

Stress Management with NLP

transformation
training

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What Is NLP?

Neuro

the nervous system - the mind and the sensory organs with which we receive and filter information through our five senses

Linguistic

the way we communicate and interpret experience through language, including body language, images, sounds, feelings, tastes and smells

Programming

the way we construct personal programs of thought, communication and behaviour

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is the study of how we think and communicate, with ourselves and with others, and of how we can use this to get the results we want.

Some Principles of NLP

The map is not the territory

- All experiences are subjective - we respond to our internal representation of events, not to the events themselves
- Everyone lives in their own unique model of the world
- Each person is unique
- Everyone makes the best choices available to them in their model
- Behind every behaviour is a positive intention
- Process is more important than content
- Experience has a structure - change the structure and you change the experience

People work perfectly

- Everyone has all the resources they need for success - there are no unresourceful people, only unresourceful states
- It's more useful to think in terms of feedback than failure
- A person's behaviour is not the person
- I am in charge of my mind, and therefore my results

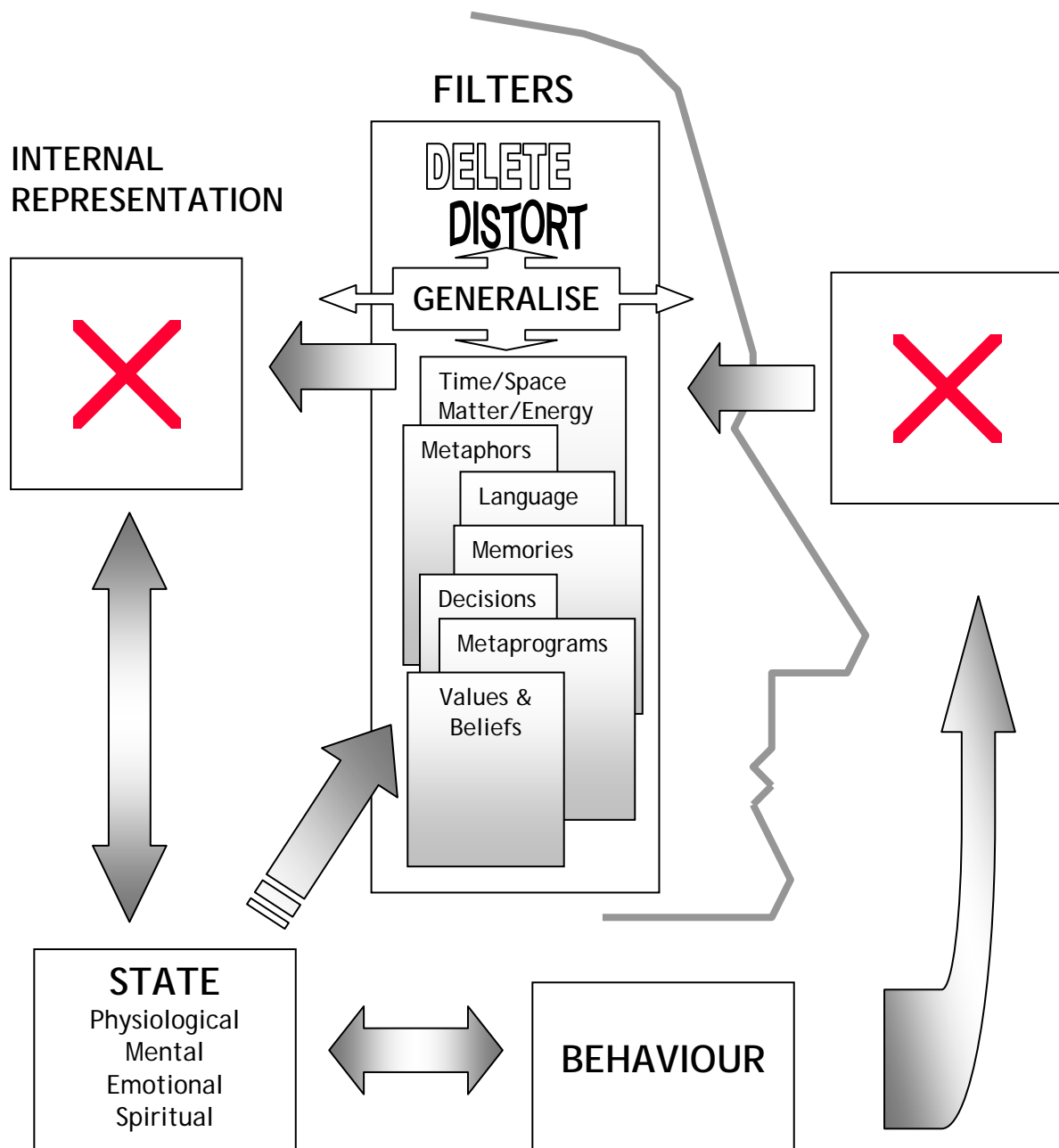
You cannot not communicate

- All meaning is context-dependent
- The meaning of a communication is the response you get

Mind and body are part of the same system

The element in a system with the most flexibility has the most influence over that system

All Experience is Subjective



Your internal filters introduce:

- **Deletions** (we pay attention to what we are interested in)
- **Distortions** (we look for patterns and connections)
- **Generalisations** (we look for commonality and predictability)

A Definition of Stress

“ Stress is what you do when you perceive a gap between the demands made on you and the resources you have to meet those demands”

The Stress Response

To understand the nature and purpose of the stress response it's useful to go back to our primitive ancestors. Although technology and society have evolved to tremendous levels of complexity since the days of the cave-dwellers, our bodies and brains are exactly the same. The stress response is a survival mechanism which evolved to protect us in dangerous situations.

