

The Stress Management Survival Kit

Michael Tunnecliffe

1. What is stress?

We often refer to ourselves as being 'under stress' when pressures or problems arise. The thoughts, feelings and behaviours triggered by these pressures or problems are the reactions we perceive as 'stress'.

2. Types of stress

There are a number of types of stress which we can experience in our day to day work role. The two most common are 'reactive stress' and 'cumulative stress'.

Reactive stress is a consequence of something happening which causes us to react in a negative manner. This may be as simple as being annoyed because someone arrives late for a meeting. It could come from more serious incidents, such as an accident.

Cumulative stress is the consequence of pressures building up over a period of time. It's often the little things which can trigger a cumulative stress reaction. Most of us have had one of those days when a number of annoying little problems put us under a lot of pressure. Cumulative stress may be a result of a number of reactive stressors in a short space of time.

3. Sources of stress

In the work situation, stress can arise from a number of sources. We all create **personal stressors** for ourselves. **Interpersonal stress** comes from having to constantly deal with other people and **organisational stress** is a product of having to conform to the requirements of a system.

Personal stressors are related to our personality, beliefs and values. We all have expectations which are not met, plus beliefs and values which those around us do not share. For many of us this can be stressful, as it may cause us to question our own beliefs, or even give in to behaviours which run against our own values.

Interpersonal stressors are situations where we are in some type of conflict with those around us (family, friends, colleagues). The stress of interpersonal conflict has been described by some people as the most difficult to manage due to the unpredictability of other people's behaviour. Conflict stressors can be of five types, ranging from the relatively easiest to resolve to the potentially most difficult to resolve.

Type 1 – Data Conflicts: A stressful situation which arises when you work from different information to that which another person has.

Type 2 – Interest Conflicts: Stress which arises when your interests clash with those of another person.

Type 3 – Structural Conflicts: Stress which comes when people use or apply rules from a system which blocks your aims, or works against you.

Type 4 – Values Conflicts: The stress of having to work with or deal with someone whose personal values differ from yours. Often, the more significant the difference, the greater the stress.

Type 5 – Relationship Conflicts: Stress which comes from working with, or dealing with someone whose whole manner creates problems for you. This is often called a 'personality clash'.

Organisational stressors are the factors within your organisation, or job role, which can create problems for you. These include change, restructure, job uncertainty, the introductions of new technology or new methods of operating.

4. Consequences of stress

Unless there is some type of physical injury to the body, stress always starts as a psychological perception. The trigger is automatic, creating a physical response within

the body. Stress reactions can be emotional, mental, physiological or behavioural. These are examples.....

Emotional reactions: *frustration, anger, apprehension, worry, depression*

Mental reactions: *unable to concentrate at work, day-dreaming, slowed thinking, increased mistakes in tasks which involve mental focus.*

Physiological reactions: *autonomic arousal (sweating, dizziness, heart palpitations) and illness (headache, nausea, indigestion, etc.) Also, muscle ache is very common.*

Behavioural reactions: *sleep disturbances, mood swings, agitation, failure to maintain good work habits, blaming others and wanting to avoid certain activities.*

5. Consequences of stress

Myth 1: All stress is bad

Stress can be positive or negative. Stress is the means by which we prepare to protect ourselves when placed under threat. Positive stress can be in the form of incentive, motivation, or initiative. Problematic stress, which can have a negative impact on our health, is due to an overload factor, or a situation where the reaction triggered is out of proportion to the actual issue causing the problem.

Myth 2: There was no stress 20 years ago

Stress has always been a part of the work situation. However, in the past there was little recognition of stress being a cause of many physical ailments. People often put the cause of their medical problems down to other factors, rather than recognise they were stress reactions.

Myth 3: Only weak people get stressed

Everyone can become stressed at sometime in their life. Stress is related more to a person's ability and resources to cope than to specific characteristics of an individual. There are, however, some people who may have a

predisposition to stress. Even individuals who show great coping in some areas of their life can be subjected to stress-related problems in other situations.

Myth 4: Being stressed means you're in the wrong job

There are many people who are now taking on duties and work-roles which are very different from the original job they were employed to do. This can be a source of stress for them, as work-roles and work demands are constantly changing. It's not so much that people are in the job; rather people have not made the adjustment required to what the job is now asking of them. If people expect to do a different job with the same beliefs, values and attitudes, it's not surprising that job is going to be a source of stress for them.

Myth 5: The best ways to handle stress are learning to relax and by taking a holiday

Relaxation and holidays are certainly good ways to handle stress, however, they are not the best, or even ideal ways to do so. Some recent research within a large US organisation showed that within 48 hours of returning to work from a two-week holiday, employees were at the same level of stress they had been before they went on leave. Relaxation is useful. However, the best form of stress management comes from determining your unique needs and following through with strategies to address these.

