

Coping with stress

Dr Ruth Turner



Contents

Section A Education about stress

- 1 Introduction
- 2 What Is stress?
- 3 Identifying the components of stress

Section B Strategies to cope with stress

- 1 How to cope with daily hassles
- 2 Time management
 - Tips on managing your time
 - Categorising your time
 - Are you getting enough time to yourself?
- 3 Being assertive
 - What being assertive means
 - How to be assertive
- 4 Balancing competing tasks
 - Balancing acts
- 5 Social support
 - Self esteem and stress
 - Social support networks
- 6 Taking care of yourself
 - Health
 - Life style
- 7 Relaxation
 - Visualisation
 - The Mitchell Method

Section C Summary

Introduction

Stress is a common experience in modern life. It is our emotional response to demands that are made of us by others, outside events, or even ourselves. Feeling over-burdened at work, reacting to a major life event, and coping with a difficult situation we were not expecting are some examples of things people report as causing a high level of stress.

Some people are able to accept the inevitability of stress in day-to-day life and resolve it as it arrives. For other people stress is a continuous and intrusive problem, and can sometimes be out of proportion to the event. It can reach such high levels that it interferes with everyday life, and disrupts relationships with others. Stress can lead to a feeling of despair and provoke a strong physical reaction from the body. If stress is prolonged, it may even lead to illness.

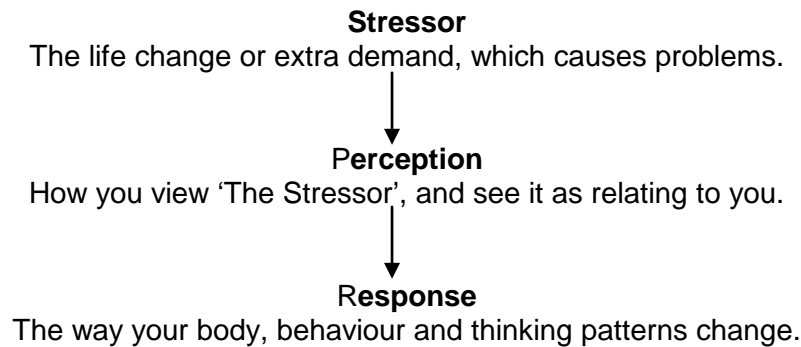
This manual is designed to help you develop a good understanding of stress. It will explain how life style alterations and changing the way you think about things can be used to reduce the stress reaction. It will also describe techniques of relaxation that can be used to reduce the physical symptoms of stress.

Section A Education about stress

What is stress?

Stress has become a very widely used term; however, not everyone agrees on how to define it.

Stress consists of:



Negative stressful event

You may have a single major stressor. This would be a negative stressful event such as receiving a large bill, or having a pressing deadline at work. This is an objectively stressful event, however the way you see the event may have an impact on how much stress it creates. You may perceive this event or situation to be very overwhelming, and outside of your control, which would increase the amount of stress, which it placed, on you.

Number of smaller difficulties

You may have a number of smaller difficulties which all add up to a large amount of stress. These could be combinations of concerns in different areas, such as your children having school difficulties whilst you are having trouble maintaining a relationship at the same time. Other things, which might build up your stress level, would be commuting to work, noisy building work outside your house or having guests to stay. Stress can be measured to some extent by the amount of changes that have taken place in your life recently. How you react to these changes can have a big impact upon how much stress they create.

Stressful life events do not necessarily have to be negative events.

Some examples of potentially stressful life events are:

- Getting married
- Moving house
- Christmas
- Retirement
- Starting a new job

When stress becomes a reoccurring problem in people's lives other areas suffer as well. With constant stress related to work or family life looking after your physical health becomes less of a priority. Less time can be found to take regular exercise or enjoy sports and activities that you may otherwise have become involved in. Often people indulge in things designed to reduce stress, such as: alcohol, smoking, large amounts of coffee or fast foods which can all be bad for our health, and effect us physically.

When stress becomes such a large part of our lives it can change the way we think about: ourselves, the world in general, and our future. We view these three areas in a more negative way, which begins to add to our stress. If the cause of our stress, such as difficulties in a relationship, appears to be inescapable; then our future can seem very difficult, and further stress will seem unavoidable. In this example the stressful nature of the relationship would begin to seem never ending.

Having less physical and mental resources to draw upon due to the effects of stress, means that your emotional state can become more erratic. You may find that you become tearful more easily when you would otherwise have been able to cope. Emotional reactions to events and situations may be more extreme if you are suffering from stress. Things that would have made you slightly anxious or upset now seem to cause great anxiety or deep sadness.

Think about the past year, what were the three most stressful events in your life? Make a note in the column next to each whether they were major causes of stress, smaller repeated difficulties that were adding to your stress, or a positive event that you also found stressful.

1.	
2.	
3.	

Look at this list. Are you surprised by how much stress these events caused? Perhaps you are surprised by how well you coped with such events.

