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Successful Stress Management In A Week



By Cary Cooper And Alison Straw

Stress' as a word is now firmly embedded in our vocabulary, although our parents rarely used it in its present context, let alone our grandparents. Yet these days, in the course of a week it would not be unusual to hear 'stress' used to describe a wide range of feelings, symptoms and situations:

- *"I feel stressed"* — describing the rush and panic in meeting a deadline... *"They're under a lot of stress"* — offered as an explanation for a colleague's unusual irritability or uncharacteristic behaviour... *"It's a stressful job"* — awarding a specific job an odd sort of status.

The experience of stress is very personal. Pressures come from many different directions, affecting us in different ways and at different times. In some situations, when we are under an enormous amount of pressure, we cope, are stimulated, and on occasions we positively thrive. In other situations we may suffer in some way, show signs of not coping, and feel unable to meet either the deadlines or the expectations.

This summary is a practical guide that will alert you to your present stress levels and give you some simple, practical advice on taking the first steps toward controlling problems in this area.

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THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Before we can deal with stress in ourselves and others, we must recognise when, and in what situations, it occurs.

The symptoms of stress can be physical and or behavioural. These symptoms can develop over time to the point where they become difficult to distinguish from normal behaviour. Any of the following symptoms can indicate a degree of stress which, if left unresolved, might have serious implications:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| • Fast breathing | • Diarrhoea |
| • Dry mouth and throat | • Constipation |
| • Clammy hands | • Undue exhaustion |
| • Feeling hot | • Tension headaches |
| • Tense muscles | • Nervous twitching |
| • Indigestion | • Fidgeting |

Of course, each of these may be experienced in normal life, as a result of normal physical effort, external temperature, or too much food and drink. They become symptoms of stress when they do not have an obvious cause, when several of them come at the same time, or when we experience them more often than we would expect.

The symptoms arise because the body believes it is preparing itself for immediate action. It is preparing us to either "fight," in what may be a life or death struggle, or for "flight" — the dash to safety — responses usually more appropriate in the jungle than our office!

Whether in fight or flight, the body automatically releases adrenalin into the bloodstream, shuts down the digestive system,

thickens the blood so that it will clot, and pumps blood more quickly around the body.

These responses were designed to be short-lived — to get us away from or to overcome the source of potential danger. But prolonged exposure to stress may make us more vulnerable to stomach and intestinal problems, skin problems and heart disease.

There are many behavioural symptoms of stress, which include feeling:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| • upset, worried, and tearful | • restless |
| • irritated by others | • a failure |
| • misunderstood | • unattractive |
| • powerless | • demotivated |
| • unable to cope | |

You may recognise such signs either in yourself or others, without being aware of the other ways in which stress affects you. You may find that you are becoming frustrated, angry and clumsy, or that you are waking at regular intervals in the night, thinking about work. You may have difficulty concentrating, thinking clearly or making decisions, or, you may experience a loss of creativity or a diminishing interest in both yourself and others.

It may also be that you become aware of increasing your alcohol consumption, smoking or eating... or the opposite — losing your appetite.

The way we respond to stress varies depending on our personality, early upbringing, and life experiences. Everyone has their own pattern of stress response, so the warning signs may vary, as may their intensity.

Some people know their own pattern of stress response and can gauge the depth of the problem by the nature and severity of their own symptoms or changes in behaviour.

One of the most obvious signs to be aware of is the intensification of your personality traits.

People who are:

- careful become over-meticulous
- anxious become panic-stricken
- insecure become vulnerable
- irritable become explosive

To identify these reactions, you will need to

become more aware of how you feel in particular situations. Beware of the following:

- Irritability
- Depression
- Anger and aggression
- Swings of mood
- Anxiety
- Withdrawal

WORKPLACE SYMPTOMS

We spend a major part of our lives at work and, if we are under stress, symptoms can effect us in the workplace, often in the following ways:

- Lower job satisfaction
- Reduced job performance
- Loss of vitality and energy
- Communication breakdown
- Poor decision-making
- Reduced creativity and innovation
- Focus on unproductive tasks

All of the above need to be viewed in relation to the previous or normal quality of your work and interactions. Most commonly, stress will lessen your satisfaction with work and reduce your performance.

Whilst you are not performing as well as you might as a result of stress, the pressures and demands on you remain the same. To prevent getting too far behind, you begin to take more work home and you may begin to feel very tired. You don't have the time or energy to take part in your normal leisure activities, and your home life also begins to suffer. Before you know it, you have become trapped in a downward spiral of problems.

