

Tips for Managing Your Own Stress

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What is Stress?

Some background information

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What is stress?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have defined stress as:

... the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them.

This definition suggests that stress has an objective component; that there is a point for all of us when we will suffer from stress, and that point is reached when pressures or other types of demand 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. However, as the definition above makes clear, we are using the word 'stress' to mean an adverse or negative reaction to too many pressures or demands.

A massive consultation exercise on stress at work was carried out by the HSC/HSE and this found that the vast majority of professionals, employers, and trade unionists thought the use of the term 'positive stress' was confusing and unhelpful. This is why the HSC/HSE now only use 'stress' in the negative sense.

It is true to say that stress also has a subjective element. Our experience of stress may depend upon our perceptions about the situation we are in and 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.

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What happens to us physically during fight-flight?

This instantaneous, acute reaction we have has been called the 'fight-flight response'. The fight-flight response is an automatic physiological reaction we all experience when we perceive that we are under threat. We unconsciously put our bodies into the optimum state to run or fight as effectively as possible.

Like it or not we still respond physiologically the same way as our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Picture our ancestor sitting by a fire when he sees the glowing eyes of a sabre-toothed tiger at the edge of the forest. Instantly his body goes into fight-flight mode and in a matter of seconds the following occurs:

- *Digestion slows down.* Blood gets routed to muscles and the brain. Today you may experience this as having a dry mouth and butterflies in your stomach
- *Breathing speeds up.* This is to prepare for action. Try catching your breath after getting scared.
- *Heart races and blood pressure soars.* Blood pressure increases to get blood to all parts of the body to prepare to fight or flee. Recall your own heart pounding in frightening situations.
- *Perspiration cools the body.* Sweating when under stress allows the body to burn more energy. When facing that stressful meeting, do you think about using more deodorant?
- *Muscles tense.* Your ancestor was ready to run from danger. Today you may have a stiff neck or aching back after a hard day.
- *Blood clots faster.* In case of injury you release chemicals to make blood clot quicker.
- *Sugar and fats pour into the blood.* This provides the energy needed to slay an attacker or run for your life. Can you recall having surprising strength and endurance during an emergency?

Why have a fight flight response?

All these physiological reactions were great for the cave men and women who lived in constant danger. They didn't know when and where the next threat would come from. For our ancestors the fight-flight response was essential for survival.

Unfortunately, today we still have the same unconscious physiological responses to perceived threats, but we are not faced with life and death situations on a daily basis. We do still have stress though and lots of it. When you think you are being threatened, you may brace yourself, but you try to control most other reactions. Dealing with that annoying customer might be stressful, but it's not life threatening. You can't punch the salesperson or the boss on the nose and release all that pent-up stress, no matter how much you'd like to. Instead you take all these brief, but regular hassles and you swallow them or ruminate about them. Psychologists call this internalising. Your body calls it destructive.

The most important aspect to understand about the fight-flight response is that it is designed to deal with emergency one-off events. Either fighting or running away should use up the extra glucose and adrenaline we pump into our bloodstream. For our health's sake we want our bodies to return to normal as soon as possible. Problems start to occur if we experience this reaction too often without using all this extra energy and the other physiological changes for their intended use.

We all experience 'events' which trigger a fight-flight response. This is not usually a problem and should not affect our health or performance in the longer term. But experiencing the fight-flight response on a regular or chronic basis can lead to the negative effects we call stress.

Event v Chronic Stress

We make a 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.

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Negative health effects of chronic stress

A chronic fight-flight response or 'stress' will quickly change our behaviour for the worse and will eventually damage our health. For example:

- Increased blood pressure: chronic high BP, stroke, heart attack
- Digestion slows down: ulcers, constipation, loss of energy through mal-absorption of nutrients
- Increased glucose: blood/sugar imbalance, possible diabetes and sugar blues
- Blood thickening: blood clots, strokes, heart attack, pulmonary embolism.
- General: adrenal glands exhausted, people look for caffeine, sugar, cigarettes to keep themselves going
- The body uses up natural vitamin C and other nutrients and this gradually weakens the immune system.

Because the immune system is weakened your ability to fight infection and viruses is reduced. Therefore if you have an "Achilles' Heel" and are, for example, prone to sore throats, upset stomachs or headaches, they will occur more often.

Mental and Emotional Effects of Chronic Stress

Our bodies and minds use a lot of energy to maintain the fight-flight response on a chronic basis. As a result there is not as much energy available to maintain our normal levels of performance in the following areas:

- Memory and concentration start to deteriorate
- We are more easily irritated and get angry at small things
- Confidence levels drop
- Creativity and problem solving abilities deteriorate
- Loss of interest in job and home life
- Experience moments of panic or despair
- ‘Anticipatory anxiety’ and worry becomes more frequent
- We become more pessimistic

Stress is generally accompanied by a lowering of mood. This can be caused by feeling constantly under threat, which reduces your confidence and sense of security. Also, physiologically, the production of excess adrenaline will starve the brain of essential nutrients and inhibit the production of serotonin, the natural mood-enhancing hormone.

