

# Practical Stress Management

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## Types of Stress we feel.

Normal stimulus levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• New stimuli are not deemed threatening.</li></ul>
Positive Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We perceive a temporary threat to normal stimulus levels but we know we have the skills or means to cope.</li></ul>
Distress and Chronic Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We perceive a threat and we either don't know if we can cope or worse still we know we cannot cope.</li><li>• Distress at work can be caused by either too many or too few demands being made on us.</li><li>• Chronic stress is prolonged distress and can lead to depression.</li></ul>

## Our Stress Reactions

- Our stress response is always active. However we are only aware of feeling stress when we are required to operate outside our normal comfort zone.
- When we perceive a threat, our brain instructs the body to generate a fight or flight response or a resistance reaction.
- In modern times, these stress reactions result from issues of self esteem or worry regarding career, family or financial matters.
- We physically decide to fight or flee but this is not appropriate in a traffic jam or business meeting.
- Our personal reaction will be affected by our cultural norms, gender, health, expectations, personality etc.
- **Stress is not an assessment of the environment, it is a state within you, and consequently it is under your control.**

### **Physical Health Consequences of Prolonged Stress**

- More prone to general infections like colds and flu.
- Heart, circulatory and cholesterol problems.
- Infertility problems.
- Problems with digestion such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome.
- Lethargy and tiredness.
- Possible diabetes.
- Increases the amount of pain induced by muscle strain and arthritis.

### **Mental Health Consequences of Prolonged Stress**

- Potential to gradually progress to ever worsening states of ill health.

### **Fatigue and Exhaustion**

- Distressed people cannot relax sufficiently to allow sleep to do its job.
- Resulting tiredness further negatively impacts on their coping ability.

### **Anger and Irritability**

- The distressed person will generally feel fed up with themselves and everyone else around them.
- This negative outlook will manifest itself in angry or passive aggressive interpersonal contact with colleagues and family.

### **Solutions to above symptoms**

- Take a 5 minute break every hour and stroll around the building.
- Limit your working day to a sensible amount such as 8 hours.
- Discuss your work problems with someone you can trust.
- Get help with your workload and refuse more work until you are less stressed.

If the above progression is not halted in time, there is a danger that you might slip into Depression, Burnout and eventually Breakdown.

- These are much harder to recover from.

## **Sources of Stress**

### **1: Life Events**

- Holmes and Rahe (1967) generated a Life Change Index (appendix A).
- Go to appendix A and total the scores that are applicable to you over the past 12 months.
- You are recommended to keep your score under 150.
- It is wise to leave a buffer to cope with the unexpected.
- Having a Stress Management Plan will give you a feeling of control and help protect you from the possible ill effects of stress.

### **2: Internally Generated Stress**

- If we allow ourselves to feel threatened by imagined or remote events, then our stress mechanism becomes activated.

### **3: Family and Relationships**

- Families are complex networks of different personality types.
- Disappointed expectations in relationships cause stress.

### **4: Type A Personality**

- Type A's are very competitive and have a deep emotional need to win at everything. They perceive everyone and everything as a threat.
- Type A behaviour can be unlearned with huge health benefits.

### **5: Work**

Stress factors can be:

- Environmental : light, heat etc.
- Career : security, advancement, responsibility level etc.
- Operational : workload, training, stable priorities etc.
- Interpersonal : bullying, difficult customers, peer relationships.
- Communications : both up and down the company.

## **Stress Test**

By taking this stress test (adapted from the British Heart Foundation), you can gauge whether or not you could be currently experiencing stress.

	Yes or No
• Feeling sweaty or shivery	
• Pounding heart or palpitations	
• Using the toilet more than usual.	
• Feeling sick in the stomach ('having butterflies')	
• Feeling thirsty or dry in the mouth.	
• Pronounced tiredness or exhaustion	
• Smoking and drinking more	
• Non injury related aches and pains?	
• Working to exhaustion	
• Headaches	
• Not enough time for hobbies or pleasure.	
• Being easily annoyed, including with yourself.	
• Feeling you cannot cope with the demands on you.	
• Loss of appetite for food, fun or sex	
• Eating too much or too little	
• Loss of sense of humour	
• Loss of interest in personal appearance	
• Loss of interest in other people	
• A feeling that everything is pointless	
• Tearfulness	
• Forgetfulness	
• Difficulty in sleeping, disturbed sleep and waking up unusually early	
• Problems with your children's behaviour and poor performance at school.	
Total	

- 5 or less yes answers means low or manageable stress levels. However even experiencing one or two of the above to extremes could mean that you need to take action.
- 6 or more yes answers means that you are experiencing stress in your life and need to start doing something about it.

### **Stress Busting Exercises.**

- Unlike your stress reaction which is an unconscious reaction to perceived threat, relaxation is a deliberate act.
- With sufficient practice, the following exercises will reduce stress.

