



Chronicle Stress Syndrome

Chronicle Stress Syndrome is a disease which, while not recognized by any official Medical Literature, is instantly recognized by storytellers, narrators, and players in large ongoing ("chronicle") roleplaying games. It has also been called "organizer burnout" in its later stages, and in some particularly advanced states "nervous breakdown" (and yes, that last one is recognized by the medical profession). Its what happens to those noble souls who take on the formidable task of organizing LARP after LARP after LARP, putting much of their Real Lives on hold in order to provide their friends and the local gaming community with a few evenings of entertainment.

Why does it happen?

Lots of reasons. You can look up all kinds of stress-related literature at your local library, and be enlightened on the topic... but there's one thing those sources will miss, and that's the one thing that makes CSS so special: the stress is coming from your usual stress release activities.

Whenever life gets rough, people count on friends to pull them through. But what happens when the stress *is* your friends?

Organizing a chronicle is a responsibility once you take it on. Your reputation is on the line, so you're under lots of pressure. And while it may be fun at first, its hard to take a break. The crowd you hang around with will pester you about the game. Your own friends complain to you about plotlines or their characters. If they try to help you at first, they eventually become annoyed at how much of your life you're spending on the chronicle, instead of on being their friend. You try to give people a good time, and all you hear is the negative feedback. You spill out your Life's Blood for them, and they complain that you got their shoes wet.

It's not the kind of thing you can escape, because you have nowhere else to go: your family dislikes the amount of time you spend gaming, your schoolwork is suffering to the point that it depresses you



just to think about it, at work you feel too tired to do a good job, and to top it off, you've alienated your non-gamer friends. Sound at all familiar? - If it doesn't yet, that's good! Watch out though. It sneaks up on you.

Signs and Symptoms

Everybody should be familiar with the signs of stress, but not too many organizers sit down and think about how many of them are present in their own lives. You should, though - your body will tell you you're under stress long before you reach the state described above.

Physical - Fatigue, weight loss, changes in eating pattern, changes in sleep pattern, insomnia, loss of appetite, frequent illness, general " unwell " feeling, lightheadedness, fainting, shakiness, trouble focusing, muscle weakness, ulcers (and the list goes on)

Mental - Problems concentrating, short term memory loss, inability to follow logical sequences of events, general confusion, inability to focus on a single topic, fixation with specific thoughts, blank lapses, (and the list goes on)

Emotional - Irritability, mood swings, lack of enthusiasm, general apathy towards life, crying spells, depression, frustration, inappropriate emotional responses, (and the list goes on)

Social (Editor's note: I haven't actually found a list of 'social signs of stress' but these are often the first clues that an organizer is experiencing CSS) - Changing social circles, avoiding old friends, overinvolvement with social circles (such as putting off school projects, or phoning in sick to work, in order to spend time with friends), family problems, breaking up with a significant other, spending less time with close friends, social withdrawal (not hanging around places where the LARP crowd will be), rigor mortis of the social life (ie: not going to movies anymore, not doing coffee with friends, quitting tabletop games, not visiting friend's houses, stop watching/ playing sports with friends) and again, the list goes on...

Organizer Experiences

Sounds scary doesn't it? You'd think a person would notice that they're under stress, and stop, or at least decrease their involvement with the chronicle. But for some reason, many don't, and they almost ruin their lives over it. Here's some of the real life things that have happened to chronicle organizers...

Break ups. Yes, they happen all the time, but that doesn't make them any less traumatic, and unfortunately they often drive an organizer to put even more time into a game.

Being kicked out of the house. Parents and sometimes roommates have forced organizers to pack up & move if they wouldn't give up the game... and many would rather do just that than recognize how much of their time the game is taking up.



Being kicked out of school, or put on academic suspension. One of the more common experiences of organizers in post-secondary institutions... and one of the saddest. Real Life should take precedence over a game anyday... and this is the rest of your life you're dealing with. Don't let it happen.

Plummeting grades. This is less severe than being kicked out, but often precedes it, especially if the organizers don't make some serious changes in their lives.

Being fired from work. Getting to work late, being tired & draggy on the job, or using up too many 'sick' days has often resulted in sudden forced unemployment. Some organizers even quit voluntarily to spend more time on the game.