If left unchecked your situation can deteriorate to the point where you feel the situation is hopeless and you are powerless to do anything about it. If this downward cycle is not stopped depressive illness can easily occur.

In fact the worst recipe for stress is one where you experience unremitting pressure or have excessive demands whilst at the same time feel as if you have little or no control.

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Recognising the Signs of Stress

One of the difficulties with stress is that people experience stress in different ways. This contributes to stress also manifesting itself in different ways. So it would be wrong to over-generalise when giving advice on how to identify stress in others.

What we can say though is that there will be changes in the stressed person. These changes may be emotional, physical or behavioural, or a combination of all three. So the key thing is to look out for negative changes of any kind. Bear in mind that the negative changes are also likely to have knock-on effects e.g. reduced performance at work.

Of course, we all experience 'bad days', so we are really talking about situations where people display these negative changes for a period of time i.e. 5 days in a row.

Examples of negative changes would be:

- Making more mistakes than usual and increased forgetfulness
- A negative change in mood or fluctuations in mood
- Avoidance of certain situations or people
- Increased use of very negative or cynical language

Recognising the Signs of Stress

- Becoming withdrawn
- Prolonged loss of a sense of humour
- Increased irritability and shortness of temper
- A change in appearance, especially evidence of poor self care
- Changed tonality of voice
- Changes in habits e.g. increased smoking, drinking
- Looking haggard or exhausted all the time
- Becoming 'hyper,' manic or irrational

This is not an exhaustive list. The important thing is to become more aware about the well-being of others. As you do, you will notice that, where stress is concerned, there are some things you can see and some you can hear, and even some you can feel. It's a good idea to use all your senses to pick up potential problems. You can use this raised awareness as a kind of 'early warning system:' an indication that you need to do something. It would be wrong to make too many assumptions at this stage, rather, use the 'warning' as a cue to investigate further. Try to find out what is causing the changes you have noticed so that it can be tackled or appropriate support can be offered to the individual concerned.

Stress, Pressure and Performance

While vulnerability to stress varies from individual to individual, managers have to assume that their staff are capable of doing their jobs and are able to handle reasonable levels of extra pressure from time to time.

It is important to understand the difference between pressure and stress. When people feel appropriately challenged they usually experience positive feelings such as excitement and drive. This results in high levels of positive energy and an enthusiasm to work hard and succeed. A person who is 'stressed' experiences only negative thoughts, feelings and physical sensations which drains their energy and lowers their mood and desire to work hard. A stressed person will want to withdraw energy from a pressurised situation and give up the battle.

Most people react well to the right amount of pressure; we need it if we are to experience the positive feelings of achievement. On the other hand if there is too much pressure and we experience stress it produces only negative reactions, which will ultimately damage our health and well-being.

You should also be aware that pressure is cumulative. If a member of your team is having personal problems at home this reduces the level of pressure they can take at work. Although you have little influence over an employee's personal life, it's difficult to ignore when they are showing signs of stress and poor performance at work.

An individual or a group can respond to pressure in two ways. If the pressure is reasonable, motivated staff will respond in a positive manner that usually results in enhanced performance. If the pressure is unreasonable or excessive the individual or group will eventually respond in a negative way by showing the symptoms of stress. It is a manager's responsibility to ensure that the pressure or demands are not excessive.

Working Long Hours

Working long hours does not automatically mean you will increase the risk of stress. The main danger from working consistently long hours is that you could exhaust yourself. It is essential to pace yourself and ensure you balance the work periods with appropriate recovery time. In sports psychology this is referred to as 'periodisation' and is an essential skill for athletes who are building up their fitness for major events like the Olympics.

Working long hours may also be a sign that someone is suffering from stress as they may have to work extra hours to cope with an excessive workload. Or they may feel that they need to work long hours because they lack confidence in their ability to do the job and are worried about their job security.

The key issue here is control. Someone who decides they have to work harder for a specific period, knowing they are in control of the situation and are confident they can rise to the challenge, is unlikely to suffer from stress. Alternatively, someone working long hours on a regular basis because they feel they have no choice, who doesn't feel in control and feels threatened if they refuse, has a high probability of suffering stress.

Individual Differences

Stress does depend to an extent on individual differences or personality factors. For example, extraverts are more likely to actively seek out and get a thrill from peak experiences (e.g. bungee jumping) while introverts would seek to avoid such experiences and would feel very threatened if put into a position of having to take part in them. Personality differences can directly or indirectly lead to stress. If someone is in a role that is a bad fit for their personality it may cause chronic stress, and if very different personalities are part of a team that can lead to conflict (from a lack of understanding that the other person perceives things very differently), which may also increase the risk of stress.

