

Managing Stress

Stress arises from feeling the pressure of demands. Demands can come from outside, for example, needing to achieve an important target at work, or the pressure of ensuring that your child gets a place at the school that is best for them. Demands may also arise from our own expectations of our selves and the goals that we set as a result of these. Inner demands usually stem from a lack of self belief and a drive to do better. For example, the drive to lose weight so that we look thinner, or the need to prove that we are right about something important. Internal expectations and demands can cause us just as much pressure as external ones.

Factors that influence how we experience pressure

In themselves, the pressures that create feelings of stress are neither positive nor negative. It is how we register the impact of stress that determines whether we experience stressors as constructive or negative. This is determined by two things, firstly our perception of whether or not we feel we have the resources to manage what is being asked of us. And, secondly how much stress each of us personally can tolerate at any one time. This is a completely individual thing and is arrived at from a unique combination of factors. Firstly, our innate temperament which will set down the blue print for how much intensity we like and how much demand feels comfortable for us. Some people actively thrive on a higher level of pressure than others. Secondly, the influences that shaped our early years will have influenced how much stress we are comfortable with at any one time. The interplay between these two factors will give each of us our unique stress quotient. Too much above or below this mark will feel negative. Something that is close to it will feel positive. Each one of us is different. Essentially, stress impacts us negatively when we feel that the demands on us are too great and that we do not have the resources to cope with them. We feel the positive effects of stress when we feel we do have the resources, or can find them, to cope with what is needed.

What does stress feel like?

Stress tends to create feelings of anxiety in us. Mild anxiety is useful because it spurs us on to action, providing the drive and the energy to deal with stressors in a head on way. This helps us to solve problems creatively so that we can be more effective. Positive stressors generate feelings of excitement, creativity and an enhanced sense of well being. We feel good about ourselves and our confidence is boosted by our achievement. We feel like a 'winner'. Negative stress will cause us to feel worried and anxious, physically tense, overwhelmed, tired and even unwell. We may find difficulty in sleeping, drink too much to try and numb our worries, and either lose our appetite or comfort eat. The negative effects of stress can cause us to feel deep anxiety and sometimes leads to depression. Needless to say, it is very important to avoid falling into these negative states. Managing our stress levels is really important and by far the best way to do this is to really understand where our comfort zone begins and ends and how much it can be stretched before it feels too much. Knowing the answers to a few simple questions can alert us to our own stress profile.

Your Personal Stress Profile

If you want to know more about your own stress profile over the coming year take some time to answer these questions. You will find out more about what you like, how, ideally, you prefer your time spread out between challenges and down time and what your short and long term stressors look like.

a. What am I like?

1. What gives you feelings of happiness, self confidence and personal achievement?
2. What makes you feel bored?
3. What makes you feel tense, overwrought and on the edge of losing control?
4. When you were growing up how did the people around you manage stress?

b. My ideal week – what works for me

In your ideal week:

1. How much time do you like for chilling out?
2. How much time do you like taken up with high octane action
3. How much time can you manage comfortably in dealing with difficulties that take you out of your comfort zone?

c. Short term stressors – the month ahead

1. What things in the month ahead will cause me negative stress?
2. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the greatest, how much stress will they cause me?
3. What things in the month ahead will cause me positive stress?
4. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the greatest, how much stress will they cause me?
5. What does the balance between positive and negative stress look like? How comfortable will I feel in managing it?

d. Long term stressors – the coming year

1. What things in the year ahead will cause me negative stress?
2. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the greatest, how much stress will they cause me?
3. What things in the year ahead will cause me positive stress?
4. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the greatest, how much stress will they cause me?
5. What does the balance between positive and negative stress look like? How comfortable will I feel in managing it?

If you have some heavy long term stressors you need to keep short term ones to a minimum so that you don't become overloaded. You can manage more short ones if the longer term is less challenging. If there are too many negative stressors you need to find ways to keep centered, find some extra support and build in more fun that will boost your energy levels.

Chilling Out

Remember how important time out is in managing your stress levels This is the best antidote. Make sure that you take time out every day from pressures. Watch a film, take a walk, read the paper, whatever works for you as a way of taking breaks. Keep a written note of how many times you do this each day and for how long. This will help keep you on target if you feel tempted to skip it. Don't give in to the voices in your head that try to tell you that you don't have time, or your being selfish, or don't really need it. Remind them that it is better to manage stress and prevent it getting out of hand than to keep going until you exhaust yourself. Protect your energy and resources by re-charging them on a daily basis.

Christine Lister-Ford

Registered Psychotherapist & Honorary Fellow of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)