

Coping with stress

Updated August 2017



Pride in our care

Introduction

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

Humans are good at problem-solving, it is something we engage in without even realising it and short-term 'stress' can be healthy as it can help us meet daily challenges and motivate us to reach our goals. 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 can disrupt relationships with others. Stress can lead to a feeling of despair and can 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.

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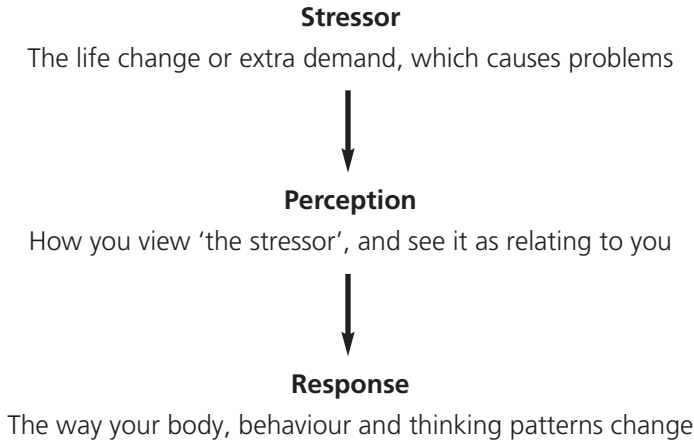
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Section A: Education about stress

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 could 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 concerns in different areas of your life, such as your children having school difficulties at the same as you having trouble maintaining a relationship. Other things which might build up your stress level could be commuting to work; working/living in a noisy building; work taking place outside your house or having visitors 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 recurring problem in people’s lives other areas suffer as well. With constant stress 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. In an attempt to reduce stress people often indulge in things such as alcohol, smoking, drinking large amounts of coffee or eating fast foods; which can 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 and we start to view these three areas in a more negative way,. This in turn adds to our stress. If the cause of our stress appears to be inescapable then our future can seem very difficult and further stress will seem unavoidable and indeed, 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 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 of these stressors in the box below and in the column record 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 problems? 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 major cause of stress in your life. If there is an element of your job that is causing your stress it is important to realise exactly what that is. Rather than saying 'work' has become stressful, think about what aspect of work is causing the stress. If the cause of your stress at work is trying to reach a deadline that seems unreasonable, make a note of that. Think of it as: '*the deadline at work*'. Write below what it is exactly what is 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 issues" 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 day-to-day problems and how you respond to them.

Making a note of your your day-to-day problems

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 see how they combine to make your overall stress level worse.

Use the headings shown below to record problems that led to you feeling stressed. It may not always be possible to record every stressful situation at the time it occurs but it is useful to make a note of them later. Have a look at a typical problem (below) to see how keep a record.

Date: 24 July **Time:** 8.30 **Hassle number** 3

What happened?

A car coming towards me. I 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 quickened.

Stress score out of 10 for this hassle: **7/10**

At the back of this manual you will find a 'Recording Problems sheet'. You may find it helpful to photocopy this page so that you have some to fill in when they are needed.

The more 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 problems try this next exercise to see if it is possible to reduce them. At the end of the day review your problem list, and then sort into three categories:

- 1 Those problems that could be avoided.
- 2 Those where although the event could not be avoided, the amount of stress it generated could be reduced.
- 3 Completely unavoidable problems 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 1: Could be avoided

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

By negotiating a better arrangement

If your stress is coming from pressure at work, it may be possible to speak to your manager 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 2: 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 problem out of proportion. If every thing else were going well in life, would this be as much of a problem? Will this 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 pastime that you could do as well?

Group 3: Unavoidable stress

Some factors to consider:

Consider why you feel that these problems are unavoidable. Are you aiming for 'better things' that you value highly and therefore accepting the current stresses as a price you are willing to pay?

Other unavoidable tasks include things 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 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 available technologies, i.e. e-mailing rather than writing and posting letters – even if it feels that you are 'reducing your own high expectations of yourself'
- 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
- Cooking 'quick meals'
- Buy shopping online
- 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, try to be as accurate and honest as possible. If you spent 10 minutes thinking about doing a task and working yourself up to do 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 'A' -the tasks which really needed to be done urgently and are a top priority; 'B' - tasks that needed to be done at some point soon but were not yet urgent; 'C' - the tasks that did not need to be done soon and were a low priority. 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'.