What other factors do you think contributed to your overall levels of stress? Make a list of them below:

Now think about what's causing most of the stress in your life at the moment. Is it a single life event, or smaller day-to-day 'hassles'? For most of us it's a combination of larger and smaller issues.

Identifying the components of stress

It is worth being exact when you think about the your major cause of stress in life. If there is an element of your job that is causing you stress, then it is important to realise exactly what that is. Rather than saying to yourself that it is 'WORK' that has become stressful, think about what aspect of work is causing the stress. If the cause of your stress at work is that you have to reach a deadline that seems unreasonable, then make a note of that. Think of it as: 'THE NEW DEADLINE AT WORK'. Write below what it is exactly that's causing your major life stress at the moment.

It is usually fairly easy to identify the big or major sources of stress in our lives. However, the smaller stressors can be harder to see. It can be difficult to understand how the "smaller stuff" can combine and build up to affect us. It is important to keep in mind that it may be harder to cope with the smaller stresses in life when there is a major stress at the same time. Because of this it is a good idea to keep a record of these "daily hassles" and how you respond to them.

Making a note of your hassles

The first stage in dealing with these smaller problems is to identify them clearly. It will then become a little easier to put them in some perspective, and to see how they combine to make your overall stress level worse.

Use the headings shown below to make your own 'hassle slips'. Fill in a separate slip each time you notice a hassle. It may not always be possible to fill out one of these slips every time we have a stressful situation, but it is still useful to make a note of them later. Have a look at a typical hassle (below) to see how to fill them in.

Date: 24 July	Time: 8.30am	Hassle no. 3
What happened? A car coming towards me had to pull out to overtake a double-parked taxi at the station. I had to brake quickly.		
How did I 'see' it? It was my right of way.		
How did I feel? Angry and a bit scared.		
What physical symptoms of the stress response did I have? Heart beat quickly.		
Stress score out of 10 for this hassle: 7/10		

At the back of this manual you will find a page of 'Hassle Slips'. You may find it helpful to photocopy these slips so that you have some to easily fill in when they are needed. The more of these slips you do, the clearer your picture will be of why your stress has reached such a high level.

Section B Strategies to cope with stress

How to cope with daily hassles

Now that you have identified what your day-to-day 'hassles' are try this next exercise to see if it is possible to reduce them. At the end of the day collect up your hassle slips review them, then sort them into three piles:

- A Those hassles that could be avoided.
- B Those where although the event could not be avoided, the amount of stress it generated could be reduced.
- C Completely unavoidable hassles that you think you will have to live with.

If you're having trouble with this, take a look at some of the suggestions below to see if it helps you.

Group A hassles: Could be avoided

Some possible ways you could be able to avoid these hassles:

- *By negotiating a better arrangement.*

If your stress is coming from pressure at work, it may be possible to speak to your boss about the level of pressure you are under. They may be in a position to take work off you or create more flexible deadlines for you.

- *By planning your day differently to make better use of your time.*

Being able to give a task the correct amount of time, and then moving on to the next thing will help you keep on top of different stresses. The temptation is to stay and dwell on certain parts of your life (such as putting extra time in at work), which could mean other areas suffer (such as spending time with children). Planning may help to prevent this.

Group B hassles: Could not be avoided, but the stress could be reduced

Some possible ways you can try to reduce your stress levels when dealing with these:

- *Try using some quick relaxation techniques.*

In the final section of this manual are some suggestions and techniques for relaxation. When you have found which one work best for you, try putting it into practise closer to the time of when the stress is caused.

- *Try thinking about whether this is really so important.*

It is possible that you have blown the hassle out of proportion. If every thing else were going well in life, would this hassle be as much of a problem? Will this hassle matter in 3 months time?

- *Could you ask for some help with any of these tasks?*

For example, your partner may be able to help out more with looking after the children while you are coping with stress (such as having a hard time at work). This won't solve your problem at work, but would give you more energy to solve those problems yourself. A colleague at work may be available to offer suggestions to make work easier.

- *Try asking other people how they deal with these stressors.*

People you know may have really good or enjoyable ways of dealing with their own stress. Does a friend have an interesting hobby or pass time that you could do as well?

Group C hassles: Unavoidable stress

Some factors to consider:

Consider why you feel that these hassles are unavoidable. Are you aiming for 'better things' that you value highly and therefore make your hassles a price you are willing to pay? Other unavoidable hassles include tasks we "have" to do, such as picking up children from school or completing a certain number of tasks at work.

For both group B and group C hassles you should use as much practical and emotional support as you can get.

Time management

Clear and open time management is not just a matter of creating opportunities to get more done. It can also be used to allocate time to relax, unwind or do things you enjoy. It should also help in being assertive, as having a clear idea of how much time you can give to a task will make it clearer whether or not you are the best person to be doing it at that point.