Illness. The common cold seems to love picking on organizers, and when it hits them, it doesn't do it lightly. Flu and other bugs also seem to hit organizers and storytellers harder than they should. Many organizers live in a perpetual state of 'being sick', moving from one bug or infection to the next.

Fainting. Partly due to lack of food & sleep, or to persistent illness, some organizers' bodies force them to take a break. This can be particularly dangerous - one organizer I know fainted into a brick wall, bashed his head, and needed stitches.

Ulcers. They happen, folks, and they hurt. No one should become so stressed over a LARP that their own body decides to begin eating itself. It's not worth it.. and yet, I've heard many ST's get them.

Other serious injuries. When bodies are tired, sick & stressed, they can do the most amazing things. I've heard of broken bones (in situations where they shouldn't have broken), simple papercuts refusing to heal, and even a punctured lung in a normally healthy young man (I'm serious. There was no other explanation. The doctor said it was 'stress related'. This was to an organizer who'd been running a chronicle of 100+ people for nearly a year, with only 2 helpers. Coincidentally, it was the same organizer who needed stitches after fainting into a wall).

Nervous Breakdowns. Unfortunately, these happen, too. Often organizers have some history of mental illness (boy - says a lot for becoming an organizer, doesn't it?) which will make them more prone to breakdown than others, but it's still not pretty... or necessary. Some people experiencing breakdowns have merely needed stress-leave from school or work, others have been recommended therapy by counsellors.

Not a pretty picture, is it? Luckily, most organizers don't take it so far. Plenty of them recognize the signs before they become severe, and relinquish or relax their position in the game. Sadly, a lot of players take this as an insult, or as an admission that the organizer was doing a bad job. A lot of organizers, too, feel terrible about letting go of a game... but it's a lot better than the alternative. Organizers who realize their limitations should be respected, not dumped on.

Stress Prevention

So how can you handle chronicle stress? Here's a few tips:



1. Remember: *It's only a game!* The moment it starts interfering with real life, take a break, and don't feel bad about doing so.
2. *Learn to say NO.* If people come up to you when you're doing something else, tell them No, they can't bother you. If they ask for a character which will disrupt game balance, say NO they can't play it, not even if they promise to do a good job. If people ask whether you've got their chits ready, or can you find their character sheet for them, and you don't or can't, say NO. Don't feel guilty and make excuses.
3. *Eat. Sleep.* I don't know what it is about organizers, but somehow they think they are exempt from these basic necessities. How many people have run a game on less than 4 hours sleep, eaten barely a crust of pizza in 24 hours, and wondered why they felt so tired and shakey the night of the game?
4. One word which can save your life: *Delegate!* Of course, some of the things which you delegate people to do won't actually get done, but then you can blame it on someone else. You did your best. If people complain about it, delegate it to THEM next time. See if they do better.
5. Establish a *Complaints Department.* Get someone you can trust, and let them stand between you and the ravaging hordes of disgruntled players. That doesn't mean you aren't going to deal with legitimate complaints, but you'll have someone to screen the legitimate ones from the casual gripes. Also, get your friend to write down the complaints so you can deal with them at your leisure (or at least when you have a free braincell.)
6. *Get it in Writing.* Whether it's a complaint or a request or a reminder, tell the person hassling you to WRITE IT DOWN. Don't write it yourself, either - make them write it. This will screen approximately half of the requests right off the bat. Then, when you have the written sheet, put it in a folder with all the other ones, and deal with it later. But please DO remember to deal with it, preferably at a Storytellers meeting where ALL the people involved in running the game can find out what's going on.
7. *Make Time for Yourself,* especially right after a game. Establish an ST Free Zone, where you can go and not be hassled with game questions (try putting a sign on your table at the restaurant after the game, which says "There are no storytellers here. Go away".
8. Alternatively, establish a time/place when & where you will or won't deal with game-related matter. Say "I refuse to deal with any of this on Sundays. Sunday is my day" and let other organizers pick different days of the week when they get free time. Or say "We will be on campus every Thursday evening to deal with game matters. ONLY bother us at that time. If you can't make it, write your request down and send it with someone who can."
9. Have *Non-LARPing Friends* and hang out with them now & then. Whether it's your classmates, co-workers, family, or a different social circle, find a place where you can be someone other than an organizer/Storyteller. It's a great reality check. Don't abuse it, either - force yourself not to discuss LARP with them, or to draw them into your problems.
10. *Goof Off* with your LARP friends and co-organizers/narrators etc. Organize a game of midnight tag. Stand on your head in elevators. Summersault through pedways. Do something silly which has nothing to do with gaming. Remind yourself of the kid in you, and in your friends.
11. *Take Time Off* from the game if you need to. There's nothing wrong with saying "Lets not have a game this month". Beware, though, of taking time off only for yourself and dumping the burden of the game on your co-organizers (as in "I'm not going to organize this month. You guys can do it").
12. *Rotate Organizers.* For some wierd reason, 4 months seems to be the magic date that organizers can handle it for, before Chronicle Stress Syndrome really kicks in. Take advantage of that, and schedule an organizer rotation. It's better to have a planned transfer of authority than for organizers to suddenly quit and dump the burden of the game on someone



