

## Chapter 4

# UNDERSTANDING STRESS





**Experiencing a degree of stress and challenge  
is essential for our wellbeing**

**Being in control of stress is the key.**

**In this chapter, we will look at  
what stress and the Fight or Flight responses are,  
and how,  
they are essential to our survival and wellbeing.**

**We will also look at how stress can be unhelpful if it  
is allowed to get the upper hand, and  
explore how unhelpful and prolonged stress can cause  
additional symptoms.**

**Finally, we will start to talk about what we can do to  
get control back over stress and these additional  
symptoms.**

What is

Stress ?

We all use different words to describe what we mean by stress.....

..... **tense**, *hassled*, **UPTIGHT**, *distant*, **hurried**, *pressurised*,  
*anxious*, **scared**, **HEADACHY**, *emotional*, **angry**,  
**SWEATY**, *achy*, *irritable*,

.....



But have you ever wondered why  
some people seem to thrive on stress!

Whilst others seem to be overcome by it?

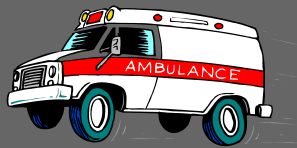
**Stress is a normal part of everyday life.**

**In fact,**

**a certain amount of stress is important  
to keep us motivated to do things.**

**Stress helps us to perform.**

**Stress also revs up our systems  
to help us deal with emergency situations.**



**But if stress becomes too high or lasts too long, we begin to struggle.**

**This happens when we experience:-**

- ongoing problems such as chronic illness,**
- unexplained and enduring symptoms such as pain or fatigue,**
- difficulties at work or at home, or in relationships or social life.**

**We can notice that even dealing with typical daily hassles becomes a struggle, and the feeling of not being in control can exacerbate symptoms and lead to secondary effects, such as sleep problems and loss of appetite.**

**It is important to manage stress  
if we are to move on in life with a chronic condition.**

## HELPFUL STRESS (1)

A certain amount of stress is important to keep us motivated to do things.

Without any stress at all, we become **lethargic and bored**.

This can actually be very stressful!



The key is to be in control of stress so that it works for us. When people are in control, they feel **invigorated, challenged and involved** in life.

Feeling stretched

**but not strained  
is the goal.**

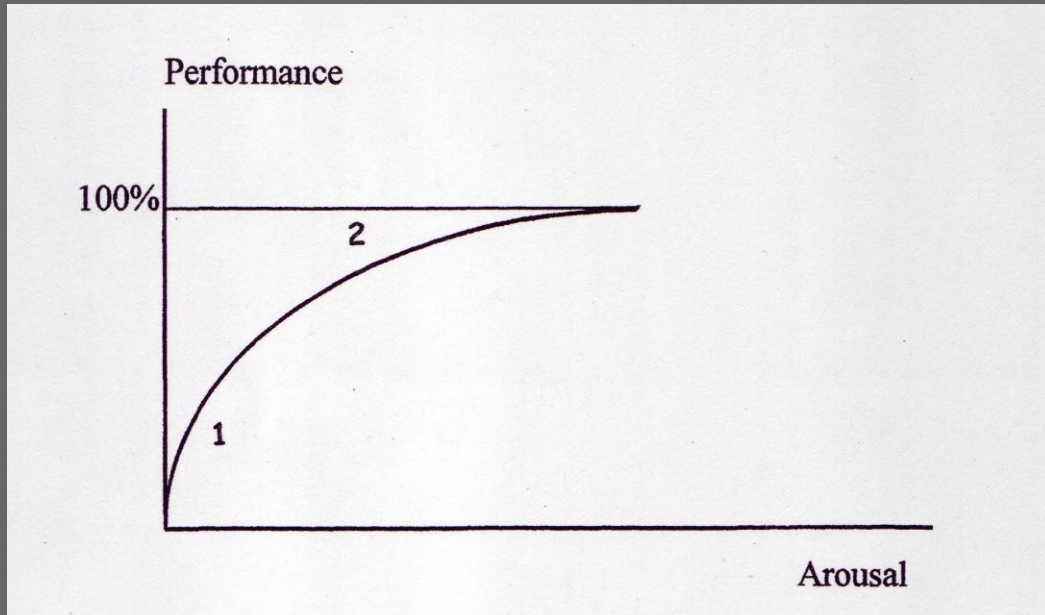


We all thrive at different levels of stress.