Some tips on managing your time:

Generally

- ⇒ Making lists
- ⇒ Selecting things - prioritising
- ⇒ Paying people to do things at home
- ⇒ Planning - daily, weekly, monthly and six monthly
- ⇒ Getting up earlier and using prime time well - ie, I'm fresher in the morning, therefore I will use this time to plan my work
- ⇒ Remembering what you want to achieve, reviewing and goal setting
- ⇒ Getting each family member to be responsible for cleaning/tidying his/her own room
- ⇒ Breaking a project down into small manageable items
- ⇒ Being organised - a place for everything
- ⇒ Building in breaks and leisure time daily, weekly, monthly, yearly
- ⇒ Using new technologies – ie, e-mailing rather than writing and posting letters
- ⇒ Looking at a whole day as a series of time slots, and plan accordingly
- ⇒ Keeping diaries
- ⇒ Delegating

Specific time savers

- ⇒ Draining not drying the dishes
- ⇒ Batch cooking and freezing
- ⇒ Buying food for the month, rather than for each week at a time.
- ⇒ Not hunting for dirty clothes, just washing what's in the basket
- ⇒ Living with a dirty car

The next activity will help you to review your day and how you actually used your time. You can then consider a harder question: 'How did you use your time in terms of priorities?'

In the box on the next page list the things you do in your day under the heading 'What you did'. Then under the heading 'How long' make a note of the time you spent on this, and try to be as accurate and honest as possible. If you spent 10 minutes thinking about doing a task and working yourself up to it, and the actual task took 30 minutes, then you spent 40 minutes in total on this item.

Think about how important each task was to do. Under the heading 'Code' mark with an 'A' all the tasks which really needed to be done urgently and are a top priority. Mark with a 'B' the tasks that will needed to be done at some point soon, but were not yet very urgent. Mark with a 'C' the tasks that did not need to be done soon, and were a low priority.

List everything you did today, from the moment you woke up, in the space below. Use a new line for each item. Add roughly how long you spent on each. Bracket together things you were doing at the same time.

What you did	How long	Code
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Now go through the list. Take one item at a time and ask yourself if doing it at that time was the best use of your time right then? Next to each item write:

- A - if it was a top priority for use of your time today.
- B - if it was a medium priority for use of your time today.
- C - if it was a low priority for use of your time today.
- D - if you could have delegated it to someone else.
- W - if you were wasting time when you had said you would be getting on with something else.

It may have been possible for some tasks to have been delegated, or given to someone else; mark these with a 'D'. Finally, for slots of time that you were wasting when you feel you should have been doing specific things, mark with a 'W'

Review your categories.

- Do you think that too many of your A list items were there because they had reached a crisis point and this was the last day you had to tackle them?

Items that were at crisis point
•
•
•
•
•

- Are you spending time on things that really are a priority, or are you doing B and C group jobs but not finishing your A list.

'A' list jobs	Finished	Not finished

Time that I would have needed to finish all 'A' list jobs: -----

Jobs that I could have postponed to finish 'A' list jobs:

-
- Look at the things you now realise you could have delegated. What stopped you? Perhaps you like doing them and even if it is possible to delegate them, you prefer not to. If you hesitate to definitely commit to delegating them, ask yourself why you are hanging onto them. Are you worried about asking people to do things? Are you worried that if someone else does them they won't get done properly? If you are choosing to do them decide how much of a priority they are. You may want to reconsider delegation.

'D' list job	Reason not delegated

Now look at your W category

Are you accumulating too much guilt over this list? It is important to recognise when 'wasting time' is the result of feeling too anxious about what you are supposed to be tackling. Your anxiety pushes you into procrastination.

However it is equally important to recognise that some things you have coded as 'W' ought really be on a priority list! Sometimes, wasting time is quite the best thing to do. You need short breaks, a quick breather, an energiser, a little relaxation or even a bit of 'silliness' to prevent the pressures of the day building up on you. They help you recover and should be valued and, indeed, planned into your day.

Now that you have done this review you should find it easier to plan ahead by making A, B, C and D lists of all the things you need to do. Use these 'things to do' lists to plan daily and weekly timetables. Don't forget to plan in time to negotiate delegating your D list. When planning your week consider whether there is a particular time when you are at your most productive. Are you a morning person or an afternoon person? If so then this would be the best time to do items that are a high priority.

Are you getting enough time for yourself?

Time can be a precious commodity. Think about how you would spend your time if you had it just for yourself. Allocating more time to yourself would lead to a more balanced life between the expectations of others and your own needs. Finding time for yourself is not a selfish act, because if you are more relaxed and less stressed then you will be more efficient in your tasks. If you are less stressed at work then you will be able to focus on your job and be able to achieve more in less time.

As you go through the week, make a note in the box below of what makes you feel good or settled, for example, routine coffee with a friend or colleague, watching your favourite soap opera, or mealtimes at home. Are these things which you could try to do more often?

What activities make me feel good?

Now you have identified the activities that make you feel good. You can work them into your time management. Schedule an appropriate amount of time for them into your diary. This will help create a balance between what you know needs to be done and what you would like to do in order to make life more pleasant.