If a cave-dweller perceived a threat - such as a sabre-toothed tiger - his brain triggered the stress response. It's worth noting that *perception* of threat is what's crucial here - you could go back in time and point a gun at him and he'd probably just be mildly curious. As soon as he registered the tiger as a threat, his body would prepare itself to either fight or run away. A complex cocktail of stress hormones would be released into his bloodstream, affecting his system at every level:

- the heartbeat and breathing speeds up
- blood (and hence energy) is diverted towards the muscles and the brain, and away from the digestive system and the skin
- the blood clots more easily
- fat reserves are mobilised and blood sugar levels increase
- the immune system is depressed, reducing the inflammatory and allergic responses

The exact mix of chemicals in the cocktail varies according to the individual and the individual's evaluation of the threat. For example, adrenaline tends to be experienced as fear, while the closely related noradrenaline is associated with anger. The arousal produced by these chemicals would help the caveman either to escape from the tiger, or to fight it. Either way, as soon as the threat was over, his system would return to normal. Heartbeat and breathing would slow down to conserve energy, and there would be an increase in the bodily secretions needed for digestion and healing.

The problem with stress in the present day is that society has evolved but our bodies have not. The stresses we face today, at work and at home tend to be chronic and recurring, rather than one-offs like the sabre-toothed tiger. If we have a problem with the boss at work, we have to go in and face that person day after day. Of course, this is not usually a life-threatening situation, but the body still reacts in exactly the same way - unless we retrain our perceptions.

With the stressful situations that we face nowadays, the opportunity to discharge the stress by fight or flight is not there; the stress remains undischarged, affecting each of us in different ways, from muscle tension and headaches to panic attacks and lack of sleep. In the longer term, chronic stress can lead to all kinds of physical and mental symptoms. It is up to each of us to retrain our perceptions and find ways of releasing stress, through relaxation and exercise, that suit us individually.