And when it's right for us, it feels good.

The following Performance - Arousal curve shows how our systems get more and more revved up or aroused the more we perform.

### Human Performance Curve



#### Stage 1

We are working well within our capability (well below 100%).  
We are in control.

#### Stage 2

Performing near our limit (say from 90% - 100%) needs our system to rev itself up (arouse itself) nearly twice as much as when performing at say 80%.

This again is OK, as long as we are in control and have a balance in our life where we rest/sleep enough to recuperate from day to day.

When we are in control, psychologists call this **flow**.  
We are working at our optimum level and it feels effortless!

## HELPFUL STRESS (2)

**In an emergency situation,  
stress helps us survive.**

Stress is the way our bodies automatically react to threats, real or imagined.

It is a normal and healthy response to gear the body up to deal with an emergency.



This is known as the  
“Fight or Flight” response.

If you were a caveman, this would be very useful.

When you are faced with a sabre-toothed tiger, your body becomes ready to **act instantly** - either to attack or to run like the wind.



And when it is all over, your body can **relax**.

**It could save your life!**

These days we don't see many sabre-toothed tigers, but there are many real threats, and many more imagined ones!

# How the body prepares itself to react in emergencies

## Acute stress

Eyes focus hard

Attention is locked on to threat

Saliva in mouth dries up

Blood shunted to muscles

And vital organs  
ready for action

Blood shunted away from  
non essential organs  
stomach and  
gut shut down  
(butterflies in tummy)

