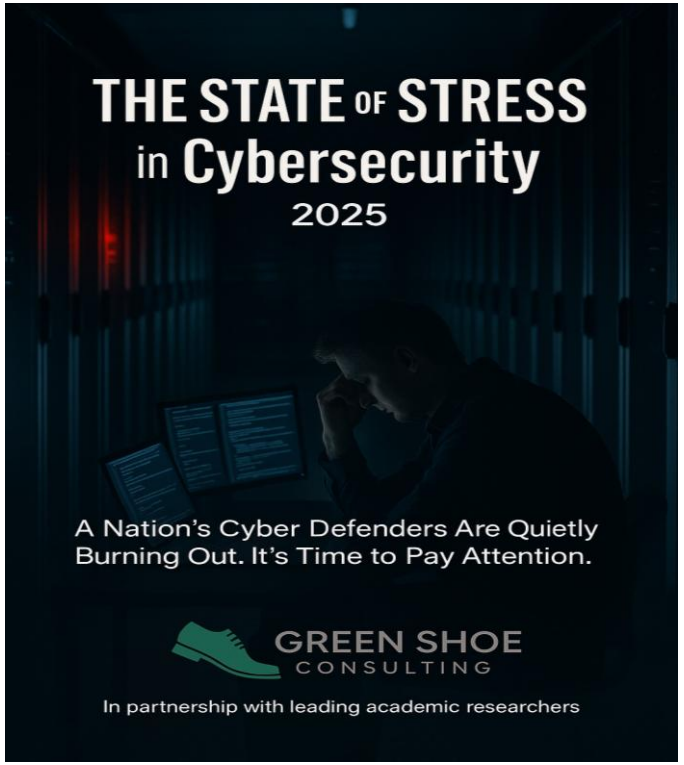
www.greenshoeconsulting.com/2026-ciso-dinner

CISO Resilience – Full Day

September 17

www.greenshoeconsulting.com/2026-ciso-resilience

Resources


THE STATE OF STRESS
in Cybersecurity
2025
A Nation's Cyber Defenders Are Quietly Burning Out. It's Time to Pay Attention.
GREEN SHOE
CONSULTING
In partnership with leading academic researchers

EXCLUSIVE
State of Stress
DEBRIEFING
Find Balance in a Burnout World
Secure your spot to have Green Shoe Consulting present detailed findings to your staff - from our groundbreaking research on CISO stress and burnout.
40 CISOs from across the US and various verticals - many F500 CISOS who have experienced some of the biggest public breaches - participated in this research.
Value
Gain Insights into stress drivers and resilience strategies tailored to cybersecurity teams.
What's included?
•One hour (on site or virtual) presentation on the detailed findings
•Up to 20 printed copies of the State of Stress Report
•Stress assessment to identify stress and burnout levels in you and your team
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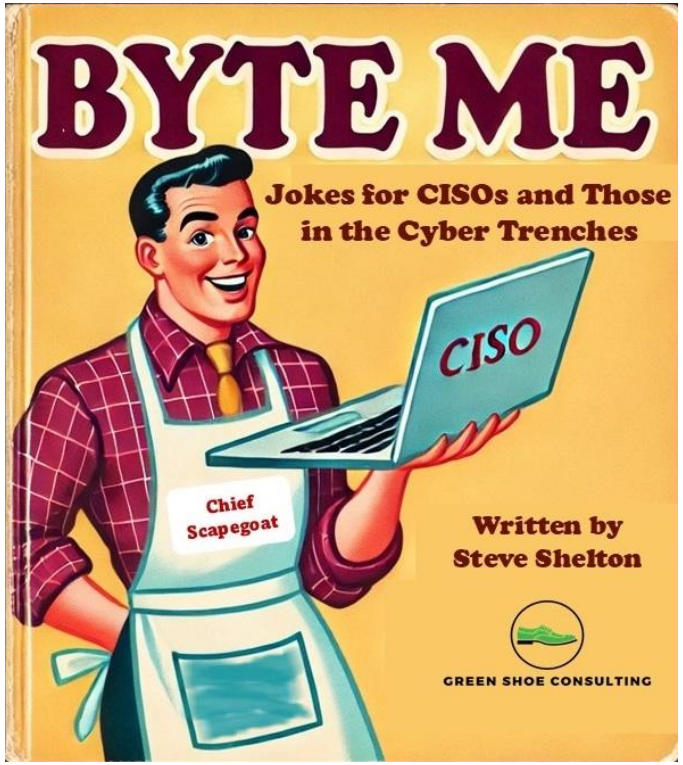
BYTE ME
Jokes for CISOs and Those in the Cyber Trenches
CISO
Chief Scapegoat
Written by Steve Shelton
GREEN SHOE CONSULTING

THANK YOU

Steve Shelton
steve@greenshoeconsulting.com

www.greenshoeconsulting.com

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