The Value of Relaxation

Relaxation helps you to reduce your stress levels, in all sorts of ways:

- **Physical:** relaxation activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which counteracts the effects of the stress response by reducing the level of arousal in the body; muscles loosen, breathing and heartbeat slow down, blood vessels may dilate, and the digestive system acts more efficiently. Regular relaxation gives the body an opportunity to heal itself and strengthens the immune system, allowing the effects of chronic stress to dissipate.
- **Emotional:** relaxation allows panic, anger and anxiety to drain away, to be replaced by a sense of stability and well-being. Everyone is familiar with the draining effects of these negative emotions; as relaxation reduces the intensity of these emotions, our inner resources and sense of self become stronger.
- **Mental:** one of the characteristics of stress is that everything clamouring for our attention assumes equal importance, making it hard to know what to tackle first, and even harder to concentrate on any one thing. Relaxation allows us some distance and perspective on our lives, creating the space in which clear priorities can emerge. As thoughts slow down, and the mind becomes dreamy and detached, we begin to access the resources of the right brain - the creative, intuitive, non-linear part of our minds. This part can often come up with solutions to problems that defeat our logical thought processes.
- **Spiritual:** relaxation provides the detachment from everyday concerns that allows us to realise what is really important in our lives; to observe thoughts, emotions and physical sensations without judging; and to have the time and space just to be, without doing. Without the distractions that normally crowd our minds, we can discover and accept who we really are.

Actually it's impossible to draw solid boundaries between these levels. Each influences the other, as mind, body and spirit are inextricably linked. Recent research on peptides (the body's "messenger molecules") confirms that peptide receptors are found all over the body, not just in the brain; and that the nervous system, the immune system, the endocrine (hormonal) system and the digestive system are in constant multi-way conversation.

Quick relaxation techniques are useful in dealing with acute stresses. Regular, deep relaxation has a deeper and more permanent effect. As your background levels of stress reduce, you become more relaxed in everything you do, able to place each event of our day in perspective rather than overreacting. It becomes much harder for people or situations to upset you; much easier for you to take control over your thoughts, emotions and actions, and to take charge of your life.

Regular relaxation with the help of your relaxation tape will assist you in coping with your own stresses. Practice relaxing without the tape as well, perhaps by repeating some of the suggestions on the tape to yourself, so that you can relax quickly and easily whenever you need to: before an important meeting or interview, between periods of intense work, or when you need to go to sleep.

You don't need to feel guilty when you take a break

We all know that we work better and feel less stressed if we take regular breaks during the working day. However, the stressed individual may feel uncomfortable and guilty about taking breaks, even when they admit that their usual driven work patterns are causing them stress (*"but the work just won't get done"*). Research is beginning to establish a theoretical basis for common-sense advice.

Our bodies have a **Basic Rest and Activity Cycle**, consisting of 90-120 minutes of activity followed by 20 minutes of rest. This cycle can easily be stretched or distorted, as when the individual works through the morning without taking a break, skips lunch, or works late. However, it has been found that people whose rest-activity cycle remains irregular for extended periods develop stress-related symptoms.

The rest-activity cycle involves alternate shifts in dominance from one side of the brain to another. When we move from activity to rest, the left side of the brain (associated with logic, sequence, details, analysis, calculation and language - "work mode") gives up dominance to the right side (associated with patterns, intuition, and emotion - "relaxation mode"). While we can force ourselves to remain in work mode for long periods, the right side of the brain eventually reasserts itself, leading to a loss of concentration and increased tiredness and error rates.

That's why workplaces and schools traditionally built mid-morning and mid-afternoon breaks into their schedule; employers and school authorities found that people **work better and think more clearly with regular breaks**. By taking breaks in the middle of the morning and the middle of the afternoon, getting out of the workplace altogether at lunchtime, and leaving work at a reasonable time in the evening, you can **improve the quality of your work and do more in less time**.

What happens if you don't take account of the needs of your mind-body system? Typically, if the 'arousal response' to stressful situations is prolonged over weeks or months ('chronic stress'), excess amounts of stress hormones are produced and flood the system. It seems that the cells of the body begin to shut down and destroy their receptor sites for these hormones. When the receptors are below their normal levels the person will experience **withdrawal** - they miss the adrenaline high and the levels of arousal and performance that go with it.

They will be tempted to overwork, or use stimulants (sugar, caffeine, nicotine or other drugs) to try to regain the high. Overachievers can become locked into a vicious circle of ever-increasing levels of activity and stress hormones - until the mind-body system 'crashes' and develops physical symptoms.

You can avoid this, and sustain health and high performance indefinitely, by being aware the needs of your mind-body system to **take regular breaks**.

