



How to Master Stress

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Mastering Stress for Optimum Performance

This series of articles explains how you can manage stress. This helps you to:

- Perform at the peak of your abilities when under immense pressure
- Produce good quality work even when tasks are dull and repetitive
- Improve the quality of your life, health and job, and
- Avoid the problems of exhaustion, depression, ill health, burnout and breakdown that are associated with excessive levels of long-term stress.

The series will discuss:

- What stress is, how it is caused, and your responsibility for your stress levels
- Optimum levels of stress and the effects of long term exposure to it

- What can happen if stress gets out of control
- The impact of life crises and how to minimize them
- How to analyze the causes of stress accurately and plan to control them
- How to protect subordinates from the bad effects of stress
- Increasing stress when you are under-motivated
- How to lower stress levels by:
 - Improving your working and living environment
 - Adjusting your lifestyle
 - Adjusting negative elements of your personality
 - Looking after your body and health
 - Using physical stress reduction techniques
 - Using mental stress reduction techniques

By the end of this article series you should have a much clearer understanding of stress and the importance of controlling it. You should be able to analyze the points of pressure in your life, and plan to neutralize them. You will also have an armory of different stress reduction methods. This will help you to control each stressor with the most appropriate technique.

Understanding Stress

What is stress, and what can cause it?

For the purposes of these articles we consider stress to be anything that stimulates you and increases your level of alertness.

Life without stimulus would be incredibly dull and boring. Life with too much stimulus becomes unpleasant and tiring, and may ultimately damage your health or well-being.

Too much stress can seriously interfere with your ability to perform effectively.

The art of stress management is to keep you at a level of stimulation that is healthy and enjoyable. This series of articles will help you to monitor and control stress so that you can find and operate at a level that is most comfortable for you. It will discuss strategies to reduce or eliminate sources of unpleasant stress. It will also explain what can happen when you do not control stress properly.

Most people realize that aspects of their work and lifestyle can cause stress. While this is true, it is also important to note that it can be caused by your environment and by the food and drink you consume. There are several major sources of stress:

- *Survival Stress*: this may occur in cases where your survival or health is threatened, where you are put under pressure, or where you experience some unpleasant or challenging event. Here adrenaline is released in your body and you experience all the symptoms of your body preparing for 'fight or flight'.
- *Internally generated stress*: this can come from anxious worrying about events beyond your control, from a tense, hurried approach to life, or from relationship problems caused by your own behavior. It can also come from an 'addiction' to and enjoyment of stress

- *Environmental and Job stress:* here your living or working environment causes the stress. It may come from noise, crowding, pollution, untidiness, dirt or other distractions. Alternatively stress can come from events at work.
- *Fatigue and overwork:* here stress builds up over a long period. This can occur where you try to achieve too much in too little time, or where you are not using effective time management strategies.

The strategies that you should adopt to manage stress depend on the source of that stress. We will explain how to analyze this later.

These different sources of stress are explained in more detail in following articles.

Survival Stress

Where you are in a physically or emotionally threatening situation your body adapts to help it react more effectively to meet the threat. This is controlled mainly by release of adrenaline.

Adrenaline causes a number of changes that help you to survive. The main ones are:

- It mobilizes sugars: this gives your body access to more strength, energy and stamina. This helps you to fight harder or run faster.
- It reduces the blood supply to your skin and short-term inessential organs. This minimizes bleeding if you are hurt, and ensures that energy is not wasted on processes that are not immediately useful.
- You may experience nausea or diarrhea: this eliminates excess weight that might otherwise slow you down.

You may have experienced these changes as 'fear'. However where speed and physical strength are important this adrenaline stress will be helpful and beneficial - fear can help you to survive or perform better.

Where calm thought or precise motor skills are important, it is best to control and, ideally, eliminate these adrenaline responses.

In as much as these adrenaline changes shut down the function of organs that are essential in all but the short term, prolonged exposure to adrenaline can cause ill health.

Internally Generated Stress & Anxiety

Your personality can affect the way in which you experience stress. You may be familiar with the idea of 'type A' personalities who thrive on stress, and 'type B' personalities who are mellower and more relaxed in their approach.

Stress can cause the levels of a neurotransmitter called nor adrenalin to rise. This can give a feeling of confidence and elation that type As like. They can therefore subconsciously defer work until the last minute to create a 'deadline high', or can create a stressful environment at work that feeds their enjoyment of a situation. The downside of this is that they may leave jobs so late that they fail when an unexpected crisis occurs. This may

also cause unnecessary stress for other colleagues who are already under a high level of stress.

Other aspects of personality can cause stress. Examples are:

- Perfectionism, where the perfectionist's extremely or impossibly high standards can cause stress
- Excessive self-effacement, where constant attention to the needs of others can lead to dissatisfaction when no-one looks after your needs, and
- Anxiety.

Anxiety

Anxiety occurs where you are concerned that circumstances are out of control. In some cases being anxious and worrying over a problem may generate a solution. Normally it will just result in negative thinking.

Albert Ellis listed the five main unrealistic desires or beliefs that cause anxiety:

- The desire always to have the love and admiration of all people important to you. This is unrealistic because you have no control over other people's minds. They can have bad days, see things in odd ways, make mistakes or can be plain disagreeable and awkward.
- The desire to be thoroughly competent at all times. This is unrealistic because you only achieve competence at a new level by making mistakes. Everybody has bad days and makes mistakes.
- The belief that external factors cause all misfortune. Often negative events can be caused by your own negative attitudes. Similarly your own negative attitudes can cause you to view neutral events negatively. Someone else might find something positive in something you view as a problem.
- The desire that events should always turn out the way that you want them to, and that people should always do what you want. Other people have their own agendas and do what they want to do.
- The belief that past bad experience will inevitably control what will happen in the future. You can very often improve or change things if you try hard enough or look at things in a different way.

Environmental and Job Stress

You may find that your environment or job are causing you stress. The stress you experience may come from some of the following:

Environmental stresses

Here your environment may be a source of unpleasant or distracting stimuli. These can come from:

- Crowding and invasion of personal space

- Insufficient working and living space
- Noise
- Dirty or untidy conditions
- Pollution
- A badly organized or run down environment

Chemical and nutritional stresses

Here the food you eat may contribute to the stresses you experience. Examples of stressors you may not be aware of are:

- *Caffeine*: this raises your levels of stress hormones, makes it more difficult to sleep, and can make you more irritable.
- *Bursts of sugar from sweets or chocolate*: these can make you feel more energetic in the short term. However your body reacts to stabilize abnormally high sugar levels by releasing too much insulin. This causes a serious energy dip shortly after the sugar high.
- *Too much salt*: This raises your blood pressure and puts your body under chemical stress.

As well as these specific sources of stress, you may experience stress if you eat an unbalanced or unhealthy diet. You may find that some dietary deficiency or excess causes discomfort and illness, which generates stress. If you are obese, then this causes physical stress on your internal organs and emotional stress as your view of yourself declines. While there is a lot of biased, dubious or incorrect dietary information around, you can normally rely on nutritional advice from your doctor or from your government's health department.

Lifestyle and job stress

Many of the stresses you experience may come from your job or from your lifestyle. These may include:

- Too much or too little work
- Having to perform beyond your experience or perceived abilities
- Having to overcome unnecessary obstacles
- Time pressures and deadlines
- Keeping up with new developments
- Changes in procedures and policies
- Lack of relevant information, support and advice
- Lack of clear objectives
- Unclear expectations of your role from your boss or colleagues
- Responsibility for people, budgets or equipment
- Career development stress:
 - Under-promotion, frustration and boredom with current role
 - Over-promotion beyond abilities

- Lack of a clear plan for career development
- Lack of opportunity
- Lack of job security
- Stress from your organization or your clients:
 - Pressures from your boss or from above in your organization
 - Interference in your work
 - Demands from clients
 - Disruptions to work plans
 - The telephone!
- Personal and family stresses:
 - Financial problems
 - Relationship problems
 - Ill-health
 - Family changes such as birth, death, marriage or divorce.

Fatigue and Overwork

A particularly unpleasant source of stress comes from what David Lewis calls 'Hurry Sickness'.

Here you can get into a vicious circle of stress, which causes you to hurry jobs and do them badly. This under-performance causes feelings of frustration and failure, which causes more stress, which causes more hurry and less success, and so on. Stress-creating behavior can compound this, as can an inability to relax at home or on holiday. If you do not manage long-term stress effectively, it can lead to long-term fatigue, failure and one of the forms of physical or mental ill health.