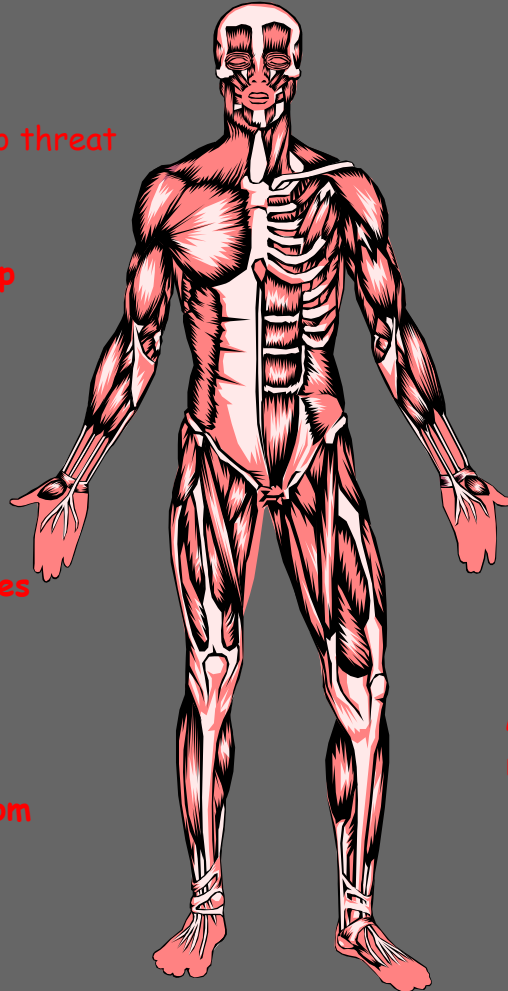
Sweat produced

Heart speeds up  
to pump more blood to  
muscles

Breathing becomes  
faster and shallow  
to get more oxygen  
to muscles

Main muscles tense up  
ready for action

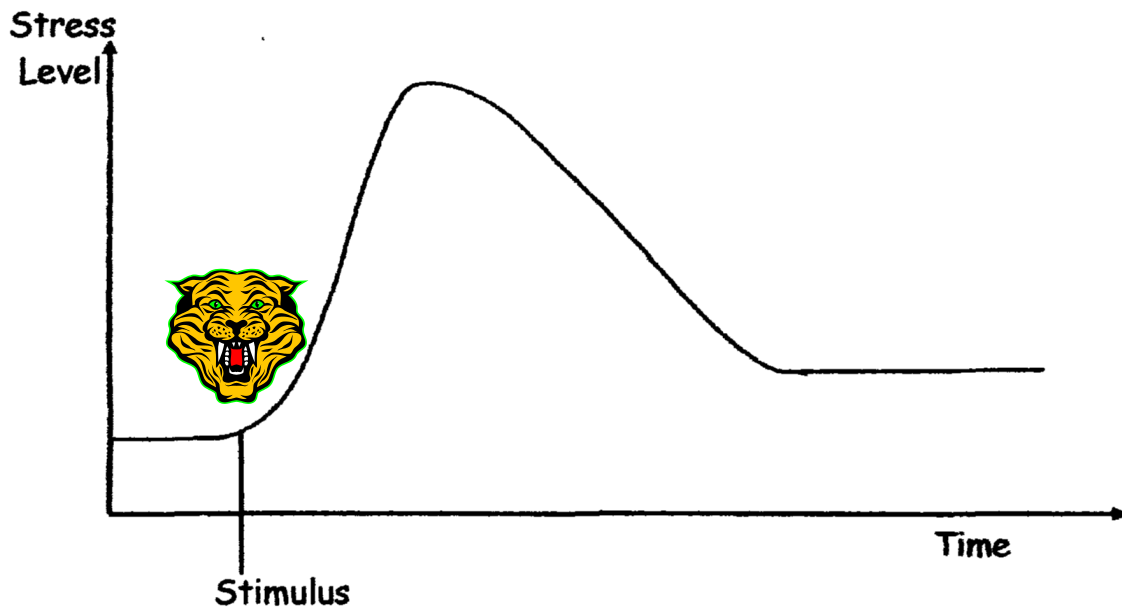
Blood supply to hands  
and feet shut down



Exactly what you need to have happen  
if that sabre- toothed tiger came round the corner  
and you had to either run fast or stay and fight!



## The Stress Response Curve (acute)



- Stress levels rise extremely fast.  
(Body getting ready for action.)
- They go very high and then we notice them.
- They fall off more gradually, perhaps staying slightly raised for some time. (In case the tiger comes back!)

Hopefully, emergency-type stressors do not happen very often but it's useful to know that millions of years of evolution have fine-tuned our system to give us the **best chance** of dealing with threats.

## UNHELPFUL STRESS (Dis - stress)

We experience stress for other reasons as well.

Some sources of unhelpful or prolonged stress could be work, relationships or difficult home or social lives.

Warning signs are that we may notice that we struggle even when dealing with typical daily hassles.