Source: Ernest Rossi, *The Psychobiology of Mind-Body Healing* (Norton, 1994)

Discover Your Peripheral Vision

Just find a point straight in front of you and focus on it. Now gradually become aware of what's around it...and let your vision spread out in front of you to the corners of the room...as your eyes continue to look at that point...and you become more and more aware of the periphery of your vision. If you stretch out a hand to one side of you, you might find the point on the edge of your vision where you only see that hand when you waggle the fingers. Let your awareness also spread behind you...I'm not suggesting that you can literally see what's behind you...but let your senses of hearing, touch and smell spread out to the periphery as well...and notice what changes in your physiological state...

Normally, in Western society, we use what's known as 'foveal' vision, where we concentrate on one point in front of us and notice all the details about that one point - driving, watching TV, reading, talking to someone...another kind of vision, 'peripheral' vision, takes in the whole panorama of what's happening in front of us and around us. It uses different light receptors in the retina and different neural pathways in the brain.

As you experienced your peripheral vision, you might have noticed certain physiological changes - perhaps a shift in your breathing from higher to lower in the chest, a relaxation of face and jaw muscles, and maybe later your hands became warm. If you normally have an internal dialogue going on, you might have noticed it was quieter than usual, or stopped altogether.

It seems that foveal vision is associated with arousal of the sympathetic nervous system (the part of the 'involuntary' or autonomic nervous system associated with activity, adrenaline and stress) while peripheral vision is associated with parasympathetic arousal (the part of the nervous system associated with relaxation, calmness and healing). In fact, to the extent that you are truly in the peripheral vision state, you can block anxiety or stress; the two states are physiologically incompatible.

Peripheral vision is known and used in many older cultures as a tool for achieving useful states. In hunter-gatherer cultures, peripheral vision when hunting allows you to catch movements of prey without having to move your head and give your position away; it also dispels fear. In martial arts, peripheral vision allows you to be aware of any movement an opponent makes with his hands, for example, while keeping the rest of him in view.

Breathing Techniques

The way you breathe is closely related to the way you feel. If you are angry or upset, your breathing is fast, shallow and irregular; when you are calm and relaxed, your breathing is slow and deep. Because breathing and emotional states are so closely related, you can consciously affect the way you feel by altering your breathing. Here are three ways to make yourself calmer through breathing.

Breath Awareness

Close your eyes and just be aware of your breathing. You don't have to change your breathing in any way, just notice your breath as it flows in and out. You might notice how the breath is cooler as you breathe in through your nostrils, and warmer as you breathe out. For this moment, just be aware that you are here, now, and breathing. Any time you feel your attention wandering, just bring it back to being aware of your breathing. Notice how you feel after a couple of minutes.

Abdominal Breathing

The more anxious you are, the higher in your chest you tend to breathe, and the less of your lungs you are actually using. Breathing from your abdomen rather than from your chest has a calming effect.

This is how you do it: for the in breath, push your abdomen outwards, as if you were inflating it; this pulls the diaphragm down, creating more room in the chest cavity and sucking air into the lungs. For the outbreath, allow the abdomen to return to its normal relaxed state; this pushes the diaphragm back up and pushes air out of the lungs. This way of breathing may feel like it's the "wrong" way round at first, but soon becomes second nature.

To check that you are breathing from the abdomen, put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach, and see if you can breathe without your chest moving at all. You may find this easier if you lie down.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

Modern research has found that at any given time, there is a greater flow of air through one nostril than through the other. When the right nostril is dominant, there is more activity in the left-hand side of the brain, and vice versa. This means that you can activate the relaxation response by blocking the right nostril, or by lying on your right side. This leads the right side of the brain, associated with the relaxation response, to become dominant.

These findings echo centuries-old yoga exercises which have the aim of balancing the intake of air through the nostrils in order to promote mental balance and stability. One such exercise involves breathing in through the right nostril for a count of two (blocking the left nostril), retaining the breath for a count of eight (blocking both nostrils), and breathing out through the left nostril for a count of four (blocking the right nostril), then going back the other way. Repeat three times and gradually add more repetitions.