Everyone and everything has a breaking point but some people are undoubtedly more hardy/vulnerable than others. For example, 'Type A' personalities who are highly reactive, competitive, time driven and ambitious tend to be more vulnerable to stress. The key risk factor for this personality or behaviour type is the level of hostility in the reaction. Those of us who regularly, habitually, react with hostility when we are frustrated, are more at risk of stress. Type B personalities who are more laid back and generally less anxious about life are less vulnerable to stress.

In conclusion, we cannot ignore individual differences and personality factors, when seeking to minimise stress risk, or in tackling stress-related situations.

Summary

- Stress and pressure are not the same thing. Pressure can be good, and when we feel stretched and challenged, that is an area of peak health and performance. Stress occurs when the pressures or demands become 'excessive', more than our ability to cope at any one time.
- A stress reaction stems from the inappropriate use of a physiological reaction we automatically experience when we perceive we are under threat. This reaction is known as the fight-flight response and is designed to maximise the body's ability to fight or run away when faced with a threatening situation.
- We need to distinguish between event and chronic stress, when considering risk to our health and wellbeing. One-off stressful events are not generally harmful, because after a relatively short period of time the body returns to normal without sustained negative effects.
- Chronic stress can be caused by constant, unremitting pressure or demands (especially damaging when combined with feelings of low control), or by ruminating and worrying about such situations before and after they occur. It can also occur when someone feels that they are unable to cope and they see themselves as being under constant (psychological) threat.
- Recognising stress involves being alert to any kind of negative changes and the effects these negative changes may have. We all experience negative changes from time to time, especially in response to stressful events. That is entirely normal. We should take most notice however when the negative changes we observe are sustained. Such changes may be a strong indication of chronic stress and should not be ignored.

Summary (continued)

- Working long hours may be a sign of stress or a cause of stress in certain circumstances. If people are working excessive hours and are unable to complete their work during their normal working hours, it may be because of excessive workload. This can increase the risk of stress, and as we have seen, if this is combined with feelings of low control it can be a significant risk to health and wellbeing. If on the other hand people are choosing to work additional hours to clear a backlog or complete a project, that is less likely to be harmful. Indeed the exercise of choice (control) in this way may help to prevent the risk of stress in the long run. A decision to work extra hours now may help to avoid pressurised deadlines later on.
- Individual and personality differences do have a bearing on stress risk. For example some types of personality are more vulnerable than others. Type A personalities, where people exhibit high levels of hostility in their reactions, increase the risk of stress. More laid back Type B personalities are much less at risk. If an employee's personality or temperament is a bad fit for their role at work this can increase the risk of stress, and may lead to problems in the longer term. We need to bear in mind also how personality might influence perspective. For example, an optimist and a pessimist will see things very differently. What an optimist may perceive as a challenge or a 'buzz', may well be regarded by a pessimist as a hopeless situation.

Hints and Tips

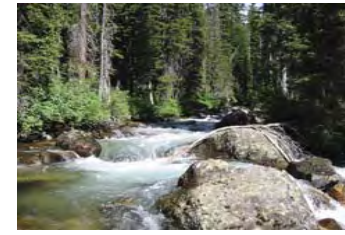
The following pages contain a number of different hints and tips which can help you to become more resilient. This is not an exhaustive list. If you are interested in learning more about managing stress in your workplace please contact us!

To view updated tips on our website please go to: <http://www.in-equilibrium.co.uk/tag/tips/>

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Relaxation



One of the most enduring and successful stress management strategies, with enormous benefits, is Relaxation.

You probably agree but like many busy people you might feel that you are unable to find time to relax.

Ask yourself the question ... do you find time for morning or afternoon tea? If you answered "yes" then can we respectfully suggest that it might be more possible than you think to fit a 10 minute relaxation break into your day!

Relaxation can take many forms, it can include diaphragmatic breathing, visualisation, meditation, yoga and there are lots of resources and books readily available to teach you how to do it.

Relaxation is a skill that needs to be learned and becomes easier with practise. If you take the time to learn to relax properly it soon becomes second nature and a very handy stress management technique that you can use any time any where – no props necessary!

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Diaphragmatic Breathing



Diaphragmatic or deep breathing is probably the most widely used reactive stress management technique. Give it a try the next time you feel under pressure or are stuck in a tense situation. Maybe you have an irate customer on the phone who is being unreasonable and aggressive. You can feel yourself beginning to get angry and losing control. Try the following while listening: take several slow, deep breaths into the pit of your stomach, follow this with some normal breathing, then take several more deep breaths. Most people are surprised at how well this simple exercise calms them down and clarifies their thinking.

