



Stress Management Society
from distress to de-stress

Excelling Under Pressure Handbook



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WELCOME

Stress is the driving force that keeps us on our toes and ensures that we push to be the best we can be. However that is only valid up to a certain point. If we have too much stress and endless wear and tear, it can drive us into physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.

Certainly we can't avoid the problem. Situations arise on a day-to-day basis, which make physical, mental and emotional demands on us. There may be decisions that need to be made, deadlines that need to be met, and lessons to be learned.

Unreasonable stress affects one in five of the working population and after acute medical conditions it is the most common cause of long term sickness absence from work (CIPD Absence Management 2014).

Stress undoubtedly makes people ill. It is now known to contribute to heart disease, hypertension and high blood pressure, it affects the immune system, is linked to strokes, IBS (Irritable Bowel Syndrome), ulcers, diabetes, muscle and joint pain, miscarriage, allergies, alopecia and even premature tooth loss.

Therefore it is imperative to strike the right balance. As individuals, we must take stock of all aspects of our life and situations and learn to cope better.

Treat it early, and your prospects are good. Ignore the problem, and there is a risk that 'burnout' may become a permanent state of affairs.



UNDERSTANDING STRESS

Stress is a physical response. Under stress, the body thinks it is under attack and switches to

'FIGHT, FLIGHT OR FREEZE' MODE

releasing substances such as adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine to prepare the body for physical action. This causes a number of reactions, from blood being diverted to muscles, to shutting down unnecessary bodily functions such as digestion.

The common physical symptoms when we are faced with a highly stressful situation are:

- Heart rate increases
- Breathing becomes shallow and fast
- Muscular tension increases
- Feeling of anger and hostility increase
- Teeth gritted
- Bladder relaxes
- Blood pressure increases
- Blood sugar increases

Our bodies have evolved to produce this stressed state in order to survive life-threatening situations like attacks from sabre-tooth tigers, however, in modern times we're no longer living in caves and running away from sabre-toothed tigers so becoming stressed is more of a hindrance than a useful tool. There are still situations where it is beneficial to work yourself into a stressful state, such as participating in competitive sports, so the challenge is being able to control the effects of stress when it isn't beneficial to the situation.

WHAT IS 'FIGHT, FLIGHT OR FREEZE' MODE?

Fight or flight means building up the energy to be able to respond to a life-threatening situation. For many people however this life-threatening experience sets the stage for 'dysregulation'. The energy mobilized by the perceived threat gets "locked" into the nervous system when we go into freeze.

This freeze response sometimes reveals itself when you breathe. Holding your breath and shallow breathing are both forms of freeze. The occasional deep sigh after a period of stress is the nervous system catching up on it's oxygen intake.

THE 3 STRESS HORMONES

When we experience the state of stress, there are many mental, physical and emotional changes due to the mix of hormones that are released.

ADRENALINE

This fight or flight hormone is created by the adrenal glands once it has received a message from the brain that it has been put in a stressful situation.

Along with norepinephrine (see below), adrenaline is the reason for the immediate response we feel when stressed. This is the reason for your fast reactions when you are put in danger e.g. reacting quickly to a person running in front of your car by slamming on the brakes. That heart pounding, fast breathing sensation is the adrenaline; it gives you a surge of energy and focuses your attention to help you quickly respond to the situation.

CORTISOL

Known as the stress hormone, cortisol is a steroid produced by the adrenal glands.

Unlike adrenaline, this hormone's effects aren't felt instantly, it takes a few minutes to be put to action as messages have to be sent to multiple areas of the brain before two minor hormones (corticotrophin-releasing hormone, and adrenocorticotrophic hormone) are produced that are needed to tell the adrenal glands to produce cortisol. This is a life saving hormone that helps maintain blood pressure and fluid balance, and regulates non vital functions such as the immune response, digestion, growth and reproduction.

The challenge that our bodies were not built to stay in a state of stress for long periods. This means the body releases cortisol constantly, which can be detrimental to our health. The results of having elevated cortisol levels can be an increase in sugar and blood pressure levels, and a decrease in libido.

