Stress Management
5 Step Program

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our five step stress management programme. A lot of research has been conducted into stress over the last hundred years. Some of the theories behind it are now settled and accepted; others are still being researched and debated.

What complicates this is that intuitively we all feel that we know what stress is, as it is something we have all experienced. A definition should therefore be obvious … except that it is not.

The most commonly accepted definition of stress (mainly attributed to Richard S Lazarus) is that stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that “demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilise.”

This programme cannot replace the work of a counsellor or therapist, it is a simple programme which will help you to recognise, understand and manage your daily pressure/stress. You will gain more control and it will give you the knowledge and skills to make healthy changes in your lifestyle.

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**Step 1 — Where Are You Now?**

When starting on any journey it is important to see where you are now.

Below is a Stress Diary. Use it over the 5 days to understand the causes of short-term stress in your life. It will also give you an important insight into how you react to stress, and help you to identify the level of stress at which you prefer to operate.

The idea behind a Stress Diaries is that, on a regular basis, you record information about the stresses you are experiencing, so that you can analyse these stresses and then manage them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Most recent stress event</th>
<th>What caused this</th>
<th>How happy you feel now (very unhappy 0, very happy 10)</th>
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**Analysing the Diary**

- First, look at the different stresses you experienced. List the types of stress that you experienced by frequency, with the most frequent stresses at the top of the list.
- Prepare a second list with the most unpleasant stresses at the top of the list and the least unpleasant at the bottom.
- Looking at your lists of stresses, those at the top of each list are the most important for you to learn to control.

**What are your top 3 stressors?**

Now think about how well you handled the stressful event. Do these show you areas where you handled stress poorly, and could improve your stress management skills? If so, list these below:
Having analysed your diary, you should fully understand what the most important and frequent sources of stress are in your life.

Knowing what causes stress for you can help you cope with it better and provide mental and emotional relief. There are many ways to plan for and avert stress. Recognising your specific triggers is one of the first steps in the process of stress management. Common causes of stress include:

- work
- family
- health concerns
- unrealistic expectations
- cynical and negative attitudes (thinking that things are always going to go badly or end badly)
- sudden traumatic events

You may be experiencing stress because your life has become out of balance. You may be spending too much time and energy on work or on caring for others at the expense of your own health and well-being. The following strategies can help you to live a more balanced and stress-free life:

- delegating or sharing your responsibilities at work and at home
- avoiding difficult colleagues, family members, and acquaintances
- learning to be more assertive — SAY NO
- doing regular exercise
- eating a healthy, balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables
- never taking on more than you know you can cope with
- organising your time better to get as much done as possible
- talking to friends or family and sharing your thoughts and fears
- listening to music or relaxation tapes — tensing and then relaxing your muscles, starting at the toes and working up to the head and neck
- take frequent breaks
- schedule time for YOU

**STEP 2 — ARE YOU BURNT OUT?**

Burnout occurs when passionate, committed people become deeply disillusioned with a job or career from which they have previously derived much of their identity and meaning. It comes as the things that inspire passion and enthusiasm are stripped away, and tedious or unpleasant things crowd in.

**Try our simple test to see if you are burnt out.**

**Scale**

- 1 Point – Not at all
- 2 Points – Rarely
- 3 Points – Some times
- 4 Points – Often
- 5 Points – Very Often

| Do you feel run down and drained of physical or emotional energy? |  |
| Do you find that you are prone to negative thinking about your job/life? |  |
| Do you find that you are harder and less sympathetic with people? |  |
| Do you find yourself getting easily irritated by small problems/colleagues? |  |
| Do you feel misunderstood or unappreciated by your co-workers? |  |
| Do you feel that you are achieving less than you should? |  |
| Do you feel tired all the time? |  |

**Total**

**How did you score?**

- 0 - 9 No sign of burnout here
- 10 - 15 Little sign of burnout here, unless some factors are particularly severe
- 16 - 20 Be careful - you may be at risk of burnout, particularly if several scores are high
- 21 - 30 You are at severe risk of burnout — do something about this urgently
- 30 plus You are at very severe risk of burnout — do something about this urgently

**STEP 3 — RECOGNISING STRESS**

The following are signs and symptoms of stress. Take a look to see if you recognise any.