Being assertive

Are extreme demands a major source of stress for you? Why do you experience such extreme demands? Is it because you have trouble saying no? *Perhaps you should think about learning some assertiveness skills.* Setting clear boundaries with others makes it less likely that they will try to place unreasonable demands on you. This is true in all areas of your life, from work, to your friends and even in your home. There is of course an important difference between being assertive, and being aggressive.

Being assertive means:

- Being open, flexible and genuinely concerned with the rights of others.
- At the same time being able to establish your own rights.
- Standing up for your own rights in such a way that you do not infringe the rights of others.
- Expressing your needs, wants, opinions, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways.

Being assertive can help avoid a lot of the confusion in our work and home lives that can lead to stressful situations. A clear understanding of what you want or expect from a person can reduce the chances of mistakes being made due to poor communication. If you are able to clearly state what you expect, then the other person will be more able to fulfil your demands.

How to be assertive

1. First decide what you want. You can't jump this stage or everyone will be confused, yourself included!
2. Say what you want clearly and specifically. 'Let's meet at 6pm', rather than 'How about around teatime?'
3. Support what you say by how you say it. If something is serious, look serious. Smiling often undermines what you are saying, so the person on the receiving end doesn't know what to believe. Tone of voice and body language must match the words themselves. Mixed messages are confusing and ineffective.
4. Don't be manipulated or sidetracked. Say you want to stick to the first point and attend to the other issues later. If need be, repeat yourself.
5. Listen to the other person. They have the right to their point of view.
6. Aim for 'win-win'. Being assertive isn't about getting what you want all the time. With two brains working co-operatively on a problem you can aim for a workable compromise so both parties get something of what they want.

Think of the last time you wanted someone to do a task for you but were unable or unsure how to ask him or her. Make a note of it here:

Now try and create a clear statement or question for that person that you could have used. Try not to be unclear but avoid being aggressive, so rather than 'don't you think the washing needs to be done?' or 'why do you never do the washing?', try something like: 'Could you do the washing? I've got a lot on my hands right now.'

The next time you need something done, or you are unable to do something you have been asked to, pause for a moment and try to create a clear but non-aggressive statement like you have done here.

Balancing competing tasks

We are very often performing balancing acts when we choose between different aspects of our lives and determining priorities. We have to balance one set of demands against another. This process in itself can be stressful. You may feel as though you cannot avoid letting someone down, or decide that the only way you can appease everyone is to let yourself down, which you may resent strongly.

Some examples of balancing acts

Demand A	Versus	Demand B
Paid work	v	Unpaid domestic or voluntary work
Work	v	Home
My job	v	My partner's job
Too much to do	v	Too little to do
Eating well	v	Not enough time or money to eat well
Need to keep fit	v	Not inclined towards exercise
Need for change and excitement	v	Need for stability
Need to get work done	v	Need to have fun
Fitting everything in	v	Getting enough sleep
Time for my family	v	Time for me

If you have problems with conflicting demands you can:

- renegotiate - set limits on what you are prepared to do
- manage your time better
- learn to live with them

Have a go at this activity that will enable you to identify which of your most important demands fall into these categories.

1. Make notes about one demand being made on you that you would like to renegotiate.

■ What is the demand?

■ What would you like to change?

■ What would make it more bearable?

■ Who would you have to discuss it with?

■ When will you begin to renegotiate?

2. Make notes about a demand that could be improved by careful time management.

■ What is the demand?

■ When can you spend half an hour making some plans? Make a note of this time in your diary.

3. What demands can't you change? Make notes about one that you will have to learn to live with.

■ What positive things could you do to help make this demand more bearable?

"You have to take life as it happens, but you should try to make it happen, the way you want to take it" (Old German saying)

Social support

Self-esteem and stress

You can think of self-esteem as your sense of self worth or what you think and feel about yourself.

If you have good self-esteem you trust your own opinions and thus can make decisions. You can speak for yourself and be assertive without slipping over into being aggressive. Having good self-esteem is sometimes referred to as having a good self-image.

With good self-esteem you will generally like yourself and other people. And expect them to like you. This makes it easier to maintain friendships and, of course, friends help guard against the harmful effects of stress.

If you have poor self-esteem you likely don't think much of yourself, and have a poor self-image. So it will be difficult to be assertive, and you may be passive or aggressive instead. With poor self-esteem your confidence in your own abilities will go down. How you feel about yourself directly influences how you behave.

It is also difficult to make close friendships if you don't think highly enough of yourself to believe that others could possibly care about you. You assume that there must be something wrong with anyone who would like someone as 'unlikable' as you!

As Groucho Marx said jokingly, 'I don't care to belong to any club that will have me as a member'.

With few friends it is difficult to get the support and feedback that can build confidence in your abilities and change your self-image. The good news is that self-esteem is learned and can be changed.

Social support networks – people need people

People really do need people! All the people who give you social support make up your social support network. And within that network you are also almost certainly offering support to some of the others.

It doesn't really matter how many people are in that network although a two person network can sometimes, put a bit too much strain on the net! It's the quality of the relationship that's important.