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.

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 jobs	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 'light relief' 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.

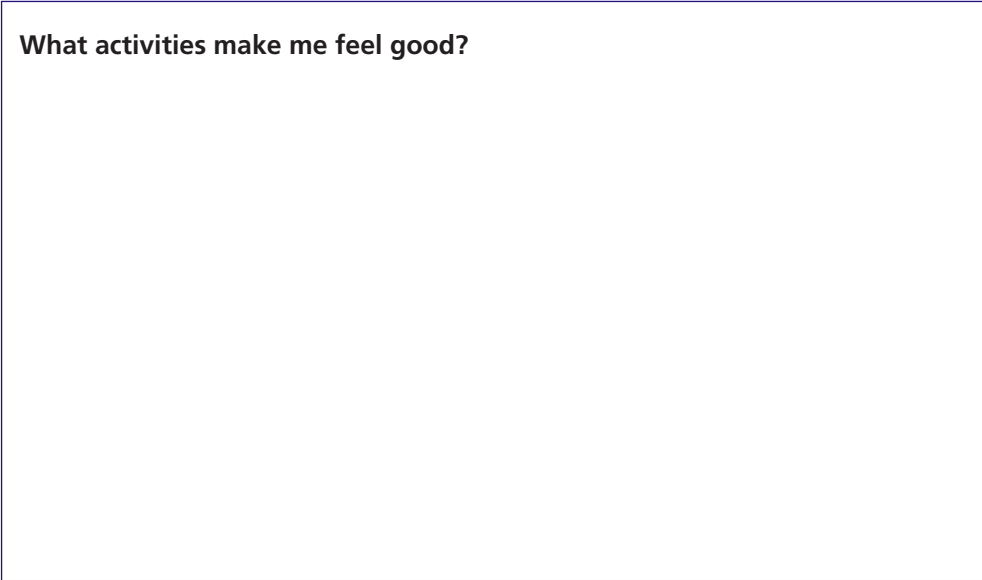
Now that you have done this review you should find it easier to plan ahead by making A, B, C and D lists of all the things you need to do. Use these 'things to do' lists to plan daily and weekly timetables. Don't forget to plan in time to negotiate delegating your D list. When planning your week consider 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 high-priority tasks

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; 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 less stressed and things you enjoy. For example, coffee with a friend or colleague, watching your favourite TV programme, or family 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 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

- First decide what you want. You can't jump this stage or everyone will be confused, yourself included!
- Say what you want clearly and specifically. 'Let's meet at 6pm', rather than 'How about around teatime?'
- 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.
- 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.
- Listen to the other person. They have the right to their point of view.
- 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 to 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/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.

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?.....

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

.....

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 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. 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 the most. This could be when you move house or job, break up a relationship or have a baby etc.

Friendship is about being accepted, loved or needed for who you are, not what you do. It's being wanted just for being you. Your friends are probably the most important members of your network. With them there is give and take – you probably play a key role 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 however 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 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. Planning events is harder to do when feeling stressed so this can be helped by having social commitments already planned in your diary.

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 are 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, video-calling, texting and e-mails 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. Unwanted side effects of any unhelpful coping strategies can damage your health. Such unhelpful strategies 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.

Careful motorists reduce wear and tear by checking the oil level and topping up when necessary, using the appropriate gears for the speed they are travelling. They do not race the engine or tear around corners on two wheels, spending most of the time in top gear. Nor do they keep pressing the accelerator when stuck at traffic lights.

They notice new squeaks or noises as they arise and will attend to them early on, to avoid possible long term damage or costly major repairs. They keep a close eye on the road to be warned of dangers ahead and enable them to take avoiding action wherever possible. When travelling on unmade roads they drive slowly, avoiding potholes or taking them steadily.

They arrange regular services and MOT tests and maintain the car's insurance. If the handbook calls for 4-star petrol, they do not use 2-star as a false economy. They fill up with petrol before a long journey and arrange regular breaks when the journey is particularly long or arduous. In other words; careful motorists look after their car, gives it the right fuel, ensures 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'. However 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 strategies you use in the short term in an attempt to cope with stress. These unhelpful strategies include smoking, excessive use of alcohol and caffeine and excessive reliance on medication i.e. overuse of tranquillisers.

