

Stress Management

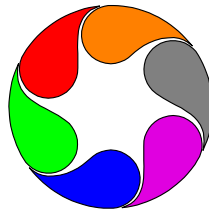
Awareness & Coping

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Stress Management - Awareness & Coping Strategies

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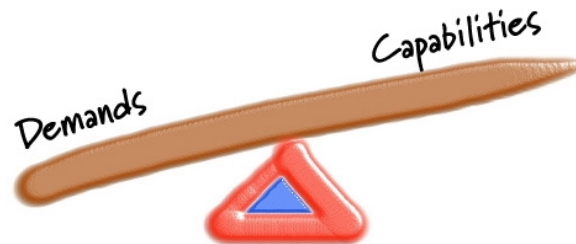
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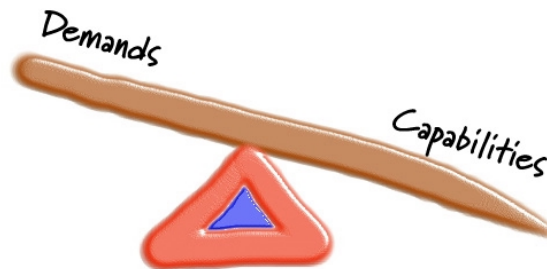
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What is Stress?

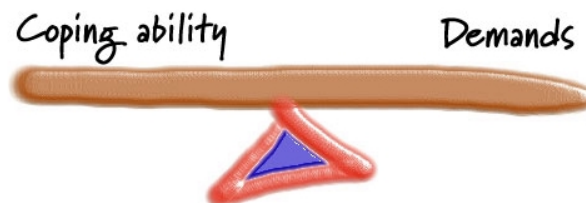
1. Stress = Pressures + Individual characteristics and social resources.
(the combination of demands *and* our unique, personal reaction to them.)
2. A state of stress exists when there is an imbalance of demands and coping abilities. When demands weigh heavier on the balance-scale we may be overstressed.



3. We may also be understressed - another form of stress. Boredom, unemployment and being overprotected are all stressful. Again there is an imbalance. It occurs when our capabilities outweigh the demands placed on us.



4. So we can have too little stress. We need it to give us a challenge; to help us feel fulfilled and useful. Stress can be good for us, so long as it does not lead to certain signs and symptoms. These are described later.
5. Stress is a part of everyone's life. No one experiences neutral stress.



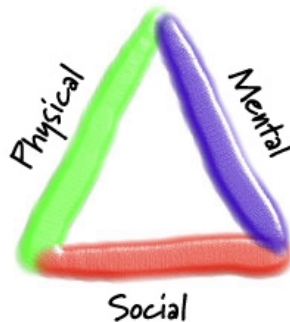
The only people not stressed are dead. Even while asleep there are demands on our bodies to work well. Our respiratory and immune systems, for example, are constantly dynamic.

6. The trick with stress is to manage it. Short of suicide we can not eliminate it. When we can get some feeling of *control* of the balance scale, adverse or negative stress begins to subside.
7. The body is designed beautifully to cope with short bursts of stress. These can be good for us. Exercise is one example. The hard work of developing a skill or finishing a big job is counter-balanced by a good dose of healthy self-pride and a satisfying sense of achievement.
8. It is the prolonged state of imbalance - with the scale tipping either way - that can hurt us. No let-up can lead to both mental and physical distress or illness. With its chain of systems linked together, our mind and body can resist the pull of pressures for a long time. But if the demands are too great, or go on for too long, our bodies and minds begin to show signs of wear and tear. If these go unheeded or unmanaged, we eventually snap at our weakest link.

Some of the body's systems where breakdown can occur include: the cardiovascular system, the respiratory system, the musculo-skeletal system, the digestive system, the nervous system, the skin and the infection-fighting system. Our genetic and personal histories are good predictors of which system will first begin to fail.

No matter which system breaks down, there is a common symptom. We feel run down or exhausted.

9. There are some early-warning signs to look for in the physical, mental and social sides of stress. They tell us that we may be starting to lose control of the balance-scale.



Physically, one sign is an increase in colds and upper respiratory tract infections (URTI). One of the first lines of defence against infection is the salivary/respiratory system. Its anti-infection agents are used up when the

body is in constant state of stress. We then become more prone to viruses and bacterial infections.

Early *psychological* signs of unrelieved stress are an increase in irritability and nervousness. We overreact to things that we normally handle more easily.

The first *social* sign is withdrawal from people, work and the things that usually give us pleasure.

The end result of too much stress is that we may become unhealthy, unlivable and unproductive.

10. So how can we get better control of the balance scale? This crucial sense of control comes after experimenting to discover what is best for you. There are no hard and fast rules on what you should use. However, when you notice nature's warning signals and begin to feel stressed, you will need to aim for one thing - ***relaxation*** - physical and mental.

You can experience this by applying any or all of the **3A's** of good stress management:

Alter: Change the external conditions or demands that produce stress e.g. reducing excessive workloads or commitments; regular breaks away from places associated with high stress. Changing the environment is usually the most efficient way of changing feelings.

Avoid: Minimise the time you spend on people or situations that you find stressful. Avoidance is fine so long as you meet your responsibilities. If you can't "alter" or "avoid" (often the best options) then ...

Adapt: Use self-protection strategies that improve your physical and mental resistance to negative stress e.g. regularly engaging in relaxation and related pursuits; learning more realistic ways of thinking; acting assertively - saying "no" and asking for and negotiating changes to demands; maintaining good eating, exercising and sleeping habits to strengthen or regenerate coping power.

Selye's Three-stage Model of Stress

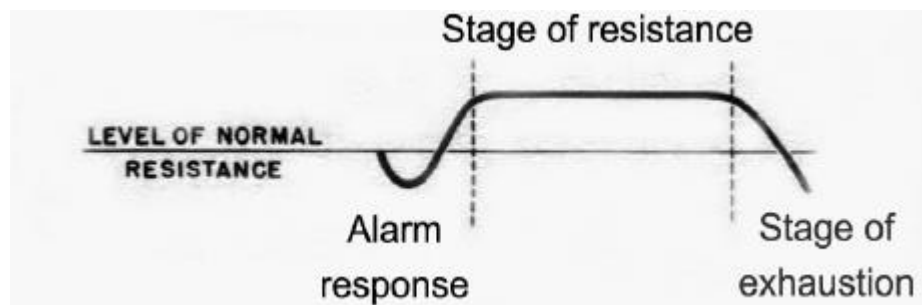
Hans Selye (pronounced "Sel-yee-ay") is regarded as the father of the modern concept of stress. He popularised the word. Selye spent most of his life in laboratory and clinical research into the physical aspects of resistance and adaptation to demands. His life's work began when, as an Austro-Hungarian medical student in the 1920's, he noticed some striking similarities in his patients as they experienced a variety of illnesses. This set him off on a lifelong quest to discover the common physiological processes involved in "just being sick" and, before too long into his research, other experiences of stress.

Selye found that our bodies react to stress with a recognisable pattern of responses. There can be up to three phases that our resistance levels go through when we are exposed to a stressor. The first is the ***alarm phase***. The body's resistance to physical damage drops for a short-time. This is so our bodies can prepare to cope with the stressor by using up available energy and normally protective stress hormones. Temporarily some of our defences against physical damage drop so that our blood pressure increases, blood-sugar rises, muscle tension increases, we breathe faster and deeper and we get a surge of adrenaline-like substances to give us extra physical capabilities should we need them.

If the stressor persists, (we can't fight or flee from it) our level of resistance increases beyond normal, relaxed levels. Our bodies start to run in higher gear. High levels of stress hormones continue to help us cope with the stressor. This is appropriately called the ***resistance phase***. If there is no relief the body can continue for days, weeks, even years until either the stressor is suddenly removed or because it is very energy-consuming our body collapses often with more dangerous and extreme physical reactions. They are the same as in the alarm phase only more intense and more relentless. It is here in this third or ***exhaustion phase*** that our health suffers or even death can occur. Our level of resistance to physical disorder, disease and psychological pressure is at its lowest. It is characterised by feelings of lethargy - an absence of energy and bodily resources to cope. The most likely physical and psychological signs and symptoms are the constitutional weak links discoverable in our personal histories and genetic inheritances.

A common example of the third phase response is the high incidence of death in the first year or so of retirement for those not prepared for it and who have suddenly ended 40 years in a stressful, demanding job without much relaxation. Another example is the weekend headache, or the high incidence of illness during our holidays or the baffling feeling of anxiety or depression, not so much during our experience of a stressful period in our lives, but more so later when the pressure is off. Selye's research explains this delayed reaction in terms of major shifts in the body's hormonal balance during the "pay-back" phase of stress. (Clinical experience suggests that after a severe stress such as a major grief, it can take 3 months to hit the "pits" and up to another 3 months before the most intense reactions pass.)

His research shows however that the fitter we are, the better our eating and drinking habits, if we do not smoke and if we are able to listen to our bodies and get periodic relief from otherwise continuing, relentless stress, the less likely we will suffer the ill effects of the exhaustion. The main lesson we learn from his work is that high levels of stress hormones are meant to be released only briefly. If they continue without enough time to recharge then our resistance is severely lessened.