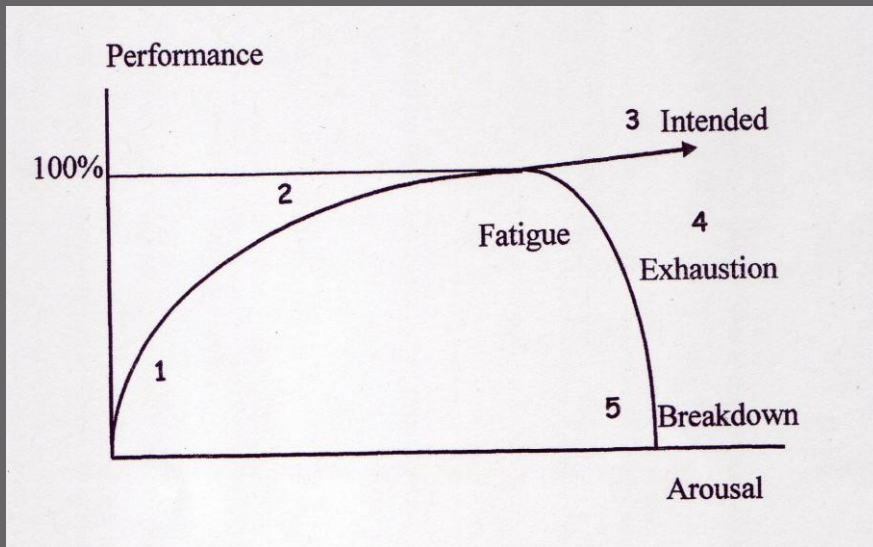


When stress becomes too high or lasts too long  
we begin to struggle.

This happens when people experience ongoing problems such as chronic illness  
or unexplained and enduring symptoms  
such as pain or fatigue.



# Human Performance Curve



## Stage 3

The problem of living a lifestyle constantly near our limit is that we can't deal with anything else. To try to do so would be the straw that breaks the camel's back

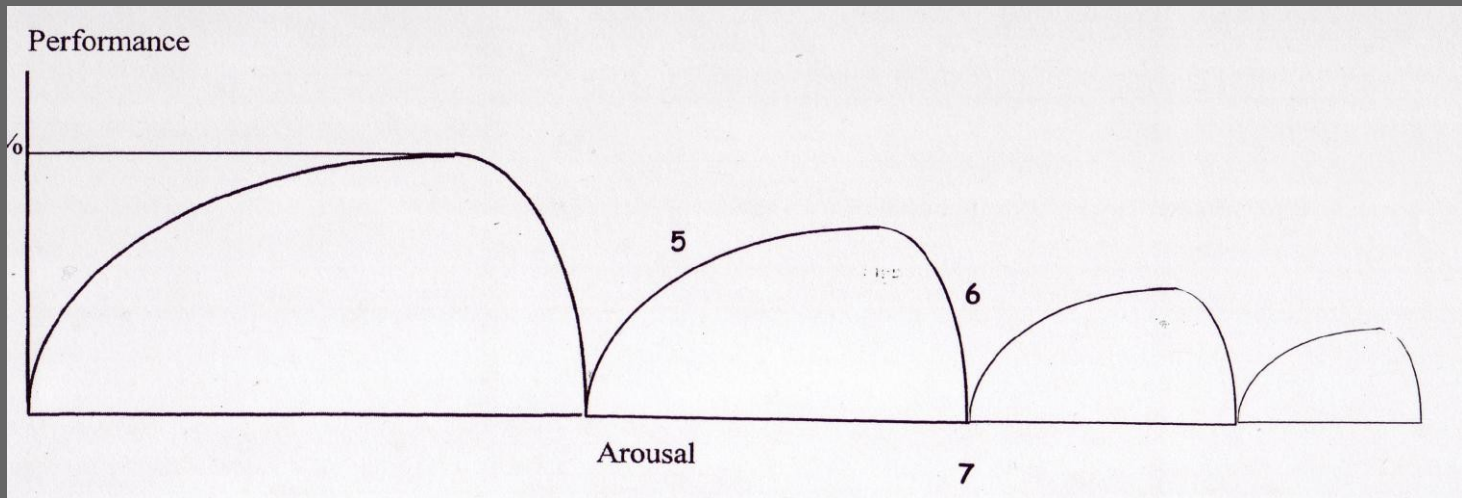
## Stage 4

We would lose control, feel strained, become fatigued, be unable to perform and become exhausted.

## Stage 5

If we continued to try to keep going, we would break down (a state where we can't do anything - physically, mentally or emotionally.) Performance is zero but our systems are still revved up/aroused. It's as if the accelerator is revving an engine which is not in gear.