### **Quieting Reflex - QR**

- This is a six-second mini relaxation technique adapted from the work of Dr. Charles Stroebe "QR - The Quieting Reflex".
  1. Close your eyes and focus your mind on what is currently stressing you.
  2. Quietly say to yourself "Alert mind, calm body" a number of times.
  3. Smile inwardly with your eyes closed and your mouth shut. This will make your smile invisible to others.
  4. Inhale slowly while counting to three. Imagine that you are breathing through holes in your feet.
  5. Exhale slowly to the count of three. Imagine the breath starting at your head, passing through your body and out through holes in your feet. Allow your face, tongue, jaw and shoulder muscles to go limp.

### **Breathing Properly**

- The proper way to breathe in non stressful situations is to use our diaphragm instead of our chest.
- Our tummy should rise and fall as we inhale and exhale.
- Simply breathing in this manner will automatically reduce the stress reaction taking place inside us.

### **Deep Muscular Relaxation (allow 15 minutes) (Appendix B)**

- Concentrate on each part of the body in turn and deliberately relax the muscle. You should experience a warm heavy sensation which you should enjoy for about 5 seconds before moving on.
- When you have completed relaxing all the muscles in for example a leg, enjoy the whole leg being relaxed for about 10 seconds.
- It is a good idea to tape record the steps outlined in appendix B, in a slow voice as a prompt to which step you need to take next.
- Sit comfortably in a chair that has good back support.
  - Your feet should be a little apart and flat on the floor.
  - Your arms should rest gently on your lap.
  - Hold your head straight looking straight forward.
  - Breathe abdominally.
  - Close your eyes.

## **Lifestyle and Stress**

- When your brain perceives a threat, you perform an unconscious audit of your capacity to cope.
- The outcome of this audit will pitch you into normal stress, positive stress or distress mode.
- Your diet, weight, fitness, sleep and consumption of alcohol and cigarettes will heavily influence your perceived capacity to cope.

## **Diet**

- When you become stressed, the body will automatically dump fat and glucose into our bloodstream to fuel our muscles.
- A well balanced diet of at least 1600 calories a day should provide you with all your vitamin requirements.
  - Low activity men need 2550 calories per day, women 1940.
- Eating patterns are important with breakfast and lunch having higher priority over an evening meal. The evening meal should be lightest.
- Smoking, caffeine and alcohol DON'T actually help.

## **Fitness and Exercise**

- An active physical life burns up the soup of hormones, neurotransmitters, blood fats etc utilised by our stress mechanism.
- Regular moderate exercise of 30 minutes a day (coupled with a well balanced diet), is required for good body metabolism and body weight.
- Fitness level is an important ingredient in the unconscious audit your mind performs when assessing the danger in perceived threats.

## **Sleep and Rest**

- We switch between slow wave and REM sleep several times per night.
- Slow wave sleep is essential for good physical health while REM sleep is essential for good mental health.
- Alcohol, tranquillizers and sleeping pills all decrease our REM sleep.
- Recurring nightmares can be a sign of distress.
- Meditation can help with sleep problems.

### **Emotional & Cognitive Support Mechanisms**

- To increase the odds that your response to perceive to threat will result in positive stress, you need to increase your innate sense of being able to cope.
- You need both emotional and cognitive weapons coping mechanisms.

### **Love and Support**

- A positive emotional environment results in fewer health problems and quicker recovery from illness.
- You need to have someone with whom you can share problems.

### **Increasing Self-Esteem.**

- It is based on how we rate our achievements against our expectations.
- Achieving realistic goals will eventually result in good self-esteem.

### **Be Assertive**

- Listen to the other person's request and assess your own needs.
- Express your feelings about the situation clearly but not aggressively.
- This needs practice and accept that you won't always win.

### **Time Management Strategy**

- Determine your priorities and realistically assess the time you have.
- Set goals and write a plan (with milestones) to achieve them.
- If concentration is a problem, say "Be Here Now" quietly to yourself.
- Tackle small bite sized pieces of the plan taking small break.
- Use all the available time and say NO to distractions.
- Reward yourself for sticking to the plan.

### **Communications**

- Sender and receiver should perceive the information in the same way.
- Adapt your communication style to the personality type of the recipient.
- Prepare your questions in advance.
  - When appropriate communicate what you already know.

**Your Stress Management Plan**

- Stress management techniques can take six weeks before they start to show results.
- You need to actually write a plan to keep yourself on track and to allow you to assess the effectiveness of the techniques you have chosen.
- Using a table such as that on page 9, determine your top three stressors and SMART goals.
- Selecting from the range of stress management techniques, develop a strategy that will help alleviate the most troubling components of your top three stressors.
  - Document this strategy in the forth column on page 9.
  - Insert dates
- Set review dates for every fortnight and revise your strategy for each primary stressor as necessary.
- When the top three stressors have been sorted, move to your next three and repeat the process.
- Don't forget to ensure you make space in your life for the stress coping aspects of your life that you identified on page 10.

**Determine your top 3 stressors**

- If the earlier stress test suggests you are stressed, use the Homes and Rahe, and Work Environment tests presented in this material to determine what your three top stressors are. Allow your feelings to guide you rather than use any numerical rating scales.
- Identify your top three major stressors.
- By tackling your problems you will increase your self esteem which is a known stress buster.