Very often you can eliminate this sort of overload by effective use of [time management skills](#), particularly by learning how to priorities effectively. You can neutralize the associated stress by effective use of stress management techniques.

How to recognize that you are under stress

While a certain level of stress is necessary to avoid boredom, high levels of stress over a sustained period can damage your health.

The sections below show common symptoms of stress, and the negative effects that excessive stress can cause. While the symptoms in isolation may or may not show stress, where several occur it is likely that stress is having an effect. Note that as the stress you are under increases, your ability to recognize it will often decrease.

The symptoms are organized into the following sections:

- [Short Term Physical Symptoms](#)
- [Short Term Performance Effects](#)
- [Long Term Physical Symptoms](#)
- [Internal Symptoms](#)
- [Behavioral Symptoms](#)

Naturally if any of the symptoms feel serious, consult a doctor.

Short Term Physical Symptoms

These mainly occur as your body adapts to perceived physical threat, and are caused by release of adrenaline. Although you may perceive these as unpleasant and negative, they are signs that your body is ready for the explosive action that assists survival or high performance:

- Faster heart beat
- Increased sweating
- Cool skin
- Cold hands and feet
- Feelings of nausea, or 'Butterflies in stomach'
- Rapid Breathing
- Tense Muscles
- Dry Mouth
- A desire to urinate
- Diarrhea

These are the symptoms of survival stress.

Short Term Performance Effects

While adrenaline helps you survive in a 'fight-or-flight' situation, it does have negative effects in situations where this is not the case:

- It interferes with clear judgment and makes it difficult to take the time to make good decisions.
- It can seriously reduce your enjoyment of your work
- Where you need good physical skills it gets in the way of fine motor control.
- It causes difficult situations to be seen as a threat, not a challenge.
- It damages the positive frame of mind you need for high quality work by:
 - Promoting negative thinking,
 - Damaging self-confidence,
 - Narrowing attention,
 - Disrupting focus and concentration and
 - Making it difficult to cope with distractions
- It consumes mental energy in distraction, anxiety, frustration and temper. This is energy that should be devoted to the work in hand.

Long Term Physical Symptoms

These occur where your body has been exposed to adrenaline over a long period. One of the ways adrenaline prepares you for action is by diverting resources to the muscles from the areas of the body, which carry out body maintenance. This means that if you are

exposed to adrenaline for a sustained period, then your health may start to deteriorate. This may show up in the following ways:

- Change in appetite
- Frequent colds
- Illnesses such as:
 - Asthma
 - Back pain
 - Digestive problems
 - Headaches
 - Skin eruptions
- Sexual disorders
- Aches and pains
- Feelings of intense and long-term tiredness

Internal Symptoms of Long Term Stress

When you are under stress or have been tired for a long period of time you may find that you are less able to think clearly and rationally about problems. This can lead to the following internal emotional 'upsets':

- Worry or anxiety
- Confusion, and an inability to concentrate or make decisions
- Feeling ill
- Feeling out of control or overwhelmed by events
- Mood changes:
 - Depression
 - Frustration
 - Hostility
 - Helplessness
 - Impatience & irritability
 - Restlessness
- Being more lethargic
- Difficulty sleeping
- Drinking more alcohol and smoking more
- Changing eating habits
- Reduced sex drive
- Relying more on medication

Behavioral Symptoms of Long Term Stress

When you or other people are under pressure, this can show as:

- Talking too fast or too loud
- Yawning
- Fiddling and twitching, nail biting, grinding teeth, drumming fingers, pacing, etc.

- Bad moods:
 - Being irritable
 - Defensiveness
 - Being critical
 - Aggression
 - Irrationality
 - Overreaction and reacting emotionally
- Reduced personal effectiveness:
 - Being unreasonably negative
 - Making less realistic judgments
 - Being unable to concentrate and having difficulty making decisions
 - Being more forgetful
 - Making more mistakes
 - Being more accident prone
- Changing work habits
- Increased absenteeism
- Neglect of personal appearance

These symptoms of stress should not be taken in isolation - other factors could cause them. However if you find yourself exhibiting or recognizing a number of them, then it would be worth investigating stress management techniques.

Understanding the Importance of Optimum Stress Levels

The level of stress under which you operate is important: if you are not under enough stress, then you may find that your performance suffers because you are bored and unmotivated. If you are under too much stress, then you will find that your results suffer as stress related problems interfere with your performance.

It is important that you recognize that you are responsible for your own stress - very often it is a product of the way that you think. Learn to monitor your stress levels, and adjust them up if you need to be more alert, or down if you are feeling too tense. By managing your stress effectively you can significantly improve the quality of your life.

This section explains the linkage between stress and performance, and shows how you can ensure that you perform at your best by optimizing stress levels.

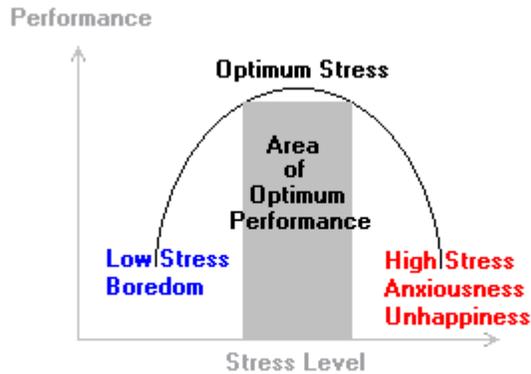
The approach to optimizing stress depends on the sort of stress being experienced:

- Short-term stress such as difficult meetings, sporting or other performances, or confrontational situations. Here the emphasis is on short-term management of adrenaline to maximize performance.
- Long term stress, where fatigue and high adrenaline levels over a long period can lead to degraded performances. Here optimizing stress concentrates on management of fatigue, health, energy and morale.

Naturally there is some element of overlap between these.

Short term stress

The graph below shows the relationship between stress and the quality of performance when you are in situations that impose short-term stress:



The Relationship Between Stress and Performance

(Please note that this graph will be a slightly different shape for different people in different circumstances)

Where stress is low, you may find that your performance is low because you become bored, lack concentration and motivation.

Where stress is too high, your performance can suffer from all the symptoms of [short-term stress](#).

In the middle, at a moderate level of stress, there is a zone of best performance. If you can keep yourself within this zone, then you will be sufficiently aroused to perform well while not being over-stressed and unhappy.

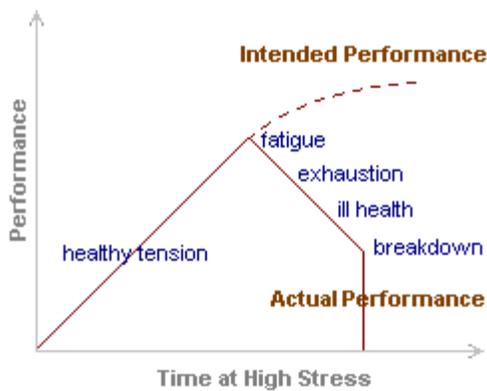
This graph, and this zone of optimum performance are different shapes for different people. Some people may operate most effectively at a level of stress that would leave other people either bored or in pieces. It is possible that someone who functions superbly at a low level might experience difficulties at a high level. Alternatively someone who performs only moderately at low level might perform exceptionally under extreme pressure.

Long term stress

The problems of long term, sustained stress are more associated with fatigue, morale and health than with short-term adrenaline management.

The graph below shows the way in which performance can suffer when you are under excessive long-term stress:

The Effect of Long Term Sustained Stress on Performance



The graph shows four major stages that you may go through in response to sustained levels of excessive stress:

1. During the first phase you will face challenges with plenty of energy. Your response will probably be positive and effective.
2. After a period of time you may begin to feel seriously tired. You may start to feel anxious, frustrated and upset. The quality of your work may begin to suffer.
3. As high stress continues you may begin to feel a sense of failure and may be ill more frequently. You may also begin to feel exploited by your organization. At this stage you may start to distance yourself from your employer, perhaps starting to look for a new job.
4. If high levels of stress continue without relief you may ultimately experience depression, burnout, nervous breakdown, or some other form of serious stress related illness.

Different people may move between these stages with different speeds under different stress conditions.

At a simple level it may appear that a measure of 'toughness' is how well you keep on going under extreme stress. This is simplistic. It is certainly possible to be self-indulgent and use stress as an excuse for not pushing yourself hard enough. It is, however, also far too easy to let yourself be pushed to a level where your work, and physical and mental health start to suffer. The strongest and most flexible position is to actively manage your levels of stress and fatigue so that you are able to produce high quality work over a long period, reliably.

