



▶ THE RECOGNISED CAUSES OF STRESS, AND THE ROLE OF CHANGE AND CONFLICT



▶ HOW STRESS AFFECTS US, AND SPOTTING THE SIGNS IN OTHERS



▶ HANDLING STRESS BY BUILDING RESILIENCE

○ Knowledge | ○ Skills | ○ Understanding

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Prompting REFLECTION and indicating ACTION

A certain level of pressure at work creates energy and motivation and helps to improve performance, but there comes a point where pressure becomes counter-productive and is detrimental to both personal and organisational welfare.

Stress, Change & Conflict

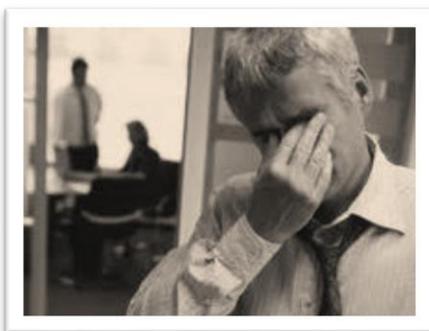
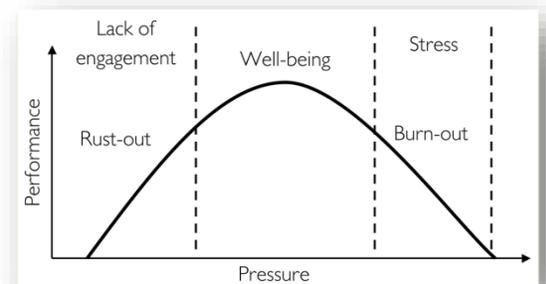
Daily hassles which are continual and build up over time are in fact more damaging to our health than major traumatic life events - which call for professional support and are thankfully relatively rare. With a better appreciation of what stress is, and some practical tips, we can improve how we handle day-to-day challenges.

Any improvement is not only good for ourselves, it is good for the organisation too – stress is the number one cause of long term absence for non-manual employees (CIPD Absence Management Survey 2008). Typically when we say stress we mean ‘pressure’, and in particular we are talking about the point at which we perceive that the

demands placed upon us exceed our ability to cope. Note the use of the word perceived; the demands we ‘perceive’, our ‘perceived’ ability to cope – already there is a clue here about how we might tackle such a sensation of pressure and avoid the individual and organisational costs of stress.

Both in work and out of work change co-exists with conflict (can you think of any instances where there was one without the other?), and conflict is stressful if we feel unable to cope.

So good tips and techniques for alleviating (and ideally foreseeing and averting) stressful situations will also equip us to navigate change and manage conflict.



How Stress Affects Us

When we feel stressed, that is, we doubt our ability to cope with the prevailing demands on us as we see them, there is likely to be a downturn in our performance for a few reasons. First, we may find ourselves making uncharacteristic emotional reactions e.g. being impatient or irritable - things that others will certainly notice. For some types there may follow behavioural changes such as an over-indulgence in sensory pursuits (eating, drinking, smoking, exercising) or disrupted sleep patterns (due to the extra adrenalin and cortisol that the body produces when stressed). Others see these things less readily, which can lead to a sense of isolation. Whilst stress isn't a medical condition as such, it is associated with headaches, indigestion and back pain, and can lead to difficulty concentrating and making decisions – all symptoms well worth avoiding if we can.



Building resilience to tackle stress effectively

Stress levels are generally reduced, and our power enhanced when we take more control of the situation we find stressful.

The first step in building our resilience towards stress is in understanding more about stress, the triggers, and about how it affects us personally. Sometimes we find that thinking rationally about the information we've gathered is enough to enable us to adopt a more healthy perspective on the source of pressure, and we no longer feel stifled but able to respond productively. Examine in particular any discrepancy between the perceived and actual pressures, and similarly your perceived and real ability to respond. Managers and supportive colleagues can provide invaluable feedback and insight at this point.

The techniques of being assertive can be used to bring demands and expectations into line with resources and capability, and enable many to take control of a previously stressful situation, not only alleviating the pressure but also giving self-esteem a boost. Similarly the disciplines of good time management make periods of increased pressure more manageable. Depending on your own response to pressure, it may be well worthwhile to manage your lifestyle more overtly; taking extra care over diet, sleep, exercise and rest at a time when

they might otherwise be marginalised by prevailing pressures.

Line managers have a key role when the pressure is on to hit targets; keeping teams informed, operating calmly, clearly and with consideration, being available to talk, and using reason to manage difficulties.

Handling stress well often finds us developing and using a secondary set of skills which are different to the preferred or dominant behaviours which see us through the majority of the time. In that sense, periods of high pressure are often reflected upon as times when we developed both personally and professionally.

‘Sometimes when people are under stress, they hate to think, and it's the time when they most need to think’ Bill Clinton

FURTHER READING:
“For your improvement”



FYI, though an excellent reference resource, has no section dedicated to recognising and managing stress.

There are of course numerous books on the topic, both from the individual and organisational perspective. In addition, stress is a topic which can be tackled highly effectively through self-managed-learning sets and coaching.

My reflections and indicated actions . . .

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