Three Phases of the Stress Response. Resistance to stress (the middle stage) can last a few minutes, hours, days, weeks, months or even years. It continues until we reach a point of 'release', when the distressing experiences ends, or 'collapse' as bodily systems respond to the effects of wear and tear. The longer the resistance phase goes on without any relief, the more severe or lengthy may be the eventual exhaustion stage.

Illustration adapted from H. Selye (1976) "The Stress of Life" (Revised edition), McGraw-Hill.
Text in paragraphs 2-4 adapted from B. Montgomery (1982) "Coping with Stress", Pitman.
Further reading: Selye's autobiography – H. Selye (1979) "The Stress of My Life", Van Nostrand Reinhold.

10 Warning Signs of Rising Stress

- 💣 Irritability
- 💣 Fatigue, even after a full night's rest
- 💣 Impaired concentration
- 💣 Inability to perform as well as previously
- 💣 Sleeplessness, especially early waking
- 💣 Loss of enthusiasm and confidence
- 💣 Increasingly cynical outlook
- 💣 Aches and pains, in the head, jaw, neck, shoulders and lower back
- 💣 Loss of appetite or a desire to binge on sugary treats
- 💣 Low sex drive

Are You Having Stress Problems? Some pencil and paper stress tests.

Stress is the normal interaction between your coping skills on the one hand, and the demands of your environment on the other. It's a normal part of being alive and not necessarily a problem. It becomes a problem when your coping skills are inadequate for the demands in your life. So stress problems can reflect many issues: too many current hassles, not enough to do, gaps in your living skills. In that way, your stress level is a good index of how you are generally functioning. Too much stress can manifest itself in any one of many bad feelings - anxiety, tension, depression, anger, frustration - or in chronic ill health or insomnia, or in difficulty in coping with routine tasks. To get an idea of your stress level, complete the test below.

The scoring instructions are in the Directions. How do you rate? This test, part of one designed by Dr Charles Spielberger, is a good, quick, written measure of your general level of stress. The percentile ranks are a way of comparing yourself with the rest of the population. If you scored in the 75th percentile, then you generally have more stress than 75 per cent of men or women. If you scored between the 75th and 95th percentiles, you are in the top quarter, but not the top five per cent, for stress. We find a reasonable rule of thumb is to take any score on the 50th or higher percentile as suggesting you have a problem with stress that deserves some attention. As we said above, stress problems can result from many sources and this test won't tell you the specific causes of your stress.

GENERAL STRESS EVALUATION SCALE

Directions: Read each statement and then circle the appropriate number that indicates how you generally feel. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any one statement, but give the answer which seems to describe how you generally feel. Add up the eight numbers you have circled to obtain your score.

	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
I feel nervous and restless	1	2	3	4
I feel satisfied with myself	4	3	2	1
I feel that difficulties are piling up so that I cannot overcome them	1	2	3	4
I feel like a failure	1	2	3	4
I have disturbing thoughts	1	2	3	4
I lack self-confidence	1	2	3	4
I feel secure	4	3	2	1
I worry too much over something that really does not matter	1	2	3	4

General stress score = _____

Percentage ranks for general stress scores

Percent	Males	Females
95	23	25
75	18	20
50	15	16
25	13	13
5	10	10

Assessing Your Workplace Stress

This questionnaire allows you to compare your current levels of stress with the average for your occupation. Repeat it every few months or at any time when there are significant changes in your working situation.

Answer the following fifteen questions by choosing one of the responses given and scoring accordingly.

<i>Response</i>	<i>Score</i>
Does not apply	0
Never	1
Rarely	2
Sometimes	3
Rather often	4
Almost all the time	5

How frequently do you:

1. Find yourself without the authority to carry out all the responsibilities placed on you?	___
2. Have difficulty getting hold of the facts and figures needed to do your job efficiently?	___
3. Feel uncertain about the scope and responsibilities of your job?	___
4. Have such a heavy workload that it is impossible to complete all the tasks demanded of you during a normal working day?	___
5. Find yourself unable to satisfy the conflicting demands of the various people in your life?	___
6. Not really know what your supervisor or immediate superior thinks about you or how your performance is being evaluated?	___
7. Worry about the decisions you make that affect the lives of those working with you?	___
8. Fail to influence your superior's decisions or actions even though these affect you?	___
9. Find the demands of your job interfering with your personal and family life?	___
10. Find that your job requires you to do things against your better judgement?	___
11. Feel uncertain as to what is expected of you by your colleagues or superiors?	___

12. Find that the volume of your work makes it impossible to do the tasks as well as you would like?	_____
13. Consider yourself insufficiently qualified to cope with the demands of your job?	_____
14. Feel that you are not well-liked or accepted by those with whom you work?	_____
15. Feel unclear about which opportunities for promotion or advancement exist within your job?	_____

Add up your score

Next, note how many questions were answered 'Does not apply'. Since these have no relevance you remove them from the final calculation by subtracting the number of zero-questions from the total number of questions asked. Suppose you gave six questions a zero score because they do not apply. Then you would have nine relevant questions.

Now divide your total score by the number of relevant questions and compare this figure with the average for your particular occupation in the Stress Chart below.

Two examples will help make the method clear.

Example 1 Suppose your total score is 59. Three of the fifteen questions received a zero score because they did not apply. This leaves twelve relevant questions.

Your stress score is calculated by dividing 59 by 12 which gives 4.9. This indicates a high stress level for all occupations.

Example 2 Your score is 18 and you replied 'Does not apply' to two out of fifteen questions, so thirteen were relevant. Dividing 18 by 13 gives 1.4, a score indicating low stress for all occupations.

STRESS CHART

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Stress Levels</i>		
	Low Stress	Moderate Stress	High Stress
Professional, technical	2	2.5	3.5+
Managerial	1.8	2.3	3.3+
Clerical, sales	1.8	2.3	3.3+
Craftsmen, foremen	1.7	2.2	3.2+
Semi-skilled/ unskilled	1.5	2	3.0+

Even if your stress score was on the high side, there is no need to worry. The procedures to be described will help you reduce your over-all stress level fairly swiftly. If your score showed no current workplace stress problems, it would be sensible to repeat this assessment every few months to check that changing circumstances have not increased your stress.

How to be happier though hassled

Amongst the most highly prized goals in life is happiness. Most of us believe its achievement is largely accidental - that it depends so much on our income, physical health, job satisfaction and status, satisfying family relationships and other factors outside ourselves that most of us have little realistic chance of dramatically changing.

Fortunately though there do appear to be some things that improve happiness and our stress-coping style despite the economic or social situation in which we find ourselves. These are things anyone, in any situation, can do to increase satisfaction with life.

Psychologists have found specific behaviours and attitudes to be common in the personalities and lifestyles of happy people. It has been shown in one major experiment* that if you actively practice even some of the items below, chances are that your level of stress should decrease noticeably. Remarkably, the same experiment showed that just giving people this information on personal happiness, even when not applied rigorously, had positive effects for about 40% of people. This may have been because it re-affirmed and encouraged some of their existing abilities.

According to this study, if you wish to cope better with stress and be happier you need to:

1. Spend more time socialising. Especially you should increase quality time with family and friends. This is special time together away from everyday pressures and responsibilities.
2. Develop an outgoing, social personality. Extraverted behaviour is a major coping asset.
3. Live a more active life.
4. Lower expectations and aspirations.
5. Develop a positive, optimistic thinking pattern. This depends largely on your ability to minimise worry.

* (Fordyce, 1977)

6. Get better organised and plan things out.
7. Eliminate negative influences. Again learning to control worry is important.
8. Become more present-moment oriented.
9. Value happiness.

Other studies ** report overlapping and some additional factors in happy copers. They include:

- Ability to organise time. They see time as filled and planned, they are punctual and efficient and do not postpone things.
- Possess reasonable social skills. For example: warm, friendly, candid and assertive; good conversational skills: high in 'rewardingness' to others i.e. rarely play destructive 'games' designed to put others down but instead support and compliment more.
- Look for solutions to problems and have social supports to help solve them.
- Involvement in goal-directed projects (with most goals not too distant) that feel worthwhile, will benefit others or achieve something. Goals may relate to work, leisure, family or friendships.
- Tend not to blame themselves for failure when depressing and other stressful events occur. They see bad times as short-term. They are high on 'internal control' - they believe they have a lot of choice in how they respond to bad events and that these are largely under their control, rather than due to other people, fate or bad luck.
- Capable of taking things as they come; are flexible realistic thinkers largely free of distorted beliefs; who accept themselves and have resolved inner conflicts; and who do not demand (vs. want, wish or prefer) that truly unchangeable personal and external reality be different.
- Work and/or leisure have more meaning and intrinsic satisfaction for them – they get some sense of achievement or success in completing tasks.

** (Argyle, 1987)

Coping with Stress: Physical Strategies

Coping With Stress - Physical Strategies

1. Learn to physically relax

Progressive muscle relaxation

- after 5-6 weeks practice can become deeply relaxed by just saying a single word or phrase to yourself e.g. "relax" or "calm body, calm mind"
- requires skilled teacher and tape or CD for initial home practice
- little effect without practice
- keep up practice occasionally to stay efficient

"Instant relaxation"

Instruct self to relax inside 60 seconds.

Pretend for minute that you are rag doll as you sit in a comfortable chair. Let go tension from all the muscles that are not needed to keep you upright.