Times of stress or great change are when you need your friends and the other parts of your support system most. This could be when you move house or job, break up a relationship or have a baby.

Friendship is about being accepted, loved or needed for who you are, not what you do. Just being wanted for being you. Your friends are probably the most important members of your network. With them there is give and take – you probably play key roles in each other's networks. Friends can give you practical advice. For example, they lend you things, give you a hand and give you personal assurance.

Friends can give you emotional support. They are people you can relax and be yourself with. You don't have to pretend. They can challenge you to see things more constructively when you're feeling sorry for yourself, and question you when you're being unrealistic or harming yourself.

Social support protects your physical and mental well being.

- Social support can prevent crises: you can get help before things reach this point.
- Support has been shown to be linked with a lower risk of both physical and psychological complaints and faster recovery from a range of physical illnesses.
- A research study in London on depression among women with young children found that just one person with whom the mother felt intimate in this way helped protect her against serious depression.

You are part of other people's support systems. Social support is often mutual. But support systems don't just happen by accident. They can benefit from reviewing, planning and nurturing!

You may be heading for trouble if time seems to be flying by so fast and you feel in such a rush that you are too busy to even pass the time of day or keep in touch with your friends. One of the great benefits of managing your time effectively is having time for friends.

Improving your social network

Taking care of current relationships

- In a busy life it can be hard to find time for friends. One way to manage this is to socialise and get something else done at the same time. Exercise together, carpool, form a reading group.
- It can be easy to forget about friends when you start a new romantic relationship or go through a stressful period. Although you may want to scale back social commitments occasionally, maintain reasonably regular contact with your friends.
- Strive for regular contact with the people who mean the most to you. Some people set up regular meetings, like a weekly squash game or a monthly lunch.

Deepening current relationships

- Of the people you already know who would you like to know better? What things do you have in common that might help to deepen the relationship?
- If deepening relationships is important to you, give those relationships higher priority than you do daily tasks like washing up, or solitary activities like reading.
- When talking about topics like movies, work, or local events, get a bit more personal about yourself. Briefly share your own feelings, opinions, or experiences. Then give the other person a chance to open up in turn.

Reviving old friendships

- Do you have any friendships that have lapsed? Perhaps you could bring those people back into your social circle, after all, you already know that you are compatible with your old friends.

- Perhaps your friendship has slipped because one of you has moved away. Letters, phone calls, audiotapes and email can be rewarding ways of interacting with people across a longer distance.
- Reconnecting with old friends can raise a lot of doubts about yourself. Do they like you? Did they ever like you? Will you be imposing on them? These doubts are often misplaced. The only way you will really know the answer is by contacting them again.

Starting new friendships

- Your goal should be to talk with a new person, not to find a soul-mate. Most of the people you meet will not become close friends, so avoid hoping for too much.
- Don't always wait for others to introduce themselves or break the ice. Mingle at parties or events. Have a few things in mind that you could talk about.
- You don't have to hide your true nature or be unusually clever or charming. Remind yourself that people respond better to warmth and genuineness than to attempts to impress.
- People who ask about the other person are often felt to be the best conversationalists. It's also much easier to ask questions than to carry out the conversation on your own.
- Once you have spoken to someone new, dwell on the fact that you have accomplished something that is difficult for most people. Pat yourself on the back.

Taking care of yourself

The better you feel about yourself, the more you want to take care of your health. Being fit and healthy makes you feel good so that you see yourself and talk to yourself more positively. This improves your self-image.

Handling stress well makes it easier for you to take care of your health: taking care of your health makes it easier to handle stress well.

Accumulated tension can lead to stress related illness. And the side effects of any props you use to make it easier to cope with stress can damage your health. Such props include smoking, alcohol and caffeine.

If you are fit you can handle stress better. A healthy diet gives you energy and maintains your body's immune (defence) system so that it can repair any damage from stress. Exercise can lift your mood, help get rid of tension and improve your physical stamina. Getting enough sleep ensures that you are mentally alert and your body is well rested so that you are ready to handle what the new day brings.

If you have a car, which do you care for most – your car or yourself?

With any machine, such as a car, careful use and regular maintenance helps it to run well, safely and efficiently, avoiding unnecessary breakdowns. This way the machine will do the job for which it was designed and might even be a source of pleasure. We can think of taking care of our health in a similar way to taking care of a car. Regular maintenance is much better than waiting for a breakdown before giving it attention.

The careful motorist reduces wear and tear by checking the oil level and topping up when necessary, and uses the appropriate gears for the speed she is travelling. She doesn't race the engine or tear around corners on two wheels, spending most of her time in top gear. Nor does she keep pressing the accelerator when stuck at traffic lights. She notices new squeaks or noises as they arise and sees to them early on, to avoid possible long term damage or costly major repairs. She also keeps a close eye on the road, so that she is warned of dangers ahead and can take avoiding action wherever possible. If she needs to travel on unmade roads, she drives slowly, avoiding potholes or taking them steadily. She arranges regular services and MOT tests, and is insured. If the handbook calls for 4 star petrol, she doesn't use 2 star as a false economy. She would fill up with petrol before a long journey and arrange regular breaks when the journey is particularly long or arduous. In other words, the careful motorist looks after her car, gives it the right fuel and regular maintenance, and drives it carefully avoiding unnecessary risks.