Source: Ernest Rossi, *The Psychobiology of Mind-Body Healing* (Norton, 1994).

Four Other Ways to Relax and Change How You Feel

Centering

Where you put your attention in your body has a big effect on how you feel, and even on how strong you are. This is recognised in the ancient traditions of yoga and the martial arts. Just pay attention to a point which is a few inches below your navel, and half way between the front of you and the back of you - in the centre of your body. At the same time look straight ahead and go into peripheral vision. Let your body relax, and make sure your knees aren't locked. You can maintain this focus on your central point all the time, whatever you are doing. If you're really focused on this point, your body can't feel anxiety, so it's useful for confrontations and pressure situations.

Project an energy bubble

Imagine that you have a bubble of energy projecting out from your central point and surrounding you like a sort of science fiction force-field. Everything stressful that happens outside this bubble just bounces off and away from you, leaving you calm and still inside the bubble. So the more stressful it is outside, the calmer you are inside...

Now I'm not suggesting that there really is a bubble of energy around you, but your unconscious mind doesn't distinguish between imagination and "reality". So if you imagine that you are shielded from stress, you will be! This is another good one for pressure situations, but you don't just have to use it as a shield. When you give a presentation, extend your energy bubble all the way out to the back and side walls of the room, and then pull it in slightly to embrace and include your whole audience. They will notice the difference!

Float up above yourself

Sometimes in emotionally fraught situations it can be a good idea to detach yourself so that you can calm down and get things in perspective. A good way to do this is to float up above the situation. Try it now.

Imagine that you are floating out of your body, higher and higher, and looking down at yourself. Float up until you reach a height at which you are completely comfortable. You'll notice that the higher up you float, the more detached you feel.

You can do this with memories or with imagined future situations as well. If the memory involves other people, float up above the memory of yourself as you interact with them. Observe the scene as a whole system - notice how they react to what you do and say, and how you react to what they do and say. What do you learn from this new perspective? With a bit of practice you'll be able to do this in a situation as it happens.

Get perspective on your feelings

Just ask yourself: "How do I feel about feeling this way?" and notice what happens to your feelings and what you learn from asking.

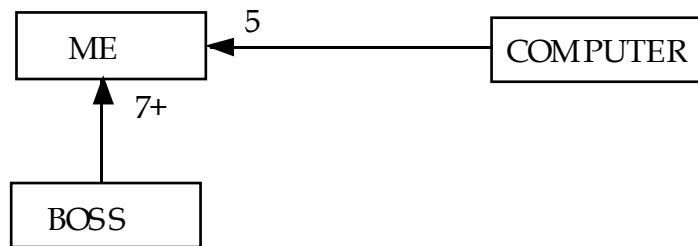
Nutrition for Stress-Proofing

- Cut down on caffeine (coffee, cola, tea, chocolate)
- Cut down on sugar
- Eat lots of fresh fruit and vegetables - the sooner you eat them after purchase, the more nutrients are left in them
- Avoid processed or convenience foods as these tend to be higher in fat, sugar and salt and lower in vitamins and minerals
- Eat **brown** things (wholemeal bread and pasta and brown rice) and avoid **white** things (white sliced loaves, fat, sugar, cream, lard, salt) apart from chicken and fish
- Steam and grill rather than boil and fry - more nutrients, less fat
- The less alcohol you drink, the better you will feel
- When you are stressed is not the ideal time to start a diet (in fact, avoid diets altogether as they don't work)
- Drink lots of water
- Set aside time to enjoy your meals - don't eat and work at the same time (unless you're a restaurant critic)
- Avoid 'energy dips'
- Cut down on caffeine