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Visualisation



Use your imagination and take a few moments to picture yourself managing what you feel is a stressful situation more successfully. Whether it's a presentation, a confrontation, or an interview, many people find that visual rehearsals boost self-confidence and enable them to take a more positive approach to a difficult task. Why not think of something you could visualise and commit to visualising it before the end of today?

The following tips refer to other ways in which you can use visualisation

The amazing shrinking man or woman

If you have someone you work beside who unnerves or intimidates you, (intentionally or not) try using your imagination to bring them down to size.

Close your eyes and visualise this person standing in front of you. Now start to shrink them in the same way as you've seen it done in Sci-Fi B movies on TV. Become aware that you are starting to smile as they get smaller and smaller and less and less significant. Shrink them right down until they are only a few inches tall, and you are having to lean forward to see them. You can't help but smile and chuckle as they use their squeaky little voices to try to talk to you. If you have a mind to, pick them up and hide them in a drawer or kick them out of the nearest window.

This sounds like just a bit of fun, but there is a serious side to it. Each time you use your imagination in this way your unconscious can't help but downgrade the person's status in your mind. You will find that the more often you shrink and dispose of someone in this way, and enjoy doing it, the less they will concern you. Try it and see.

The Bubble Technique

This is a useful technique you can teach yourself which has helped many people in situations where they have felt under pressure or have faced aggression.

- Visualise yourself inside a bubble. The colour and texture of the bubble is up to you but they must make you feel comfortable and safe. Now fill your bubble with all your favourite things, including music, memories, smells and feelings. Develop the habit of being in your bubble whenever you can. Think of practicing this exercise as a 'treat' you are allowing yourself, brief periods of relief during your busy day.
- The surface of the bubble can protect you from negativity and aggression from outside sources. Visualise aggressive words and attitudes bouncing off or being deflected round you by the bubble surface. Simultaneously the contents of the bubble make you feel relaxed, calm and confident which allows you to think clearly and respond in an assertive manner.
- Eventually you will find that you can visualise yourself surrounded by your bubble during actual stressful events and feel safer and more confident in those situations.
- Remember this is a technique which, like any other, improves with committed practice and application over time.

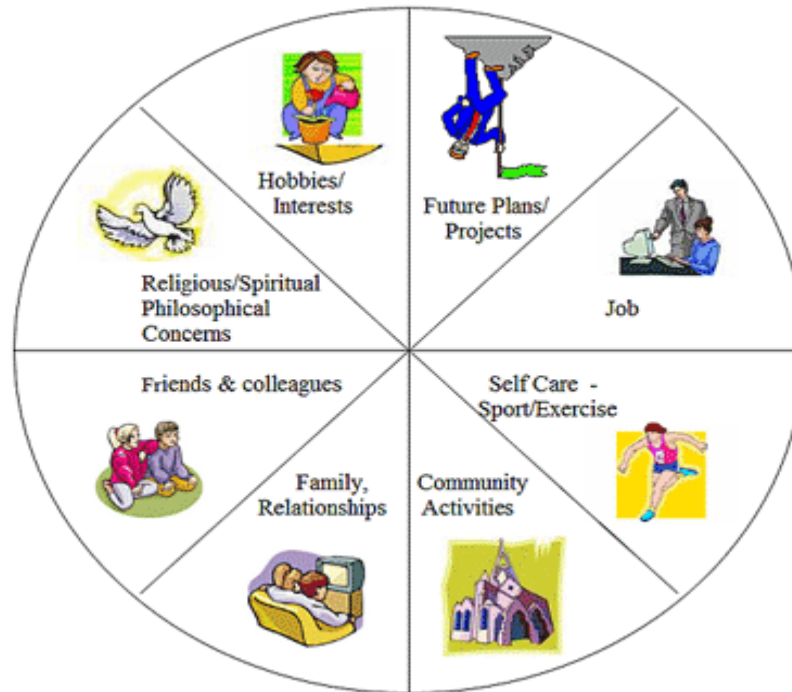
Feelgood Factors Exercise

Quick Exercise

- Firstly, just take a few seconds to relax. Now, what you need to do is take some time to think about all the things that make you feel good. These are the things that, when you think about them give you a warm feeling inside, a feeling of happiness or contentment.
- Ask yourself the question: “What sort of things really make me feel good?” and see what comes to mind. It could be particular memories, events, people, activities, music.
- As you think about them write them down in a list. Just thinking about and producing this list is a good stress management exercise in itself. It makes you focus on the feel good factors rather than the negative stressful things, which will of course reduce your stress.
- In addition to the above, you could also imagine, in that relaxed state;
- The last time you felt you were on top form at work – what were you doing? How were people responding to you?
- A future event where you perform at your best, imagine people’s positive reactions.
- Think of that moment you felt good and bring it into the visualisation – bring those emotions and feelings into it – focus on how good it feels.
- Using positive feelings to benefit you in more challenging circumstances is an excellent way to improve your emotional reaction to a person or event.