NOREPINEPHRINE

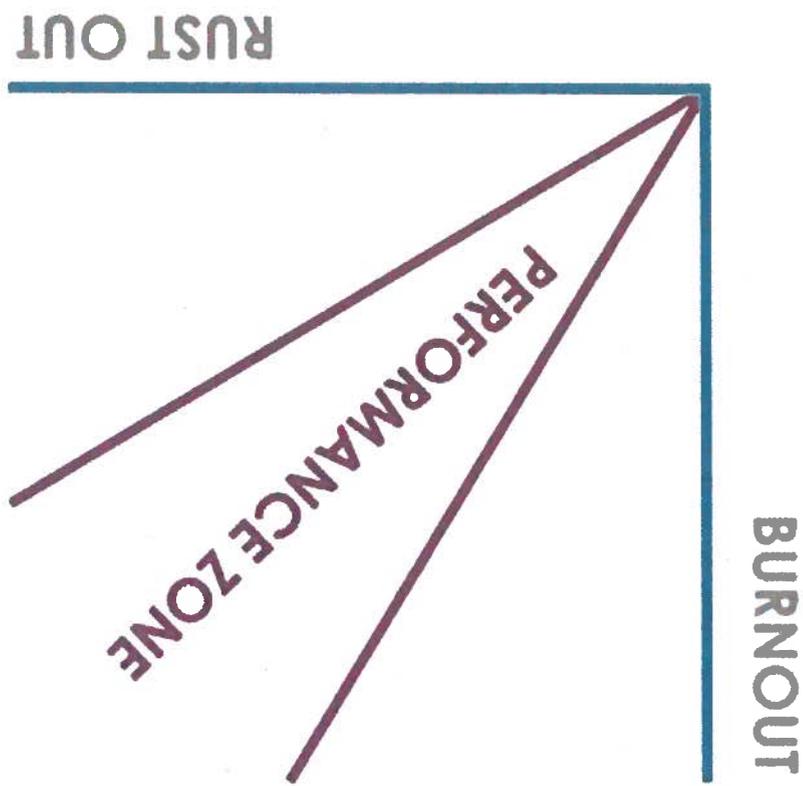
This hormone is released from the adrenal glands, and is similar to adrenaline.

The main role of the norepinephrine hormone is that of a stimulant, which helps you become more responsive. It also helps move blood flow towards crucial areas that are needed for the fight or flight responses, such as muscles, instead of non essential areas such as skin. Norepinephrine may seem irrelevant as it is so similar to adrenaline, however it is a necessary back up to increase our chances of survival if our adrenal glands aren't working to their full potential.

THE PERFORMANCE ZONE

This is the zone to drive optimal performance, whether applied to sports, work or even driving. When our stress levels move beyond the performance zone and edge towards burnout we will struggle, problem solving, lateral thinking and creative thinking diminish. We are unable to think clearly and make good decisions, and can become reactive, angry and sometimes even aggressive. Below the performance zone we may find ourselves unable to motivate ourselves, energy and enthusiasm will be low and we will be bored sluggish and lethargic.

Make yourself familiar with the signs when your stress levels move above or below the performance zone so that you can reign them back in or raise yourself back up.



THE BRIDGE ANALOGY



Stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that:

**“DEMANDS EXCEED THE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESOURCES
THE INDIVIDUAL IS ABLE TO MOBILISE.”**

The Stress Management Society uses the bridge analogy to approach the topic of stress. When a bridge is carrying too much weight, it will eventually collapse. It is possible to see the warning signs before this happens, the bridge would bow, buckle and creak.

The same principle can be applied to human beings, with excessive demands and challenges placed on our bridges. There may be early warning signs. However stress can creep up on some of us, resulting in an unexpected breakdown.

The bridge analogy can also be applied to a team or organisation as a whole by looking for more general signs such as team deadlines not being met or a decrease in staff morale.

Early identification of stress and stress-related problems

One of the difficulties with stress is that people experience stress in different ways. This contributes to stress manifesting itself differently. So it would be wrong to overgeneralise when giving advice on how to identify stress in others. However, what we can say is that because stress has negative effects, it will usually manifest itself one way or another.

It isn't always possible to prevent stress, so a key action in order to minimise risk is to identify stress-related problems as early as possible, so that action can be taken before serious stress-related illness occurs (thus preventing a costly outcome for all concerned).

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 (e.g. 5 days in a row).