- Altered sleep patterns
- Irritability & aggression
- Tiredness & lethargy
- Anxiety & apprehension
- Breathlessness
- Poor decision making
- Dizziness & light-headedness
- Preoccupation with trivial issues
- Indigestion / heartburn
- Inability to prioritise
- Nausea
- Coping difficulties
- Bowel disturbances (diarrhea, constipation)
- Mood swings
- Headaches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Muscle tension & pain
- Short-term memory deterioration
- Nervous tics
- Feelings of failure
- Increased smoking and drinking
- Lack of self-worth
- Altered eating habits
- Feelings of isolation

This list is by no means comprehensive, and there is some overlap between the categories, but it should enable you to map out your own stress response and help you to understand that of others.
STEP 4 — DEVELOPING COPING SKILLS

Your attitude has a lot to do with whether events and occurrences produce a feeling of stress. Once you admit that you are not able to control everything, you will be better equipped to handle unexpected situations. Stress management comes down to finding ways to change your thinking and manage your expectations.

Other important ways to adjust your attitude include:
- Be realistic. Shed the Superman/Superwoman image. Don’t expect too much of yourself or others.
- Be flexible. Give in sometimes.
- Rehearse/prepare for presentations and interviews.
- Think positively. Look at each stressful situation as an opportunity to improve your life.
- Don’t take work problems home or home problems to work.
- Laugh each day. Rely on humour to relieve tension.

Organising and simplifying your life

If one of your main sources of stress is the sheer number of things that need to be done, getting organised should help you feel more at peace. Simplifying your life also should help you feel less overwhelmed.
- Plan your day and your week around YOU
- Learn to prioritise. Do what is urgent/important first and realise that some things can wait until later.
- Cut out some activities and delegate tasks.
- Break large demands into small, manageable parts.
- Work through your tasks one by one.
- Taking care of your body, mind and spirit can help reduce feelings of anxiety and frustration that often accompany stress.
- Practice relaxation techniques such as controlling your breathing, clearing your mind, and relaxing your muscles.
- Get 7 – 8 hours sleep if possible and eat a nutritious breakfast/lunch.
- Exercise. It relieves tension and provides a timeout from stressful situations.
- Reduce or eliminate caffeine (coffee, black and green tea, cola drinks, and chocolate) - caffeine is a stimulant, it can make you feel more anxious.
- Avoid or reduce intake of alcohol, tobacco and recreational drugs.
- Get a massage, read a good book or see an upbeat movie.
- Consider getting a pet. A pet’s love is unconditional.
- Try to take time everyday to slow down and do something you enjoy, even if it is just for a few minutes.
- Set aside some personal time, but limit time spent with negative people. Go for a walk. Listen to music. Take some time off to rejuvenate yourself — even if it’s just one day midweek or a long weekend. If possible, go on vacation.
- Do volunteer work or start a hobby.
- Pray or meditate or do Yoga or Tai Chi.

Accepting support from others

One of the most effective things we can do when we are stressed is to talk to a friendly listener who remains calm and listens in a way that makes us feel understood. To help reduce stress, develop a network of friends and family members to turn to when stress threatens to overwhelm you. If you are a naturally private or independent person, it might seem challenging to build a support system. In order to cultivate a circle of friends, you need to take the first step.
- Think of individuals who care about you and with whom you can share your most personal thoughts.
- Reach out to the people you feel close to. Call them; make dates to see them; be open and available to them.

If you think that you would benefit from help, either in identifying the things that are causing your stress, or in learning techniques to help you relax, there are many people who can give you professional assistance in these areas. It’s time to seek professional help if you:
- feel that stress is affecting your health
- feel that it will never end
- feel so desperate that you think about quitting your job, running away, taking a drug overdose, or injuring yourself
- feel depressed, sad, tearful, or that life is not worth living
- lose your appetite and find it difficult to sleep
- have worries, feeling and thoughts that are hard to talk about
- hear voices telling you what to do

Please talk to your doctor if you feel depressed or extremely anxious as these conditions affect your physical health. You and your doctor can discuss your individual treatment options.
**STEP 5 — TAKE ACTION**

This programme has been written to help you to manage your stress better. The first four steps have shown you how to recognise your stressors and taught you simple coping techniques.

Your next step is to take action. Simply look at your stress in one of two ways::

- How can you reduce the stressors you’re under — from work, life or balancing the two?
- How can you cope better?

Choose a goal based on either reducing stressors or improving coping skills and list the actions you will need to take to achieve your goal (e.g. Goal: reduce my stress at work. Actions: get organised with my time, talk to manager, take regular breaks etc). Simply tick if you achieve each action over the next week.

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Now you have completed one week, choose stressors or coping as your goal and list your actions.

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Now that you have completed the task for two weeks it is important to reflect:

- Did you achieve any of your actions?
- Did you learn ways of managing stress better?
- What can you do to improve things further?