Work/Life Balance

Think about the proportion of time you devote to work, home/family life/ social/community life, time for yourself. Do you feel you have the balance right? If you find areas in your life you want to devote more time to – plan how you are going to take control!



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Social Networks

Other people are very important to your ability to cope with pressure. Thousands of studies from the field of Social Psychology have repeatedly shown that social support is the number 1 buffer against stress. The more pressure there is, the more important that support becomes.

We are social animals. We need other people and other people need us. What can we do to make sure we get the social support we need?

Do an audit of your social life. Key questions you could ask yourself would be:

- What are the most important social relationships in my life?
- Are those relationships as good as they could be?
- What could I do to invest in those relationships?
- Do I need to develop some new relationships/friendships?
- If so, what actions do I need to take?



A key issue is that of investment. Investment in relationships is one of the most important things you can do to prevent and reduce stress, and boost your health and wellbeing in the long term. Social psychological research has shown unequivocally that the most powerful influence technique is reciprocity – that is, you have to give to get. Yes, sometimes people will let us down, but in terms of stress risk, the biggest risk for our health and well-being comes from not making the investment.

Planning

Planning each day by writing down specific tasks keeps you organised and helps you feel in control. It feels good to tick off routine tasks you know you will complete as the day goes by. Remember those who fail to plan, plan to fail.

Time Management

It may be stating the obvious, but if we can manage our time effectively, this can prevent stress. Our definition of stress pointed out that stress is a reaction to excessive pressure or demands. Time management/prioritisation can help in two ways: by getting the important stuff done, and by dropping the stuff that isn't important.

The late Stephen Covey suggested that what we need to do is to consider what is **urgent** and what is **important**.

Urgent things are those that we feel we need to do immediately. They appear to require attention 'now'. For example if we are about to leave for an important appointment but the phone rings, we can feel under pressure to answer that phone. Of course, the phone call may be trivial, and is probably much less important than getting to that meeting on time! With urgent things, there's a pressure to react. They tend to be 'in your face' things, 'obvious' things. Sometimes those things seem difficult to put off or ignore.

Important things are those that are meaningful in terms of what you are trying to achieve. They are more based upon results. They can be less obvious, less visible, although important things can also be urgent.

Planning (continued)

With two basic variables, there are four possibilities

- Urgent and important
- Important but not urgent
- Urgent but not important
- Neither important nor urgent

From a stress prevention point of view, the key thing is to plan, to be proactive. This requires an investment of time and effort. What causes the stress is where we are always reactive, and feel at the mercy of events. In psychology we talk about 'locus of control'. People with an internal locus see themselves as influencing events, whereas those with an external locus feel that external pressures are influencing them. By working out systematically, proactively what is urgent and what is important, we can build a more internal locus.

Naturally, we will always give a priority to what is both urgent and important. But what many of us are bad at is neglecting the things that are not urgent but are important. If we don't plan and reflect on what's important, the risk of always reacting to events increases, as does the stress risk.

Planning (continued)

Get out of Bed!

Get out of bed earlier and use the extra time to do something you don't normally get the chance to do.

Have a cup of tea and read the papers alone, take a nice long shower or have a soak in the bath, sort through your old clothes and put them in a bag for the charity shop.

Once you have done the things you never get time to do, you can do the things you never imagined you would get around to doing!

Take Action

The thing that prevents most people from turning dreams into reality is failure to turn ideas into action.

- This could be because we tend to focus on the TASK and not the OUTCOME. The task may seem to be taxing, demanding, even frustrating ... but the outcome could be satisfying, exhilarating, even life-changing!
- Avoid the stress of under achievement by listing all those uncompleted tasks or projects and writing beside each one of them how you would feel if the project was actually completed. Focus on that feeling and then act!

Take Control

Quick Exercise to take control

- Reflect for a few minutes on all of the 'sources of pressure' in your life.
- Divide these into 2 columns; those you have 'some control' over and 'no control' over.
- Challenge the 'no control' list. Are there some, where you do have some control? If so, move them into the 'some control' column.
- Accept that you cannot control the things remaining on the 'no control' list. 'Release' them, let them go.
- Prioritise the 'some control' list. Which of these things are the most important in terms of your stress levels right now? Then, select the top 5.
- Start with the item at the top of the list and do some action planning. What is the most important thing you could do now that would reduce your stress associated with that thing? Then think about what you can do in the near future, and then the medium future and so on. This is basic planning.
- It is vitally important that you follow through and put these actions into effect. Be realistic. Don't try to do everything at once but focus on the most important things first. Make a commitment to act.
- This kind of action planning is a wonderful stress management habit. If you can do this habitually you will have progressively more and better feelings of control over the things that really matter in your life.