High performance in your job may require continued hard work in the face of high levels of sustained stress. If this is the case, it is essential that you learn to pay attention to your feelings. This ensures that you know when to relax, slacken off for a short period, get more sleep, or implement stress management strategies. If you do not take feelings of tiredness, upset or discontent seriously, then you may face failure, burnout or breakdown.

As well as paying attention to your own stress levels, it may be worth paying attention to the stress under which people around you operate. If you are a manager seeking to improve productivity, then failing to monitor stress may mean that you drive employees into depression or burnout. If this is a danger, then reduce stress for long enough for them to recover, and then reconsider the pace you are setting.

Finding your optimum stress levels

The best way of finding your optimum level of stress is to keep a stress diary for a number of weeks. This is explained in more detail in the section on [Understanding and Controlling Your Stress](#).

The Impact of Life Crises, and How to Minimize Them

Life crises such as death of a spouse, divorce or bankruptcy can disrupt even the best stress management regime.

Different life crises have different impacts. In many cases, however, it may be possible to anticipate crises and prepare for them. It may also be useful to recognize the impact of crises that have occurred so that you can take account of them appropriately.

Some very interesting work in this area has been done by Drs T H Holmes and R H Rahe, with the *Social Readjustment Scale*. This allocates a number of 'Life Crisis Units' (LCUs) to different events, so that you can evaluate them and take action accordingly. While this approach is obviously a simplification of complex situations, using LCUs can give you a useful start in adjusting to life crises.

The idea behind this approach is to run down the LCU table, totaling the LCUs for life crises that have occurred in the previous 2 years. As a rule of thumb, you may anticipate some form of serious mental or physical effects of the crises according to the following table:

Life Crisis Units and the Probability of Illness

<i>LCUs</i>	<i>Probability of illness</i>
300	80%+
200-299	50%
150-199	33%

The LCU table is shown below:

Life Crisis Scoring Table

<i>Event</i>	<i>LCUs</i>
Death of spouse	100
Divorce	73
Separation	65
Jail term	63
Death of close family member	63
Personal illness or injury	53

Marriage	50
Fired at work	47
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Change in health of family member	44
Pregnancy	40
Sex difficulties	39
Gain of new family member	39
Business readjustment	38
Change in financial state	38
Death of close friend	37
Change to a different line of work	36
Change in number of arguments with spouse	35
A large mortgage or loan	30
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
Change in responsibilities at work	29
Son or daughter leaving home	29
Trouble with in-laws	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Spouse begins or stops work	26
Begin or end of school or college	26
Change in living conditions	25
Change in personal habits	24
Trouble with boss	23
Change in work hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in school or college	20
Change in recreation	19
Change in church activities	19
Change in social activities	18
A moderate loan or mortgage	17
Change in sleeping habits	16
Change in number of family get-togethers	15
Change in eating habits	15
Holiday	13
Christmas	12
Minor violations of law	11

Where you are in danger of suffering the ill effects of life crises, try to minimize the disturbance to your life. If, for example, you have lost someone close to you, try to avoid changing your job.

If you have a high score, or know that you will have a high score in the future, it may be worth pre-empting any problems by adopting stress management strategies now. Look after yourself.

What can happen if stress gets out of control

Where you are under excessive levels of short-term stress, then you may find that your performance goes to pieces. Afterwards, however, you will be able to treat this as a learning experience and can adopt stress management strategies to avoid the problem in the future. The effects of long-term stress going out of control can be much more severe. If you do not take action to control it, this can lead to:

- Fatigue and Exhaustion
- Depression
- Burn Out, or
- Breakdown

This section explains what happens during these, and suggests strategies to avoid or cope with them.

Fatigue and exhaustion

Steps to remedy this can be as simple as going to bed earlier, or taking a good break. Alternatively re-examine your life and check whether the things you are doing lead to you meeting your [personal goals](#). This may show you which jobs or commitments you can drop. Implementing [time management](#) strategies may also help you to work more effectively, giving you more time to relax.

Where the problem is serious, go to see your doctor.

Handling Depression

Depression may often be initiated by high levels of long-term stress, by failure associated with stress-related under-performance, or by life crises.

Deep depression is a clinical illness should be treated medically. It is important that if you are depressed that you take this seriously. Severe depressions that can cause years of unhappiness and low performance can be neutralized quickly with drugs, by the appropriate form of psychotherapy, or by other forms of personal action. An important part of intelligence is knowing when there is a problem, and when to ask for help.

Depression may start when:

- You miss important deadlines
- Projects fail
- You are passed over for promotion
- You feel out of control
- You are very tired
- You are feeling inadequate while getting to grips with a new, difficult job
- You are bored for a long period of time

The following points may help in handling depression before it gets serious:

- An important way of guarding against depression is getting your attitude right: positive thinking really can help. As long as you can draw useful lessons from failure, then failure can be positive.
- Similarly, talking about problems to a partner or to a respected colleague can often help a lot. They may have been through a similar situation, seen the problem before, or may be able to gently point out that you have the wrong perspective on a situation.
- Where you are under stress caused by excessive demands, using effective [time management](#) can improve things. Similarly taking an enjoyable break may reduce stress.
- Where you are not under enough pressure, you can set personal challenges to increase stimulus.

If you are already suffering from a mild form of depression, then the following suggestions may help you to deal with it:

- *Self-confidence*: where lack of self-confidence is a factor, there are a number of things you can do:
 - Start to set personal goals. This will help you to give yourself direction in life, and will help you to acknowledge that you can achieve useful and important things.
 - Write down a list of your negative points. Challenge each item on the list objectively, asking yourself 'is this fair?', or 'is this really serious?'. You should find that many of your negative beliefs are wrong or insignificant. Where you identify serious failings, set measurable personal goals to eliminate or neutralize them.
 - Similarly, bring your anxiety and negative self-talk up to the surface of your consciousness. Ask yourself whether it is realistic to worry about the things you worry about: if you have no control over them, then worry does no good. When you look at them rationally, you may find that worries are irrational or out of proportion.
 - Write down a list of the things that you can do well, and of the positive parts of your personality. Ignore 'virtues' like humility and modesty - these are not good for your self-confidence or well being. Be proud of your good points - they can help you to contribute positively to the world.
- *Positive thinking*: almost all apparently negative experiences have positive elements to them. Learn to identify these positives: this will help you to draw the best from every situation. Even failing at something can be an intense and valuable learning experience.
- *Relationships*: You may find that the root of problems lies with:
 - Assertiveness: if you are failing to assert yourself, you may find that other people are not paying attention to your wants and needs. This can be upsetting and humiliating. Learn to express your wishes firmly, but only be confrontational if absolutely necessary. Assertiveness training can be beneficial in learning to do this.

- Social Skills: if your relationships are difficult, then you may identify that difficulties lie in the way in which you deal with other people. In this case some form of Social Skills training may be beneficial. Alternatively if you can identify where things are going wrong, you may be able to set goals to overcome the problem.
- Other people: it is easy to assume (especially when you are depressed) that the fault in relationship problems lies with you. This may or may not be the case. Examine your relationships rationally: you may find that people around you are causing problems - there are some extremely rude, awkward, arrogant or confused people in the world. If people are making your life worse, then you may be better off without them.
- *Standards*: You may find that you have set your standards unrealistically high. This will typically occur where you believe that a certain standard of achievement is necessary, but where you do not have either the financial or time resources available to achieve those standards. In this case it may be realistic to assess the standards that you can reasonably achieve within the set constraints, and aim at these.
- *Fatigue and exhaustion*: If you are very tired, or have been under stress for a long period, you may find that a good break helps you to put problems into perspective.

Avoiding Burn-Out

What is Burnout?

Burnout occurs where highly committed people lose interest and motivation. Typically it will occur in hard working, hard driven people, who become emotionally, psychologically or physically exhausted. You are at risk of burnout where:

- You find it difficult to say 'no' to additional commitments or responsibilities
- You have been under intense and sustained pressure for some time
- Your high standards make it difficult to delegate to assistants
- You have been trying to achieve too much for too long
- You have been giving too much emotional support for too long

Often burnout will manifest itself in a reduction in motivation, volume and quality of performance, or in dissatisfaction with or departure from the activity altogether.

Symptoms of Burn-Out

Burnout will normally occur slowly, over a long period of time. It may express itself physically or mentally. Symptoms of burnout are shown below:

- A feeling of lack of control over commitments
- An incorrect belief that you are accomplishing less
- A growing tendency to think negatively

- Loss of a sense of purpose and energy
- Increasing detachment from relationships. This may cause further conflict and stress, adding to the problem.