## Recurring Human Performance Curve



If at:-

(5) We continued to try to keep going or tried to get going too quickly after a period of recuperation,

(6) we would crash again,

(7) and again become more and more revved up.

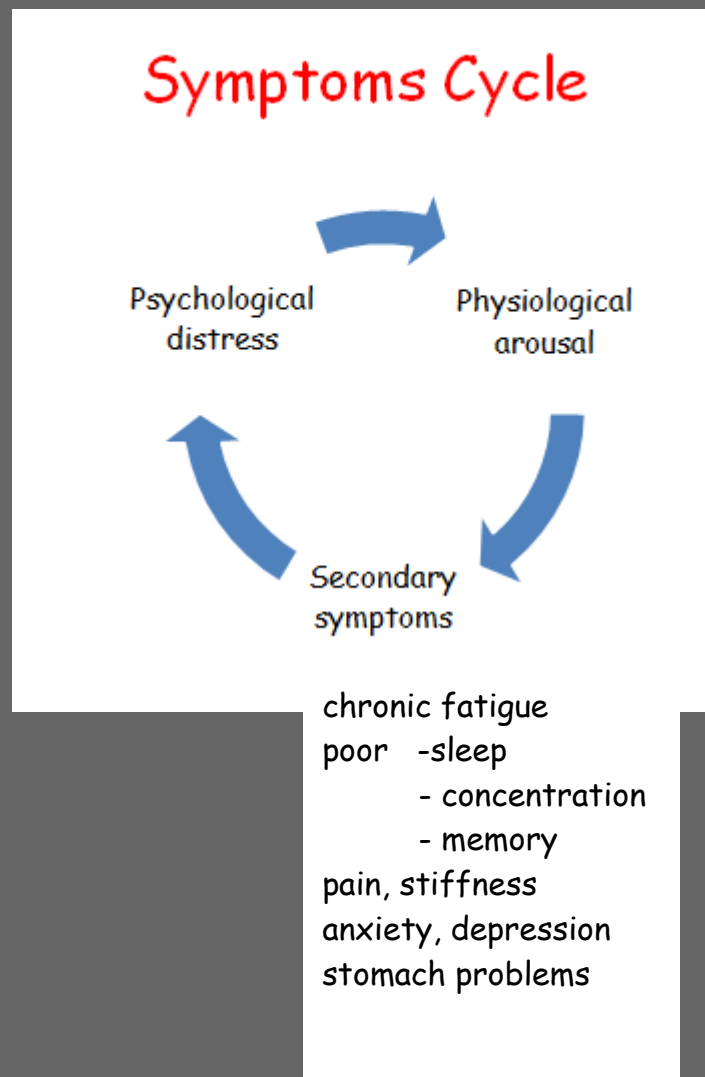
The solution is to dampen down arousal first,  
before trying to get going.

Take the foot off the accelerator, and re-engage the gears before moving off again.

## RECOGNISING SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

The feeling of not being in control can make symptoms worse and lead to secondary effects such as fatigue, pain, poor concentration (brain fog), sleep problems and stomach problems.

This in turn can lead to more dis-stress as you can see in the following diagram.



