

sort your life out stress

I don't believe people die from hard work. They die from stress and worry and fear — the negative emotions. Those are the killers, not hard work. The fact is, in our society today, most people don't understand what hard work is all about. **A L Williams**

Do you find that there are times in the year when you feel seriously overworked, that no matter how many hours you put in your tray remains full? Does your energy dip and your home life suffer; you have no time for relaxation and you begin to feel under the weather? If so you are not alone. As the pace of life increases and our expectations rise the incidences of stress in our daily lives multiply. In this the last Sort Your Life Out article in the series we will give you tips on how to identify and cope with stress.

In 2004, the Government announced that stress costs the UK economy approximately £13.5 billion each year through lost productivity and increased illness at work. And it's estimated that 70% of visits to the doctors and 85% of serious illness is triggered or made worse by stress. It's easy to see from these dramatic statistics that stress has become very common - but what exactly are we talking about?

The official definition of stress (as defined by the Health and Safety Executive) is 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them'. Or, as Dr. Frank Bond, senior lecturer in psychology at Goldsmiths College, London, said, stress is 'dealing with a situation that we feel exceeds our ability to cope'.

But stress isn't always a negative thing because we can experience good and bad stress.

Good stress happens when we have enough going on for us to feel motivated and slightly challenged: for example, the motivation to get out of bed and go to work; the drive to clean the house before friends come round so we can enjoy their company; or running for a bus so we can arrive at a party on time. Small stresses that have positive outcomes, like these, give us a sense of purpose and achievement.

Bad stress, on the other hand, is prolonged and results from not being able to resolve

issues. The sense of hopelessness leaves us feeling overwhelmed and our body responds to this by producing the fight or flight reaction. Your heart starts pounding and blood flows to all your muscles. You start breathing faster and you can become hungry for breath because you can't seem to take in enough air. Your body releases adrenaline and cortisol, which, in turn, release sugar into your blood to give you energy and prepare you for action. This is our body's way of preparing for danger and it is designed to protect us - but this bodily system was designed to deal with situations that our ancestors came across, such as coming face to face with a wild animal! In cases like these, the fight or flight response is perfect because our automatic reaction is either to fight or run for our lives! But nowadays, the kind of stress we experience has changed.

The things that tend to cause stress nowadays - like work, relationships, traffic jams and burst pipes - don't require a physical reaction, like fight or flight. So instead of fighting or running away, both of which are natural releases for all the adrenaline that gets pumped into our bloodstream, the body keeps it all inside and the side effects are both psychological and physiological ways. This plays havoc with our health, yet so few people seek out help on how to cope with stress.

A man who suffers or stresses before it is necessary, suffers more than is necessary

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Many people describe themselves as 'a stressed person' but the truth of the matter is that we get stressed because we have learned to respond like this. Our brains do not know that stress is good or bad so we just behave and respond in the automatic way that our body is designed to do, which is to experience the fight or flight response. To override this, we have

to learn to react differently and so we need to learn how to re-programme our minds and practise a different way of behaving.

Psychologists believe that it takes 21 times of repeating a behaviour for a new habit to develop; for example most people had around 20 driving lessons or swimming lessons until they could do it. So what you need to do to stop feeling overwhelmed by stress is to practise and repeat responding in a different way. Over the coming weeks follow our Sort Your Life Out Guide to dealing with stress

1 Why not to be stressed

The most common side effects of stress are: fatigue, headaches, insomnia, muscle aches, decrease in concentration and memory function, indecisiveness, racing or blank mind, confusion, loss of sense of humour, anxiety, nervousness, frustration, worry, fear, irritability, impatience, and a shortness temper. This is hardly an attractive list so isn't it time you decided to change your ways?

2 Discover your triggers

Make a note of what makes you feel stressed. This will help you become aware of what triggers your reactions. Perhaps write down in a diary what happened around you and how you felt. After the situation has passed look back and ask yourself some simple questions. If the situation was happening again what could I do differently? How would this make me feel? What would the outcome be if I changed how I acted?