Avoiding Burn-Out

If you working very hard, then you should take great care not to burnout. You can avoid mental burnout by ensuring that what you do remains fun: there is a limit to your mental energy that you should respect. As you get better at what you do, people may want increasing amounts of your time, and will rely on you more and more. It is easy for commitments to get bigger: people tend to be quite happy to consume other people's mental resources without worrying about the consequences. You must learn to say 'No' to commitments that you do not want to take on - otherwise you will be in severe danger of burning out as you become unhappy with your situation.

If you are in Danger of Burning Out...

If you feel that you are in danger of burning out, or are not enjoying what you do, the following points can help you correct the situation:

- Re-evaluate your goals and priorities them
- Evaluate the demands placed on you and see how they fit in with your goals
- Identify your ability to comfortably meet these demands.
- If you are over-involved, reduce the commitments that are excessive
- If people demand too much emotional energy, become more unapproachable and less sympathetic. Involve other people in a supportive role. You owe it to yourself to avoid being bled dry emotionally.
- Learn stress management skills
- Examine other areas in your life that are generating stress, such as work or family, and try to solve problems and reduce the stress
- Get the support of your friends and family in reducing stress
- Ensure that you are following a healthy lifestyle:
 - Get adequate sleep and rest to maintain your energy levels
 - Ensure that you are eating a healthy, balanced diet - bad diet can make you ill or feel bad.
 - Get adequate regular aerobic exercise
 - Limit your caffeine and alcohol intake
- Perhaps develop alternative activities such as a relaxing hobby to take your mind off problems
- Acknowledge your own humanity: remember that you have a right to pleasure and a right to relaxation

Late Stages of Burn-Out

If you are in late stages of burnout, feeling deeply demotivated and disenchanted with your job or life, get help from a good psychologist.

If You Have Burned Out...

If you are so demotivated that for a time you do not want to continue with what you do, then take some time off. Alternatively try to switch to another area of activity within your organization. If you come back later, you may find that you start to enjoy work again, and can take on only those commitments that you want.

You may, however, find that you have absolutely no interest in continuing with what you are doing. In this case it may be best to drop it altogether. If you are the sort of person who has burned out, i.e. highly motivated and hard driving, then a complete change of direction may be appropriate. It is very likely that you will find another area in which you will excel. You will discover that you are only demotivated and listless in the area in which you have burned out.

The difference is that you will have already burned out once: next time you now know the signs to look for and the things to watch. Providing that you learn these lessons you will be able to pace yourself, and control your energy much more effectively. This will help you to control stress so that you operate at stress levels where you can give your optimum performance.

'Breakdown'

Where an individual has been under sustained stress for a long period of time, has suffered serious life crises, or has reached a stage of exhaustion and demoralization, and then breakdown may occur.

This may show itself physically as a heart attack, angina or a stroke, or may show as 'nervous' or 'mental' breakdown, where the sufferer becomes mentally ill. In the latter case symptoms may not be seen by the individual, but may be obvious to partners, friends and colleagues.

'Breakdown' sounds sudden and dramatic - in the case of physical breakdown it may be. Mental breakdown, however, may be slow in onset, and may be mild or severe. The boundary between prolonged unhappiness or exhaustion and breakdown is blurred - one definition of breakdown may be that the sufferer finally carries out some act that makes it impossible to continue functioning normally in society.

Symptoms of nervous breakdown may be:

- Uncharacteristic, uncontrollable, irrational behavior
- Intense and excessive anxiety
- Severe depression
- Obsessive activity - persistent performance of an irrational activity, or of a normal activity to an irrational degree
- Manic depression - depression interspersed with periods of euphoria
- Destructive and self-destructive behavior:
 - Sobbing
 - Screaming
 - Shouting
 - Violence
 - Self-mutilation

- Suicide
- Doing stupid things:
 - Giving up a good job
 - Breaking up good relationships
 - Shoplifting
 - Becoming dependent on drugs
- Schizophrenia

Where breakdown appears to be underway, seek professional help immediately.

Planning to Manage Stress

We operate best at an optimum stress level: not having enough stress leaves us feeling bored and lethargic. Having too much stress damages our performance in the short term, and can lead to unhappiness, exhaustion, burnout and serious illness in the long term. It may not initially be obvious what causes you stress, whether you are effective in controlling it, or what your optimum stress level is.

The next articles in this section explain how to find out the causes of stress in your life, and how to plan to control them.

Your Stress Diary

Keeping a stress diary is an effective way of finding out both what causes you stress, and what level of stress you prefer.

In this diary note down your stress levels and how you feel throughout the day. In particular, note down stressful events. Record the following information:

- At a regular interval, for example every hour, record routine stress. Note down:
 - The time
 - The amount of stress that you feel (perhaps on a scale of 1 to 10)
 - How happy you feel
 - Whether you are enjoying your work
 - How efficiently you are working
- When stressful events occur, write down:
 - What the event was
 - When and where did it occur?
 - What important factors made the event stressful?
 - How stressful was the event?
 - How did you handle the event?
 - Did you tackle the cause or the symptom?
 - Did you deal with the stress correctly?

After a few weeks you should be able to analyze this information. It may be interesting as you carry out the analysis to note down the outcomes of the jobs you were doing when you were under stress.

This should give you two types of information:

1. You should be able to understand the level of stress you are happiest with, and the level of stress at which you work most effectively. You may find that your performance is good even when you feel upset by stress.
2. You should know what the main sources of unpleasant stress in your life are. You should understand what circumstances make the stresses particularly unpleasant, and should begin to understand whether your strategies for handling the stresses are effective or not.

It is probably only worth keeping the diary for a short period of time. You will find that the longer the time you keep the diary, the smaller the benefit of each additional day will be. If, however, your lifestyle changes or you begin to suffer from stress again in the future, then it may be worth using the diary approach again. You will probably find that the stresses you face have changed. If this is the case, then keeping a diary again will help you to develop a different approach to deal with them.

Making an Action Plan to Manage Stress

Once you understand the level of stress under which you work most effectively, and know precisely what is causing you stress, the next stage is to work out how to manage stress effectively.

The best way of doing this will probably be to make an Action Plan of things that you are going to do to manage stress. Some elements of this action plan will be actions you are going to take to contain, control or eliminate problems that are causing you stress. Other elements may be health related such as taking more exercise, changing your diet, or improving the quality of your environment. Another part of the plan may cover stress management techniques that you will employ when stress levels begin to build.

A range of stress management techniques will be explained later in this article series.

Different techniques are will be effective for different situations and causes of stress.

The contents and structure of your plan are for you to devise - it will depend entirely on your circumstances.

An example plan is shown below:

- Improve co-ordination with John Smith
- Train Michael Brown to be able to take on low-level quotation
- Set work goals for what I want to achieve this year
- Ask for more feedback from my boss
- Buy an ionizer to improve the office air quality
- Tidy up my office area to reduce distraction
- Take breaks every two hours at work
- Go to sleep at 10pm each night to get adequate sleep
- Reduce the amount of caffeine I drink
- Plan home goals with my partner for how we will spend the next month
- Use deep breathing whenever phone interrupts important work

Increasing Stress Levels - Psyching Up

Where you are not feeling motivated towards a task, either because you are bored by it, or because you are tired, then you may need to psych yourself up. This will increase your arousal so that you can perform effectively.

You can use the following techniques to psych up:

- Focus on the importance or urgency of the task
- Set yourself a challenge - i.e. to do the job in a particular time or to do it to a particularly high standard
- Use suggestion - 'I can feel energy flowing into me'
- Break job down into small parts, do each part between more enjoyable work, and take satisfaction from the successful completion of each element.

Stress Reduction Techniques

This section shows you practical and effective methods of reducing stress to a level where you can perform most effectively. The techniques that you select depend on the cause of the stress and the situation in which the stress occurs.

In choosing methods to combat stress, it is worth asking you where the stress comes from. If outside factors such as important events or relationship difficulties are causing stress, then a positive thinking or imagery-based technique may be effective. Where stress and fatigue are long term, then lifestyle and organizational changes may be appropriate. If the feeling of stress come from adrenaline in your body, then it may be effective to relax the body and slow the flow of adrenaline.

Mental Techniques for Stress Reduction

This section concentrates on techniques for controlling stress that comes from events or anxiety. This includes stress and anxiety before a speech, exam, presentation or performance, and stress that come from unpleasant or irritating events.