Certain factors at work may indicate a potential problem

- More accident prone
- Forgetting things
- Showing a negative change in mood or fluctuations in mood
- Avoiding certain situations or people
- Using more very negative or cynical language
- Becoming withdrawn
- Showing a prolonged loss of sense of humour
- Becoming increasingly irritable or short-tempered
- Arguments and disputes between people
- A tendency to suffer from headaches, nausea, aches and pains, tiredness and poor sleeping patterns
- Indecisiveness and poor judgement
- Self-harming
- A problem with drinking or drug taking
- Looking haggard or exhausted all the time

CAUSES OF STRESS AT WORK

These are some traditional causes of stress at work

Feeling out of control of your destiny

Unreasonable demands in
the job

Overwork

A feeling of being under-appreciated

Difficulty with resolving
problems

Bullying or
harassment

Difficulty with communication

Uncertainty about job security

Office politics



THE TOP PRINCIPLE

Write down 3 situations/worries that you often think about or are currently challenged with:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Worrying about the future can cost us a lot of time and energy. It is a time robber just like unexpected or unscheduled interruptions. Time robbers are a massive problem when trying to manage your time effectively. Dealing with time robbers is ultimately a problem solving exercise. This consists of a logical 'step by step' analysis of what the problem actually is. It is also necessary to define the level of control. A useful device for ascertaining this level is the TOP principle: *is the problem...*

Totally within my control

Outside of my control

Partially within my control

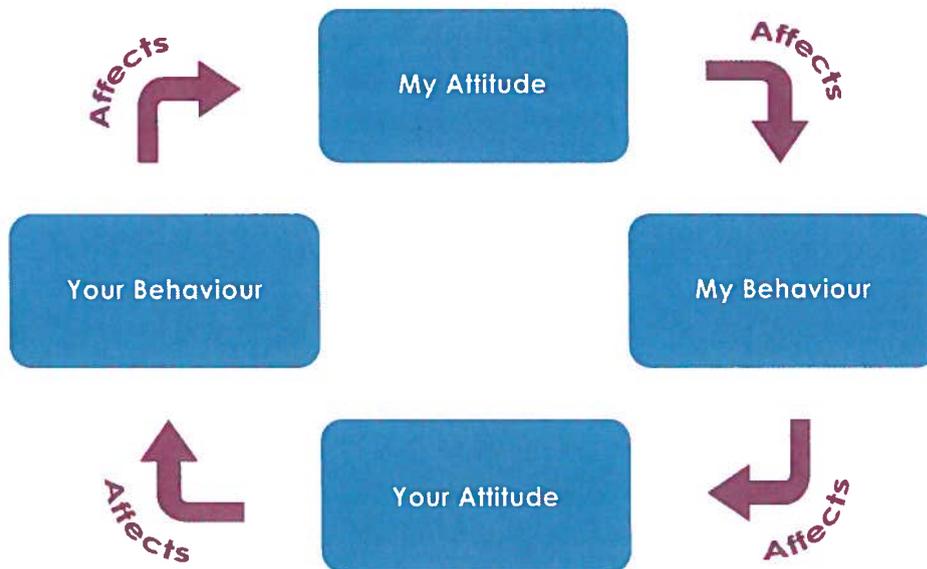
If the problem is totally outside of your control, then there is absolutely no point in attempting to solve it. We have to re-focus our energies on to things that we can have an effect over. How would you classify each of your 3 worries? Circle the respective letter.

1. T O P

2. T O P

3. T O P

BETARI'S BOX



Our stress levels may increase due to the behaviour of the people around us but also by the way we react to them. The following module draws on the Betari's Box concept to raise awareness of how people's behaviours and attitudes are directly linked to each other, and how we can reduce interpersonal conflict and stress.

ATTITUDE AFFECTS BEHAVIOUR

Our attitude becomes visual through our external behaviour. This may be apparent in the signals we send to others, such as smiles, tone of voice and use of particular words. It has an effect on how we act towards other people. The reverse is also true. The attitude of others has an effect on their own behaviour.

BEHAVIOUR AFFECTS OTHERS' ATTITUDES

If a person is aggressive towards you, you will interpret this in a certain way, which will in turn affect your own attitude. And again, the reverse is true. Your behaviour affects the attitudes of those around you as they interpret, rightly or wrongly, what you do. This creates a circle. The way you act affects someone else's attitude. Their attitude affects their behaviour, which has an effect on your own attitude that affects your behaviour, and the cycle continues.

BETARI'S BOX

TIPS TO BREAK A CYCLE OF NEGATIVITY

Sometimes you can find yourself stuck in a cycle of being irritable, which makes you defensive and more irritable. Once you recognise this, see if you can press the "reset button" and be pleasant to others.

Remember that whether your attitude is good or bad, it affects everyone you come into contact with.

You can only control your own actions, so if a colleague is stuck in a negative cycle, then remember that you have a choice in how you respond. Just because that person is negative to you doesn't mean that you have to respond in a negative way.

Practice empathy. Empathy can also get you out of a negative cycle once you're in it.

If someone around you is persistently aggressive and rude, explore the reasons for their negative behaviour. If they are familiar with the Betari's box, you could use this as a starting point for the discussion.