Some people take more care avoiding wear and tear on their cars than on themselves.

Health

When it comes to maintaining your own health do you know what's right for you and how to do it?

We all tend to have quite grand and unspecific intentions: for example, 'I'll take up swimming and go every day'. But the first steps might be getting answers to these questions: 'Is there a pool near me that's open when I could go? Can I afford the admission fee? Can I find my swimming costume – and does it still fit me?'

Concentrate on making your health changes as enjoyable and as convenient as possible.

Most of the things we can do to improve our health and generally maintain our bodies in the best working order can be enjoyable in themselves. Healthy eating and moderate exercise can be fun.

Try to reduce any health-damaging props that you use in the short term to make it easier to cope with stress. The props include smoking, excessive use of alcohol and caffeine, and reliance on tranquillisers.

The use of such props can bring powerful short-term rewards so they are difficult to change. Giving them up needs careful planning but that there is a good deal of help available. Good things that you may already be doing include avoiding caffeine before you go to bed or deciding in advance how many alcoholic drinks to have. And, of course, deciding to find out more is a positive step forward.

Lifestyle

A healthy life style can be achieved through the following:

- ✓ Develop a balanced eating plan
- ✓ Change harmful habits
- ✓ Ensure that you have adequate rest
- ✓ Build your stamina and resistance to stress through physical conditioning.
- ✓ Learn to relax

Now think about your own life style:

Area	Good things I am doing	Things I could improve
Balanced eating plan		
Change harmful habits		
Adequate rest		
Physical conditioning		
Relax		

You can now think about combining the issue of balancing competing tasks, which was discussed earlier, with what you now know about taking care of yourself. What you are now looking to do is make sure you are giving yourself the appropriate amount of time to relax, take regular exercise, and prepare healthy meals that give you a balanced diet.

In the box below make a note of some things you feel would be beneficial for you to do, if you had the time mentioned in each heading. Remember to think about each heading in terms of relaxation, developing and maintaining your social support network, taking regular exercise, and eating well.

- If I had ten minutes for myself I would...
- If I had half an hour to myself I would...
- If I had one hour to myself I would...
- If I had half a day to myself I would...

Relaxation

Relaxation is a very important stress management technique.

Physical symptoms, such as headaches, backache and high blood pressure, tend to respond best to the following:

- ◆ Muscle relaxation exercises
- ◆ Yoga
- ◆ Massaging
- ◆ Breathing exercises
- ◆ Aerobics

Psychological symptoms, such as lack of concentration, worrying etc. may respond well to:

- ◆ Breathing exercises with visualising
- ◆ Muscle relaxation exercises
- ◆ Meditation/prayer
- ◆ Yoga
- ◆ Activities that require concentration – eg, chess
- ◆ Recreation – eg, reading, painting
- ◆ Physical activities that require concentration – eg, sport, dancing, walking, etc.

Below are descriptions of four different methods of relaxation. Why not give them a try and see which one works best for you? You may find that relaxation is difficult at first. You may not find it easy to relax your muscles, or you may have trouble concentrating on relaxing. This is why it is important to practice relaxation techniques – it takes time and practice to be able to relax effectively. If you practice twice a day, you will start to notice that it becomes easier to relax, and that you can become more relaxed more quickly. When you feel ready, you can reduce the amount of time you spend practising and use your skills whenever you feel you need them.

Applied relaxation

Applied relaxation is something to do be done alone and when you are expecting no interruptions. Sit or lie down in a comfortable place (a bed or a sofa are good examples). It will be helpful if the room is relaxing – warm and pleasantly lit. If you find a piece of favourite music soothing, use it as a soft background to your relaxation. If too much silence puts you on edge, leave the radio on at a low volume – preferably to a music station. Try to adopt a ‘passive attitude’, which means not worrying about your performance or whether you are successfully relaxing. Just ‘have a go’ and let it happen.

Remove your shoes and loosen tight clothing. Start by taking a couple of deep breaths. Allow yourself to be still for a few minutes to help you get in the right frame of mind and allow yourself to start to unwind. Focus on your breathing, and let your muscles slowly start to relax.