2. Exercise to increase your physical capacity to endure stress.

See earlier handout on "Selye's Three Stage Model of Stress". One thing that his research found was that the fitter you are the longer you can cope with the physical effects of stress.

Regular aerobic exercise (anything that gets you puffing at least a little – such as brisk walking) is one of the best forms of exercise. 30 minutes most days of the week is generally recommended.

3. Large muscle activity

Engaging in large muscle activity is perhaps the fastest, easiest, most natural way to lower emotional or stress hormones (e.g. noradrenaline) that cause rise in blood pressure, acceleration of the heart, increased clotting effect in blood, partial muscle contraction, raised sugar and blood-fat levels. All these must be "burnt off" as when we engage in the "fight-flight" reaction.

If not the body stays keyed-up and becomes damaged with unrelieved "overrevving"; we stay feeling bad as well.

Large muscle activity reverses all these dangerous physical and emotional changes. By moving our muscles we use up fuel in the blood, lower blood pressure and generally return our bodies back to their natural, relaxed state. We then feel less extreme emotion - anger, anxiety, etc. So physically and emotionally, we feel better very quickly.

Four methods of dealing with these are:

1. Walking
2. Exercises/gym activities
3. Stretching
4. Isometrics

4. Breathing Techniques

The "Count 6" method. This has been used by stage actors before performing for centuries. It stops "stage fright" - the panic that might cause them to forget or mess up their lines. Slowly count 6 upon inhalation and exhalation of a deep breath. Use at least 3 or 4 times. Practice in calmer moments makes it easier to apply under stress. Apply it before stress rises to too high a level. Maintain steady breathing thereafter.

The relaxing sigh. Simply let out a big sigh after inhaling. Repeat 8 to 12 times.

5. Stress-protective diet

A diet of the wrong food combinations can have effects on the body which are similar to those of unrelenting stress, lack of rest and inadequate physical activity. In other words a bad diet can mimic the physical symptoms of adverse stress.

As well what you eat while under excessive stress can make things worse and unfortunately we are most likely to eat the wrong foods when under stress.

The problem foods are those that raise the level of acid wastes. They can cause various symptoms and conditions of ill-health.

A typical stress-producing diet includes numerous cups of coffee and tea, a quick sandwich, doughnut or piece of cake (made with white flour and sugar), a bar of chocolate promising a quick lift of energy (another 'sugar-shot'), alcohol or smoking cigarettes. These all add to the danger of over-acidity and to loss of vitamins and minerals essential for body resistance. Similar results follow from excessive consumption of animal proteins (e.g. fatty meat.)

To reverse these effects it can help to eat food rich in alkaline-forming minerals (such as calcium, potassium, magnesium, sodium and iron), oxygen, vitamins and fibre.

Some suggestions:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Protein-containing plant foods (almonds, cashews, soya bean products, avocados and egg-plants). Yoghurt and cottage cheese are also excellent sources of protein.
- Mineral-rich sesame, sunflower and pumpkin seeds and various kinds of sprouts.
- Whole-grain products and cereals. Note however that their mineral composition is probably spoilt by the use of fertilisers such as acid-producing phosphates.

You do not have to become a vegetarian and cut out all animal products nor all fats (the body needs some).

However, a diet which can counteract the effects of stress should consist mainly of plant foods such as those mentioned.

Coping with Stress: Mental Strategies

Effects of Perception on Stress

'Fill in the blanks' exercise. What thoughts could result in the non-stressful outcomes?

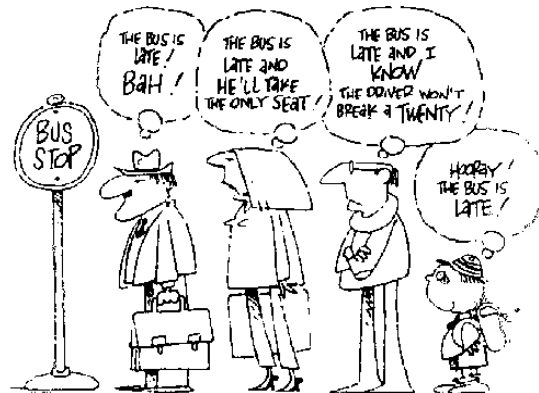
Potential Stress	Stress-inducing perception	Non-stressful Perception
Morning ...Sleeps in. Awake at 8 a.m. instead of 7 a.m.	<p>THOUGHTS: How could I? I can't be late again! The boss will be furious! I know this will be a terrible day,</p> <p>ACTION: Gulps coffee, skips breakfast, yells at wife, breaks shoelace getting dressed in a rush.</p> <p>RESULT: Leaves home anxious, worried & hungry.</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>ACTION: Phones office. Has a late breakfast.</p> <p>RESULT: Leaves home calm and relaxed.</p>
Caught behind slow drier	<p>THOUGHTS: What a hopeless inconsiderate driver - an idiot.</p> <p>ACTION: Flashes lights, honks, curses,bangs on dash. Finally passes, dangerously.</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>ACTION: Brief relaxation e.g. isometrics, deep muscle relaxation.</p>
Manager complains about quality of work and asks for improvement in performance from department	<p>THOUGHTS: That self-righteous creep! He should look at his own performance! He has no right to expect more from me.</p> <p>FEELINGS: Anger, blame.</p> <p>ACTION: Angrily yell at boss, subordinates, wife, kids, get drunk, plan revenge.</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>FEELINGS: Concern, disappointment.</p> <p>ACTION: Calmly talk to get details, talk to subordinates, plan ways to change.</p>
Mid-day ... errors and behind on deadlines and large pile-up of paperwork.	<p>THOUGHTS: That's the last straw. I'll have to have this whole report re-done. I'll have to stay and work late.</p> <p>ACTION: Skips lunch. Has a coffee at desk. Spills coffee over important papers.</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>ACTION: Eats a light lunch and has short walk in the park.</p>
Evening ... about to go to bed.	<p>THOUGHTS: What a life! It should be better than this. It's not worth it. I'll never amount to anything!</p> <p>STRESS LEVEL: High</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>STRESS LEVEL: Low</p>

Effects of Perception on Stress

Exercise from previous page. Suggested thoughts resulting in non-stressful outcomes.

Potential Stress	Stress-inducing perception	Non-stressful Perception
Morning ...Sleeps in. Awake at 8 a.m. instead of 7 a.m.	THOUGHTS: How could I? I can't be late again! The boss will be furious! I know this will be a terrible day, ACTION: Gulps coffee, skips breakfast, yells at wife, breaks shoelace getting dressed in a rush. RESULT: Leaves home anxious, worried & hungry.	THOUGHTS: I must have needed the extra sleep. I'd better let the office know I'll be late. ACTION: Phones office. Has a late breakfast. RESULT: Leaves home calm and relaxed.
Caught behind slow drier	THOUGHTS: What a hopeless inconsiderate driver - an idiot. ACTION: Flashes lights, honks, curses,bangs on dash. Finally passes, dangerously.	THOUGHTS: This is a good opportunity to practice relaxation. ACTION: Brief relaxation e.g. isometrics, deep muscle relaxation.
Manager complains about quality of work and asks for improvement in performance from department	THOUGHTS: That self-righteous creep! He should look at his own performance! He has no right to expect more from me. FEELINGS: Anger, blame. ACTION: Angrily yell at boss, subordinates, wife, kids, get drunk, plan revenge.	THOUGHTS: It certainly is disappointing to get complaints like this one. I'd better get the details to see what I can do. FEELINGS: Concern, disappointment. ACTION: Calmly talk to get details, talk to subordinates, plan ways to change.
Mid-day ... errors and behind on deadlines and large pile-up of paperwork.	THOUGHTS: That's the last straw. I'll have to have this whole report re-done. I'll have to stay and work late. ACTION: Skips lunch. Has a coffee at desk. Spills coffee over important papers.	THOUGHTS: I'll be in better shape for this if I take a break. I'll have a walk and some time out of the office. ACTION: Eats a light lunch and has short walk in the park.
Evening ... about to go to bed.	THOUGHTS: What a life! It should be better than this. It's not worth it. I'll never amount to anything! STRESS LEVEL: High	THOUGHTS: A reasonable day. Glad I was able to sort out the problem with the boss. Felt really effective this afternoon. STRESS LEVEL: Low

A Chain Reaction Model of Stress



Self-talk (what we tell ourselves about an event) is an important link in the chain of the stress response. This model shows how belief becomes biology.

Event (being fired, driver cutting in front of you, criticism, losing something.)



Certain **perceptions or self-talk** - "This is a very dangerous situation" or "I might look silly if I make a mistake" or "Things should be how I would like them to be and it is awful, horrible when they are not."



Emotional reactions (e.g. anxiety, worry, alarm, anger.)



Physical changes (e.g. respiratory, hormonal, muscular, cardiovascular changes.)



Behavioural reactions (impatience, irritability, avoiding responsibilities, getting loud and aggressive, becoming shy and withdrawn.)



Stress-related Disorder if emotional and physical reactions are very intense, long-term without much relief. (e.g. panic attacks, chronic headaches, cardiovascular problems, digestive problems, insomnia, reactive depression, "burn-out" etc.)

Often, though not always, we can do little to change or prevent stressful events. What we do have control over though is *how we define those events* - what we **specifically** tell ourselves about them.