## What prolonged stress does to the body

### Thoughts locked

Feel trapped

### Dry mouth

Lump in throat

Choking feeling

### Breathing faster

Too much oxygen

Light-headed and faint

### Stomach and gut shut down

Diarrhoea

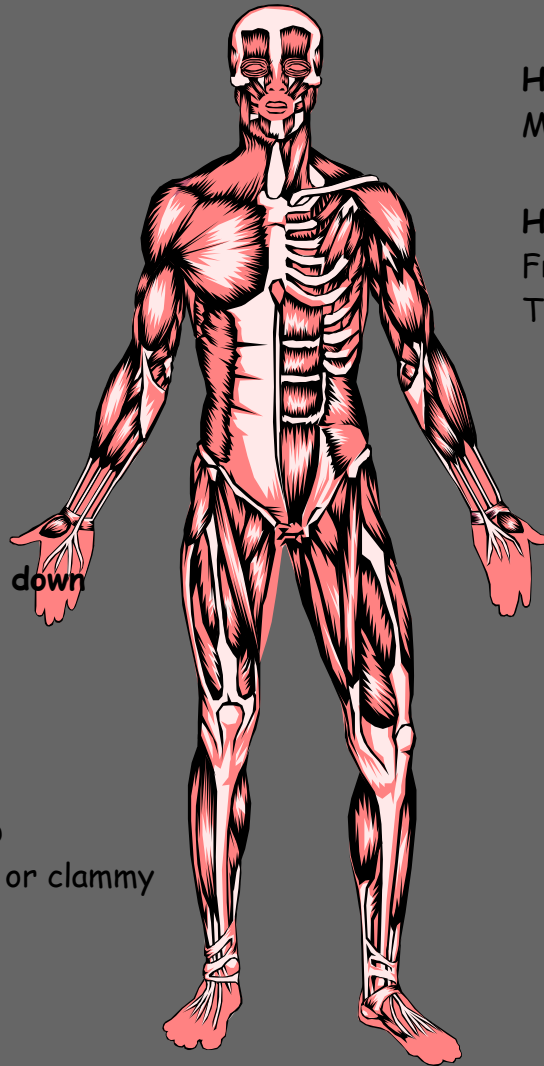
Pain, feeling sick

### Main muscles tense up

Feel sweaty - hot, cold or clammy

Aches and pains

Restless, exhausted



### Hard to focus

May cause headaches

### Heart beats faster

Frightening feeling

Think something is wrong

### Blood supply shuts down

Feet and hands -  
cold and clammy

Cramps, aches

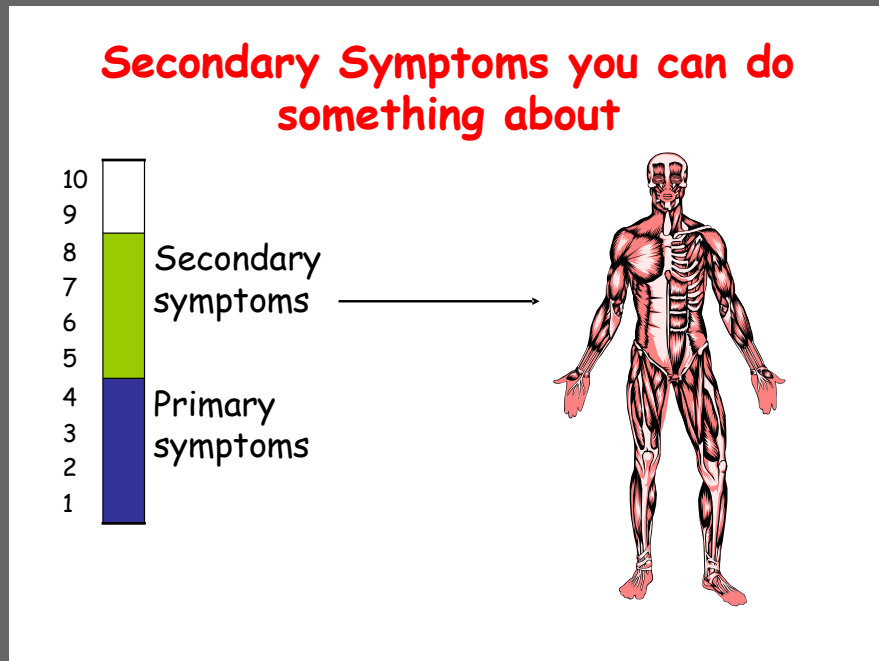
Fists clench

**Difficulties arise when people experiencing these  
„secondary symptoms“  
logically think their condition is worsening.**

- Either current medication may be increased, or further investigations show that „nothing is wrong.“
- People may then start thinking the symptoms are „all in their mind“.
- Or they may (logically) demand further medical investigations.
- They may even worry that they have a serious undiagnosed and medically unexplained condition, for which there is no treatment.

