

# Text 9

What if the good life isn't really all that good? What if the very things so many of us work so hard to get – a high-paying, powerful job; a beautiful house; a wardrobe of nice clothes; and a fancy education for our children to prepare them for carrying on this way of life – turn out to be more trouble than they are worth?

It has long been believed that the psychological burdens associated with being a “low-status individual” – in other words, poor – grow lighter as people move up the social ladder. It turns out that this is true only to a point. Once you get high enough, the mental and physical health benefits associated with greater affluence start to disappear. In fact, research indicates that as you near the top, life stress increases so dramatically that its toxic effects essentially cancel out as many positive aspects of succeeding.

A professor of sociology at the University of Toronto has a phrase for this: “the stress of high status.” He has surveyed thousands of Americans and Canadians of all income levels and has discovered that people with higher levels of education and in higher-status jobs with medium-to-high salaries are experiencing higher levels of stress.

Why is this so? If you are the sort of driven, work-devoted person that high-status people tend to be, then you feel compelled to answer every single e-mail, text or phone message, no matter when you receive it or where you happen to be. Having authority over others pushes high-status people to be involved in all sorts of interpersonal conflicts and management problems.

And then there are all the small details such as getting the right clothes, the right haircut and the big-enough house, as well as raising the perfect children who will get into Harvard. In high-status communities, this can feel less like a choice than a requirement. 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.

It was thought that the recession might make people focus 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.

Interestingly, the younger workers in the study are considerably less stressed than the older ones. They seem to be used to today's all-demanding professional culture. In the future, this may just be a normal part of everyday life.