

# What is Stress and how do you recognise it?

Stress is a concept that means different things to different people. Why is this? The HSE have defined stress as

**“Stress is a reaction people have when excessive pressure or demands are placed upon them, and arises when an individual believes they are unable to cope”**

This definition is basically saying that stress occurs when the pressure you are under exceeds your perceived ability to cope.

The key words here are ***perceived ability***, as this will be different for each of us.

So stress is not just an external pressure such as meeting a deadline, its whether or not you believe that you can cope with a situation that you personally perceive as important or threatening.

In our workshops we ask people to give examples of stressful situations at work. We usually get examples such as making presentations, heavy workload, difficult customers etc...

We then demonstrate the individuality of stress by asking if everyone finds these situations stressful. The response is always that some people don't find them stressful, in fact frequently some people say they actually **like** these situations.

We also make the distinction between **event stress** and **chronic stress**.

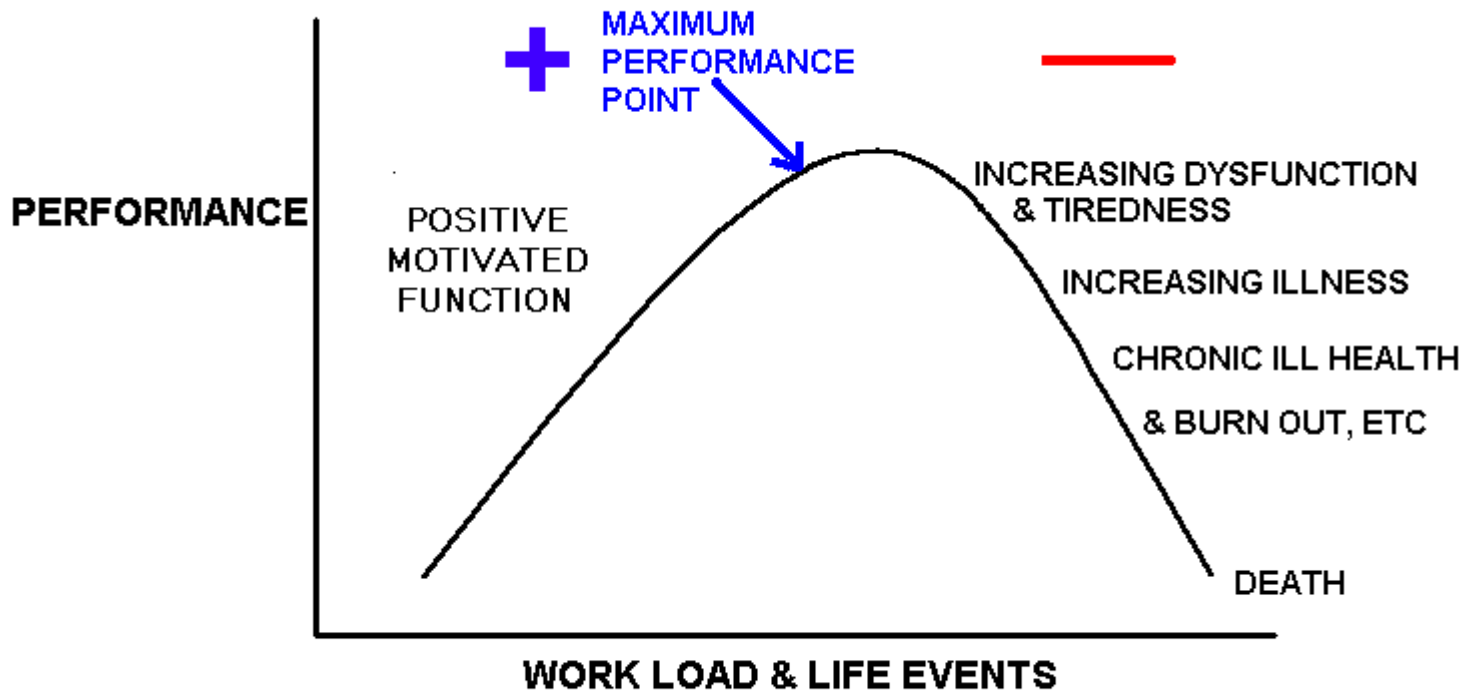
**Event stress** is the negative reaction we have to one-off situations and events that reduces our performance and can upset us emotionally. If however the event stress becomes more frequent or we constantly feel that we cannot cope, we can start to suffer from **chronic stress**. Unlike event stress which we usually recover from after a short period of time, chronic stress can stay with us for days or weeks on end. It is the physical and psychological effects of chronic stress that eventually makes us ill.

So how do we know when we are at risk of suffering the unhealthy effects of stress? Let's return to our working definition, and split it into two discrete parts:

- 1. A reaction that people have to excessive pressures or demands placed upon them,**
- 2. and arises when an individual believes they are unable to cope.**

The first part of the definition suggests that stress has an objective component; that there is a point for all of us when we will suffer from stress,

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and that point is reached when pressures or demands become excessive. This clearly indicates then that excessive pressure represents a high risk.

Note that pressure itself is not necessarily bad. With the right amount of pressure we can feel challenged, stretched, and this is when we perform at our best. Some people refer to this as 'positive' stress. This may be because we often use the words 'pressure' and 'stress' interchangeably. Here, just to be absolutely clear, we use the word 'stress' to mean a negative reaction to too many pressures or demands. Recently, a massive consultation exercise on stress at work carried out by the HSC/HSE found that the vast majority of professionals, employers, and trade unionists thought the use of the term 'positive stress' was confusing and unhelpful. The HSC/HSE now only use 'stress' in the negative sense (see the definition).

The second part suggests something more subjective. Our experience of stress may depend upon our perceptions about the situation we are in, whether we believe we can cope.

Logically then, it follows that, if we can reduce pressure and influence perceptions in the right way the risk will be reduced.

This is of real value to us in seeking to reduce or minimise the risk, because it clarifies what we need to do. We need to reduce the pressure overall, and the way to do that is to change the way we feel about the situation.

What follows is a selection of tools and techniques designed to help you to reduce your personal risk to stress. However because stress is so dependant on personal perception it will inevitably involve an element of trial and error before you discover what works best for you.