6. Check your level of stress at work.

Page 6 has a self assessment, score and results you can use to monitor your levels of stress. You may wish to print a few copies of page 6 to complete and check your scores from time to time.

7. Basics of stress management

Stress management is realistically looking at ways to manage or cope with those factors or situations which place you under pressure. At its simplest level, there are only three ways to manage stress....

1. CHANGE the stressors putting pressure on you
2. INFLUENCE the impact of these stressors, or
3. Take steps to COPE with them.

Of course, what you can do is largely determined by the level of power you have in any given situation. Many people want their stress managed by having the key stressor go away, yet they have no power to make this happen. As a consequence, the stress continues and the individual's frustration levels rise.

Practical and constructive stress management is about identifying the key areas of pressure, or factors creating stress for you, then deciding what are the most useful steps you have the power to take in order to reduce this stress.

If you are experiencing stress, doing what you have done in the past is unlikely to help. Remember that old saying..... *If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got.*

The three key areas of stress management are thinking differently, acting differently, and lifestyle change. Here are some ideas you may find useful.

8. Thinking differently

Reframing: Much of the stress we experience comes from how we view events in our life. Reframing is changing the way we view an event or situation to make it less stressful. Remember that old question*Is the glass half full, or half empty?* We feel differently about a half glass full to a half empty glass. Reframing doesn't change the reality of a situation, it just helps us to view the situation less stressfully.

Positive thinking: We can reduce stress by focusing on a positive aspect of a situation. Negative thoughts debilitate us and reduce our power, while positive thoughts make us feel

physically and mentally stronger. Ways to increase your positive thinking are:

- Focus on your personal strengths
- Ask yourself what have you learnt from the stress?
- Look for opportunities in the stressful situation
- Decide to make positive changes

9. Acting differently

Resolve conflict: Conflict is one of the greatest sources of stress for most people. In fact, some researchers say that around 75% of our stress comes from dealing with other people. When confronted by a conflict situation, pause and respond to that situation, rather than react to it. When we respond, we take control. However, when we react, we work out of emotion and self-protection. Try to use the L-A-T-E approach to resolving conflict.

L – Listen to the other person's point of view

A – Acknowledge key points of agreement

T – Tell the other person your ideas in a calm manner

E – Encourage the other person to problem-solve

Talk to people you trust: Talking about the situations creating pressure for you helps most people to defuse built-up emotions. While at work, talk to a colleague you trust. Away from work talk with family and friends. Part of you may want to avoid contact with others when you are feeling stressed, however, it's important not to isolate yourself from your support people.

Get organised: Often a good deal of stress comes from the pressure of disorganisation. Some of the ways you can become more organised are.....

- Plan your day and try to stay with your plan
- Set clear priorities so important tasks get done

- Take notes on things-to-do and use your diary well
- Avoid time wasters and being caught up in trivia

Use Distractors: When a situation is very stressful, have an alternative activity as a distractor. You can then come back to the original task with a fresh outlook. A simple ‘time-out’ can have a positive impact.

Break work into smaller parts: Any large task can look less formidable and become less stressful if it’s broken into a set of smaller tasks.

Improve your work skills: Consider the skill areas you can develop or improve, and be willing to learn. Many people become stressed when they have to take on tasks outside of their area of skill or expertise.

Use humour: Humour is an effective stress management tool. Look for the funny side of situations and be to use appropriate humour to lower tension.

10. Lifestyle change

Learn to relax: Stress is often signalled by an increase in body tension. Regular relaxation activities can help reduce this tension. These can range from simple breathing changes (breathe slower and deeper) to looking for alternative activities away from work which help you to relax (eg. hobbies, music, gardening, sport etc.)

Exercise: Most exercise, even walking, is beneficial as a means of managing stress. Regular exercise reduces muscle tension, helps the body to relax, improves circulation, lowers blood pressure and has a beneficial effect on worrying thoughts and anxieties.

Caution: *If it’s not something you already do, exercise needs to be planned and carried out cautiously. A sudden high power exercise program can do more harm than good, creating more stress. For anything beyond walking, get your doctor’s advice first.*

Maintain good sleep habits: Sleep is an important means of reducing stress. Research has shown people under stress benefit from attention to their sleep habits. With more sleep, your stress levels are reduced and your personal resilience level increases.

Moderate alcohol use: Some people speculate that alcohol is the most commonly used stress management tool in our society. While moderate alcohol consumption can be beneficial, excessive usage can have a serious physical, psychological and social impact.

Do what you have stopped doing: An interesting aspect of people under stress is they stop doing the very things which helped them deal with stress. These can include sport, hobbies and recreational activities. If you have stopped doing something you enjoy, because you’re too tired, or haven’t the time....start doing it again.