Although these strategies can offer powerful short-term rewards, they also add to the stress and often make it harder for you to address the underlying problem. These strategies can become problems in themselves as they are often hard to give up and may need careful planning. Should you find you need support to do this there is a good deal of help available; the CPFT website or NHS Choices can guide you to find appropriate help.

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 lifestyle 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 lifestyle:

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 – e.g. chess, jigsaws, Sudoku, colouring, 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 when you are alone and when you are not expecting any interruptions.

Sit or lie down in a comfortable place (e.g. a bed or the sofa). 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; 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 an imaginary scene in their mind; one in which they are completely calm, content, and relaxed. Pay great attention to detail, using all of your senses focusing on what can you: see; hear; smell; feel; 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 called Herbert Benson. It is based on research that examined 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. 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 or 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 on to 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

- Take your time coming out of the relaxation
- Open your eyes... collect your thoughts and stretch your body
- 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 7:11 breathing pattern - the opposite of hyperventilation

The important thing here is that the out-breath must be longer than the in-breath. This causes stimulation of the part of your nervous system responsible for relaxation.

This is a basic law of biology and if you breathe in this way then your body will have no choice but to relax.

It may take a few minutes but the body will respond regardless of what your mind is thinking. Experience this now. Sit down and close your eyes for a little while. Just become aware of your breathing and breathe in to the count of seven and breathe out to the count of eleven. You can hold for a couple of seconds at the bottom of the out breath if that's comfortable for you.

It may be a little difficult at first, but doing this regularly causes your general anxiety level to come down. You may also find that you begin to breathe this way automatically if you feel anxious. Regular relaxation actually starts to inhibit the production of stress hormones in the body so it actually becomes harder and harder to panic. As you become more generally relaxed the 'baseline' of arousal from which you are starting lowers. It actually becomes harder to get stressed!

Hyperventilation responds very well to this technique. If you practice this daily, hyperventilating should cease to be a problem very quickly. It can also give you much more control over anxiety/panic attacks which contribute to you feeling stressed.

Here is how you do it, and it is as easy as it sounds:

1. Breathe in for a count of 7
2. Then breathe out for a count of 11

breathing' (your diaphragm moves down and pushes your stomach out as you take in a breath) rather than shallower higher lung breathing. If you find that it's difficult to lengthen your breaths to a count of 7/11 then reduce the count to breathing in for 3/5, or whatever suits you best, as long as the out-breath is longer than the in-breath.

Continue in this way for 5-10 minutes or longer if you have time – and enjoy the calming effect it will have on your mind and body

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 looked at the reasons for being assertive and the benefits that can be gained from them. We identified how time management, through prioritising tasks and learning to delegate appropriately, can 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.

We hope this manual has been useful and that you have been able to apply these practical solutions to your every day life and combine them with the relaxation techniques.

You can find out more information about stress and anxiety on other websites by searching the CPFT website www.cpft.nhs.uk or NHS Choices.

Recording day-to-day problems

Date:	Time:
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 problem:	

Date:	Time:
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 problem:	

Further help

Psychological Wellbeing Service

If you are registered with a GP in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, Wansford or Oundle, you can access the Psychological Wellbeing Service via self-referral or through your GP. Call **0300 300 0055**. Lines are open from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, excluding Bank Holidays. It offers a range of support to help you make changes in your life to improve your wellbeing and to help you cope with stress, anxiety and depression. This includes self-help reading materials, guided self-help (both over the telephone and face-to-face), one-to-one therapies.

First Response Service

If you or a loved one is in mental health crisis, you can call our 24-hour First Response Service on **111 (option 2)**. This service is for anyone, of any age, living in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Specially-trained mental health staff will speak to you and discuss with you your mental health care needs

Mind

www.mind.org.uk/Stress

Urgent Care Cambridgeshire

Dial 111

NHS Choices

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/pages/understanding-stress.aspx>

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Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

If you have any concerns about any of CPFT's services, or would like more information please contact: Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on freephone 0800 376 0775 or e-mail pals@cpft.nhs.uk

Out-of-hours' service for CPFT service users

Contact Lifeline on **0808 808 2121**

7pm-11pm

365 days a year

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