Give Yourself a Break

If you are a bit of a perfectionist and tend to be very hard on yourself, try giving yourself a break. For a few days think of yourself as a valued friend who needs support and encouragement. If you know this 'friend' is genuinely doing their best, there is nothing to be gained from constant criticism.

De-clutter

You may have heard of this de-cluttering tip for paperwork - either "file it, bin it or act on it." Well now you can use it for your wardrobe- "retain, repair, revamp or retire". How many minutes do you spend sifting through clothing that hasn't seen daylight for a couple of years? Un-cluttering your wardrobe can have quite an effect on your mood and the time you have at the start of your day!

(Retire does not mean to the loft.....it means Oxfam!)

Sleeping



How hot are you in bed?

You probably know that your body temperature is a key factor in how well you sleep at night. But did you know that once in bed you actually start to lose heat through your face, hands and feet as your body prepares for sleep? If your bedroom is too hot you won't be able to lose heat adequately, which can result in a broken night's sleep.

Park your thoughts

Do you ever have problems getting off to sleep, or do you ever get up for the loo and have difficulty getting back to sleep again? An effective technique that may help is to 'park' your unfinished business before you go to bed. To do this simply take a piece of paper and write down all the things that are occupying your mind before you go to bed. Some people also find it helpful to list all the things they have to do the following day. Once you have finished, 'park' the list in another room and if you need to, refer to it again in the morning. The effect of this exercise is to clear your unconscious mind to allow you to fully rest your body and your mind.

If you haven't done it already, become aware of your energy levels and performance on days after a bad night's sleep. Good quality sleep is, essential for maximising your energy and performing at your best both of which help in combating stress.

More than a third of all adults in the UK have sleeping problems. If you think you are one of them then don't just accept it. There are many things you can do to improve the quality of your sleep, some of which are covered below.

Eat early to ensure good quality sleep

Are you eating and drinking less than 2 hours before you go to bed? It can take food up to 2 hours to fully digest, so if you do eat late you risk indigestion. Drinking before you go to bed can also disturb your sleep, particularly if you drink coffee or tea as they act as a stimulant. However, some people do find that an early evening drink such as chamomile tea can help them sleep later on. Alcohol will also affect your sleep quality. It may help you fall asleep but it will also dehydrate you, causing you to wake early with a dry mouth and throat.

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Sleeping (continued)



Empty your mind

Is your mind too active? Are you thinking about tomorrow's demands and challenges? If you are, try writing down all your plans for the following day before you go to bed to free your mind for sleep.

This is a simple but very effective technique. Anxiety always reduces when we increase our perception of control. The act of writing things down also means we don't have to worry about forgetting to do them. It also un-clutters your mind and slows it down. It is better to avoid having things around that may trigger thoughts which could keep you awake. For example, keep work-related items (especially colleagues!) out of the bedroom.

Acquire relaxation skills

Everyone knows that you can't 'force' yourself to go to sleep any more than you can 'force' yourself to remember things. A very pleasant way to drift off to sleep is to practice physical and mental relaxation. In an earlier tool we discussed 'diaphragmatic breathing' as a way of calming yourself down in stressful situations.

This also works very well if you want to get to sleep. If you combine it with a visualisation of a peaceful scene it can be an enjoyable way of drifting off to sleep. Remember, relaxation and visualisation are acquired skills; so the more you practice them the easier they become. You can use your relaxation skills tape to help you relax whenever you want.

Nightly rituals

Nightly rituals, whatever they are, can also send a strong message to your unconscious that you are ready for sleep. Examples include listening to soothing music, having a bath or reading a novel in bed.

The above is certainly not an exhaustive list, but the main message is that you find, through trial and error, what works for you. And remember, we all need different amounts of sleep, so don't worry if you are not sleeping as much as your partner. They may need more than you do.

Thinking

Live in the Present

Live in the here and now instead of the past or the future. Take note of what is happening now instead of being anxious about what might happen in the future. Focus on what is happening now instead of on the situation that occurred an hour ago.

Assertiveness

Being assertive means we are able to ask for what we want from others; it means we can say no to the requests of others; it means we can express a range and depth of emotion, such as love, liking and anger, without feeling self conscious or becoming aggressive; and it means we can express personal opinions without becoming defensive. Very few people manage to be assertive all the time in all areas of their lives. Some people swing from being passive and not getting what they want to being aggressive because of the resulting build-up of frustration. It is undoubtedly true that we could all benefit from being more assertive in some areas of our lives

By being more assertive we can improve our sense of identity, our confidence and our self-esteem. A snowball effect is created: the more confident we feel, the more assertive we are and so on. By stating more clearly what our needs are, we increase the chances that these needs will be met.