else's shoulders. Besides, if you help a new set of organizers take over the game, you can train them properly. If disgruntled players try to wrest control of the game out of your hands, it gets messy.

13. *Quit.* If all else fails, quit the game. It's rude to your players, its dissapointing to co-organizers, and its a blow to your ego. It's also Your Life - and it's more important than any game.

*If you are an Organizer, Storyteller, or Narrator, please remember:
If you aren't having fun, your players will have even less.
You owe it to them, and yourself, to take care of the organizing team.*

Merits & Flaws

If Chronicle organizers were a World of Darkness character class.....

Own computer (1 pt merit) - A merit well worth taking!

Own vehicle (2 pt merit) - Without this, you may need to depend on co-organizers or even players to get you to the game on time.

Own property (4 pt merit) - If you actually own a building in which you can play for free, you can bypass a lot of the hassle of finding a site every game.

Anal-Retentive (2 pt flaw) - I think that's pretty self explanatory, isn't it?

Compulsive Obsessive (4 pt flaw) - Ditto.

Access to printing/photocopying facilities (2-4 pt merit) - A 2 point merit if you have access to facilities for printing off lots of propoganda. A 4 pt merit if it's free.

University Student (2 pt merit/2 pt flaw) - This alternates from being a merit during most of the year, to a flaw during exams and when papers are due.

Competance (2 pt merit) - Considering the number of people who lack this, I think its worth looking for in a co-organizer.

Organized (4 pt merit) - Wow. I envy people with this merit.

Leadership (2 pt merit) - With this merit, you can actually get people to listen to you at games, and usually even follow your directions.

Understanding Significant Other (5 pt merit) - One of the most valuable merits, but it can be lost during 'play'. Make sure you spend time maintaining it.

Understanding Parents (3 pt merit) - A must if you live at home.

Non-LARPing friend (1 pt merit) - An inexpensive merit very few people think to invest in, but it can be invaluable if used wisely.

Caffeine addict (Flaw? Merit? No - neccesity)

Ego Signature (2 pt flaw) - Some people just have to leave their mark on everything they do.

Control Freak (4 pt flaw) - Some things in life you have no control over, and players are foremost among those. And yet, some people still try.....

God Complex (5 pt flaw) - Oh, I don't even want to think about this one.

Access to willing (well, draftable) volunteers (4 pt merit) - Ooooooooh!

Backed by a LARP club/gaming group (2 pt merit) - The support of a parent organization or affiliated group is great, especially if it means you can use the magic words "We're part of a Non Profit Organization..."

Enemy (1-5 pt flaw) - An irritating newbie is a 1 pt enemy. Persistant annoying players who don't like your storytelling style are 3 to 4 point enemies. Previous or competing LARP organizers can qualify



for 5 point enemies if they despise you.

Background in Theatre Arts (3 pt merit) - Make up, special effects, contacts in acting or prop-building... all kinds of tidbits can come out of this.

Email Address (1 pt merit) - If you haven't already taken this merit, get it!!

Independantly Wealthy (6 pt merit) - Oh, wouldn't we all love that?

Unlisted phone number (7 pt merit) - No Comment.

Readable handwriting (1 pt merit) - I'm really not sure about this one, but my editor insisted I add it after I handed her my first draft of this. Be glad you have the typed version, I suppose.

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