

DEALING WITH STRESS

OBJECTIVES:

This module will help you to :

- Understand how to keep energy levels high throughout the day
- Understand how to improve concentration and creativity
- Understand how to make better decisions under pressure

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(please note that if you are undergoing severe stress you should consult a medical professional - this module is a guide to help minimise some stressful situations that may arise at work but is not intended to replace any medical or professional help)

What is stress at work? It can be many things but we will be looking at it as being able to maintain a stable performance under pressure and/or opposition, for instance, time pressure, unclear instructions etc.,

Today's workplace is highly competitive, an often hectic and demanding workplace where managers must continue to function effectively, maintaining self-control and inspiring confidence in high stress situations. Demands frequently produce stress from time pressures and opposition to ideas. Stress may result from being in ambiguous situations without clear job responsibilities and the authority to act. These same stresses may effect higher level managers and be intensified by the increased impact of upper management decisions.

Individuals will differ in the way they react to stress. The point at which pressure becomes stress will vary from one person to another. We all have our breaking points and once stress is experienced on a regular basis, we risk losing our effectiveness as well as ulcers, high blood pressure, strokes and heart attacks. Death is only nature's way of telling us to slow down - it's far better that we tell ourselves first.

Recognising the early signs of stress and to learn ways of coping with it are important. Our primitive ancestors knew just two ways of responding to a threat - fight or flight. Neither of these is helpful to the more subtle threats that can make life stressful for today's manager. You can really deal with a demanding boss in quite the same way as a charging elephant. We need to discover other ways of dealing with stress, minimising it or preferably, avoiding it.

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AM I UNDER STRESS?

The following questions will help you decide whether you are merely under pressure or are beginning to experience stress. Are the following descriptions true of you more than 50% of the time, less than 50% of the time or indeed, never at all?

	+50%	-50%	NEVER
Do you feel overworked?			
Are you irritated by other people's incompetence?			
Do you feel like hitting people instead of telling them what is bothering you?			
Do you become withdrawn, sulky, or difficult to talk to?			
Do you put off making important decisions?			
Do you have doubts about your decisions once you have made them?			
Do you find it difficult to delegate work?			
Do you feel you could never cope without tobacco, alcohol or tranquillisers?			
Do you feel anxious and panicky?			
Do you get depressed for no obvious reason?			
Do you find it hard to concentrate?			
Do you respond badly to criticism?			
Are you over-tired and unable to sleep?			
Do you feel your work is no longer worthwhile?			
Do you feel you are not really up to your job?			
Do you feel there is no one with whom you can discuss your real feelings?			
Do you worry about the state of your health?			
Are you relieved when a health problem forces you to stay off work for a day or two?			
Do you feel that food is tasteless, hard to get down, or just not worth bothering with?			
Do you wish you had a less responsible job?			
Do you feel that life itself is getting too much for you?			

If you answered NEVER to all the above questions you are probably kidding yourself - question: do you pretend to yourself that things are not as bad as they are?

If you answer +50% to more than six of the questions then you may already be under too much stress and perhaps should consult a doctor.

WAYS TO IDENTIFY STRESS

1. Communicating Less

Those under stress will tend to 'retreat' and avoid communicating. They say less at meetings than they would usually. They read the cereal packet at breakfast rather than communicate with the family.

2. Less Energy

Feeling lethargic, putting tasks off, feeling tired - all signs of stress

3. Low Productivity

Producing less, not getting work completed on time, forgetting to do things.

4. Punctuality

The person under stress will often start being late or even totally forgetting appointments

5. Rough Nights

Trouble getting to sleep, tossing and turning, waking up in the middle of the night, wanting to sleep all the time, falling asleep watching the television are all signs of stress

6. Appetite

Either weight gain or weight loss can signal stress. Picking at food, frequent trips to the fridge, constant eating - all usually without a real 'hunger' can be signs of stress.

8. Decreased Wants

Lack of interest in what is going on around the person - both personal and professionally. Asking what do I want to: read, write, reorganise, discuss, visit, clean out, buy. The person who is not feeling stressed will be able to think of many; the person under stress will have great difficulty in thinking of any answers

WAYS TO MINIMISE OR AVOID STRESS

1. Healthy Eating

We all know what food is good for us and what food is bad, so make sure you eat a good diet. Make sure you include plenty of protein foods - fish, lean meat, cheese, yoghurt, skimmed milk; vitamin B from whole grain breads, cereals, yeast extracts; vitamin C from citrus fruits, peppers, baked potatoes, strawberries; vitamin A from dark green and yellow vegetables and pulses.

Limit your intake of caffeine (coffee, tea), refined products (sugar, white flour), salt (don't add any extra - most food contains enough salt already); foods high in saturated fats (fried food, sausages, hamburgers); alcohol.

2. Exercise

Exercise will ensure a strong heart and circulation and is a good way of relieving tensions. Swimming, walking, cycling - any exercise is good.

Take a walk - often one of the most effective stress management tools available. A quick ten-minute walk not only gets the blood flowing but lets you clear your mind as well. Feel like you want to strangle someone? Just found out about a BIG mistake - walk before you talk and you are far less likely to do so say something you will regret later. Afternoons can be quite 'dopey' - take a walk to increase your energy levels rather than a cup of coffee.