People who are generally assertive are confident people who are simply happy to be themselves.

Thinking (continued)

Prevent Unwanted thoughts

Stress is frequently caused by what we think about. If you find yourself either worrying about a future event or if you can't get a bad experience out of your mind try the following.

- Firstly, write down the worries or ruminations you want to stop, this raises your awareness of them.
- Secondly, the next time you find yourself dwelling on these unwanted thoughts interrupt the thought process by shouting in your mind (or out loud if you want to) STOP!
As soon as you shout stop bring yourself back into the here and now by looking at everything around you and listening to everything around you.
- If you focus your attention on what you can see and hear in the present it is impossible to worry about the future or past at the same time.

If you persevere with this exercise for a few weeks you will find you can banish unwanted thoughts that can cause you stress.

Must you always be right?

Do other people upset you, particularly when they don't do things your way? Try co-operation instead of confrontation; its better than fighting and always being 'right'. A little give and take on both sides will reduce the strain and can surprise you by making you both feel better.

Thinking (continued)

Overcoming shyness

Shyness is a feeling of unease around people - especially with people we don't know, or with those we feel insecure with. It is very common, but it often stems from false beliefs about what others are thinking, (e.g. that they are making negative judgements about you) or negative beliefs about yourself (e.g. that you are not as good at communicating as others).

A negative result of shyness may be that others think you are uncaring or ignorant. When the real problem is that you are so focused on the difficulties of a situation that you are unable to pay sufficient attention to what people are actually trying to say.

Here are four suggestions for overcoming shyness:

1. People who are worth having as friends will judge you on the kind of person you really are, you are made up of lots of different characteristics. So try to stop thinking about what others are thinking about you.
2. Think positively. This is easier said than done, but how will you know if you don't try? Rather than expecting perfection from yourself be realistic about your own strengths and weaknesses. Life would be boring if everyone had the same opinions, if someone has a different viewpoint from you, it doesn't mean they have rejected you as a person.
3. Learn to be sociable (at your own pace) Force yourself to smile, to greet others and to carry on a conversation. Remember, asking people questions about themselves usually results in them speaking for a while.
4. Set realistic and meaningful goals for yourself. Make a list and try the easier ones first, as your confidence builds up build on your successes by doing the next one on your list.

Remember shyness affects most of us at some point in our lives, but if you are thinking negatively your predictions will automatically have a negative outcome. The reality may actually be easier than you think!

Thinking (continued)

Acceptance

If you can create an environment where genuine praise is given freely, the people within that environment will be much more able to develop themselves and live to their potential.

Too much criticism saps the desire to move forward.

There are several views on what 'too much' actually means, but research has shown that healthy, lasting relationships are likely to have a ratio of 5:1 positive:negative interaction. That means 5 positive comments to one negative comment, can you think of an example of a relationship where you manage to do this?

There are many things we have no control over, like the weather and world events, and if they are bad we accept it. There is no question of taking personal responsibility or blaming ourselves for things we have no control over. However when it comes to people and relationships we often blame ourselves or feel bad because of other people's behaviour. Try to adopt the same attitude to someone's bad behaviour as you would to the weather or anything else you have no control over. Remember the only thing we really have any control over is our own reactions to events.

Write it down

Don't bottle up your feelings. Often stress occurs out of frustration and lack of communication. Learn positive ways to express your feelings and desires to people who may be causing you stress.

If it isn't possible to express your feelings, or it doesn't seem appropriate, then there is an alternative. Put your feelings on paper in a diary. Often the simple act of 'getting it off your chest' in an appropriate manner will reduce your stress level.

This tip is supported by research. For example, a study at the University of New York found that after 70 people with either asthma or rheumatoid arthritis wrote about their most stressful experience for 20 minutes a day for 3 consecutive days, nearly half found that their physical discomforts had eased significantly (Journal of the American Medical Association, 1999).



Nutrition



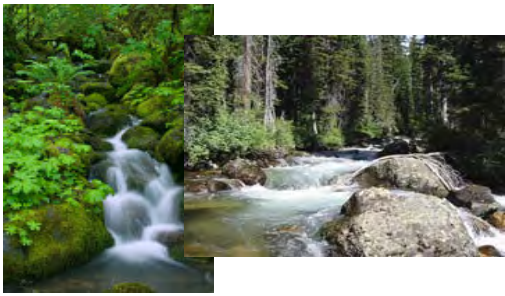
Key points to remember

- Excellent information on the NHS website : <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/Healthyeating.aspx>
- Aim for a balanced diet which includes water, carbohydrates, protein and healthy fats as well as vitamins and minerals
- Aim to eat breakfast every day, this has many benefits including giving you energy and helping concentration
- Plan your protein consumption to precede performance periods
- Carbohydrates help you to relax
- Have fresh fruit and vegetables available, you will eat it
- Try not to let yourself get thirsty
- Avoid caffeine, especially after lunchtime
- Limit sugar and salt
- Give the above a go for 2 –3 weeks and notice the positive effects on your energy, health and stress levels.