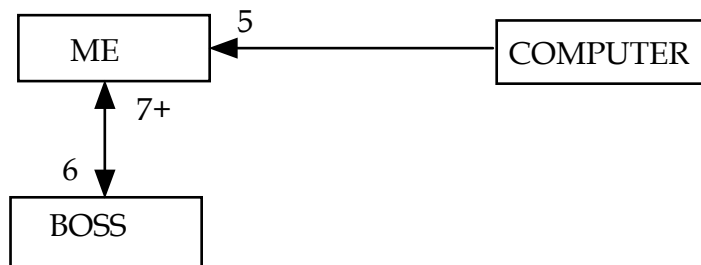
Stress Mapping

Stress Mapping is a way of identifying where your stresses are coming from, enabling you to target more precisely your actions to reduce them. It also helps you to see how you have been contributing to the stress levels of others, and to become more aware of the flows of stress in any group setting, whether at work, in the family, or in a social group. Let's look at a very simple example:

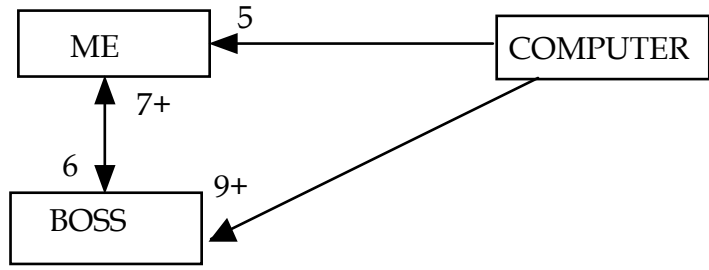
Step 1. How much stress are others causing you? Rate it from 1 to 10. Show the direction of the stress with an arrow and write the number next to it. If the stress from one person (or thing, e.g. a computer system) is low but sometimes surges to higher levels, denote this with the normal stress level and a plus sign.



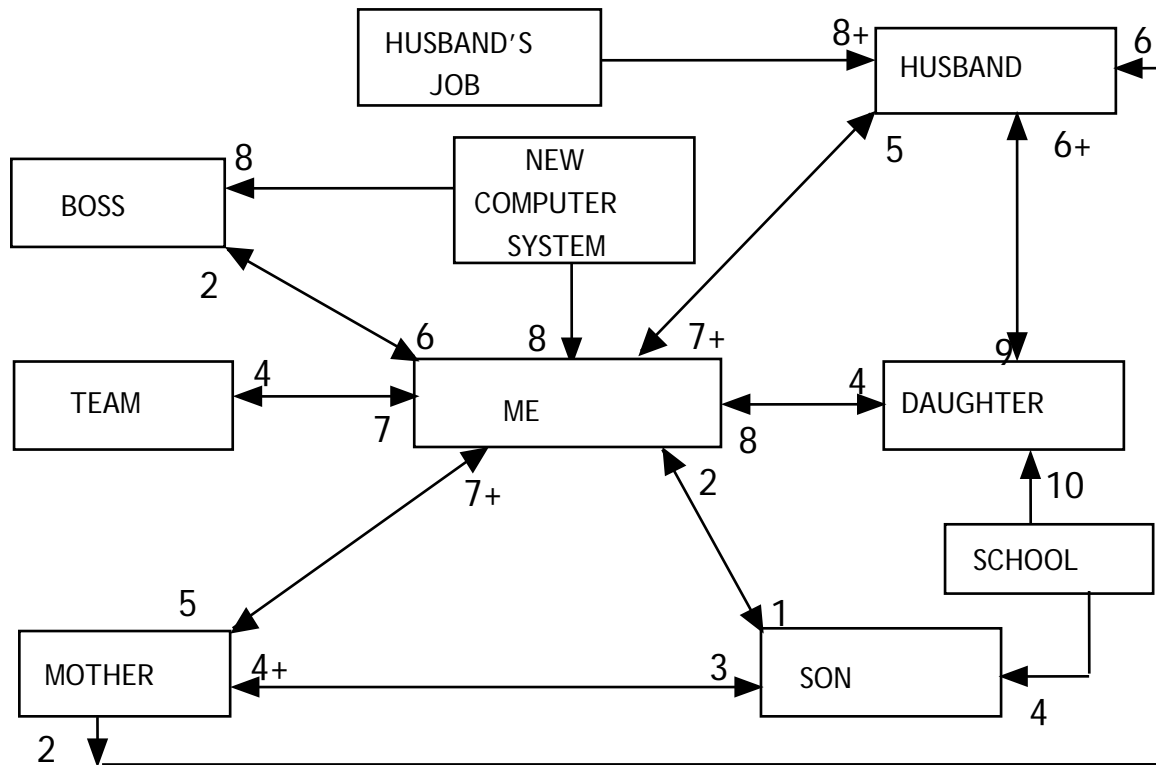
Step 2. People who are stressed themselves are often stressful to deal with. So, how much stress do you think you are you causing the people around you? Again, write it in. Could you reduce it? This requires you to adopt the point of view of the people that you deal with and try to see yourself as others see you.