Over time these specific thoughts may grow into certain **thinking styles**. These are habitual ways of interpreting events, such as overgeneralising. "Well I messed that up. I shouldn't make mistakes like that. It just proves what a total failure I am!"

Each reindoctrination with faulty thinking slowly builds our **core beliefs** that define ourselves e.g. "I am a failure."

To re-build them with more realistic beliefs we need to challenge and dispute our faulty reasoning.

Compare the following:

"I am a failure because I have made many big mistakes in my life."

versus

"I'm a human being, therefore fallible. I make mistakes in my life - some of them big ones! But that just makes me like everyone else."

Where's the evidence for the first conclusion? The second – an example of good, realistic thinking - is more in tune with the reality of human life.

Cognitive Restructuring

Changing Your Mental Attitude Towards Stressors



Cognitive restructuring is a two part process by which we:

1. become **aware** of our unrealistic thinking patterns which lead to feelings of stress and self-defeating behaviour and
2. **change** these thought processes to more productive ones.

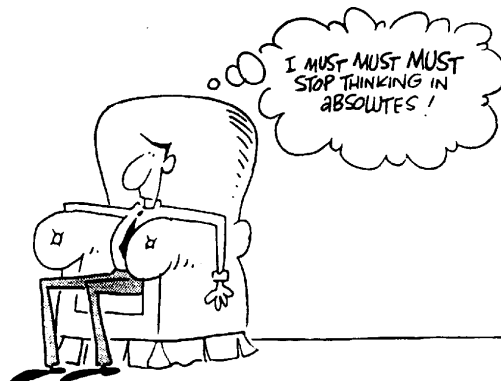
The assumption here is that it is not what I actually *experience* but *what I tell myself about that experience* just before, during or after it. This determines to a large degree how I will feel and act in relation to it. Put six people through the same stressful situation and you'll get six different reactions. They have their own unique interpretations that relate to their experiences and how they define the situation.

The aim of cognitive restructuring is first to recognise faulty self talk. Often it may have become so rapid over the years that we may not even notice it as complete sentences. All we may perceive is a distressing feeling or an image born of some half-conscious self-talk. When our thinking is unrealistic, our distress intensifies. High levels of distress can, in turn, narrow our perspectives. So an initial step is to check for the nature of the thinking that underlies our stressful responses. Ask: "Am I 'shoulding' or 'catastrophising' myself into distress?"

Second is to practise ways of coping with any self-defeating statements. The aim is to get a more realistic, less exaggerated view of ourselves, others and our situations. This usually means giving ourselves a challenge. "Where is it written in purple letters across the sky that I should ...?" "Will it really be terrible, awful or unbearably catastrophic if things don't turn out the way I want/demand?" "This is what I prefer... but hell if it doesn't happen, probably at worst it'll be unpleasant or a pain in the rear but 'unpleasant' I can stand!" Less extreme internal language means less extreme reactions.

Some **styles of thinking** that make us more vulnerable to distress include:

1. Making irrational, absolutist assumptions about the world and its events.
"Everybody must like and approve of me all the time." "I must never fail at anything!"
2. Drawing conclusions when evidence is lacking or even contradictory.
"I see a youth walking the street at night and assume he is up to no good!"
3. Exaggerating the meaning of an event.
" If I am late for work one more time I just know I will be fired."
4. Disregarding important aspects of a situation.
Not hearing that I have been praised by my colleague for the way I handled a situation or my creativity on our project; only recalling the bit about how I overspent on my budget.
5. Oversimplifying events as right/wrong or good/ bad instead of seeing the big picture or the subtleties in life - the shades of grey.
"They are either for me or against me."
6. Overgeneralising from a single event.
The new worker on the job neglects to say 'good morning' so I tell myself she is stuck-up.
7. Specific self-defeating self statements.
"I'm gonna screw this up." "I can't stand it!" when in fact your track record has been pretty good or that you have coped with far worse.



Some **techniques** to try instead:

1. Substitute reality for imagination. Argue with yourself. "I can handle this." "Just because he's frowning doesn't mean he is going to get angry." "I can't make everyone like me." Disputing beliefs on paper is more effective. See pages 32 - 34.
2. If disputing seems too lengthy and difficult under pressure, collect and recall some powerful stock phrases that you believe to be true. "Shit happens!" "Bad things happen to good people." "Sometimes the world is an unfair, cruel and nasty place." "Should ...should ... should. Shouldhood is shithood!" See pages 35-36.
3. Stop persistent disturbing thoughts by silently shouting "STOP!" to yourself and following it with more realistic or self-affirming thoughts. See the section on managing worry.
4. Relabel your feeling so that it can be used more creatively. From "I'm so anxious I can't think." to "This anxiety can be an ally: a cue to cope ... to use my stress management techniques."
5. Combine more rational thinking with calming physical strategies. When you become angry or anxious, remind yourself to reduce the volume and pace of your speech or to breathe slowly and steadily.

Common Mistakes in Thinking

Listed below are common *styles* of thinking - as opposed to specific thoughts listed on the following pages - that can get us into emotional trouble. Recognising the particular thinking traps that you are more likely to fall into can give you advance warning of when you are more likely to be distressed.

Overgeneralising

This involves drawing a general conclusion on the basis of only one incident. You are telling yourself that, if something was true in one case it will apply to any case that is remotely similar. In fact life is rarely that simple.

Black and white thinking

This means to see things as being only one extreme or the other such as telling yourself a friendship must be very good, otherwise it is very bad. In the real world there are many shades or grey.

'Who needs evidence?'

This mistake involves drawing a conclusion without any real evidence to support it, or in the face of contradictory evidence. For example, saying no one likes you when you could not possibly have asked everybody, or even do have some friends. Ask yourself, "What is the real world evidence to support my conclusions in this self-talk?".

Looking at the world through deep blue glasses

This means focusing on what is wrong and blowing it up out of all proportion - your mistakes, your failures, your problems - and ignoring or belittling anything that's right - your successes, good times and achievements. Looking at the world through rose-coloured glasses can be misleading too. Stop distorting the world in either direction.

Imagining the worst

This is a special case or exaggeration of looking through the world through deep blue glasses, but it is so common that it deserves a mention of its own:

imagining the worst means assuming the worst possible outcome for any event, usually so exaggerated that it's really improbable, if not impossible.

Taking things personally

This means blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong, even when you may only be partly or not at all responsible, like blaming only yourself for problems in your marriage (we'll bet your spouse contributes to them too). If you really run the whole universe, please tell us how. Taking things personally can also mean assuming that everybody notices every mistake you make, that you are the centre of everybody's (disapproving) attention. You will usually find most people are too busy worrying about their own problems even to notice you.

A note about depression and thinking styles

People who are more likely to remain depressed for significantly longer than others tend to engage in three particular thinking styles.

The more chronically depressed see serious adversity as “personal, permanent, pervasive” – the so-called cognitive triad or 3P's of depression. They are down on themselves, the future and the world. In other words, they believe it is somehow their fault that the bad thing happened; they believe that when life hits them with a major blow they believe that the effect is not temporary - that it will probably not pass; and they think every aspect of their life - their whole world - will be affected by this event.

On the other hand, people who recover relatively quickly from a depressing event see it as temporary, having a well-defined impact on *part* on their life not the whole, and they are wise enough to realise that significant forces beyond themselves generally operate more powerfully to influence human misfortune. In other words, they believe that are not to blame when things go badly wrong.

Remaining aware of these depression thinking traps can help you do a psychological side-step before you fall into them. This will allow you to minimise the time you remain depressed after, say, a major loss.

Stress and Your Thinking

Apart from drugs and alcohol the most powerful way of lowering your stress levels is to change your thinking from self talk that is negative, irrational or that emphasises not coping to self talk that is more rational, positive and which emphasises constructive coping. Thinking more rationally is an important stress management procedure. Humans do their most important relaxation in their minds. (The corollary is equally true, self talk is a prime cause of stress related problems.)

Ten Popular Irrational Beliefs

1. I must be loved, or at least liked, and approved by every significant person I meet.
2. I must be completely competent, make no mistakes, and achieve in every possible way, if I am to be worthwhile.
3. Some people are bad, wicked, or evil and they should be blamed and punished for this.
4. It is dreadful, nearly the end of the world, when things are not how I would like them to be.
5. Human unhappiness, including mine, is caused by factors outside of my control, so little can be done about it.
6. If something might be dangerous, difficult, unpleasant or frightening I should worry about it a great deal.
7. It is easier to put off something difficult or unpleasant than it is to face up to it.
8. I need someone stronger than myself to depend on.
9. My problems were caused by events in my past and that is why I have my problems now.
10. I should be very upset by other people's problems and difficulties.

Common themes: Exaggeration of reasonable ideas.

Exaggeration of importance of things and consequences of events.

Setting too high goals and standards.

Ten Rational Ideas

(Numbers correspond with previous page.)