Avoid the Sugar Blues

If you find you are regularly tired and lethargic in the afternoons it may have something to do with your eating habits. If you are taking too much sugar through sweets and sugary drinks you may be spiking your blood sugar levels and suffering the 'sugar blues'. This gives you periods of extra energy followed by periods of low energy and lethargy. Try avoiding the sweets and eat more fruit in between meals, you may be surprised at how more alert you feel in the afternoons.

in equilibrium



Water



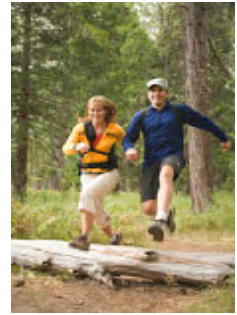
Water makes up approximately 75% of the human body and it is thought that brain tissue consists of up to 85% water. Even the smallest reduction in our body's water concentration can have far reaching effects. Dehydration reduces energy and clarity of thought. Much of the stress we experience can be dealt with better if we regularly drink 3 –4 pints of good quality water every day.

Five reasons for drinking water

1. Water is an essential nutrient that is involved in every function of the body.
2. Drinking enough water enables your body to burn fat and calories more effectively. It also rids the body of toxins and waste, improves your metabolism and increases energy levels.
3. Water must be continuously replaced because an average of 250ml is lost on a daily basis through breathing.
4. If they can, professional sportsmen and women drink water regularly when competing. They know that even slight dehydration reduces clarity of thought and performance.
5. As the beauty experts know, water is nature's best moisturiser. By drinking sufficient water, you can moisturise your skin from the inside.

in equilibrium

Exercise



There are many benefits to be gained from having some form of regular physical activity not least of which is a noticeable reduction in stress. Don't make the mistake of being put off by the belief that regular exercise has to be a chore you need self-discipline to maintain. To get real benefits you don't have to do that much, particularly if you do very little to start with.

- An individual's motivation to exercise increases when they realise that the main benefits are not physical, but are in fact mental and emotional.
- So why is regular exercise so good for stress management? The main reasons are:
 - Increases physical and mental energy, relieves tension
 - Naturally lifts your mood
 - Increases your self-esteem
 - Regular fitness boosts creativity

These ingredients make us more confident and positive about our ability to cope with demands and to rise to challenges, whereas one of the main causes of stress is a perception or belief that you can't cope.

Exercise (continued)

Why is exercise so good for managing our stress?

- Improved blood flow to the brain brings extra oxygen and sugar which boosts your concentration and alertness.
- The faster blood flow through the brain carries away more toxic materials and waste products which slow you down
- Endorphin production increases improving mood and feelings of well-being
- Remember, these benefits stay with you at all times, not just when you are exercising.
- If you are not ready to join a fitness club here are some activities you can build into you daily routine:
 - Make yourself walk more by deliberately parking further away from your work or the shops. This usually reduces the stress of finding a parking space as well
 - Instead of sitting down for a coffee break encourage a colleague to go for a walk with you
 - Join a dance club or get into the habit of doing your 'Madonna' routine in the living room
 - If you want a more regular approach think about exercising 3 times a week for 15 – 20 minutes. And forget the 'no pain, no gain' adage, unless you're into that kind of thing it simply isn't necessary.

And finally....

In the final analysis stress is a truly personal matter. Some people thrive on the constant tensions of living to work. Others need more of a balance with life outside work. It all comes down to your core values, desired pace of life, long term goals and ability to deal with pressure. Only you can really know what is best for you, however, if you think you are suffering from stress related symptoms, now is the time to deal with it.

Not acting, whether it be the organisation or the individual, is usually a mistake. Stress related issues don't tend to go away, because they are often not clear cut, the easy option is to ignore them, but this tends to exacerbate the problem. The best thing to do is try to understand what is happening and deal with it as quickly as possible. One benefit of 'stress' becoming a more recognised concept is that there are lots of resources, information and people who can help, when you do decide to deal with it. If you want to go for prevention, using many of the techniques mentioned here can help you to be more resilient and less vulnerable to stress.

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Contact Details

If you are interested in further details about what we can do for your organisation please contact us:

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We provide in-house training courses in [Stress Management](#), [Developing Resilience](#), [Mental Health Awareness](#), [Bullying & Harassment](#), [Equality & Diversity](#) and many more.

Find full details on our website.

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