



STRESS SURVIVAL KIT

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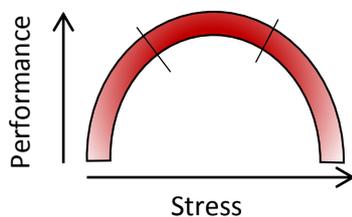
It's raining. You're driving to work along a busy motorway. The radio is playing. Although you're seeing the road ahead and are aware of the cars around you, your brain is mostly focused on the sale you plan to make today.

Suddenly the car just in front of yours brakes hard and slews to the left. You catch a glimpse of a fallen motorbike ahead. How do you react to this incident on the road? I can guarantee your first reaction is to stop thinking about that sale!

What exactly is stress?

Stress is the body's automatic response to a change in our circumstances. Parts of our body tense for action, the liver releases sugar into the bloodstream for energy, our breathing becomes faster, providing more oxygen, and all our senses become heightened. Time seems to slow down. This is the famous 'fight or flight' response.

At the lowest possible level of stress, you're likely to be either asleep or meditating. The external forces that usually stimulate you are not penetrating your brain. At the highest level, you're probably panicked to a point of sheer immobility.



There's a point at which your stress is comfortably manageable, and your performance is at its peak. You're thinking clearly and rationally, with enough adrenaline pumping through your bloodstream to keep you at a high state of awareness and responsiveness.

Your body isn't designed to perform at this peak level for long. Yet, many of us impose almost constant stress on our bodies. We blame work pressure, the need to succeed, or some other artificial benchmark for doing so. We learn to ignore warning signs, and deny ourselves time out to relax. But we can also pay a huge penalty, in terms of the cost to our health and long-term survival.

How do you recognise stress?

Are your sleep patterns changing? Are your eating or drinking habits changing? Do you have increased random thoughts about failure? Are you worried? Tense? Are you becoming forgetful? Have you started making excuses for yourself? Are you more emotional than usual?

If you've answered "Yes" to two or more of those questions, you're probably under stress. *Negative stress.*

It's all about change

It may be a physical change, (moving house or changing jobs), an emotional change, (a development in your relationship with your partner or family), or an intellectual change, (learning a new skill, or realising that you are currently lacking in a necessary skill).

Change causes stress. Even if what we have now isn't particularly good, it's familiar. To change means getting out of our comfort zone, and taking a risk. And risk is inherently stressful.

Positive stress comes from doing something challenging but ultimately enjoyable or beneficial. Negotiating that hard-won agreement, playing sport. Negative stress comes from fear. And fear doesn't need any rational basis.

Are your self-beliefs causing you stress?

Many of us have developed self-beliefs and thought patterns that are highly stressful. They can lead to unrealistic expectations of our work performance, and our behaviour in relationships. Here are some self-talk statements that might be jeopardising your long term health:

- I must always perform at the very highest level
- Each year I must earn a greater income
- I must not fail

Or

- I'm not capable of ...
- It's probably too hard to ...
- Nobody expects me to ...

The first three are framed as imperatives – "must" statements. The second three are simply excuses. Either way, if you're telling yourself any of these things, you're causing yourself stress.

You can reduce that stress by reframing your self-beliefs. Patterns you have learned can be unlearned. Here are some examples of ways we can change those stressful statements:

- I'll always do my best, but I will accept that I can't always be perfect
- Each year I'll earn the best income possible under the circumstances
- I will accept occasional failure, but always strive to learn from the experience

- I need more training or support to ...
- It might be hard, but I'm up for the challenge
- People might be surprised by what I can achieve

Action or reaction?

In certain situations, we need to react immediately. The driving incident earlier is an example. Your brain goes into overdrive, and you become highly alert and aware, assessing your options and making almost instantaneous decisions.

Fortunately, most of the time, you're not in life or death or other emergency situations. For example, when a client, customer or colleague says something you disagree with, you have a number of choices. You can instantly snap a response. That's reaction.

Or, you can ask him why he thinks that way. You might say that you'd like to think his point through, and get back to him shortly. In some circumstances, you will even be able to ignore the statement completely, and forget about it. Any of those is an example of action.

Whenever possible, taking action rather than just reacting is likely to result in a better outcome, certainly with less long-term stress involved.

The concept of control

If you're a person who needs to be 'in control', you probably have a diary so full of things that must be done that you can hardly slot in time for yourself. Rather than accepting someone's behaviour as *theirs*, you are likely to apply interpretations that affect *you*. This tends to add further stress to your already stress-filled life.

You need to realise that you can't personally control everything that happens around you. You must learn to differentiate. You may find it helpful to apply the 'Serenity Prayer', attributed to American theologian, Reinhold Neibuhr:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.

Of course, if you happen to be atheist, I'm sure you can just as easily address this to your own subconscious!

Use the red balloon

Actually, your balloon can be any colour, but I happen to like red. Every time you experience a stressful situation, imagine you're puffing a breath of air into the balloon. The more stress, the more the balloon fills with air. As you know, a balloon can only take so much before it bursts.

Of course, you can release some of the air by learning and using stress-coping mechanisms. These include:

- Planning and pre-evaluating situations you might expect to encounter
- Assessing and analysing situations *before* you act
- Learning and using effective problem-solving or conflict-resolution techniques
- Improving your time/task management skills
- Learning not to make impossible demands on yourself and others
- Developing a more assertive style
- Allowing yourself to be 'wrong' periodically, without guilt or blame (provided the consequences aren't too serious)

The first step towards balance

Take some time to evaluate what's happening right now in your life. Drive to a beach, a forest, or lake – somewhere quiet and serene, where you're not likely to be disturbed by your normal routine. Switch off your phone, and ask yourself –

What are the stressors in my life?

Write them down. Be very specific about exactly what (or who) is causing you stress. Remember, you might be your biggest problem! Many of us simply try to do too much. We don't know how or when to say "No".

Now look at the items closely. Which *can* you change? Which are you *willing* to change? How can you implement that change?

Just take one step at a time. Make a plan to change one thing, and stick to it. Ask for help if necessary. Celebrate the little achievements along the way. Accept and acknowledge that things can and sometimes will go wrong, but keep moving forward. One step at a time.

Remember, stress in and of itself is not necessarily *good* or *bad*. It's all about moderation. We need certain levels of stress to keep us functioning at the highest level. But if you let stress build to too high a level, you're going to crash, and it might not just be on the motorway.

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