By recognising and acknowledging these changes, you can forestall some of the more long-term consequences of stress in your workplace behaviour.

These consequences can be viewed in terms of the health, performance and productivity of the individual. There are also other costs, to organisations and to the economy as a whole.

It is estimated that in Britain at least 40 million working days are lost each year due to the effects of stress, costing British industry in the region of \$20 billion.

It is important to recognise that our bodies can cope with occasional episodes of stress, and these usually do little harm. However, in today's society,

stressful situations often follow in quick succession, with little or no time for recovery, or are extended over long periods of time. When this occurs there may be serious consequences.

Worrying about these consequences may seem like a potent source of stress in itself. However, we must remember that they are only likely to operate as the result of long-term exposure to severe, unresolved stress.

After reading this summary, you should be much less liable to such dangers!

Exploring Your Symptoms Checklist

1) What do you recognise as the symptoms of stress for you?

2) Think about situations and experiences you have had and which you would describe as stressful:

- How did you feel?
- How did you behave?
- How did it affect your work?

By learning to recognise your own symptoms and pattern of stress response you will be able to gauge the depth of your problems and develop positive strategies to manage them. Just as damage from stress initially affects the individual, the causes and the process of learning to cope with stress begin at an individual level.

THE WORKPLACE CAUSES OF STRESS

There are common workplace causes, which can be broken down into the following areas:

- Factors related to the job
- Role in the organisation
- Relationships at work
- Career development
- Organisational change

Now let's take a closer look at these factors individually:

FACTORS RELATED TO THE JOB

There are many factors intrinsic to the job itself which can have an impact on an individual's stress, including:

Environment

The environment in which we work has an impact on how we are able to perform in a particular role. It is, however, an element of work that can be overlooked.

It may be that you consider yourself an organised person, whose desk is always tidy and ordered. But on looking around, you may become aware that your desk is like an island and you are surrounded by untidiness and clutter. Over time you have become used to this environment, but an environment that doesn't fit with you can affect your work, your mood and your overall well-being.

Our role also can affect the environment in which we work. For example, following a promotion to a new department, one manager was awarded the ultimate benefit, in the eyes of the directors — an office. However, both the office and the quiet environment began to feel like a sentence of solitary confinement. The manager missed the noise and busyness of the open-plan office, the opportunities to bounce ideas off colleagues, and the mutual support. The environment fitted the role but not the individual.

Think about your work environment. Throughout the week, become aware of the situations in which you thrive and those which adversely affect you.

Travel

Travel falls into two categories: travel to and from work — 'commuting' — and travel for work.

Commuting frequently represents a major cause of stress, especially from the delays and difficulties so often experienced, whatever the means of travel. Driving, in particular, has its own associated problems. Public transport, whilst generally less stressful, may present its own unique stressors. If you have been delayed on a train journey, or your plane has not arrived on time, you will have experienced a whole range of emotions which may have included anger, frustration, anxiety or confusion.

Travelling for work can often appear glamorous, particularly to those who are desk-bound. However, travelling long distances to unknown places, often alone, tired, with limited time to make the cultural adaptations necessary, can present stress factors as well as challenges.

Technology

The introduction of new technology into the workplace has required employees to adapt to new environments, systems, and ways of working. Once the necessary adaptations have been made, keeping up with new technology can be an added pressure in an already busy schedule, which can lead to an overload.

Think back to a situation when you were learning a new skill and remember how clumsy and incompetent you felt. When new technology is introduced, in a way it's much like beginning again, but it has an added dimension as you often need to 'unlearn' skills, which can lead to you becoming very conscious of your incompetence. For some, this can be a challenge; however, for others it may prove too big an adaptation, or serve to reinforce their existing feelings of incompetence.

Pressure

Work with overwhelming time pressures and demanding deadlines can create stress, depending on how well and to what extent you feel your skills and abilities are being used.

There are two different sources of work pressure:

- too much work
- poor skills match

The symptoms of too much work are the easiest to identify; you may need to work long hours, or it may be that you find it increasingly difficult to differentiate between work and home. Such pressures can also be self-imposed, by:

- setting unrealistic goals
- not delegating
- attempting to change too much too quickly

The matching of people to roles is also essential. When the job demands are below your capabilities, you may find the work boring, not stimulating, and unchallenging. On the other

hand, the job may call for knowledge or skills you do not, at present, possess. In both situations, the result may be:

- low self-esteem and confidence
- lack of commitment and motivation
- being easily diverted

Pressure can also relate to the type of job, as some jobs have a high exposure to pressure and therefore risk of stress. The stress response is intended to be short-lived, but people in high-risk jobs have a constant exposure.