3 Do something different

Some people see being stressed as the norm and that that's how they are supposed to be: they don't think they have a choice. For example every time they find themselves stuck in traffic, their heart rate increases as they become tense and stressed. When they lumbered with an extra job at work, they moan and complain and find it hard to think straight. And if they have to go and stay with their in-laws they automatically get

snappy with their partner and think about what a terrible time they're going to have.

But we don't have to accept our reactions as normal. You do not have to behave in a particular way because this is how you've always behaved; or react in the same way as everyone else. Your past actions don't have to be your future actions. Just because your brain is used to doing something doesn't mean you can't teach it how to react differently – but first of all, you need to see that you have a choice.

If you're in a traffic jam, you could put on your favourite CD and enjoy the music. If you're given extra responsibility at work use it as a chance to learn something new – or even to ask for a pay rise. And you could think of how much it means to your in-laws to have family to stay. You can choose any of these reactions – in fact, the list of things you can choose to think or do is endless. You always have a choice.

When we do things like this for the first few times it can feel a bit strange; but if you practice you can learn how to choose your reaction rather than your reactions choosing themselves!

4 Sort out the good from the bad

Recognise what kind of stress you're under. If you feel challenged but know that you can cope, realise that this is the positive form of stress. Accept what's happening and maybe even change what you call this so that you make a clear distinction between negative and positive stress. Perhaps call it a 'challenge': a challenge stretches us but if you are well within your capabilities to deal with it then this will help you to develop and learn. It really is OK to be under a bit of pressure.

If you're under chronic stress, however, then you will feel totally overwhelmed and will find it hard to find a way out. Also if stress lasts over a particularly long period of time, then you know that you have to address either the cause or, if you can't do that, your response. You might want to consider even talking to a professional. There are now many people who are professional life coaches or counsellors that are experts at helping people sort their stress out,

5 Breathe deeply

Relaxation techniques and exercise have both been proven to help you minimise the risks of stress – and there is one particularly important factor that the two things have in common. When we are relaxed and when we exercise, we breathe deeply. By expelling our lungs fully, we get rid of the stale toxic air that often sits at the bottom of our lungs because most of us don't breathe deeply enough. Breathing deeply also slows down our heart rate so we feel calmer and more in control. So next time you feel your blood pressure start to rise or your heart beating wildly, take a few moments to breathe deeply and slowly.



6 Clear your mind

Meditation has been clinically proven to reduce blood pressure, particularly in people whose blood pressure has been elevated by stress. Many people think that meditation means chanting or staring into a candle – but meditation is really about emptying your mind of unnecessary chatter. You only need to meditate for a minimum of five mins and you can do it in a number of ways: you can focus on your breath and count each 'in' breath for four counts and each 'out' breath for four counts; or you can imagine being in a beautiful relaxing place – real or imaginary; or you can listen to one of the many relaxation CDs available. Whatever method you choose, the key thing is to put aside your worries and concerns and focus on calm and positive thoughts.

7 Wish away your stress

If you need to feel confident in a particular situation, spend a few minutes thinking back to a time in the past when you did feel good about yourself. Close your eyes and imagine being back in that situation and make the memory as life-like as you can. See what you saw back then, hear what you heard and feel what you felt. By taking yourself back to that time, you'll start to notice that you can feel that way again: so with that confident feeling, go and do what you have to do.

8 Chin up!

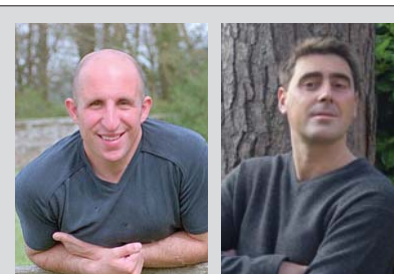
One great way to change what's going on inside your head is to change what you do with your body. When we feel low or 'down' we tend to look down. But when we feel upbeat, we tend to hold our head up high.

It's actually really hard to look up at the sky and feel down at the same time: try it and see. Now look up at the sky and smile. Doesn't that feel more natural? It should do because looking up lifts our spirits. So next time you feel like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, lift your chin up and smile! It's simple – but it works. **UF**

In times of great stress or adversity, it's always best to keep busy, to plough your anger and your energy into something positive

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