Stop what you're doing as soon as you realise you're in a negative mood. Take a few minutes to assess why you're feeling so negative. Negativity often begins with an insignificant event such as getting stuck in traffic and can escalate from there. Break out of the cycle by focusing on something positive.

FLAWED STRATEGIES WHEN DEALING WITH STRESS

When the general public were asked to complete the sentence

“I’m So Stressed, I Need A....”

The most popular answers are:

1. ALCOHOL

2. NICOTINE

3. REFINED SUGAR

4. CAFFEINE



All of these are stimulating and will not directly alleviate stress (with the exception of alcohol which is technically biphasic i.e. in small quantities it is stimulating and in large quantities it is a depressant)

If you take away the consumption of the top 4 cravings from the act, you are left with a constructive

STRESS & NUTRITION

Many of us feed ourselves platefuls of food loaded with toxins, chemicals, fats, sugars and other nasties which are of no benefit to our bodies and we expect it to cope. There has always been a link between stress and nutrition. A balanced diet will boost our resistance against the effects of stress on the body.

Therefore it is important to constantly top up on vital nutrients. Someone with a healthy and balanced diet is likely to be far less stressed than someone with a poor diet as their bodies are working more efficiently and they are more resilient to stress.

BUILDING PERSONAL RESILIENCE

BREATH

Days without water, weeks without food but minutes without breath...

MASSAGE

Relaxation and removing tension

HYDRATION

How do you know if you are hydrated? Check the colour of your urine!

TALK TO SOMEONE

A problem shared is a problem halved.

MUSIC

Distraction and relaxation

EAT WELL

Sustainable energy equips us for being better able to manage stress. If you are putting junk food in your body you are putting it under more stress.

RELAXATION

Music, meditation, guided relaxation, yoga, etc.



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BUILDING PERSONAL RESILIENCE



HOLIDAY

Use your leave to take breaks and holidays to rest and restore.

SLEEP

Introduce a sleep routine – think of preparing a child for sleep...

EXERCISE

When we get stressed our body is preparing for a physical response. Any kind of physical activity burns off the stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol). It also releases feel good hormones like serotonin and endorphins

SEX

Burns off stress hormones and produces dopamine and serotonin.

HOBBIES

Activities outside of work and home can be a great way to break up the week and alleviate stress

BREAKS

Taking regular breaks throughout the day resets the system and has been proven to enhance our productivity



BREATHING EXERCISES

Relaxation Technique

Benefits

More oxygen = calmness and more oxygen in brain increases concentration and focus

Instructions

- Imagine a triangle that starts at your belly button and the corners are at your hips
- Inside that triangle is a ball or a balloon
- Every time you take in a breath, imagine that ball or balloon filling up with air
- Take a nice slow deep breath in through the nose and fill the belly up with air
- Hold at the top of the breath for 5 seconds and then slowly exhale through the mouth, pulling the navel to the spine. Repeat 5 times

Re-energising Technique

(Please do not use this if you are pregnant, have high blood pressure, heart disease or musculo-skeletal issues)

Benefits

This protects against airborne diseases; tones the heart; burns toxins; increases exchange of O₂ and CO₂ in bloodstream, thus stimulating metabolism. Excellent for asthmatics. Balances nervous system.

Instructions

- Stand in a comfortable position
- Inhale and raise arms out sideways, Diaphragm descends, belly pumps out
- Exhale and bend arms in to ribs
- We will be repeating this 30 x
- 10 x slow, 10 x medium and 10 x fast

ABOUT THE STRESS MANAGEMENT SOCIETY

Stress is a much used (and abused) term these days. You frequently hear people say "I'm stressed" or "I'm depressed", yet there is still much confusion about what these terms actually mean and how best to tackle them. This is where we can help. We are the UK's leading authority on stress management issues, which is why you will regularly hear us talking about this topic in the media.

The Stress Management Society is a non-profit organisation dedicated to leading effective universal change by maximising your resilience, happiness, productivity and success with our passionate approach to reducing stress and promoting wellbeing. Our extensive knowledge of stress and wellbeing and our cutting edge interventions have made us the primary organisation dealing with work-related stress reduction and wellbeing promotion in the UK since 2003.

For years, we've been empowering individuals to take charge of their wellbeing through our workshops, guides and regular updates. We also act as a trusted advisor for many companies such as British Airways, Allianz and Shell, guiding them through the mental wellbeing solution maze.

For more information or to book a workshop or a coaching session see www.stress.org.uk, call 0203 142 8650 or email info@stress.org.uk

If you want to promote wellbeing in your company using branded stress management products, go to www.stressmoodcards.com.



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