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Feel Karma Stress Guide





Stress Management Society
...from distress to de-stress

ABOUT STRESS

The Health & Safety Executive defines stress as: "The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". The organisation recognises that there is a convincing body of research showing a clear link between stress and ill health. Its research with Personnel Today Magazine recently showed that over 105 million days are lost to stress each year – costing UK employers £1.24 billion.

The research is based on responses from almost 700 senior HR practitioners and almost 2,000 employees.

Other findings are:

- 11% of absence is attributed to stress
- 52% say stress is increasing
- 60% claim stress is damaging staff retention
- 83% think stress is harming productivity

The H&SE's official position on the problem is that work-related stress is a serious problem. Tackling it effectively can result in significant benefits for organisations. It states that there are things that can be done to prevent and control work-related stress. And indeed it considers that the law requires employers to take action on the matter.

Pressure itself is not bad. In fact, many thrive on it. But when those pressures exceed a person's ability to cope, then that is when the problems start. It follows, therefore, that we can tackle stress either by reducing pressures or by increasing coping resources – or a combination of the two.

That's where The Stress Management Society comes in, by giving people the techniques they need to cope with the stresses of working life.





UNDERSTANDING STRESS

Much 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. During this time, there seems to have been something approaching open warfare between competing theories and definitions: Views have been passionately held and aggressively defended. 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.

Definitions

Hans Selye was one of the founding fathers of stress research. His view in 1956 was that "stress is not necessarily something bad – it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental." Selye believed that the biochemical effects of stress would be experienced, irrespective of whether the situation was positive or negative.

Since then, a great deal of further research has been conducted, and ideas have moved on. Stress is now viewed as a "bad thing", with a range of harmful biochemical and long-term effects. These effects have rarely been observed in positive situations.

The most commonly accepted definition of stress 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."**

We also recognise that there is an intertwined instinctive stress response to unexpected events. The stress response inside us is therefore part instinct and part to do with the way we think.

Fight or flight

Some of the early research on stress (conducted by Walter Cannon in 1932) established the existence of the well-known "fight-or-flight" response. His work showed that when an organism experiences a shock or perceives a threat, it quickly releases hormones that help it to survive.



In humans, as in other animals, these hormones help us to run faster and fight harder. They increase heart rate and blood pressure, delivering more oxygen and blood sugar to power important muscles. They increase sweating in an effort to cool these muscles, and help them stay efficient. They divert blood away from the skin to the core of our bodies, reducing blood loss if we are damaged. As well as this, these hormones focus our attention on the threat, to the exclusion of everything else. All of this significantly improves our ability to survive life-threatening events.

Life-threatening events are not the only ones to trigger this reaction. We experience it almost any time we come across something unexpected or something that frustrates our goals. When the threat is small, our response is small and we often do not notice it among the many other distractions of a stressful situation.

Unfortunately, this mobilisation of the body for survival also has negative consequences. In this state, we are excitable, anxious, jumpy and irritable. This actually reduces our ability to work effectively with other people. With trembling and a pounding heart, we can find it difficult to execute precise, controlled skills. The intensity of our focus on survival interferes with our ability to make fine judgments by drawing information from many sources.

We find ourselves more accident-prone and less able to make good decisions. There are very few situations in modern working life where this response is useful. Most situations benefit from a calm, rational, controlled and socially sensitive approach.

In the short term, we need to keep this fight-or-flight response under control to be effective in our jobs. In the long term we need to keep it under control to avoid problems of poor health and burnout.

What is stress?

To really understand this, ask yourself: what causes stress?

We cannot specify what external conditions cause stress as the stress reaction is based on our interpretation of a stressful condition. There is not a specific cause of stress – only a person's reaction to a condition, situation or an event.

How we react to a stressful situation is based on our individual appraisal and interpretation; although some situations are considerably more stressful than others – such as going to the dentist, having surgery, moving job/school/house, exams, weddings, divorces etc.