3. Cut out the Vices

We have already mentioned alcohol but it needs to be stressed - alcohol will fog your mind. Tobacco will sap your endurance and is very dangerous to your health. Drugs - just do not touch them - even prescribed drugs can affect your stress levels, even though people usually start taking them to reduce stress, it is not long before it becomes an addiction.

4. Check out your Values

Do your own personal values conflict with those around you? Do you like the atmosphere in which you work; the people with whom you work; the pace at which you have to work? If not, consider changing jobs - otherwise you will be constantly frustrated which will contribute to your feeling stressed.

5. Turn Off

Do not take your work home with you. Try not to even think about work when you are not there. Schedule some time for yourself every day - reading a book, taking a walk, watching the television, playing with the kids - just don't think about work.

6. Say No

Learn to say no. A constant stress that people face is the feeling of having more to do than they have time to do (also check out the planning and organising module of this workbook). Start saying no. Whether it is an extra project, committee, dinner date - unless it fits in with your goals, wants and job description, politely decline. You do not have to give a reason, but do be firm. If you are a 'yes' person, you will find this difficult, but it will get easier in time.

7. Fair Fights

Do not get in to arguments with people. If you disagree, learn to 'bite your tongue', retreat and go away and think about it. This will give you time to 'cool off' and separate the problem from the person. If you are wrong - admit it, smile, and feel proud that you did not let your pride harm your relationship. If the other person admits to being wrong, forgive quickly and move on. Conflict is a major source of stress in professional life; it can be dealt with positively. Make it your goal to become comfortable with conflict and then become good and handling it.

Use the following checklists to help you deal with stress. Tick those that you are not using already but think you ought to try.

	TICK
Admit to yourself when things are getting too much for you	
Learn to say NO to annoying tasks that could be done just as well by somebody else	
Try to deter other people from passing their crisis on to you	
Delegate more	
Establish more routine within your work area	
Arrange at least an hour a day for yourself	
Keep your list of priorities in mind or preferably on display where you are working	
Do not waste time on low priority tasks when you know you have more important/urgent tasks to do	
Try to pace your work, plan ahead and tackle potential problems before they blow up in to a crisis	
Learn to lose a few battles without feeling that you are losing face	
Be tolerant about your own mistakes, will anyone care in ten years time?	
Try to have as much fun as possible and plenty of laughs (even if they are at your own expense)	
Pay attention to your body signals - palpitations, upset stomachs, headaches/migraines	
Get plenty of sleep - at least 8 hours a night (without any drugs/alcohol etc.,)	
Take a nap in the middle of the day	
Exercise more - walking, jogging, swimming, golf, gym, aerobics, working your muscles will invigorate and energise you	
Learn relaxation techniques - get a book from the library, or even an audio or video tape	
Take regular holidays	
Spend time with the most important people in your life - your family and friends	
Do not become too competitive - especially in sport - it <u>will</u> become stressful!	
Avoid or give up alcohol, tobacco, drugs etc.,	

PLAN FOR THE CRISIS

What is a crisis? The dictionary says:


A crucial stage or turning point in the course of anything

A time of extreme trouble or danger

At times of crisis most people involved will experience considerable stress, anxiety and discomfort. The normal human response to such conditions is automatic physical preparation for "fight or flight" - the adrenal glands go to work, blood pressure rises, and these and other more subtle physiological changes have a major psychological impact on the people in the crisis situation. A calm and rational approach is not typical, although such a reaction is the single most important means for effectively dealing with crisis.

When situations impact on the body as well as on the thought processes of the manager is usually negative.

Think about a crisis that you have either personally been involved with or that you have heard about and write it in the box:



If you had had a crystal ball and been able to predict that this situation was going to happen prior to when it did, would you have been able to handle it better? Probably usually, it is because there has been no time to plan - it is an immediate problem. What we need to do is to plan for our future crisis.

Therefore, think of as many 'crises' as you possibly can and complete the following plan on how you are going to deal with them. This way, if and when the 'crisis' does happen, you will have already planned for it and it will not be crisis but a planned action! Some crisis have already been listed, but you need to plan your action and add as many more as you can think of (of course not every one will consider all of these to be a crisis - but best plan for it anyway).

Crisis to be planned:

Fire
Lightening Strike
Bomb Scare
Machine Breakdown
Severe Bad Weather
Theft
Injury to Customer
Robbery
Drunk on the premises
VIP Visit
No Water
Death on the premises
No Staff turn up
A flood
Gas leak
Power Cut

plus your own:

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SITUATION (THE CRISIS!)	THE ACTION I AM GOING TO TAKE	THE RESULT WILL THEN BE

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ASSIGNMENTS

- 1) List the ten most frequent stress-producing situations you face in your job. Rank them from most to least successful. Produce an action plan on ways to eliminate or cope with each.
- 2) Ask your manager to help you identify ways in which you respond negatively or ineffectively when you feel stressed. With their help, identify alternative behaviours to use that will produce more effective results.
- 3) Monitor your energy levels - when do you feel most energetic, when do you feel most tired? Plan your day around your energy levels to ensure you are always at your most effective.
- 4) Ask your manager, colleagues and even subordinates to tell you when they notice you becoming tense. Note the time, place, situation and people. Try and identify trends and identify ways to react differently.

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