11. Coping with the stress of organisational change and uncertainty

Government departments, private companies and organisations world-wide, are experiencing changes which are causing significant stress for many people. Words and phrases such as downsizing, re-structuring, functional review, quality management, etc have come into common use over the last ten years. This change and uncertainty is a major reason for stress within these organisations. The following are six steps you can take:

Clarify your level of control. What can you control? What can you influence? What is out of your control? Put the answers to these in writing, and then decide just what you need to do according to your level of control.

Set yourself short-term objectives.

Take your future a week or month at a time. Decide on a few clear objectives for the short-term and work at achieving these.

Deal directly with your apprehensions. When ‘worst case’ worries play on your mind, don’t try to ignore them, or pretend they don’t exist. Tackle your concerns with a ‘*so what.....can I do?*’ response. Write a list of options you have. Make these options visual, and resist evaluating the relative merits of your various options before you have a list to work with. Also, actively counter worrying, as it’s an activity which fatigues the mind and drains the spirit, without achieving anything.

List your resources. We all have resources we can draw on to assist us deal with situations which don’t work out as we would like. Write a full list of the personal, occupational, professional, social, financial and experiential resources you have.

Identify and use your support people. All of us have support people.....who are yours? Use your supporters to assist you to defuse the anxiety which accompanies uncertainty. Have them help you to brainstorm your options. Avoid people who tend to be knockers and critics rather than supporters...at this point in time you just don’t need them.

Take time to look after yourself. Take some time out for yourself. Spend time enjoying the company of family and friends. Eat regular meals, take time to exercise and don’t try to manage any anxiety you may have by just using cigarettes, coffee or alcohol.

12. Stress management resources

The management of stress only happens when an individual makes a decision to actively deal with the stress being experienced. Remember, the signs of stress can occur at a number of levels....physical, emotional, mental, or changes in behaviour. If you have any signs which indicate you’re under stress, it’s important to respond to these in the short-term, rather than ignoring them and hoping they’ll just go away. Usually, the situation gets worse, with the possibility of more serious problems arising.

This kit outlined a range of stress management options. You are the only one who can manage your stress. Think about the following suggestions and tick those which are initiatives you’re prepared to do.

Tick the options you could use.....

<input type="checkbox"/>	Increase self-management activities (exercise etc).
<input type="checkbox"/>	Develop a personal organisation plan
<input type="checkbox"/>	Problem-solve your situation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Look for positive ways of seeing the stressful situation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Improve key work skills
<input type="checkbox"/>	Talk to a colleague you trust
<input type="checkbox"/>	Talk with family or friends
<input type="checkbox"/>	Talk to a supervisor you trust
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use positive distracters to deal with stressful worry
<input type="checkbox"/>	Contact the EAP or staff support in your organisation
<input type="checkbox"/>	If you have noticed physical problems, seek medical assistance (your GP)
<input type="checkbox"/>	If you’re very concerned about worry or anxiety, seek private counselling

Write down important points for you to remember about your personal stress management.

Remember

Check your level of stress at work

The feelings we have about our job, those we work with, and our organisation, often reflect the level of stress being experienced. To assess yourself at this point in time, read each of the following statements then circle the number which indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

1. I often feel angry when I'm at work
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
2. I feel like I have to succeed all the time
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
3. I find myself not wanting to talk to others at work
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
4. I feel constantly under pressure to get things done
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
5. I find myself easily irritated by others at work
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
6. Work has become very boring, tedious and routine
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
7. I feel like I'm at a standstill in my career
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
8. I often feel very negative about work
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
9. I've become very frustrated by my job
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
10. I find it difficult to organise my day
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
11. I've become less tolerant of the mistakes of others
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
12. I feel cynical about the changes happening at work
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
13. I find myself taking out work frustrations at home
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
14. I have concerns about my future at work
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
15. I increasingly think about changing jobs
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
16. I find myself thinking negatively about my work
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
17. I often think about not going to work
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
18. I cope better when I use alcohol or take medication
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
19. I've noticed physical signs that I'm not coping well
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree
20. I frequently feel tired and listless during the day
Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly agree

Score yourself

Add together the numbers you have circled to get a total.

Your total score: _____

20 – 44 Indicates a normal level of functioning with minimal stress likely to cause problems.

45 – 74 Indicates a moderate level of stress. Early warning signs are showing. You probably need some ideas on managing the pressure. Read pages 3 – 5 and decide what would benefit you.

75 – 100 Indicates some severe stress-related difficulties. Getting some assistance would be advisable.

(Adapted from *Breaking the Stress Habit* – Goliszek, 1989)