This exposure is similar to the experience of an athlete at the beginning of a race. The official goes through a process of preparing all the athletes for the split-second that they need to 'go'. The experience of those in the high-risk groups is similar to an athlete being "on their marks."

ROLE IN THE ORGANISATION

There is a tendency to think of stress as applying only to busy executives, who are constantly resolving problems and making decisions. However, such people may sometimes experience less stress than those below them. This is because they can control much of their working lives: being able to make decisions and to prioritise results in less stress than when not being in control.

Your own role may require you to have responsibility for people, budgets, buildings or projects. All of these can bring their own particular stressors, because they are dependent on other unpredictable factors, such as:

- relationships
- market forces
- economy
- environment

Your role in the organisation can also create a kind of conflict. It is not uncommon to find yourself in a situation where you are torn by conflicting job demands; doing things that you don't want to, that you believe are not your job, or having more tasks or projects given to you than you feel is reasonable. You may not be sure whether to maintain the status quo and respond to the demands, putting yourself under more pressure, or challenge them. Both strategies are risky!

RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE ORGANISATION

Relationships with other people can be a major source of both stress and support at work.

When the relationship with superiors is good, there is an atmosphere of warmth, friendship and mutual trust. However, if the opposite is true, superiors are likely to be:

- critical
- unapproachable
- uninterested
- distant

The same can be true of relationships with subordinates.

Relationships within the organisation can be a source of great satisfaction. Many strong and lasting friendships are made as a result of a working relationship.

Take a moment to think of friendships that have stemmed from a work relationship. The basis of this relationship may have been shared.

Now, here's a cautionary note: having identified the workplace symptoms and the causes, *do not automatically assume that the symptoms are a reflection of workplace stressors*. The demands on us are never that straightforward. It is important, therefore, to identify the source of the stress and differentiate between work factors and those in our lives generally.

HOW TO PREVENT STRESS

You should now have a good idea about the sources of stress. You should also have identified personality characteristics and life situations that make you more stress-prone, and recognised ways to cope better with stress.

Stressful situations are an integral part of our everyday lives, but we can develop strategies to minimise the harm they cause. Let's focus on these strategies, putting into practice all that we have become aware of ... to move from coping with stress to preventing it. This is a two-stage process, which involves:

- monitoring
- managing

Workplace Stress Checklist

Look down the following list, identifying which cause stress in your work situation, rating them on a scale of 1-10 (1 = highest; 2 = lowest)

<i>Factors related to the job</i>	Heavy workload
	Work environment
	Travel
	Danger
<i>Role in the organisation</i>	Technology
	Clarity with role
	Authority
	Control
<i>Relationships at work</i>	Feedback
	Conflict
	Support
	Praise
<i>Career development</i>	Recognition
	Security
	Opportunities
	Interest
<i>Organisational change</i>	Inability to influence
	Change of style
	Threats

situations and specific people who consistently seem to be implicated in your stressful experiences.

Identify whether they are:

- at a particular time
- in response to certain events
- when you are with certain people

Aim to be as specific as possible; collate all the facts. If you feel unhappy or emotional, is a problem lurking in the background? Learn to identify troublesome situations as problems.

To begin this process start a diary like the one in the box on this page and try to maintain this over a four-week period to give you a basis for establishing preventive strategies. Each incident and relationship can be managed if you are able to accurately identify and anticipate the problem.

Having identified what you should have done; the next step is to translate these "should haves" into future behaviours and actions.

MANAGING STRESS

You should now be aware of what it is that makes you susceptible to stress, and be at the stage of making decisions on how you need to change.

The following will give some guidance on how to achieve this:

FORGET THE NEAR MISSES

It may be that from the monitoring, you have identified relatively few stressful incidents. For some, even a small number of problems —

MONITORING STRESS

We must become aware of our own personal warning signs. Look back at what we have already discussed about the commonest signs of stress:

Symptoms Checklist

Think back to a stressful situation:

- What symptoms did you exhibit?
- When did these occur?
- What was the probable cause of the stress?

Now turn to the future. Identify the incidents and situations that you look forward to with anxiety during the weeks and months to come. These may include a re-organisation, house move, redundancies at work, relationship breakdown, business presentation, etc.

From this you will be able to pinpoint types of

Your Stress Diary

	Incident	People involved	What you did	What you should have done
SUNDAY				
MONDAY				
TUESDAY				
WEDNESDAY				
THURSDAY				
FRIDAY				
SATURDAY				

sometimes just one — can dominate their thinking and emotions. Professional sports people learn to leave behind their 'near misses' or 'bad shots,' the 'might-have-beens'.