Focus your attention on your hands and arms. Tighten the muscles in this area, and notice what it feels like when these muscles are tight and tense. Hold this for about 10 seconds. Then relax the muscles in your hands and arms – let the muscles become floppy and limp. Concentrate on the changes in sensation in your muscles from the tense state to the relaxed state. Focus on the feelings of relaxation in your hand and arm. Then move on to other muscles groups. Tighten and release each of these groups of muscles, one at a time:

- Feet, calves, thighs
- Buttocks, stomach, back
- Shoulder, neck
- Jaw, eyes, scalp

Once you have gone through each of the muscle groups, tensing and relaxing, turn your attention back to your breathing. Focus on filling your lungs, and letting the air out through your mouth as slowly as you can. Continue to breathe slowly and regularly and notice the rhythm – like wavelets, running onto and receding from a beach. While you are lying quietly, focus again on your body. Go through the muscle groups and check to see if your muscles have remained relaxed. It is not unusual for some muscles to have tensed up while you have been relaxing others. If you notice any tension at all, focus on relaxing that area. Let the muscles go loose and limp. When you are satisfied that you are physically relaxed and that your breathing is deep and regular, let your feelings of relaxation continue to deepen. There is no hurry – just enjoy the comfort.

Sometimes people can use this time to imagine a fantasy scene in their mind – one in which they are completely calm, content, and relaxed. If you like, build a relaxing fantasy in your mind. Pay great attention to detail, using all of your senses in turn –

What can you see?
What can you hear?
What can you smell?
What can you feel?
What can you taste?

When you are ready to stop practising, count backwards from 5 to 0, and then open your eyes. Take a deep breath, stretch, and get up very slowly. Take your time and notice how relaxed you feel.

Relaxation response

This simple method of relaxation was devised by an American doctor, Herbert Benson.. It is based on research that examined what were the key factors in a variety of western and eastern forms of relaxation and meditation. The research identified four key factors that reduce the physiological response in the body. These are:

- Being in a quiet place
- Using a word or short phrase which should be repeated over and over again
- Adopting a passive attitude – just letting it happen rather than striving to relax
- Being in a comfortable position

Guidelines for learning the relaxation response

Prepare to relax

- Make sure that you will be warm enough. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes. Think about letting go of the tension in all of your muscles..
- Keep the muscles loose.

Focus on your breathing

- Breathe through your nose. As you breathe out say the word 'one' silently to yourself (or another word, such as 'calm', 'peace', or easy).
- Breathe easily and naturally.

Don't try too hard

- Do not worry about if you are not good at reaching a deep level of relaxation.
- Keep a passive attitude and allow relaxation to happen at its own pace.

Deal with distractions

- Distracting thoughts will probably occur. Do not dwell on these.
- If you start to feel a little dizzy or breathless this will be caused by overbreathing because you are feeling anxious about doing it right. Just breathe out when your body naturally wants to and concentrate on saying your word.
- If you notice a slight tension in your 'favourite spot' – your jaws, neck or scalp – this will be because you are trying too hard. Just let go – this type of relaxation comes when you are not thinking about it.

Bring your relaxation to an end

- You may open your eyes to check the time but do not use an alarm, which will make you tense up again.
- When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes open. Then stand up slowly.

The relaxation response can be adapted to many everyday settings when it's not convenient to sit down and close your eyes. All the variations involve natural breathing and repetition of a word or counting to still the mind and relax the body. Think of times in your life when you could put into practice adapted versions of this technique. For example:

- Waiting for trains buses and other people.
- In a lift.
- While waiting for the safety release on a washing machine.

Visualisation

Positive mental relaxation involves looking at, or 'picturing in your imagination', something that makes you feel good. You could choose to visualise a place, person, object or event that makes you feel good. You may prefer or find it easier to look at a photograph or hold an object. But eventually being able to 'see it in your minds eye' enables you to use this relaxation technique wherever you are, including using it when you want to get to sleep, when you will certainly need to have your eyes shut! As you go through this relaxation, if you are aware of your breathing, pay attention to breathing out smoothly and slowly. As you breathe out, let yourself go so that you enter into the visualisation more vividly.

Visualising an object

Now 'see' the object as clearly as you can. Look carefully at its shape.... what details can you see? What colour is it? Is it big enough for you to hold? If so, imagine yourself holding it in your hands or arms..... How heavy is it?... Touch its surface... what does it feel like?.... Does it have a smell?... If so what is it like?...

Now that you have a clear picture of it, what does it remind you of? ... How did you get this object? ... When did you first see it? ... Is it linked to a special event? .. Recall this time in as much detail as you wish ... What emotions does this bring back? ... How does it make you feel? ... Stay with the good feelings for a few minutes ...

Hold on to the good feelings that are linked with this object and bring them back with you as you finish your recovery period of relaxation.

Visualising an event

Choose an event that you were proud of being involved in, or that was highly enjoyable or worthwhile. Pretend that you have a videotape of this event and play the video in your minds eye. Remember, you are in control of the videotape and can turn it off if you want to. Perhaps you want to watch it as an observer to begin with ... but you may find that you recall it so vividly that you can see yourself involved in what is going on. What was the event? ... Where did it take place? ... Who was there? ... What happened? ... Recall the sights ... and the sounds. How does this make you feel? ... Stay with the good times and the feelings for few minutes ...

When the feelings and thoughts have refreshed you – hold onto the good feelings that are linked with this event and bring them back with you as you finish your period of relaxation.