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We cannot avoid stress. Situations arise on a day to day basis which make physical mental and emotional demands on us. There may be decisions that need to be made, deadlines that need to be met, lessons to be learned. It doesn't matter whether we are at work or at play. Stress is the driving force that keeps us on our toes and ensures that we push to be the best we can be.

However that is only valid up to a certain point. If we have too much stress and endless wear and tear, it can drive us into physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.

Having too little stress can also be a problem. If we are not exposed to the driving forces that push us and we are not stretched or committed, we can become bored, sluggish and lethargic. Therefore it is imperative to strike a balance between not enough stress and too much stress.

As individuals, we must take stock of all aspects of our life and situations. We must change our attitudes and behaviours – it is not so much the things which stress us that cause the problems, but rather the way in which we react to them. If treated early, the prospects are good. If left, there is a risk that 'burnout' may become a permanent state of affairs.



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How do we feel when we become stressed?

When a stressful situation is interpreted as dangerous or threatening, people experience feelings of tension, apprehension and worry. They also undergo a range of physiological and behavioural changes. These feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry may also be accompanied with behavioural and physiological changes such as trembling; palpitations; dizziness; tremors and so on. These are also very often, the symptoms of anxiety. Therefore anxiety is something that is felt.

We encounter sources of stress every day of our lives and at every stage of human development.



Think about the kind of stresses we go through:

At birth As a toddler

At school As a teenager

At work At home

At middle age At retirement/old age

Change causes stress – environmental and technological in particular – as well as life events. The key factor that causes stress is SIGNIFICANT CHANGE THAT REQUIRES ADAPTATION – if only we could learn to adapt more easily...

Internal stress causing factors combine with external ones. There can be many kinds of internal conflicts that cause stress. The most common one is conflict between some emotion or desire and prohibitive internal voice eg, 'I want to' versus 'I mustn't' or between a reluctance to do something and an internalised sense of duty – an 'I don't want to' versus 'I should'.

What happens in our bodies when we get stressed?

Fight/flight mode – stress

Heart rate increases

Mouth dries up

Forehead tenses

Breathing becomes shallow and fast

Eyes strain

Jaws and teeth are clenched

Distresses facial complexion

Anger/hostility

Perspiration increases

Blood vessels close

Skin tightens

Increased white blood cells

Blood sugar increases

Blood pressure increases

Stomach butterflies/digestive system suspended

Bladder relaxes

If you stay in this state for a prolonged period it will lead to exhaustion and then depression.



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Rest and digest – relaxed

Heart rates decreases
Breathing deepens and slows
Blood vessels return to normal
Salivation returns to normal
Facial muscles relax
Pupils return to normal
Production of white blood cells inhibited
Muscles relax
Blood pressure reduces
Blood sugar reduces
Sweat glands close
Digestion returns to normal
Bladder contracts
Restful and calm feelings

Chronic stress can lead to - BACK PROBLEMS, HEART PROBLEMS, MIGRAINE, ASTHMA, DIGESTIVE PROBLEMS, SKIN CONDITIONS AND ALLERGIES.

Remember it is physically impossible to be ANXIOUS and RELAXED at the same time.

Stress and anxiety both require energy, once the energy is used up, then the person is de-pressed, there is no energy left to feed the anxieties, which are not being resolved. Another way of looking at it is, the person de-pressed themselves to escape dealing with reality.





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ABOUT OUR STRESS MANAGEMENT TRAINING

We provide a workshop for anyone interested in being freed from the stress trap. It is especially aimed at people working in a high-pressure environment. However its techniques can benefit people from any level, background or industry.

It includes training in 'desk yoga' and 'desk massage', which can be done discreetly, even in an open plan office. Such techniques relax stressed muscles and rebalance body and mind. They also focus on proper breathing, an essential tool in de-stressing.