Anticipation & Avoidance

By anticipating stress you can prepare for it and work out how to control it when it happens. This can be carried out in a number of ways:

- *Rehearsal:*
By running through a stressful event such as an interview or a speech several times in advance you can polish your performance and build confidence.
- *Planning:*
By analyzing the likely causes of stress, you will be able to plan your responses to likely forms of stress. These might be actions to alleviate the situation or may be stress management techniques that you will use. It is important that you formally plan for this - it is little use just worrying in an undisciplined way - this will be counter-productive. Formal planning of responses to stress is explained in the Mind Tools section on athletes' on-site psych plans.

- *Avoidance:*
Where a situation is likely to be unpleasant, and will not yield any benefit to you, it may be one you can just avoid. You should be certain in your own mind, however, that this is the case.

Reducing the Importance of an Event

A number of factors can make an event take on a high level of significance and cause stress as a result:

- The importance and size of the event
- The prospect of a large financial reward, of promotion, or of personal advancement
- The presence of family, friends or important people

If stress is a problem under these circumstances, then think carefully about the event - take every opportunity to reduce its importance in your eyes:

- If the event seems big, put it in its place along the path to your goals. Compare it in your mind with bigger events you might know of or might have attended.
- If there is a financial reward, remind yourself that there may be other opportunities for reward later. This will not be the only chance you have. Focus on the quality of your performance. Focusing on the rewards will only damage your concentration and raise stress.
- If members of your family are watching, remind yourself that they love you anyway. If friends are real friends, they will continue to like you whether you win or lose.
- If people who are important to your goals are watching then remind yourself that you may well have other chances to impress them.

If you focus on the correct performance of your tasks, then the importance of the event will dwindle into the background.

Reducing Uncertainty

Uncertainty can cause high levels of stress. Causes of uncertainty can be:

- Not having a clear idea of what the future holds
 - Not knowing where your organization will be going
 - Not having any career development plans
 - Not knowing what will be wanted from you in the future
- Not knowing what your boss or colleagues think of your abilities
- Receiving vague or inconsistent instructions

In these cases lack of information or the actions of other people are negatively affecting your ability to perform.

The most effective way of countering this is to ask for the information you need. This might be information on your organization's performance. It may involve asking what your employer wants from you in the future, so that you can set the appropriate career development goals. If you are unsure of how you are doing, ask for a performance review. Where instructions are inconsistent or conflicting, ask for clarification. If you ask in a positive way, then people are usually quite happy to help.

Imagery in Stress Reduction

Imagery is a potent method of stress reduction, especially when combined with physical relaxation methods such as deep breathing.

We are all aware of how particular environments can be very relaxing, while others can be intensely stressful. The principle behind the use of imagery in stress reduction is that you can use your imagination to recreate a place or scene that is very relaxing. The more intensely you use your imagination to recreate the place or situation, the stronger and more realistic the experience will be.

What is imagery?

Remember that your brain is a mass of nerve cells. Your sense organs convert signals from your environment into nerve impulses. These feed into the areas of your brain that interpret that environment. Imagery seeks to create a similar set of nerve impulses that can feed into those areas of the brain that experience the outside world.

This can be illustrated very effectively if you have access to equipment that measures body stress (this functions by measuring, for example, muscle electrical activity, electrical conductivity through skin sweat, etc.) By imagining a pleasant scene, which reduces stress, you can cause a needle on the machine to move in one direction. By imagining an unpleasant and stressful situation, you can move it in the opposite direction. This can be quite alarming when you see it happen the first time!

Imagery in stress reduction

You can use imagery in the following ways to reduce stress:

One common use of imagery in relaxation is to imagine a scene, place or event that you remember as peaceful, restful, beautiful and happy. You can bring all your senses into the image, with sounds of running water and birds, the smell of cut grass, the taste of cool white wine, the warmth of sun, etc. Use the imagined place as a retreat from stress and pressure.

Scenes can involve complex images such as lying on a beach in a deserted cove. You may 'see' cliffs, sea and sand around you, 'hear' the waves crashing against rocks, 'smell' the salt in the air, and feeling the warmth of the sun and a gently breeze on your body. Other images might include looking at a mountain view, swimming in a tropical pool, or whatever - you will be able to come up with the most effective images for yourself. Other uses of imagery in relaxation involve mental pictures of stress flowing out of the body; or of stress, distractions and everyday concerns being folded away and locked into a padlocked chest.

Imagery in preparation and rehearsal

You can also use imagery in rehearsal before a big event, allowing you to run through it in your mind. It allows you to practice in advance for anything unusual that might occur, so that you are prepared and already practiced in handling it. Imagery also allows you to pre-experience achievement of your goals. This help to give you the self-confidence you need to do something well.

Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking

These three related tools are useful in combating negative thinking. Negative thinking causes stress because it damages your confidence that you are equal to the task you face. Negative thoughts occur when you put yourself down, criticize yourself for errors, doubt your abilities, expect failure, etc. Negative thinking is the negative side of suggestion - it damages confidence, harms performance and paralyses mental skills.

Thought Awareness

Thought awareness is the process by which you observe your thoughts for a time, perhaps when under stress, and become aware of what is going through your head. It is best not to suppress any thoughts - just let them run their course while you observe them.

Watch for negative thoughts while you observe your 'stream of consciousness'. Normally these appear and disappear being barely noticed. Normally you will not know that they exist. Examples of common negative thoughts are:

- Worries about how you appear to other people
- A preoccupation with the symptoms of stress
- Dwelling on consequences of poor performance
- Self criticism
- Feelings of inadequacy

Make a note of the thought, and then let the stream of consciousness run on.

Thought awareness is the first step in the process of eliminating negative thoughts - you cannot counter thoughts you do not know you think.

Rational Thinking

Once you are aware of your negative thoughts, write them down and review them rationally. See whether the thoughts have any basis in reality. Often you find that when you properly challenge negative thoughts they are obviously wrong. Often they persist only because they escape notice.

Positive Thinking and Affirmation

You may find it useful to counter negative thoughts with positive affirmations. You can use affirmations to build confidence and change negative behavior patterns into positive

ones. You can base affirmations on clear, rational assessments of fact, and use them to undo the damage that negative thinking may have done to your self-confidence. Examples of affirmations are:

- I can do this.
- I can achieve my goals.
- I am completely myself and people will like me for myself.
- I am completely in control of my life.
- I learn from my mistakes. They increase the basis of experience on which I can draw.
- I am a good valued person in my own right.

Traditionally people have advocated positive thinking almost recklessly, as if it is a solution to everything. It should be used with common sense. No amount of positive thinking will make everyone who applies it an Olympic champion marathon runner (though an Olympic marathon runner is unlikely to have reached this level without being pretty good at positive thinking). Firstly decide rationally what goals you can realistically attain with hard work, and then use positive thinking to reinforce these.

Self-Hypnosis and Auto-Suggestion

What is Self-Hypnosis

Hypnosis, like meditation, has a bad reputation. Many people over many years have made their living by overlaying this practical and useful technique with religious, mystical and magical rituals that are not warranted.

Hypnosis is merely a state of mind in which:

- You are very relaxed
- You are paying complete attention to the suggestions you want to implant
- You do not criticize the suggestions made, and accept them at face value.

Self-hypnosis is used to directly program your unconscious with affirmations and suggestions that would otherwise have to run through critical processes in your mind. You can use this programming as an effective method to reduce stress and induce relaxation.

Normal hypnosis is often ineffective in stress reduction, as it requires the presence of a hypnotist. Self-hypnosis, however, is just as easy and has the additional benefit that you can completely control the inputs to your mind when you are in a suggestible state.

Hypnotizing Yourself

The first few times that you use self-hypnosis, it is best to find a place where you can be undisturbed for a while. Sit or lie down, eliminate any distractions, and relax. This puts you in the best possible conditions for using the technique - however as you get more practice you will find that you can use self-hypnosis almost anywhere. Obviously it

should *not* be used when you need to be alert - e.g. when driving or operating machinery, etc.

The first step is to relax yourself: close your eyes, and try using imagery of waves of relaxation running down your body from your scalp downwards, washing out stress. Let the waves run in time with your breathing, first washing down over your head, then your neck, then your torso, then arms, and finally your legs. Feel the muscles in your body relaxing as the waves of relaxation wash over them.

Alternative techniques can involve fixing your eyes on a spot on the wall, or riding down in a lift/elevator from the top of a tall building, slowly dropping down into relaxation and drowsiness. The method you choose to induce hypnosis is up to you.

The next step is to use suggestion to deepen the state. This is as simple as saying to yourself something like 'I am feeling relaxed and comfortable. With every breath I am becoming more relaxed and more comfortable.'