1. I want to be loved or liked and approved by some of the people in my life and I know I may feel disappointed or lonely when that does not happen, but I can cope with those feelings, and I can take constructive steps to make and keep better relationships.
2. I want to do some thing well most of the time, but like everyone else, I will occasionally fail or make a mlstake. Then I may feel bad, but I can handle that, and I can take constructive steps to do better next time.
3. It is sad that most of us do some bad things from time to time, and some people do a lot of bad things, but making myself upset won't change that.
4. It is disappointing, sometimes very disappointing when things are not how I would like them to be, but I can cope with that. Usually I can take constructive steps to make things more how I would like them to be, but if I can't it does not help to exaggerate my disappointment.
5. My problem(s) may be influenced by factors outside of me or my control, but my thoughts and actions also influence my problem(s), and they are under my control.
6. Worrying about something that might go wrong won't stop it from happening it just makes me unhappy now. I can take constructive steps to prepare for possible problems, and that's as much as anyone can do. So I won't dwell on the future now.
7. Facing difficult situations or problems may make me feel bad at the time, but I can cope with that. Putting off problems does not make them any easier - it just gives me longer to worry about them.
8. It's good to get support and assistance from others when I want it, but the only person I need to rely on is me.
9. My problem(s) may have started in some past event(s) but what keeps them going now are my thoughts and actions, and they are under my control.
10. It is sad to see other people in trouble, but I don't help them by making myself miserable; sometimes I can take constructive steps to help them.

Commonalities: Accept reasonable bad feelings.

Set reasonable goals and standards.

Try to look at the world more realistically.

Doing something constructive (changing stressors.)

You can practically apply these more rational thoughts by writing them out on a card and rehearsing them must before you go into a situation that you expect to feel bad in. Reading the card several times a day is another useful practice technique. After a while you will not need so much practice and your thinking will be more rational automatically.

Disputing exaggerated, unrealistic thoughts

Some useful leads to help challenge irrational beliefs:

1. "What evidence do I have for this thought?" "Is there an alternative way of looking at the situation?"
2. "How would someone else think about the situation?"
3. "Are my judgements based on how I felt rather than what I did?" (Feelings are not facts!)
4. "Am I setting myself an unrealistic or unobtainable standard? "
5. "Am I forgetting relevant facts or over-focusing on irrelevant facts?"
6. "Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms?"
7. "Am I over-estimating how responsible I am for the way things work out?"
"Am I over-estimating how much control I have over how things work out?"
8. "What if it happens?" "What would be so bad about that?"
9. "How will things be in X days/months/years time?"
10. "Am I over-estimating how likely an event is?"
11. "Am I underestimating what I can do to deal with the problem/situation?"
12. "Am I thinking in absolutes ... 'should', 'must', 'ought', 'always', 'never' ?

Daily Stress and Tension Log Example

Ratings 1 = very relaxed
10 = very distressed

Date & time	Description of situation	Initial stress rating	Stress-producing Thoughts	Rational Evaluations / Alternative Thoughts	Final stress rating	Other responses
Monday p.m.	Deadline pressure for report to be finished by 4 p.m.	6	My colleagues will be furious at me if it is not ready. I will lose face with my boss and workmates.	If I continue to upset myself like this it won't help me get the report done by 4. If I work steadily and calmly it will probably be done. Even if it is not done, I can discuss the situation with my boss. I'm not going to lose my job over this.	3	Felt calmer, more relaxed but keyed up enough to work efficiently.

Daily Stress and Tension Log

Ratings 1 = very relaxed
10 = very distressed

Date & time	Description of situation	Initial stress rating	Stress-producing Thoughts	Rational Evaluations / Alternative Thoughts	Final stress rating	Other responses

Use of Coping Self-Statements

People frequently believe that they do not have sufficient time during the course of their daily activities to practise disputation with themselves. Some have found that an effective substitute for the long-winded process of disputation is to rely on well-rehearsed coping statements which can be used quickly and briefly.

The use of powerful self-repeated statements such as 'I do not need what I want!' and 'I am a fallible individual who will often fail in important tasks!', allows people to short-circuit the longer, but more elegant, solution to emotional problems.

People can easily teach themselves rational, coping statements to replace the irrational ideas they invent. Some people prefer to write coping statements on small cards to carry with them. They become easy to remember with practice. What also makes them easy to remember is that each relates to one of the three major self-defeating attitudes: demanding, awfulising and damning.

- Demanding** that we, others and the world's condition should be, ought to be, must be a certain way and if conditions are not the way they should be
and this leads to
- 'Awfulising'** about this state of affairs
and
- Damning** ourselves, others or the world for this situation.

Once these are recognised as destructive it is a simple process to invent personal coping statements. For maximum effect it is a good idea to start with about ten and add to them if desired. The themes involved become clear very quickly. It is left to individuals to apply them.

On the following page are some typical examples of destructive self-talk and their more constructive replacements.

Destructive versus constructive self-talk:

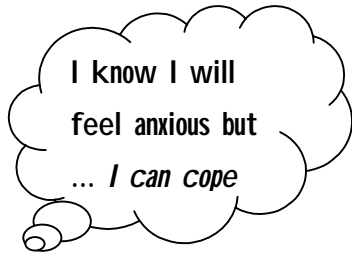
- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. It is awful | 1. It is unfortunate |
| 2. I have to/must... | 2. I had better do... |
| 3. You have to/must... | 3. You had better do... |
| 4. I am a worthless person | 4. I am a person who behaved poorly |
| 5. I can't do... | 5. I won't do... |
| 6. It is impossible to do | 6. It is difficult to do |
| 7. It/you made me angry | 7. I made myself angry |
| 8. Who am I? | 8. What do I enjoy/want? |
| 9. I am a failure | 9. I am failing at this task |
| 10. He/she is crazy | 10. He/she is behaving crazily |
| 11. I am a better person | 11. I have behaved better |
| 12. I hate myself | 12. I don't like some of my traits |
| 13. I need ... | 13. I want ... |
| 14. I am this deed | 14. I do misdeeds |
| 15. He/she is a shit | 15. He /she does shitty things ... |
| 16. I should be rewarded | 16. I have earned this reward |
| 17. I can't stand failure | 17. I don't like to fail |
| 18. He/she should have performed better | 18. I wish he/she had performed better |
| 19. I will never master this | 19. I have not mastered this yet |
| 20. I like you | 20. I like your (list traits) |

Managing Worry



One of the worst things about worry is the way it seems to completely take over a person's life. It can paralyse thinking and activity. Nobody likes to lose one's sense of control. So understandably most habitual worriers would like to be completely rid of their anxiety. They are often overwhelmed by it or they 'worry about worry', fearing that it will lead to something worse. Yet trying to quickly and totally eliminate habits of worry that go back many years is unrealistic. The trick with worry is to lower your sights and aim to *manage* it.

A combination of the following strategies will work better than relying on just one or two. The more you practice them, the stronger your sense of control over worry.



Coping with Worrying Thoughts

See the cut-out below. Keep it in your wallet or purse. Rehearse the self-statements until they become an automatic response to worry. Again, the goal is to manage rather than master worry - to accept a certain degree of anxiety after taking steps to reduce, rather than eliminate it. So, at worst, your experience of worry is difficult or unpleasant but not immobilising. (Anyone can cope with 'difficult or unpleasant'.) It is more likely though that you will experience fewer and shorter episodes of worry.



COPING WITH WORRYING THOUGHTS

Many stress-producing thoughts or images start automatically in your head but they do not keep going automatically.

You have a choice in the matter. Worry is a useless and stress-producing exercise. Nothing has ever changed as a result of worrying about it.

As soon as you catch yourself beginning to dwell unnecessarily on stressful thoughts, fantasies or pictures read the following words and follow your own instructions.

"I know I will feel anxious when I think about future bad events, but **I can cope** with feeling anxious and I don't have to exaggerate it by dwelling on those thoughts.

I can take **constructive steps** to prepare for coming events and that's as much as anyone can do. Now I will think of something else or **do something active** to fill my mind.

I can even choose to **act in some way that is in direct conflict with my worry**. That will convince me of the folly of my unrealistic fears in the most compelling way of all - by facing them. That way I will find they were not what I imagined.

I'll learn through experience that with effective thought and actions, **I can cope**."

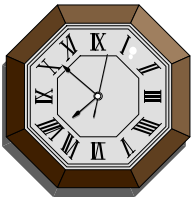


Thought-stopping

If the instructions on the cut-out don't allow you to cope, add thought-stopping. Sit down somewhere quiet and practice your intrusive thought. By the way, doing this reinforces the idea that you have control over it.

When you really have it in your head yell 'Stop!' to yourself under your breath. Then say the message on the cut-out to yourself. If you feel silly or begin to laugh – all the better. Focusing on any amusing or ironic effects of your intrusive thought provides a healthy balance.

You may have to use thought-stopping up to 3 times in as many minutes. If it continues and it is a serious source of stress for you, then seek out a suitably qualified person.



Organising worry: 'Worry-time and worry-place'

It can help to set aside a certain time each day for worrying beforehand. If you like write them down and save them on paper until your worry-time.

Divide your worry-time into two parts.

- (i) worry about problems for which you can plan constructively. Think about realistic solutions.
- (ii) worry about problems you can't solve e.g. the weather, wars, the road toll etc.

You may wish to gradually shorten your worry-time from, say, daily 10 minute periods to 5 minute, then 2 minute segments, then every other day and so on.

It can also help to set aside a special place where you will do your worrying. Don't worry in any place but that place. A bed is not a good place. It will become associated with worry and make getting to sleep difficult. Good places might be a garden shed, a walk-in cupboard, or little-used and difficult to get at corner of your yard or work place.

The effect of both these strategies is to give you control over worry by controlling the where and when of worry. Combined with other strategies that give you more control of your thoughts, you are postponing further worry until your designated worry time. If you begin to make a joke of your new habit with other people, then that's all the better.