Coming out of relaxation

1. Take your time coming out of the relaxation
2. Open your eyes ... collect your thoughts and stretch you body
3. Get up slowly to avoid feeling giddy or odd. If you have been lying down, roll onto one side and gradually sit up before standing.

Many people enjoy being able to visualise a variety of objects, places, people and events. We hope you will experiment to find out what suits you. Other people stick to one image so that, with practice, the picture springs instantly to mind. This provides a fast escape route when you are feeling harassed.

The Mitchell method of relaxation

Do not change the order of the instructions below – they are based on the fact that when you give yourself an exact order for movement, one set of muscles works and their opposite group relaxes automatically. That's what we want. You are going to tell yourself to make a small movement, stop and then feel each time.

Sit in a high back chair, leaning backward, or lean forwards on to a table or other support, or lie down on your side or back. If you lie down on your back, have a cushion under your head, and if your lower back feels uncomfortable, put one or two large cushions on top of each other under your thighs.

First, stroke your fingertips over you forehead and through your hair several times. Then place your hands flat on your tummy or thighs. If you are sitting in a chair place your arms and hands on the arms of the chair.

Begin at the shoulders, pull your shoulders down away from your ears, pull them all the way down. Stop. Feel the length that comes into the back of your neck as a result. Push your arms away from you a little and make a wide angle at your elbows. Stop. Feel your heavy arms well supported, with elbows open and out. Stretch your fingers, make them as long as you can. Make space between each finger so the hand becomes wide as well. Stop. Let your hands flop back onto your support. Feel your fingers and thumbs stretched out, separated and touching the support, with nails on top. In particular, feel your heavy thumbs.

Turn your legs outwards, so your knees and feet flop outwards. Stop. Feel your heavy legs supported, push your toes away from you. Stop. Feel your heavy floppy feet.

Push your body into the support. Stop. Feel your body in contact with the support. Move onto your head. (If your head isn't supported, try just pushing back as if there was an imaginary wall.) Push your head into the support. Stop. Feel your heavy head in contact with the support. Your neck muscles will now release completely because your head is well supported.

Now think about your breathing. Breathe in gently, feeling your ribs lifting up and outwards. Breathe out and they drop. Breathe again, in your own time.

Now your face. Drag your lower jaw down inside your closed mouth, so that your teeth are slightly separated. Stop. Feel your loose jaw, also feel your soft lips lightly touching each other. If your tongue is on the roof of your mouth, pull it off and let it rest in the middle of your mouth. If you haven't already done so, close your eyes. Feel your upper lids resting gently over your eyes. Enjoy the darkness.

Now imagine you are stroking your fingertips from your eyebrows, across your forehead, up through your hairline and back, as we did at the beginning.

While your body is fully relaxed it is important to direct your thoughts. Think of something enjoyable from your past, preferably something with a sequence, perhaps a song or a poem, or looking over the face of a loved one in your mind. Or perhaps your favourite garden or food, something you have really enjoyed. It is important to think about the good side of life, and to reinforce enjoyment and happiness.

When you feel ready to come out of your relaxation, have a good stretch and, if you are lying down, roll onto your side and get up slowly.

Always stretch your limbs and body in all directions and yawn. Do not hurry. Sit up slowly and wait for a minute or two before standing up.

Repeat the sequence often, in any position, and enjoy the feeling this gives you.

Tip

Try all the different methods of relaxation and decide which one works best for you. It is possible that there are times of day or circumstances that lend themselves to one method over another. So try them all and discover which you are most comfortable with.

Section C – summary

Hopefully by now you will have had the chance to practice some of the techniques in this manual. If you have not started to see results immediately don't worry, remember it takes time and practice to deal with your stress. You are now aware of the life-style changes that can be made as well as having some methods of relaxation. Once you have had the chance to work on the techniques for a few weeks you should have a good idea of which one works best for you. Remember the more you practice the better you get.

We have looked at the reasons for being assertive and the benefits that can be gained from them. Skills for time management through prioritising tasks and learning to delegate appropriately can now be used to reduce stress. Then the manual addressed your self-esteem in relation to your self-image and how this is important for building a network of friends. Hopefully you have been able to apply these practical solutions to your every day life, and combine them with the relaxation techniques.

Daily hassle slips

Date:	Time:	Hassle number:
What happened?		
How did I 'see' it?		
How did I feel?		
What physical symptoms of the stress response did I have?		

Date:	Time:	Hassle number:
What happened?		
How did I 'see' it?		
How did I feel?		
What physical symptoms of the stress response did I have?		
Stress score out of 10 for this hassle:		

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) provides service users, their carers and families with help, information and support to resolve concerns quickly and efficiently.

Freephone: 0800 376 0775

Tel: 01223 726774

Email: pals@cpft.nhs.uk

**FOR MORE
INFORMATION:**

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust

HQ Elizabeth House, Fulbourn Hospital, Fulbourn, Cambridge CB21 5EF

T 01223 726789

F 01480 398501

www.cpft.nhs.uk

Reprinted January 2010