Once you are completely relaxed and focused on your own suggestions, you are in a useful state of self-hypnosis. One suggestion you can usefully embed is that when you repeat a particular trigger word to yourself you will relax into this state.

Suggestion and Hypnosis

Before you enter a hypnotic state it is useful to think about the suggestions that you want to apply in it. Suggestions can be simple affirmations that undo the damage done by negative thinking (see Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking).

Alternatively you can use them to make psychological adjustments or reinforce confidence to help to achieve goals that you have set.

Once you have decided what you want to use in suggestions, spend a little time working out a form of words for each suggestion that is short, positive, and powerful. Repeat this to yourself when you have reached a self-hypnotic state.

Effective use of suggestion can:

- Build confidence
- Reinforce goals by etching them into your mind
- Reduce stress
- Motivate and energize when you are feeling sluggish.

Suggestion can be used without hypnosis, for example you might make a suggestion tape to play when you are driving, while still wanting to remain alert. Using suggestion with self-hypnosis just makes it more effective.

Meditation

Meditation is a very effective method of relaxation.

The idea of meditation is to focus your thoughts on one relaxing thing for a sustained period of time. This rests your mind by diverting it from thinking about the problems that have caused stress. It gives your body time to relax and recuperate and clear away toxins that may have built up through stress and mental or physical activity.

Meditation is particularly useful where:

- You have been under long term stress,
- You have been under short term stress which has caused adrenaline to be released into your bloodstream,
- You have been worrying about problems,
- You have been physically active.

Relaxing using meditation can have the following effects:

- Slows breathing
- Reduces blood pressure
- Helps muscles relax
- Gives the body time to eliminate lactic acid and other waste products
- Reduces anxiety
- Eliminates stressful thoughts
- Helps with clear thinking
- Helps with focus and concentration
- Reduces irritability
- Reduces stress headaches

Meditation Techniques

The essence of meditation is to quiet your thoughts by focusing completely on just one thing. Unlike hypnosis, which is more of a passive experience, meditation is an active process, which seeks to exclude outside thoughts by concentrating all mental faculties on the subject of meditation.

In all cases it helps if your body is relaxed. It should be in a position that you can comfortably sustain for a period of time (20 - 30 minutes is ideal). If you choose, and you are sufficiently supple, then the lotus position may be appropriate. Otherwise, sitting in a comfortable chair or lying on a bed may be equally effective.

A number of different focuses of concentration may be used. Which one you choose is a matter of personal taste. Some of these are detailed below:

- *Breathing:*
A useful method may be to focus your attention on your breathing. Concentrate on breaths in and out. You can accompany this by counting your breaths using the numbers 0 to 9. You can visualize images of the numbers changing with each breath. Alternatively you could visualize health and relaxation flowing into your body when you inhale, and stress or pain flowing out when you exhale.
- *Focusing on an object:*
Here you completely focus attention on examination of an object. Look at it in immense detail for the entire meditation. Examine the shape, color differences, texture, temperature and movement of the object. Objects often used are flowers, candle flames or flowing designs. However you can use other objects equally effectively (e.g. alarm clocks, desk lamps, or even coffee mugs!)
- *Focus on a sound:*
Some people like to focus on sounds. The classic example is the Sanskrit word

'Om', meaning 'perfection'. Whether or not this is practical depends on your lifestyle.

- *Imagery:*

This can be a very refreshing and pleasant way of meditating. Here you create a mental image of a pleasant and relaxing place in your mind. Involve all your senses in the imagery: see the place, hear the sounds, smell the aromas, feel the temperature and the movement of the wind. Enjoy the location in your mind.

In all cases it is important to keep your attention focused. If external thoughts or distractions wander in, let them drift out. If necessary, visualize attaching the thoughts to objects and then move the objects out of your attention.

You may find that your attention keeps breaking as you worry that time runs out. In this case it may be easiest to set an alarm to go off when you should stop meditating.

You will find that as you practice meditation your attention will improve.

Physical relaxation techniques

These are useful where stress is caused by physical processes in your body: perhaps where muscles are tense, or where you are experiencing the effects of adrenaline.

Taking Exercise

Taking frequent effective exercise is probably one of the best physical stress-reduction techniques available. Exercise not only improves your health and reduces stress caused by unfitness, it also relaxes tense muscles and helps you to sleep.

Exercise has a number of other positive benefits you may not be aware of:

- It improves blood flow to your brain, bringing additional sugars and oxygen which may be needed when you are thinking intensely
- When you think hard, the neurons of your brain function more intensely. As they do this they build up toxic waste products that cause foggy thinking in the short term, and can damage the brain in the long term. By exercising you speed the flow of blood through your brain, moving these waste products faster. You also improve this blood flow so that even when you are not exercising, waste is eliminated more efficiently.
- It can cause release of chemicals called endorphins into your blood stream. These give you a feeling of happiness and well-being.

There are a lot of wrong approaches to exercise. Many traditionally recommended forms of exercise actually damage your body over the medium or long term. It is worth finding reputable and up-to-date sources of advice on exercise, possibly from your doctor, and then having a customized exercise plan drawn up for you.

An important thing to remember is that exercise should be fun - if you do not enjoy it, then you will probably not keep doing it.

Progressive Muscular Relaxation

Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR) is a purely physical technique for relaxing your body when muscles are tense.

The idea behind PMR is that you tense up a group of muscles so that they are as tightly contracted as possible. Hold them in a state of extreme tension for a few seconds. Then relax the muscles to their previous state. Finally you consciously relax them again as much as you can.

You can apply PMR to any or all of the muscle groups in your body depending on whether you want to relax just a single area or your whole body.

Experiment with PMR by forming a fist, and clenching your hand as tight as you can for a few seconds. Then relax your hand to its previous tension, and then consciously relax it again so that it is as loose as possible. You should feel deep relaxation in the muscles.

Although you might well be able to relax muscles as far without the initial tension, tensing the muscle helps to provide a starting point for the exercise. It helps in gauging the initial level of tension in the muscle.

For maximum relaxation you can use PMR in conjunction with breathing techniques and imagery (e.g. of stress flowing out of the body).

It can also be effective to link the exercise of PMR to a keyword that you can say to yourself. Associating the feeling of relaxation with the keyword means that in a moment of tension you can bring the feeling of relaxation purely by repeating that word.

Breathing Control

Deep breathing is a very effective method of relaxation. It is a core component of everything from the 'take ten deep breaths' approach to calming someone down, right through to yoga relaxation and Zen meditation. It works well in conjunction with other relaxation techniques such as Progressive Muscular Relaxation, relaxation imagery and meditation to reduce stress.

Biofeedback in Stress Management

Strictly speaking, biofeedback systems are tools to aid relaxation as opposed to stress management techniques.

Biofeedback systems use electronic sensors to measure stress, and then feed the results of this measurement back to you. This feedback may take the form of movement of a pen on a graph plotter, or may be by the pitch of sound coming through earphones.

This feedback allows you to experiment with stress management techniques, and actually see or hear them taking effect on your body. It allows you to practice different ways of using the techniques and compare the results.

There are three main approaches to biofeedback:

- *Skin temperature methods:*
Adrenaline diverts blood from the body surface to the core of the body, in preparation for response to danger. As less warm blood is going to the surface, skin temperature drops.
- *Skin electrical activity methods:*
When you are under stress you sweat more. Skin that is damp (sweating) conducts

- electricity more effectively than skin that is dry. These methods of biofeedback measure the amount of electricity conducted between two electrodes on the skin.
- *Muscle electrical activity:*
These methods measure the electrical activity of muscles under the surface of the skin. This is useful in measuring the tension of these muscles.

Biofeedback methods are useful ways of demonstrating the effectiveness of what may otherwise seem to be fairly nebulous methods of relaxing such as imagery. They convert vague feelings into hard, observable information, and help you to fine-tune the use of stress management techniques.

Techniques for Reducing Long Term Stress

The main emphasis in management of long-term stress is on adjusting your working methods and your lifestyle. Formal relaxation techniques do have a part in this, but equally important are time management skills, a positive attitude, a healthy diet with sufficient exercise and adequate rest, and a pleasant environment. Adjusting these things will improve the quality of your life as well as increasing your resistance to stress. This section explains these in more detail.

Time Management

Time Management is a set of related practical skills that help you to use your time in the most effective and productive way possible. Time management helps you to reduce work stress by being more in control of your time and by being more productive. This ensures that you have time to relax outside work.