Test your worry thinking

Worry solves nothing! A study from Columbia University has provided scientific evidence to support this common sense belief. It showed that:

- ☞ 40% of what we worry about never happens!
- ☞ 30% of problems are over and done before we start to worry about them!
- ☞ 12% of our worries are about non-existent health problems!
- ☞ 10% of our worries are actually focused on the wrong things!

This leaves just 8 out of every 100 worries worth bothering about!

"O.K. so 92 % of the time I'm dead wrong. But ... (and professional worriers usually ask this!) ... what about the other 8%?!!"

Then, as Charlie Brown would probably have suggested to Sally, do a **Worry Test**.



In no more than 60 seconds answer all 4 questions below.

1. ***How likely is it that this will happen?***

Rate this from 1 = Extremely improbable to
5 = Virtually certain.

2. ***How accurate is my information?***

Rate this from 1 = Highly doubtful to
5 = Absolutely reliable.

3. ***Are there practical steps I might take to prevent or solve this should it happen?***

Rate this from 1 = Many practical steps to
5 = No way of improving matters.

4. ***How serious are the likely consequences?***

Rate this from 1 = Not very serious to
5 = Catastrophic.

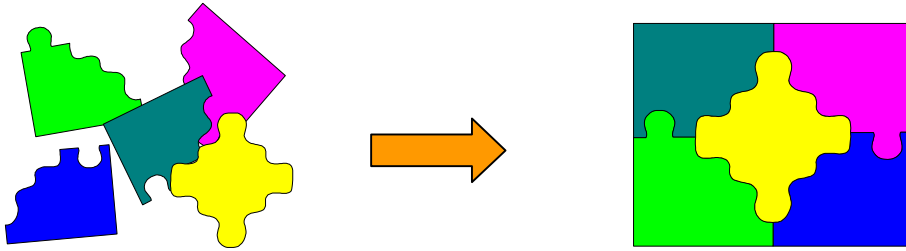
Scoring

If your score was *between 5 and 10* the worry is too trivial to waste further time on.

A score *above 16* suggests that the problem is so intractable, nothing you do is likely to improve matters, so you might as well stop worrying.

A score *between 11 and 15* justifies concern, but only as a spur to action. Take practical steps to improve the situation by:

- Finding out more about what is happening.
- Developing a strategy for avoiding or lessening the consequences.



Focus on solving the problem not on your “what if...?” thoughts and images

If the problem you are worried about is one you can do something about, conserve your emotional energies and focus them on what can be done using this step-by-step approach to problem-solving:

Step 1: What is the problem/goal?

Think about the problem/goal carefully, and ask yourself questions. Then write down exactly what the problem/goal is.

Step 2: List all possible solutions

Start 'brainstorming'. Write down all ideas, even bad ones. List the solutions *without being critical of them* at this stage.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Step 3: Assess each possible solution

Quickly go down the list of possible solutions and assess the *main* advantages and disadvantages of each one.

Step 4: Choose the "best" or most practical solution

Choose the solution that can be carried out most easily to solve (or to begin to solve) the problem.

Step 5: Plan how to carry out the best solution

List the resources needed and the major pitfalls to overcome. Practice difficult steps, make notes of information needed.

- Step 1. _____
- Step 2. _____
- Step 3. _____
- Step 4. _____

Step 6: Review progress and be pleased with any progress

Focus on achievement first. Identify what has been achieved, then what still needs to be achieved. Go through steps 1 to 6 again in the light of what has been achieved or learned.

What has been achieved?

What still needs to be done?

Once you have completed these steps either apply them or wait until you need to. Then occupy yourself with some absorbing activity.

Feelings

The way bad feelings contribute to our stress levels starts with the fact that our culture does not like people to feel bad (hurt, anxious, tearful, angry, depressed etc.)

Unfortunately there is a myth in our society that says you should never feel bad - you should always be able to control bad feelings - and that there will be terrible, unpleasant consequences of feeling bad and of letting people know how you feel.

But all normal people feel bad some of the time. If you lose someone close you should not be pressured out of feeling sad. If you miss out on something you really wanted it is O.K. to feel disappointed. If someone betrays a trust you are allowed to feel resentful.

If you allow yourself to feel bad and don't try to push it out of sight, a funny thing happens. When you face it, admit it, accept it as natural it tends to go away in time. At worst you just stay feeling bad for a while with no dire consequences occurring. Where's the problem in that?

However if you accept the myth that you should never feel bad you may take any of any of three self-defeating paths:

How Not To Handle Bad Feelings

1. Denial/bottling them up. They often explode or implode later. Displacement on to the wrong person.
2. Short-term relief (but in the long-term expensive) techniques. Includes smoking, over-drinking, overeating, irrational avoidance of situations.
3. Exaggerate the effects of bad feelings. Many people feel bad about feeling bad. One example is the way some people feel about being anxious or uptight. Because they accept the myth that you shouldn't feel bad and they recognise that their feelings are irrational then they criticise themselves for being irrational and feel bad about that as well.

By accepting irrational beliefs Numbers 2 and 4 (see 10 Popular Irrational Beliefs) they make a problem out of a problem. They then feel anxious about feeling anxious and it cannot go away because they don't accept their anxiety and let it live in peaceful co-existence with the part of them that is striving to be rational for most of the time. Instead, a war continues inside their heads without any sign of truce, keeping the anxiety alive.

Countering with rational ideas Numbers 2 and 4 will end the battle, provided it is done often and intensively enough.

How to handle bad feelings better

(Refer to your Daily Stress & Tension Logs for suggestions below.)

1. Be aware that how you think is how you feel. Your perception of an event (based on your attitudes, beliefs and experiences) determines how you feel about it.

How you feel does not depend on the event but how you think about the event. This is very handy because how you think is entirely under your control.

Recognise that the more control you perceive that you have the less distressed you will feel.

2. Get in touch with your feelings. (Hard if you've been into denying them). Diary them. For example: "Monday afternoon - felt anxious at work". Record *feelings* not thoughts.
3. Next to them write the *thoughts* you have about the situations in which you are having bad feelings. Thought example: "My colleagues will be furious at me if I don't measure up to their standards".
4. Test your self-talk. What evidence is there about the situation and your thoughts on it? How realistic is your thinking? What is a more rational/realistic view?
5. Accept that ***you can cope*** with bad feelings.

- Give yourself permission to feel reasonably bad if the situation warrants it but recognise you will survive that.
- Use coping self-statements like:

"I expect to feel (bad) in (this situation) but *I can cope* with feeling bad. I don't have to deny my feelings but nor do I have to exaggerate them. If possible I will *do something* to make the situation better; if that's not possible I'm *not going to make myself feel any worse* than is reasonable".

6. Most highly-stressed people tend to disregard their successes and achievements and instead focus on their failures, real or imaginary. This contributes to their stress-producing thoughts. Avoid this trap by

- ☺ recognising your successes
- ☺ giving yourself a mental pat on the back

"I can do it".

"I'm handling this situation better than I used to".

"I got through it without feeling angry".

Doing this gives you more confidence for the next similar situation.

As simple as it sounds your self-confidence only consists of the value judgements you make of yourself. If you would like greater self-confidence recognise and reward your successes.

7. Prepare for troublesome situations that recur with mental rehearsal of self-statements.

Coping with Stress: Behavioural Strategies

Behaviour Patterns and Stress

Three successful types of behaviour (what people *do and say*) when under pressure that counteract most stress-producing and self-defeating behaviours:

- Assertiveness
- Levelling, listening, validating skills
- Problem-solving

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the direct, honest, open communication of your thoughts, feelings, wants and opinions. It is done without getting loud and aggressive. Your communication shows that you are sensitive to the other person's rights and that you will stand up for yours.

Assertiveness is often a more successful alternative to aggression or non-assertiveness.

Both of these have fear as their basis. Aggression involves fear of losing power or control of the situation. Non-assertiveness is founded on losing approval or fears of other's aggression.

See the following Table that compares the three styles.

Among the more common job-stress related situations are those that have to do with making and refusing requests, setting limits on the demands made of you and clearly communicating them. An exercise on this is set out below.

Steps towards assertiveness

1. Develop a set of assertive beliefs and a sense of your personal rights. See "Bill of Assertive Rights."
2. Become aware of the situations you could be more assertive in.

3. Mentally prepare yourself.
4. Inoculate yourself against anxiety with an appropriate self-statement. (e.g. "I'm not going to let old emotional buttons get pushed here. Any one is free to make requests - 'a cat can look at a king' - as the saying goes. If nothing else, I will at least know that I tried to improve the situation and handled it like a fair and reasonable person.")
5. Practice your response.
See scripted assertiveness exercise below. Mentally rehearse or role play.
6. Reward your successes.

Bill of Assertive Rights

1. The right to be treated with respect.
2. The right to have and express your own feelings and opinions.
3. The right to be listened to and taken seriously.
4. The right to set your own priorities.
5. The right to say **NO** without feeling guilty.
6. The right to ask for what you want.
7. The right to get what you pay for.
8. The right to ask for information from professionals.
9. The right to make mistakes.
10. The right to choose not to assert yourself.

These widely agreed-upon rights are part of our culture. So in a sense you are born with them. You don't have to earn them, as you do for some other rights. Of course everyone else has these rights. So they carry reciprocal responsibilities.