Step 3. Finally, it's useful to be aware of stresses which affect other people in the system independently of you. If the computer system is periodically stressing the boss out and this affects the amount of stress he passes on to you, will the knowledge that it's not anything you're doing help you to stop worrying about it?



Stress Map Example



Effective Coping Strategies

We all have our own ways of coping with stress, ranging from meditation to drinking oneself into a stupor. Some of these ways of coping are helpful, others just make matters worse. So how do we ensure that the coping strategies we choose are good ones?

There are three criteria for an effective set of coping strategies:

Balance: Are your coping strategies primarily on the mental level? If so, it may be useful to introduce more physical activity and/or relaxation to your life. If they are primarily physical, you may benefit from introducing some strategies on the mental level.

Priority: Are you giving as much time as you would like to the things you enjoy? When we encounter stress, the things which help us to cope with stress are very often the first thing to go.

Integration: Good coping strategies strengthen the sense of your life as a unified whole.

- What is the effect of each activity on the other areas of your life? Is it helping or hindering?
- Do these activities increase your energy, health and inner resources or drain them?
- Do they help you to connect with people around you or does it cut you off from them?
- Do they help you to face up to and solve your problems or are they just a temporary escape?
- Are these activities good for you in the long term as well as the short term?

These factors determine whether each coping strategy is adaptive (helpful) or maladaptive (just making matters worse).

Resource Anchoring

One of the easiest and quickest ways to get yourself out of a state of frustration, or any other emotional state which you experience regularly but would prefer not to, is to use an NLP technique called **Resource Anchoring**. This is a way to 'anchor' resourceful emotional states (such as calmness, courage or joy) to cues or triggers under your control, so that you can disrupt or replace a 'negative' emotional state with a positive one whenever you need to.

The steps are:

1. Remember what it feels like to be frustrated.
2. With this in mind, decide what resourceful state you would like to have available to you to dispel that feeling of frustration - it might be calmness, for example, or the ability to see the funny side.
3. Remember a time when you were in that positive state. Really put yourself back into that experience - what did it you see, what were you hearing, how did it feel?
4. When those feelings have peaked, come out of that state and decide on a word, an image and a gesture which you can use to 'anchor' that state. We are going to build an association between the word, image and gesture and the emotional state you want to anchor, so that each time you think of the image, repeat the word to yourself, and make the gesture, you will recall the emotional state you want. It helps if the word and image are in some way reminiscent of the state you want to achieve, and if the gesture is fairly discreet (for example, pressing thumb and forefinger together) so that you can use it anywhere.
5. Now go back into the resourceful emotional state, taking as long as you need to let the positive feelings really take hold. As they are coming up to their peak, repeat your anchors - the word, image and gesture - a few times.
6. When the positive feelings have peaked and begun to diminish, come out of the resourceful state and think about the situation when you would feel frustrated. What's the first thing you see, hear or feel that lets you know you are in that situation again? This is probably a trigger for the state of frustration. Imagine you are experiencing that trigger - and use the word, image and gesture that you've just set up. Notice what happens - you can expect the resourceful state to come back to you. As you practice, the 'negative' trigger will also become associated with the positive state.
7. If the result is not as strong as you want, repeat step 5 a few times. Experiment.

Resource anchors are like rechargeable batteries - they may need topping up from time to time. Any time you are in a particularly good state - a sense of achievement, say - anchor it so it's always there whenever you need it. You can stack more than one resource on the same anchor.