Lastly the workshop includes training on how to relax and become more centred through creative visualisation. Even a few minutes in this state of deep relaxation is equivalent to several hours sleep. Delegates are taught to achieve a state of self-hypnosis to take advantage of these benefits. Once learned they can be applied in any type of work environment, or even on the bus going to work!





A TEN-STEP GUIDE TO COPING WITH STRESS

1) Avoid nicotine, alcohol and caffeine.

They are all stimulants, so therefore they cannot calm you down. If you're stressed, steer clear of them and keep yourself well-hydrated by drinking water instead.

2) Work off stress with physical activity.

Pressure or anger releases adrenaline in the body. Exercise helps to reduce it, and produces 'good mood' substances in the brain. So go for a brisk walk around the block when you feel tense, and try some regular exercise after work.

3) Relax with a stress reduction technique every day.

Try self-hypnosis – it's very easy and can even be done at your desk. We can recommend courses in self-hypnosis and will soon be bringing out a CD that will teach you the secrets of this technique. Email us for details on info@stress.org.uk. Or think up a self-affirming mantra to repeat to yourself (eg 'I deserve calm in my life', or 'I have a choice in every situation'). Repeat it to yourself whenever you feel tense.

4) Get enough sleep.

Sleep is essential for the body to function properly. Sleeping pills are not necessary if you change your life-style. If you've habitually skimped on sleep, you probably won't even remember how it feels to wake up fully rested. Give it a go for a week, and see if there's a difference in how you perform during the day.

5) If you're ill, rest.

Don't just carry on regardless. Working will tire the body and prolong the illness. So recognise that you have limits and don't carry on as if you were firing on all cylinders.

6) Agree with somebody; once in a while!

Life shouldn't be a constant battleground. So even if you disagree with someone, avoid conflict by just agreeing or keeping quiet. After all, they have a right to their opinion, just as you do.

7) Learn to accept what you cannot change.

A well known prayer asks for the serenity "to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference". This philosophy will help you avoid unhappiness, cynicism and bitterness.



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8) Listen to your body.

When you are tired, hungry or thirsty, do something about it. Also recognise stress and anger in your day and counter it immediately with a brisk walk, ten minutes' in deep relaxation or whatever works for you. Order a batch of our ['stress spots'](#) to put around the house or office so you can test your stress levels whenever you like.

9) Learn how to say 'no'.

Simple, but effective. Where a 'no' is the appropriate response, say it without guilt.

10) Manage your time.

Take one thing at a time. Don't overdo things. Create time buffers to deal with unexpected emergencies. And, recognise that your day to day problems and responsibilities are the things that cause stress in your life. Tackle them with a system that works for you.

Stress often results from a general difficulty in coping with day-to-day problems and responsibilities. A useful strategy for dealing with a sense of being overwhelmed by all the things that need attention is **prioritising** and **diarising**:

Make a list of all the things that you need to do; list them in order of genuine importance; noting what you need to do personally and what can be delegated to others; and noting what needs to be done immediately, in the next week or next month etc.

What starts out as an overwhelming and unmanageable list which was the source of the stress and anxiety, is transformed into a more realistic and manageable set of tasks, spread out over a more achievable time frame, with some items removed from the list altogether, either through delegation or the realisation that they are, after all, unnecessary or unimportant.





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ABOUT THE STRESS MANAGEMENT SOCIETY

The Stress Management Society is an organisation dedicated to helping people tackle stress at work and at home. Our team of health and professional consultants offers the highest quality consultancy, staff training, event organisation and stress management products. All our services are delivered in line with the Health and Safety Executive's Stress Management Standards. We work with individuals and companies ranging from sole traders to those listed on the FTSE 100. We work both in the public and private sector. We offer everything from simple advice to company-wide stress audits. If you need help tackling stress, please get in touch.

For more info or to book a workshop see
www.stress.org.uk call 08701 999 235
or email info@stress.org.uk.

