

# Commuter stress study: transfer travel takes a toll

By [Judy Rife](#)

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Brooklyn — Finally, there is proof: A long train commute is more stressful than a short one, especially if it involves a transfer.

Not that the men and women who make the two-hour trek to the city from Orange County need any scientific research to convince them.

"Stress happens when all the connections don't sync up as they should," said Joseph Piombino of Warwick. "Between Metro-North, the PATH system and the subway lines, there is always the possibility something could go wrong that delays you several minutes — thus missing your train."

The ongoing research, published in professional journals ranging from Health Psychology to Transportation Research Report, is the work of Richard Wener of the Polytechnic University in Brooklyn and Gary Evans of Cornell University in Ithaca.

The two environmental psychology professors have had a long-standing interest in studying the impact of this "ubiquitous stressor" on Americans' health and job performance. What got them going was a \$175,000 grant from the New Jersey Department of Transportation.

For their research, Wener and Evans used central New Jersey commuters whose 75-minute journey to work in the city is among the longest in the state. Mind you, 75 minutes is the amount of time it takes a commuter who boards a train in Port Jervis to reach Tuxedo; it's another 55 minutes before he gets to Hoboken.

The men collected saliva from the commuters — they chewed on sterile cotton balls — to test for cortisol, the substance that the adrenal gland secretes when the body is stressed, and administered perceived stress surveys and simple cognitive tests.

The results?

Commuters who switched to New Jersey Transit's direct train service to Pennsylvania Station, when it became available on the Morris and Essex lines, had less stress than commuters who continued to travel to Hoboken and transfer to PATH or the ferry.

"When the commute improved — when it was shorter and more direct — stress levels declined," said Wener, who himself commutes to Brooklyn via Hoboken from central New Jersey.

Time, however, appears to have a bit more of an impact than effort — transfers — on stress levels. As a result, Wener said, the so-called extreme commuters who live in Orange County are likely to benefit from any reduction in the amount of time their journey to work takes, regardless of how they get there.

In principle, Benita Auge of Salisbury Mills agrees. But in practice, the 10 minutes she saved using Secaucus wasn't worth the chaos she encountered in the country's busiest train station, or the competition for seats on the trains.

"Penn Station is a zoo," said Auge. "The commuters are pushy, and the travelers are hauling around luggage — a constant source of irritation — and there are few seats on the trains at any time in any direction."

So, she's gone back to Hoboken, where she can buy one of the world's best cinnamon raisin bagels in the morning and have her pick of seats on a waiting train in the evening.

"Commuting so far every day, no matter the method, is difficult," said Brian Weber of Monroe.

On one hand, he thinks a one-seat ride would be "a huge improvement." But on the other, he doubts it will cancel the distance factor.

"My definition of stress," said Weber, "is school play, etc. in the evening. You promised the kids you'd be there. Meeting, etc. runs long. You're thinking, 'If I don't leave in the next three minutes, I'll miss the train — and the play. Kids will hate me, wife will be angry, but there is nothing I can do about it.'"

Wener and Evans, researching the same demographic pool, also determined that commuters who drove to the city had more stress than commuters who took the train, even if the drivers' trips were shorter. Jim McKenna of Harriman, whose Manhattan office was destroyed on 9/11, went back to driving only after he was stranded again, two years later, in a blackout.

"If you calm down, leave plenty of time and pay attention to the road, I find I'm not as stressed as trying to make train and bus schedules," said McKenna. "It is more expensive, but normally the car takes less time than public transit. More importantly, I know I can get out of the city in an emergency — which I think is another stress factor."

NJ Transit, however, likes having "proof" — not only that the train is better than the car — but also that the direct train is better than the indirect one. After all, it is betting the ranch on a \$6 billion plan to build another tunnel beneath the Hudson River so twice as

many people — including the extreme commuters from Orange County — can have a one-seat ride to midtown Manhattan.

"We didn't know what to expect when we were told about the research and asked to cooperate," said Jim Redeker, NJ Transit's assistant executive director. "But we think it's terrific that they've given us additional confirmation about the benefits of the investments we've made — and will continue to make — in faster, more direct train service. Transit has always got to be about the quality of life."

## **10,000 steps gives health**

Train riders walk 30 percent more than car drivers on their journey to work, almost enough to count as a personal exercise program.

"I call it the Commuter Olympics," said Brian Weber, an Orange County commuter, as he recounted the rigors of navigating Secaucus Junction and Pennsylvania Station and then a mile of crowded streets to his office.

Did he mention he wears a backpack perpetually crammed with books, laptop and water bottle?

As part of their study of commuter stress, environmental psychologists equipped New Jersey train riders and car drivers with pedometers to measure their physical activity. Their goal was to determine if people could design their commute to compensate for a lack of regular exercise in their daily lives.

"There's only a small group of people who exercise regularly, so it's important to get people to build more walking into their daily routine," said Richard Wener, a co-author of the study. "Part of that could be how you design your commute."

Wener suggested people strive to meet the Centers for Disease Control's recommendation of a minimum of 10,000 steps a day — and start with such obvious strategies as parking at the far end of the lot and using the stairs at the office.

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## **Nature and noshing take stress down a notch**

Environmental psychologists who are studying commuter stress have no surefire cure, but they do have some pointers for racheting it down a notch.

"Anything that lets your mind get away is good," said Richard Wener, an associate professor at Polytechnic University in Brooklyn. "Listen to music. Read a book. Look out the window at nature."

Wener said the emphasis should be on activities that don't require the kind of "effort-ful" attention that frequently induces mental fatigue.

"A novel that you can't put down or an iPod that you've programmed yourself are examples of naturally fascinating activities that require only easy attention and act as mental restoratives to reduce stress," said Wener.

Taking the ferry or taking a scenic walk — connecting nature to the commute — is another way to lower stress levels. In fact, Wener's personal stress-buster is to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Benita Auge, an Orange County commuter, said one of her tricks is to not wear a watch. "Whenever the train is late, constantly glancing to see what time it is, only serves to increase my stress level," Auge said. "There is nothing I can do about it."

Another trick is a treat in the form of a cinnamon-raisin bagel from the bakery at the Hoboken terminal.

"Brilliant, not wearing a watch is brilliant!" said Wener. "Especially since you can always check the time if you absolutely have to on your cellphone."

But he thinks Auge would do well to try his favorite treat from the bakery: the cappuccino muffin.