Distorted Thinking

"People are disturbed not by things but by the views which they take of them"

(Epictetus, first century philosopher)

Language shapes our thinking. The words we use can introduce distortions into our internal representations of our experience; we then act as if those distortions are reality and make things worse for ourselves.

It is worth challenging yourself if you catch yourself thinking in this way to get your view of the world back on a more rational basis. There are a number of types of distorting language to look out for:

1. Statements of necessity: **ought/ought not, should/should not, must/must not, have to, got to**

Words like these are often signs of rigid, dogmatic belief systems, often learned in childhood, which not everyone will share and which may no longer be appropriate to your circumstances. They are red flags indicating that you are limiting your behaviour in ways which may or may not be legitimate. The effective challenge to a rule like "I mustn't do this" is:

"What would happen if I did?" This gets you to think outside of your limits.

2. Statements of capability: **can't, unable to, not possible, out of the question, I'm no good at**

Again, these words put limits on their behaviour (or to get out of doing things). People often say "I can't" when they mean "I don't want to". And again, you can challenge these limiting beliefs by asking yourself:

"What would happen if I could?" or even "What do I need to change in order to be able to do it?"

3. Generalisations: **always, never, ever, everybody, they, everyone, anywhere, all**

At their most extreme, generalisations can produce a feeling that the entire world is against you: "Everyone dislikes me" when you actually mean a couple of the people that you work with. An effective challenge is just to repeat the generalising word as a question:

"Everyone?" "All the time?"

which will automatically make you look for counter-examples.

Submodalities - the building blocks of experience

Submodalities are the qualities of each sensory modality. They are the building blocks of subjective experience. The submodalities in which a representation is coded tell you how important it is and what response to have - so if you change the submodality codings you can change the response.

Visual	1	2	3	4
Monochrome/Colour?				
Near or Far?				
Bright or Dim?				
Location?				
Size of Picture?				
Focused/Defocused?				
Framed or Panoramic?				
Movie or Still?				
Amount of Contrast				
3D or Flat?				
In the picture/outside it?				

Auditory

Location				
Direction				
Internal or External?				
Loud or Soft?				
Fast or Slow?				
High or Low? (Pitch)				
Tonality				
Timbre				
Pauses				
Cadence				
Duration				

Kinaesthetic

Location				
Size				
Shape				
Intensity				
Steady				
Movement/ Duration				
Vibration				
Pressure/Heat?				
Weight				

This is not an exclusive list - what other submodalities do you notice?

Further Reading

Stress Management and Relaxation

Relax: Dealing with Stress

Murray Watts and Professor Cary L. Cooper: BBC Books

Meditation Made Easy

Lorin Roche: HarperSanFrancisco

The Psychobiology of Mind-Body Healing

Ernest Rossi: Norton

Introductions to NLP

NLP and Health

Ian McDermott and Joseph O'Connor

Excellent, with a whole chapter on stress

NLP at Work

Sue Knight: Nicholas Brealey Books

Refreshingly jargon-free, beautifully laid out and applied to realistic work situations. This is a marvellous book.

Heart of the Mind

Connirae and Steve Andreas: Real People Press

A self-help book of NLP techniques applied to specific problems.

Introducing NLP

John Seymour and Joseph O'Connor: Thorsons

A comprehensive overview of NLP.

NLP: the New Technology of Achievement

Steve Andreas and Charles Faulkner

Easy to understand and packed full of useful techniques. Very American indeed.

Useful books from other perspectives

Feel The Fear And Do It Anyway

Susan Jeffers: Arrow, 1991

You Can Heal Your Life

Louise Hay: Eden Grove

Life and How to Survive it

Robin Skynner and John Cleese: Mandarin

If you can't find these books in your local bookshop, you can order them from Amazon.co.uk, often at a discount, via the Transformation Training web site at:

www.trance.dircon.co.uk/books.html

Stress Action Plan

Date _____

Action to be taken by _____

Take breaks: _____

Time Management: _____

Relaxation: _____

Diet: _____

Exercise: _____

Thinking Skills: _____

Anchoring: _____

How does this reflect Balance, Priority, Integration (p.16)?: _____