Understanding the secondary symptoms cycle in this way  
helps us understand  
there is something we can do to bring them under control.

When you start to break the cycle,  
secondary symptoms can be brought under control.



Sometimes, secondary symptoms  
are identical to primary symptoms.

Which begs the question .....

**How many of the symptoms are due to a primary illness and how  
much are due to the secondary effects of stress?**

One way of dealing with this is to become skilled at relaxation  
training.

We will also look at further techniques of symptom management later  
in Chapter 13 - the Mind-Body chapter.

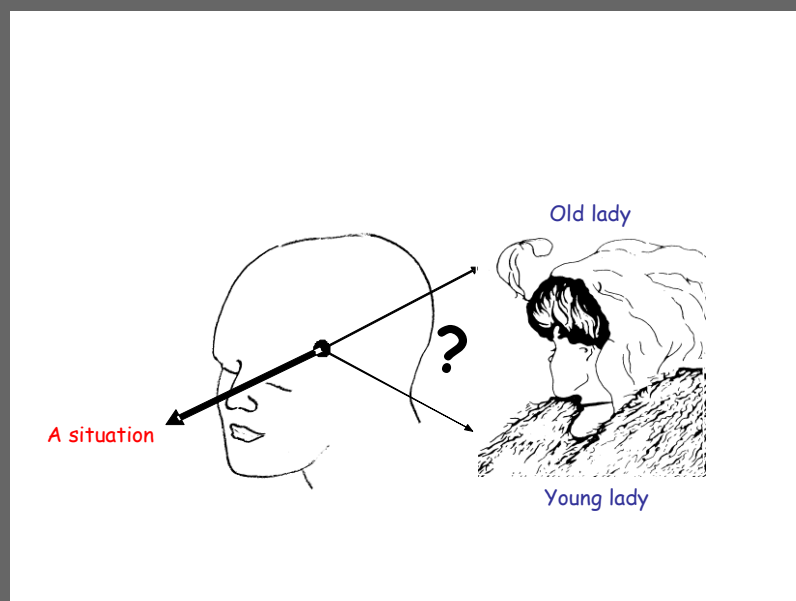
## FIRST STEPS IN STRESS MANAGEMENT

IT IS IMPORTANT TO MANAGE STRESS  
IF WE WANT TO MOVE ON IN LIFE  
WITH A CHRONIC CONDITION

and

Knowing how stress works  
will help us to work out how to manage it.

- Stress is a result of how you see a situation.



- Your perception of a situation dictates how you react to it.



With practice, we can choose to see a situation differently  
BUT IT DOES TAKE PRACTICE!  
And it does require us to be  
aware of the situations we react to

## RELAXING, OR TAKING A MOMENT TO REFLECT

Here's an example:-

- You have had a busy day.
- You need to do the shopping on the way home and you still have the evening meal to prepare.
- You are stuck in a long queue in the supermarket and the assistant is being really slow.

And you are tired.

How would you react in this situation?

What would it be like if you:-

- Used this opportunity to relax?
- Took time out & practised belly breathing?

What difference would it make?



One way to do this is to become skilled at relaxation training.  
And this is what the next chapter is all about.

## In summary

- Experiencing stress and feeling in control is essential to our wellbeing.
- When stress levels become too high or last too long we begin to struggle.
- Dis-stress can cause secondary symptoms.
- Becoming skilled at relaxation training is an essential tool in the management of stress and in the control/reduction of symptoms.
- Knowing how stress works helps us to work out how to manage it. The first step in stress management is knowing, to a degree, that we can choose how to respond to stressful situations.