Assertiveness Exercises: Assertively Making Requests

You have a perfect right to make requests just as others have a perfect right to refuse your requests.

Often the simplest and often most effective way of getting someone to do something is to ask.

- make your requests clear and precise
- try to be positive and non-defensive
e.g. with courtesy
- ask the person to do something not stop
(guides action and avoids negative feelings)

Write a future request using above guidelines:

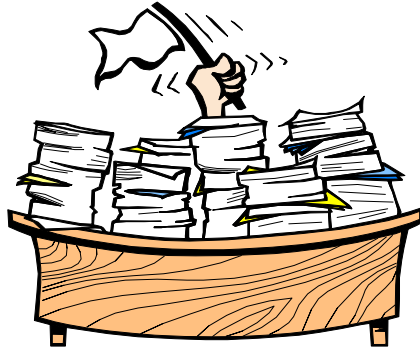
Assertively Refusing Requests

You have the right to refuse unacceptable requests without feeling guilty! This is provided that you are prepared to accept any reasonable consequences that flow from your refusal.

- Refuse unacceptable requests clearly,
non-defensively and promptly
- If you want time to think about a request say so
- Keep eye contact & speak clearly & audibly

Identify a request that you have accepted in the past but would like to have refused. Write out how to refuse it assertively:

'How I Learned to Say "No" Without Feeling Guilty'



When should you exercise the right to say "no"?

In situations where you want to say NO to a request but you feel you should say YES because you might hurt the other person's feelings, they might think less of you or you want to avoid a possible argument.

Why say no appropriately?

- Basic reason for saying NO assertively is to give you firm control of your life.
- Not saying NO assertively can lead to negative feelings (lack of self respect, anger, frustration and resentment) which can be avoided.

Who should say no?

Everyone! *if* you have the **time**
you have the **energy** and
you feel you can accept the **risk**
you accept that everyone, and that includes you, has rights

Why don't we say no appropriately?

Most people are not assertive for the following reasons:

- a. they have never been taught how to be assertive (their teachers, friends, relatives may show them how to be non-assertive or aggressive but not assertive.)
- b. they have a negative self-image: they see themselves as not very worthwhile people.
- c. fear of what others might think of them or do if they stand up for their rights.

Because of c. they develop rationalisations - reasons they give to themselves for not being assertive. But these rationalisations are just excuses or justifications that make them feel OK about not being assertive. The most common rationalisations are:

1. Fixing on a low probability event as an excuse e.g. "I won't ask her to stop smoking because she might get very angry and burn me with her cigarette." You can't guarantee this won't happen but it is a very low probability event.
2. Fixing on a higher probability event but giving it added meaning e.g. "if I stand up for my rights my friend will be very angry and that would be devastating!"

Again it might happen, *but* would it be devastating?

3. Making up rationalisations which cannot possibly be true e.g. " if I say no, she may never speak to me again and I could not survive."

How to say “no” assertively

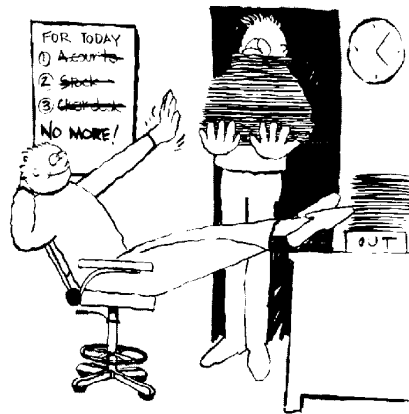
First - decide whether or not to be assertive (Use 'time, energy, risk' formula.)

If you are choosing not to assert yourself make sure it is not a rationalisation. If it is it might help to think about the worst possible outcome - is it really likely or catastrophic?

Second - Work out an answer which cares for the other persons rights but which clearly states yours e.g. "No tonight is not a good time but I'll be free to help you on Monday."

Third - say it without inappropriate emotion (e.g. anger or nervousness.)

Fourth - be prepared to negotiate assertively if the other person wants to discuss the issue.



Levelling, listening, validating skills

These three fundamental communication skills can go a long way to resolve distress.

Levelling (opposite of bottling-up.)

Listening (prevents mind-reading, interrupting, self-listening.)

Validating (acceptance and recognition of the others feelings.
Acceptance of what others say about their feelings as true. You may or may not understand why they feel the way they do but you acknowledge their right to their own feelings with a statement that validates those feelings.)

Problem-solving

Planning and taking constructive action to minimise your distress is an important stress-management procedure.

1. Define the problem
2. Brainstorm possible solutions
3. Evaluate possible consequences of your list of possibilities
4. Select a solution
5. Plan the solution
6. Implement and monitor your plan

Personal Plan

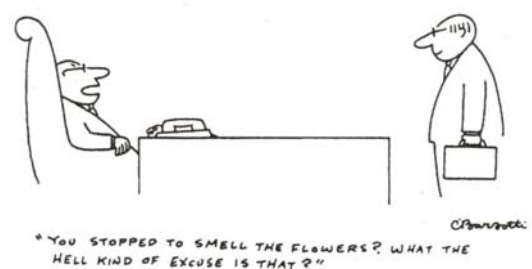
Describe a situation over the next month which may stress you:

Awareness of signs and symptoms: How might the stress affect you?

- Mental (e.g. worry, 'what if?' images)
- Physical (e.g. tension, overbreathing)
- Behavioural/Social (e.g. irritable, withdrawn)

Management: How might you apply any of the coping strategies you have learned?

- Identifying and challenging your self-talk about the situation (A-B-C-D-E model)
- Assisting your body's response to the situation with a stress-release technique (e.g. relaxation or other physical strategy)
- Things you can do or say to reduce the stress (e.g. talking it out, assertively making or refusing a request, changing the environment)



Appendix A: Isometric Relaxation



This is one of two companion outlines on "isometric" relaxation and progressive relaxation. Isometric relaxation is a quick form of relaxation and involves 'spot' relaxation without muscle contraction. Progressive relaxation requires muscles to be tensed and relaxed in a progressive manner and relaxes the body totally.

You should **master both forms of relaxation**, because the progressive muscle relaxation exercises are useful for *becoming* relaxed (**before** you confront your stress or fears) and the isometric relaxation is useful for *remaining* relaxed (**while** you confront your stress or fears).

Isometric Relaxation

Isometric relaxation exercises can be done as you experience stress or fear. Most of the exercises do not involve any obvious change in posture or movement. This is because isometric refers to exercises in which the length of the muscle remains the same. (From Greek *iso* = same or equal *metria* = measure.) Because it stays the same length, there is no obvious movement. This can be handy if you do not wish to draw attention to yourself or where it is simply not practical to use progressive relaxation.

The most common mistakes that people make with isometric exercises is putting the tension in too quickly, or putting in too much tension. These are meant to be gentle and slow exercises. The aim of the exercise is to relax you, not get you even more tense. If circumstances do not allow you to hold the tension for seven seconds, you can still benefit from putting in the tension slowly over some period of time and releasing it in the same manner.

When sitting in a public place

- Take a small breath and hold it for up to seven seconds.
- ❖ At the same time, slowly tense leg muscles by crossing your feet at the ankles and press down with the upper leg while trying to lift the lower leg.
- or*
- ❖ Pull the legs sideways in opposite directions while keeping them locked together at the ankles.
- or*
- After seven seconds, breathe out and slowly say the word "relax" to yourself.
- Let all the tension go from your muscles.
- Close your eyes.
- For the next minute, each time you breathe out, say the word "relax" to yourself and let all the tension flow out of your muscles.

Choose other parts of the body to relax, for example, the hands and arms

- Take a small breath and hold it for up to seven seconds.
- ❖ At the same time, tense hand and arm muscles by placing hands comfortably in your lap, palm against palm, and pressing down with the top hand while trying to lift the lower hand.

or

- ❖ Place hands under the sides of chair and pull into the chair.

or

- ❖ Grasp hands behind chair and try to pull them apart while simultaneously pushing them in against the back of the chair.

or

- ❖ Place hands behind the head, interlocking the fingers, and while pushing the head backward into hands try to pull hands apart.



- After seven seconds, breathe out and slowly say the word "relax" to yourself.
- Let all the tension go from your muscles.
- Close your eyes. For the next minute, each time you breathe out, say the word "relax" to yourself and let all the tension flow from your muscles.
- If circumstances permit, continue with various muscle groups.

When standing in a public place

- Take a small breath and hold it for up to seven seconds.
- ❖ At the same time, straighten legs to tense all muscles, bending the knees back almost as far as they will go.
- After seven seconds, breathe out and slowly say the word "relax" to yourself.
- Let all the tension go from your muscles.
- Close your eyes.
- For the next minute, each time you breathe out, say the word "relax" to yourself and let all the tension flow from your muscles.

Other exercises for hand and arm muscles

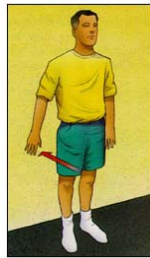
- Take a small breath and hold it for up to seven seconds.
- ❖ At the same time, cup hands together in front and try to pull them apart.

or

- ❖ Cup hands together behind and try to pull them apart.

or

- ❖ Tightly grip an immovable rail or bar and let the tension flow up the arms.
- After seven seconds, breathe out and slowly say the word "relax" to yourself.
- Let all the tension go from your muscles.
- Close your eyes.
- For the next minute, each time you breathe out, say the word "relax" to yourself and let all the tension flow from your muscles.