Think back over the last month and try to identify the times when:

- you felt you were criticised
- you felt you were praised

We are much more likely to hear criticism than praise. We may even interpret praise as criticism. For example, the manager who is praised for a report may question the quality of his or her previous reports, rather than accept the praise for the current one.

If we carry these criticisms around with us, we are perpetually at a disadvantage; we become weighted down with them and unable to focus on the next challenge. We will also be more likely to miss the opportunity to enjoy the much more frequent good moments that can in fact revive and relax us.

You will know of people who look for problems — they inevitably find them or maybe create them. Begin, *from today*, to look for opportunities rather than problems.

LEARN STRUCTURED RELAXATION

Regular relaxation is vital in managing the effects of stress, but the methods you choose must be effective.

There are a number of ways to practise relaxation, but they all have common factors.

Relaxation takes place in a quiet environment, free of stress-inducing reactions.

The relaxer ...

- adopts a comfortable position
- focuses attention
- has a passive mental attitude

Such methods must be learnt and practised regularly, and should become a part of your life.

Some prefer to use established techniques such as yoga; others develop their own personal approach. Whatever the method; the benefits can be noticeable.

TREAT YOURSELF

Apart from structured relaxation, occasional treats are a great help. Everyone benefits from a

good holiday, but we do not need to wait for our annual leave.

We can:

- pamper ourselves
- take a long bath
- go for a walk
- listen to music
- take a weekend away

Indulge in whatever you enjoy. Build these treats into your everyday life and reward yourself for progress and achievement.

SLEEP WELL

You must ensure that you get sufficient sleep and rest. We all differ in the amount of sleep we need and in our ability to fall asleep quickly and sleep deeply.

This can be improved by:

- relaxing
- avoiding over-eating
- creating a comfortable environment

One of the effects of stress is exhaustion. This is not something that can be resolved by rest as, no matter how much rest you have, you may still feel tired. It is the quality of the rest that is important. Therefore:

- resolve conflict
- put aside worries

By doing this you will benefit from good quality rest, ensuring that it is truly recuperative.

TAKE SENSIBLE EXERCISE

Our minds are easily affected by a number of purely physical factors — from drugs to diet and fatigue. Regular aerobic exercise can have a number of positive effects to minimise and prevent these effects.

Most managers live very sedentary lives. Indeed, much modern gadgetry — such as remote control televisions, washing machines, dishwashers and so on — is designed to reduce physical effort and hence exercise.

One very inactive manager was shocked by the results of a health test, which showed him how unfit he was. Like so many of us, he:

- drove to and from work

- spent most of his day in the office
- passed most evenings resting in a comfortable armchair in front of the television

The test results had a massive effect on him and he started to exercise regularly. Consequently, not only did he feel much better, but his whole outlook on life had in some way lightened; he had more energy and his feelings of fatigue had largely disappeared.

Generally, more physical exercise reduces our weight and improves our physical health.

Try different forms of exercise. It may take a few attempts before you find one you like and fits with you and your lifestyle.

EAT HEALTHILY

Good nutrition is a help in reducing susceptibility to stress. A balanced diet of protein and carbohydrates, including fewer foods that are high in sugar and fat content, will soon enhance your general health and feelings of well-being.

Be aware of what you eat. Is there an imbalance? If so, how could you change this?

Change ...

- eating patterns
- routines
- types of food

COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

In managing stress we must ensure that our communication is clear and accurate.

Have you ever walked away from someone, wishing you had not said something or knowing that you have been misunderstood?

We must aim to ...

- speak clearly
- say what we mean
- be specific
- listen carefully
- clarify our understanding

Begin by clarifying misunderstandings as they arise, expressing feelings, talking, writing, and venting frustrations. Also ...

- check others' understanding of what you say
- don't leave matters in the air

SEEK HELP

Everything discussed so far is aimed at building our resilience and lowering our reactivity. Managing our stress may also involve changing our outlook and rethinking many aspects of our lives. You may need help to do this.

Seek help through your existing networks of friends, colleagues and family. Re-establish these networks if necessary, or explore other avenues, such as professional help.

A FINAL WORD

Whilst stress, at some level, may be a feature of our working life, there are many ways we can recognise, monitor, control and reduce stress in our lives. This summary is your first step towards successful stress management. Seeking help and learning simple measures that will promote your health and well-being will also yield positive results for a more stress-free life both at work and at home. You'll feel healthier, more productive and yes, more relaxed.



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