The central shift of attitude within time management is to concentrate on results, not on activity. To this end it embraces a range of skills that help you to:

- Assess the value of your time, and how effectively you are using it
- Focus on your priorities so that you know which tasks should be done, which ones can be delegated, and which ones can be dropped
- Plan projects so that they are done properly, with adequate resources
- Use the time you have more effectively
- Create more time
- Manage and avoid distractions
- Increase your productivity and personal effectiveness

This helps you to reduce long-term stress by:

- Helping to put things in perspective when you feel 'drowned' in work
- Ensuring that you are in control of where you are going and what you are doing
- Helping you to be highly productive, and secure because of this

- Improving your enjoyment of your current role, and increasing your prospects of promotion to more interesting jobs
- Giving you more quality time to relax and enjoy life outside work.

The Mind Tools section on [Time Management Skills](#) covers this in much more detail.

Your attitude and it's effect on your stress

Attitude is fundamental to long-term stress management. Where your attitude is negative or hostile, you will create problems out of opportunities and cause stress by alienating and irritating other people. Where you have a positive attitude, you can maintain a sense of perspective and draw the positive elements out of each situation. You will find that people will be more helpful and co-operative as they find you a pleasure to work with. This next series of articles discusses the attitudes that will help you to maintain perspective, stay in control and get the best out of other people.

Keeping things in Perspective

When you are under stress it is very easy to lose perspective. Problems that are relatively minor can take on an apparent size that makes them seem difficult and intimidating. Naturally this feeds your feeling of stress, which makes your problems feel worse, which feeds your feeling of stress....

If you take a positive approach to life, trying to find a good side to every situation, then you will find that you are much less prone to stress. You will worry less, sleep better and enjoy life more. You will probably also find that you do better as people enjoy working with you more.

An important part of this is learning to view mistakes as learning experiences - if you have learned something from a mistake, then it has a positive value.

When you face what seems to be a huge and overwhelming problem, ask yourself the following questions:

- *Is this really a problem at all?*
If you view it in a different way, is it actually an opportunity to do something well? If it really is a difficult problem, then most other people will probably fail at it or give up. If you can deal with the situation, then this will be a major triumph for you. If you take the problem on, then what will you learn from it, whatever the outcome?
- *Is this a problem anyone else has or has had?*
If it is, find out how they deal with it or just talk to them to share the problem - they may be glad to talk. If you are facing a problem at work, talk to older or more experienced colleagues whom you trust. They will probably have seen the problem before, and may be able to help to put it in perspective.
- *Can you break it down?*
With a little thought you can usually reduce seemingly huge and impossible problems to a number of smaller, more manageable problems or tasks.

- *If you are facing a lot of problems, can you priorities them?*
This helps you to work out the order in which you should approach tasks, and helps you to distinguish between important jobs and jobs that can be deferred. A good way of doing this is to use a [Prioritized To Do List](#).
- *Does it really matter anyway?*
If everything goes wrong, will it really matter anyway? If it does, will it matter in six months or a year? Bear in mind that you will probably have plenty of opportunities to correct any failure, or to shine in other ways if things go wrong. As long as you have done your best, and learn from any mistakes you make, then you cannot do any better.

Being in Control

When you are in control of your life, you can control the level of stress you face. When you are out of control and unable to schedule events, then you cannot prevent stress building on top of stress. You will experience unpleasant peaks and troughs of stress. The feeling of being out of control is unpleasant and stressful in its own right.

Being in control of your life is largely a matter of attitude.

Often the difference between being in control and out of control comes down to making an investment of a little of your free time in planning. An effective method of doing this is to use [personal goal setting](#). It starts by helping you to choose your long-term life goals. Then it provides a framework for working out a series of lower level plans ending in a list of jobs to do today to meet your lifetime goals.

By planning you can anticipate problems in advance. This helps you to work out how to prevent or avoid a problem, or anticipate and exploit the positive elements of a situation. Some of the most satisfying and enjoyable work you can do is work that you choose to do to meet your own long-term goals.

Part of this process of planning and goal setting should include self-improvement goals. If you have identified areas of your personality that you should improve, then you can set goals to do this. This can include work on improving your self-image, being realistic about your faults, thinking positively, learning from mistakes and taking satisfaction from your successes.

Change

It is important that you learn to welcome change - otherwise you will expose yourself to intense stress. You will be aware that we are currently in the middle of a huge information revolution. As this runs its course, its impact on ways of life and society will be at least as great as the Industrial Revolution.

As with the Industrial Revolution, people who resist change will be crushed by it. People who welcome change will be able to exploit the new niches opening up on a constant basis. Success depends on adaptation to, or anticipation of, change.

Attitudes to Other People

Relations with other people can be either very satisfying or very stressful and unpleasant. While a certain amount of this comes down to their personalities, your attitude has a surprisingly large effect on the way that other people respond to you.

It is important when you are trying to improve the quality of relationships that you understand the difference between managing them and exploiting them. When you manage a relationship you are improving it for mutual advantage. When you exploit a relationship you are improving your results at the expense of the other person. If you exploit other people, then you will probably get a reputation for this and suffer in the medium and long term. It will also cultivate an unnecessarily cynical attitude to other people.

The following are important factors in forming harmonious relationships with other people:

- *Take a positive approach:*
People enjoy working with and relating to happy, optimistic people. When things are getting difficult, a smile or positive approach to a problem can make the difference between success and failure of a project.
- *Project a positive image:*
Take care over personal grooming. Wear good quality, well cared for clothes that project a suitable image. Learn about body language, and learn how to adopt a good, open posture.
- *Be assertive:*
When you deal with other people, you should confidently project your right to have your views taken into consideration. This does not mean aggressively insisting on getting your own way, which irritates other people and tramples on their rights. If you are not assertive then you will probably not be noticed, your triumphs will not be given their due weight and your needs will not be given proper attention.
- *Pay compliments where they are due:*
If you notice something good about someone, or they have done something well, compliment them. This costs you nothing, and helps to build their confidence. It is obviously important to be sincere - no one likes an obvious flatterer.
- *Try to leave people pleased to have spoken to you:*
This can be an extremely useful maxim, providing that you do not allow other people to exploit you as a result. When you are dealing with well-adjusted human beings, the more you give, the more you get.

An extremely powerful technique when dealing with other people is to try to understand the way they think. Try to think yourself inside their mind. See life through their eyes, feel what they feel, and understand their background, influences and motivations. Sometimes things can go wrong. Some people are not intelligent in the way they conduct relationships. Where you face relationship problems, your attitude will often determine the amount of stress you experience:

- *If someone is sarcastic and rude to you:*
remember that this is probably caused by a fault in his or her character. They are

probably irritating and offending many other people as well. Examine any comment rationally: if it is unfair, then reject it. If rude comments are fair, then learn from them. Do remember, though that one person's vice may be another person's virtue: what seems stubborn to one person may seem firm-minded to another.

- *If someone hurts you:*
do not bear grudges. If you do, you will tend to churn them over in your mind. This will damage your vital positive attitude to life, may cause stress and may interfere with the quality of your sleep. Forgiveness is important in maintaining relationships that are important, providing that the forgiveness is genuine. You may decide, however, not to forget the fact of the hurt - it makes sense to confront, avoid or circumvent people who are unnecessarily hurtful.
- *If you are facing a frustrating situation:*
where unnecessary obstacles are put in your way, or people you are dealing with are being indecisive or unhelpful, then using relaxation techniques can be useful. This helps you to remain calm with people.
- *If someone is annoying you:*
it is almost always best to remain calm and neutral, if only because you will be able to think and react more clearly and effectively.

Slowing down out of work

A good way of reducing long-term stress is to take up an easy sport or hobby in your own time. If you spend all your working day competing or stressed, then it can be pleasant to be completely non-competitive for some of your non-work time.

It can be very relaxing to take up slow physical activities such as sailing or walking where there is little or no pressure for performance.

Similarly you can reduce long-term stress by making a routine period of time for yourself every day for undirected activities such as:

- Reading a novel
- Watching television or listening to music
- Making love
- Meditating
- Having a long bath
- Having a massage
- etc.

Health, Nutrition and Exercise

A surprising amount of the stress we may experience on a daily basis can be caused by the chemicals we consume. By eating or drinking certain things we can actually put our bodies under chemical stress.

Similarly if we are eating an unbalanced diet we may be stressing our bodies by depriving them of essential nutrients. Eating too much for a long period causes obesity. This puts your heart and lungs under stress, overloads your organs and reduces stamina.