Further Isometric Exercises

Various muscles that can be tensed and relaxed in order to make up additional isometric exercises. You need first to decide which of your muscles tense up most readily. (If you have difficulty deciding, consider what people say to you: "Your forehead is tense"; "You're tapping your feet again"; "You're clenching your jaw.") Once you have decided on a muscle or muscle group, decide how you can voluntarily tense these muscles, and finally how you can relax them. In this way, you can design your own tailor-made set of isometric exercises.

Instructions

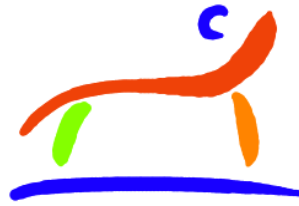
Some example exercises are given on the next page. Complete the remainder by starting with those muscles that you rate as highly tense. Write down some suggestions for putting tension in the muscle area and then suggestions for relaxing that muscle. Give the suggestions a try, but remember to tense gently and slowly.

Site of muscle tension	Manner of relaxing	Manner of tensing
Shoulders and neck	Hunching shoulders up toward the head	Letting shoulders drop and let arms hang loose
Hand tension	Make a fist	Let all fingers go loose. Place hands palm facing upward on lap

Important points about learning to relax quickly

1. Relaxing is a skill - it improves with frequent and regular practice.
2. Do the exercises immediately whenever you notice yourself becoming distressed or fearful.
3. Do not tense your muscles to the point of discomfort or hold the tension for longer than seven seconds.
4. Each of these exercises can be adapted to help in problem settings. Use them whenever you need to relax.
5. After a few weeks of using these exercises you should be able to reduce your tension, prevent yourself from becoming overly tense, and increase your self-control and confidence.

Appendix B: Progressive Relaxation



Progressive relaxation is useful for reducing physical and mental tension.

Relaxation helps people to: reduce worry and anxiety, improve sleep, and relieve physical symptoms caused by stress (e.g., headaches, stomach pains, diarrhoea or constipation).

If you follow the steps below you will be well on your way to learning how to relax. This exercise should take about 15-20 minutes. However, if you only have 5 minutes to spare, 5 minutes is certainly better than nothing!

1. Find a quiet and relaxing place

Choose a comfortable chair in a place which is free from noise and interruptions (make sure you take the phone off the hook). If a chair does not provide good support, use cushions placed against a wall. Some people prefer to do the exercises lying down, but do not use this position if you are likely to fall asleep. These relaxation exercises are not meant to put you to sleep, since you cannot learn to relax while asleep. Sleep is not the same as relaxation - consider those times when you have awakened tense.

You may need to explain to your family what you are doing so that they will not disturb you. Telling your family may also reduce any embarrassment you may feel.

2. Clear your mind

Try to clear your mind of all worries or disturbing thoughts. If these worries or thoughts drift back into your mind while you are relaxing, do not worry, just let them float gently out of your mind without reacting to them. Let your mind be clear and calm.

3. Practise the slow breathing method

Breathe in for 3 seconds and breathe out for 3 seconds, thinking the word "relax" every time you breathe out.

Let your breathing flow smoothly. Imagine the tension flowing out of your body each time you breathe out.

4. Relax your muscles

For each of the muscle groups in your body, tense the muscles for 7-10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds.

Only tense your muscles moderately (not to the point of inducing pain).

Relax your muscles in the following order:

Hands - curl hands into fists, then *relax*.

Lower arms - bend your hand down at the wrist, as though you were trying to touch the underside of your arm, then *relax*.

Upper arms - tighten your biceps by bending your arm at the elbow, then *relax*.

Shoulders - lift your shoulders up as if trying to touch your ears with them, then *relax*.

Neck - stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then to the back in a slow rolling motion, then *relax*.

Forehead and scalp - raise your eyebrows, then *relax*.

Eyes and nose - screw up your eyes and nose as if you had just smelled something bad, then *relax*.

Jaw - clench your teeth (just to tighten the muscles), then *relax*.

Tongue - press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then *relax*.

Chest - breathe in deeply to inflate your lungs, then breath out and *relax*.

Stomach - push your tummy out to tighten the muscle, then *relax*.

Upper back - pull your shoulders forward with your arms at your side, then *relax*.

Lower back - while sitting, lean your head and upper back forward, rolling your back into a smooth arc thus tensing the lower back, then *relax*.

Buttocks - tighten your buttocks, then *relax*.

Thighs - while sitting, push your feet firmly into the floor, then *relax*.

Calves - lift your toes off the ground towards your shins, then *relax*.

Feet - gently curl your toes down so that they are pressing into the floor, then *relax*.

5. Enjoy the feeling of relaxation

Take some slow breaths while you sit still for a few minutes, enjoying the feeling of relaxation.

Practise once or twice every day for at least 8 weeks.

During the day, try relaxing specific muscles whenever you notice that they are tense.

You will need to commit yourself to at least eight weeks of daily practice in order to achieve really long-lasting effects. Naturally, longer is even better. Some people continue daily relaxation for many years. If you can do this, we strongly advise it. However, not all people continue relaxation in this way. People who benefit most from relaxation either practice regularly, or practice immediately after they notice any increase in tension or anxiety. In the case of anxiety management, when possible it is advisable that you use a relaxation tape as a preparation before you expose yourself to what you fear.

Appendix C: Cross-stressing using exercise



There is a way of exercising that helps you recover more quickly from stress. Instead of feeling its ill effects long after a stress has passed, this technique helps you to return to normal more efficiently. Defences against stress are restored sooner and you 'bounce back' more readily.

A technique known as **cross-stress exercise** trains your body to cope better with added demands. It involves an adaptation of aerobic exercise. This approach is based on the fact that stress is a stimulus for growth. More specifically, growth occurs when *recovering* from stress. (Recall how weight lifters create muscle mass by waiting a day or two before re-stressing a muscle group.)

It is well known that steady-state aerobics, such as swimming, walking or jogging build up physical endurance. Aerobics are vigorous exercises designed to increase oxygen intake. Typically they keep you puffing to the point where having a conversation would be difficult, but not impossible.

To apply this strategy choose a form of aerobic exercise that you enjoy. Using the following formula, calculate your maximum heart rate, then your upper and lower limit. This gives you your exercise range ('aerobic zone').

1. Subtract your age from 220 if you are a man
2. Subtract your age from 226 if you are a woman
3. Multiply this number first by 0.70 and then by 0.80 to define your lower and upper limit respectively

Example calculation:

Female, age 40 years

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Maximum heart rate} \\ 226 - 40 \end{array} = 186 \text{ beats per minute (bpm)}$$

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Lower limit (heart rate)} \\ 186 \times 0.70 \end{array} = 130 \text{ bpm}$$

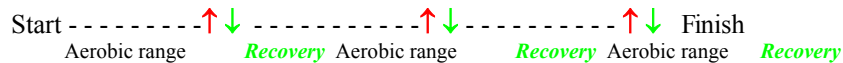
$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Upper limit (heart rate)} \\ 186 \times 0.80 \end{array} = 149 \text{ bpm}$$

↑
↓
This is your aerobic zone.

When exercising, spend 50 to 80 percent of your time within the aerobic range (e.g. between 130 and 149 bpm) and of the remaining time ½ above and ½ below the range.

For example, if you walk for 30 minutes, and you decide to spend 80% of your time in the aerobic zone you would spend a total of 24 minutes within the aerobic range of 130-149 bpm. For the other 6 minutes (20%) do the following:

1. after 8 minutes in the aerobic zone spend **1 minute above** your upper heart rate of the aerobic zone limit (up to 90% of your maximum rate - in this example around 167 bpm) – **not** your maximum heart rate.
2. next, slow down for **1 minute below** your lower aerobic zone limit (down to 60 % of your maximum heart rate - in this example around 130 bpm).
3. then, **go back** up to the aerobic zone (between 130 to 149 bpm) **for next 8 minutes** and repeat the cycle another two times.



The moment your heart rate begins to reduce, as in a pause in exercise, the cardiovascular system is recovering from the stress of exercise demand. Remember it is this recovery that is doing the good in terms of building strength and endurance. An increase in heart rate is being conditioned to be followed by a decrease in heart rate. So with practice, it becomes increasingly likely that once a high stress episode passes, the cardiovascular system will more rapidly recover to its normal level. You will feel better sooner too!

You might like to try brisk walking 30 – 45 minutes four or five times a week, or less time if engaging in more rigorous training such as jogging.

Don't overdo it. It's all right to experience mild discomfort, but you'll gain nothing with pain. If you haven't regularly exercised for a while, prepare for this regimen with activity such as moderately-paced then brisk walking. Build up to an aerobic level gradually.

Your cardiac function needs to be o.k. for this form of strenuous exercise. Check with your doctor if you are not sure.

Doreen Tracey
Psychologist
TTH



Reference: Dr. N. Hall (1999) 'Stress and Disease' - Cortext seminar presentation, Townsville, Australia.

Information adapted from Murray, D.R., et al. (1992). 'Sympathetic immune interactions during dynamic exercise - Mediation via a beta 2 adrenergic dependent mechanism.' Circulation, 86 (1), 203-213.

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