Name the troubled area, e.g. self, work, family etc.	What precisely is the problem?	Identify a SMART target or goal.	Set a realistic strategy that would solve or reduce the size of the problem.

**Stress Coping Mechanisms in your Life**

- Stress coping activities allow your hormone and neurotransmitter levels to return to normal.
- By not handling your stress, there is a danger that less pleasurable aspects of your life will overrun the aspects you still enjoy.
- Stress coping mechanisms include family and friends, a hobby in which you can completely lose yourself, regular exercise, known stress management exercises such as meditation, yoga etc.
- List three things in the boxes below that regularly give you pleasure or help you cope with stress.
- Identifying these aspects will help you safeguard them.
- Identifying the particular aspects of the pleasurable thing or activity may allow you to spot other avenues of stress relief.

Name the item or activity you enjoy.	What particular aspect gives you pleasure and how can you safeguard or expand this?

**Further Reading**

- *Managing Stress*. T. Looker and O. Gregson. ISBN0-340-86007-3.
- *10 Steps to Positive Living*. W. Dryden. ISBN 0-85969-695-2.

**Appendix A**

**The Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Ratings Scale**

<b>Life Event</b>	<b>Scale of Reaction</b>
Death of a Spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital Separation	65
Imprisonment	63
Death of a Close Family Member	63
Personal Injury or Illness	53
Marriage	50
Dismissal from Work	47
Marital Reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Change in Health of Family Member	44
Pregnancy	40
Sexual Difficulties	39
Gain a New Family Member	39
Business Readjustment	39
Change in Financial State	38
Change in Frequency of Arguments	35
Major Mortgage	32
Foreclosure of Mortgage or Loan	30
Change in Responsibilities at Work	29
Child Leaving Home	29
Trouble with In-Laws	29
Outstanding Personal Achievement	28
Spouse Starts or Stop Work	26
Begin or End School	26
Change in Living Conditions	25
Revision of Personal Habits	24
Trouble with Boss	23
Change in Working Hours or Conditions	20
Change in Residence	20
Change in Schools	20
Change in Recreation	19
Change in Church Activities	19
Change in Social Activities	18
Minor Mortgage or Loan	17
Change in Sleeping Habits	16
Change in Number of Family Reunions	15
Change in Eating Habits	15
Vacation	13
Christmas	12
Minor Violation of Law	11

## Appendix B

### Steps for Deep Muscular Relaxation

For each body part mentioned below, the procedure is the same. Firstly bring the body part to consciousness. Relax the muscle until there is a feeling of warm limpness. Enjoy this feeling for about 5 seconds before moving on.

- Focusing on your left leg, relax your toes. Wait until you feel a limpness and warmth and enjoy this for about 5 seconds.
- Now focus on your left instep and when ready move to your ankle.
- Focus on the muscles in the lower part of your left leg.
- Now move to your knee.
- The next muscle group is in your left thigh.
- Now relax your left hip.
- Enjoy your whole left leg relaxed for about 10 seconds.
- Focusing on your right leg, relax your toes. Wait until you feel a limpness and warmth and enjoy this for about 5 seconds.
- Now focus on your right instep and when ready move to your ankle.
- Focus on the muscles in the lower part of your right leg.
- Now move to your knee.
- The next muscle group is in your right thigh.
- Now relax your right hip.
- Enjoy your whole right leg relaxed for about 10 seconds.
- Now move to your left arm initially relaxing your fingers and palms. Enjoy this for about 5 seconds.
- In turn, move to your wrist, lower arm, elbow, upper arm and finally your left shoulder enjoying each for about 5 seconds.
- Enjoy the relaxation of your entire left arm for about 10 seconds.
- Now move to your right arm initially relaxing your fingers and palms. Enjoy this for about 5 seconds.
- In turn, move to your wrist, lower arm, elbow, upper arm and finally your right shoulder enjoying each for about 5 seconds.
- Enjoy the relaxation of your entire right arm for about 10 seconds.
- Turn your attention to your stomach muscles and allow them to completely relax. Enjoy this for about 10 seconds.
- Now start at the base of your spine and moving slowly up the spine, allow each part of it and the associated muscles to relax. Your back should feel heavy and sink into the chair.
- Relax your shoulders again.
- Keeping your head straight, relax your head muscles. You should feel your head balances on top of your spine.

- Focusing on your head, relax your jaw and allow your mouth to open slightly. Relax your tongue, eyes, forehead and scalp.
- Stay with the feeling of your whole head being relaxed for about 10 seconds.
- Concentrate on abdominal breathing feeling your breaths as slow and heavy.
- While trying to recall happy memories, allow whatever thoughts that emerge to drift through your mind. Do not try to follow or retain them.
- Your whole body should feel relaxed now. Sit and enjoy this for 5 minutes before slowly opening your eyes.
- Before you try to stand up, take three deep breaths and move your arms and legs. Some people reduce their blood pressure to such an extent that if they don't take this last precaution, they actually faint from low blood pressure.