You should be aware of the effects of the following:

- *Caffeine:*
Caffeine is a stimulant. One of the reasons you probably drink it is to raise your level of arousal (i.e. stress). If you are drinking many cups of coffee a day, then you may find that you can reduce a lot of stress by switching to good decaffeinated coffee for a portion of your daily intake.
- *Alcohol:*
In small amounts alcohol may help you relax. In larger amounts it may increase stress as it disrupts sleep (and causes hangovers!). In large amounts over a long term alcohol will damage your body.
- *Nicotine:*
While in the very short term nicotine can cause relaxation, its toxic effects raise the heart rate and stress the body. If you smoke, try taking your pulse before and after a cigarette, and notice the difference. After the initial period of giving up smoking, most ex-smokers report feeling much more relaxed on a general basis. If you are ready to give up smoking, then an excellent book to read is Alan Carr's 'Easy Way to Give Up Smoking'.
- *Sugar:*
Sugar-rich foods can raise energy in the short term. The problem with this is that your body copes with high levels of sugar by secreting insulin, which reduces the amount of sugar in your blood stream. Insulin can persist and continue acting after it has normalized levels of blood sugar. This can cause an energy dip.

If you eat a good, well-balanced diet then you should be able to minimize this sort of chemical stress. Your body will be receiving all the nutrients it requires to function effectively. As with exercise, there is a lot of bad advice on diet available. You will normally be able to get reliable information on diet from your doctor or your government's department of health.

Eliminating Stress From Your Environment

If your living and working environments are badly organized then they can be a major source of stress. If your environment is well organized and pleasant, then it can help to reduce stress and increase productivity. Remember though that while it may be important for people under stress to have a calm environment, others may enjoy the raised levels of arousal associated with the 'buzz' of a busy office.

While the points listed may each contribute only in a small way to creating a more pleasant environment, taken together they can have a significant effect in reducing stress: This section explains how you can reduce stress in your environment by improving:

- Air quality
- Lighting
- Decoration and tidiness
- Noise
- Furniture & Ergonomics

- Personal space

Air quality

Poor air quality can make life unpleasant. The following factors can contribute to the problem:

- Smoking
- Air conditioning
- Heating
- Ionization by electrical equipment
- Overcrowding
- Pollution
- Solvents in e.g. carpets and furniture
- Excess humidity or dryness

You can do a number of things to improve air quality and reduce the stress caused by it:

- Ban smoking
- Open windows
- Use an ionizer. This helps to freshen the air by eliminating positive ions created by e.g. electric motors powering computer fans.
- Use dehumidifiers where humidity is a problem
- Introduce plants where the air is too dry. Evaporation of water from the plant pots or from the plants themselves will help to raise humidity. Plants also raise the amount of oxygen in the air and reduce stuffiness.

Lighting

Bad lighting can cause eyestrain and increase fatigue, as can light that is too bright, or light that shines directly into your eyes. Fluorescent lighting can also be tiring.

What you may not appreciate is that the quality of light may also be important. Most people are happiest in bright sunshine - this may cause release of chemicals in the body that bring a feeling of emotional well-being. Artificial light, which typically comprises only a few wavelengths of light, does not seem to have the same effect on mood that sunlight has.

Try experimenting with working by a window or using full spectrum bulbs in your desk lamp. You will probably find that this improves the quality of your working environment.

Decoration and tidiness

If your environment at work or home is dirty, uncomfortable or neglected, then this can cause stress. Similarly if your living or working area is untidy and chaotic, then this can be distracting.

It is important, however, not to be dogmatic about tidiness: while it is very difficult to successfully co-ordinate many tasks in an untidy work area, it is perfectly possible to

work on one task successfully. The recent trend of 'clear desk' thinking arrogantly ignores one of the most important lessons about human beings: that people work in different ways.

Noise

Noise can cause intense stress.

In a working environment a high level of background noise can severely impair your ability to concentrate. In an open plan office, the sound of people talking casually, of office machinery, or of meetings going on can seriously undermine the quality of work done. Ringing telephones disturb not only the person to whom the call is directed, but also other people in the same area.

Large amounts of background noise during the day can cause irritability, tension and headaches in addition to loss of concentration.

Solutions to noise at work can involve:

- Installation of partitions,
- Use of meeting rooms separate from the main work area,
- Use of quiet rooms when concentration is needed,
- And, if all else fails, use of earplugs.

In a home environment, unwanted noise can be even more stressful and irritating as it intrudes on private space.

Where noise comes from neighbors or someone sharing the house, it may be effective to try a pleasantly assertive approach. Ask that music is turned down or that a different room be used as a child's nursery.

Where noise comes from outside the home, double-glazing may be effective in reducing it.

Furniture & Ergonomics

Another source of stress is muscular tension and pain caused by bad furniture, or by bad use of good furniture.

This normally shows itself in backache caused by badly designed chairs or by bad seating positions in properly designed chairs, although it can show itself in other ways. It is important to take the time to arrange your working environment so that it is comfortable. For example, when you consider that you may spend a large proportion of each day sitting in a particular seat, it is worth ensuring that it is not causing you pain or damaging your body.

If you work at a computer, then it is worth ensuring that the monitor and keyboard are comfortably positioned, and that you are well positioned relative to them. If you find that tendons in your hands get sore when you type for sustained periods, then it may be worth experimenting with a 'natural' keyboard. If you find that your eyes get sore when looking at a monitor, or that you start to get headaches, then try taking breaks periodically.

If you feel that you are experiencing pain from your environment, it may be worth looking into ergonomics in more detail.

Personal space

It is important for people to feel that they have sufficient personal space at work and at home. You may have experienced the dissatisfaction, stress and irritation of working at a different desk each day, or of sleeping in a different hotel room each night. This unpleasant situation is largely caused by the lack of power to organize and control the space in which you operate.

Other people can also cause you stress when they impose themselves on your personal space, perhaps entering it uninvited.

The ideal way of establishing personal space is to have a room or office of your own, into which you control access. If this is not possible, you can block off areas with furniture, screens or blinds.

In the highly undesirable situation where no personal space is available, then you can establish some feeling of ownership by bringing personal objects such as small plants or photographs of loved-ones into the workspace.

Some recent experiments in management practice have involved eliminating personal space in the working environment, allocating different working cubicles to members of staff each time they come in. The idea behind this is to keep sales people out of the office. If your employer shows this level of contempt for you, then the best thing may be to find another job with a better company.

Summary

This series of articles has shown the following key points:

- That the stress you experience is something that is largely under your control
- Stress can come from a range of different sources
- Short term stress occurs where you find yourself under pressure in a particular situation
 - A certain level of short term stress is needed to feel alert and alive
 - Too much is unpleasant and can seriously damage performance
 - Short term stress is best handled using mental or physical stress management techniques
- Long term stress comes from a build up of stress over a long period
 - Sustained high levels can lead to serious physical and mental illness if not controlled
 - Long term stress is best managed by changes to lifestyle, attitude and environment
- By using a stress diary you can monitor and understand the causes of stress in your life. The diary can help you to evaluate your performance under stress.
- Once you understand what is causing you stress, you can make an action plan for stress management. This gives you positive goals to work towards.

Above all, you should now be able to master stress and make it work for you.

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Prioritized To Do Lists

What are To Do Lists?

'To Do Lists' are lists of tasks to be carried out to achieve goals. These goals might be specific targets, or may simply be the efficient administration of your day. By ordering these tasks in order of importance, you have prioritized your To Do List.

Whilst To Do Lists are very simple, they are also extremely powerful, both as a method of organizing yourself and as a method of reducing stress. Often problems may seem intimidating and large or you may have a seemingly huge number of demands on your time. This may leave you with a feeling of loss of control, or of being overburdened with work, or of facing hopelessly huge obstacles.

Getting Back Control

The solution is often simple: write down the tasks that face you, and if they are large, break them down into their component elements. If these still seem large, break them down again. Do this until everything that you have to do is listed. Once you have done this, run through these jobs allocating priorities from A (very important) to F

(unimportant). If too many tasks have a high priority, run through the list again and demote the less important high priority items. Once you have done this, rewrite the list in priority order. You will then have a precise, sharp plan that you can use to eliminate the problems you face in the order that they need to be eliminated. This allows you to separate important jobs from the many time-consuming trivial ones, and gives you control of the problems facing you, reducing stress hugely.

Even if the things you want to achieve do not seem overwhelming, To Do Lists are extremely useful ways of organizing yourself efficiently, and of motivating yourself to achieve what needs to be achieved efficiently.

Preparing To Do Lists

It is a good idea to prepare To Do Lists whenever suits you: some people recommend doing them at the end of each day for the next day, others at the beginning of a day, others whenever you feel that things are getting out of control - the important thing is that you use them in the way that suits you.

If you haven't used To Do Lists before, try them: they are one of the keys to being really productive.