

Chapter 7
Managing Stress at Work and at Home
Dr. Sandy Ages

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How Stress Affects Your Life

Stress is a fact and a reality of life. It is the pressure we feel at work to meet deadlines, to handle conflict, to perform our best in front of colleagues, clients or our supervisor. It is the pressure we feel at home to meet the everyday challenges coping with family issues, bills etc. Stress affects everyone.....child and adult.

Dr. Walter Cannon identified the body's immediate reaction to a threatening situation as the "fight or flight" response. In the early evolution of humanity these reactions were critical to survival for hesitation could be fatal. There was a need to respond quickly to the threatening situation and either fight or flee.

Reaction to Stress

The body's physiological changes to stress occur rapidly. What happens to the body in a stressful situation?

- adrenaline secreted
- respiration increases
- muscles tense
- heart rate increases
- blood pressure increases
- sugar production increases
- blood vessels constrict
- muscles prepare for action
- immediate surge of energy

Hans Selye in his research on stress, coined the term General Adaptation Syndrome which is characterized by three stages. In the first stage, alarm, the body mobilizes for action; the second stage, resistance, where the part of the body or system attacked takes action; the third stage, exhaustion, occurs as resistance wears down. This last stage is a reaction to the first two stages. It either allows the body to recover from the stressful reaction or once again prepare for the first stage, alarm to reoccur. If an individual continually responds to stress in this heightened manner, the individual becomes weakened and vulnerable or susceptible to illness.

A *stressor* is any stimulus that is internal or external to an individual and has the potential to set off a physiological response. Our individual stress reactivity is our tendency at a particular time to be vulnerable to stress. Our stress reactivity is based on several factors

- our personality

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- our cognitions
- our emotions
- our behaviour patterns

Stress is viewed as the interaction of a stressor (an internal or external event to an individual) and the individual's stress reactivity. Stressors can be positive and challenging to promote action or motivation to perform a specific behaviour. Stressors can be negative and create distressful physical or psychological reactions.

The following formula explains the relationship between stress, stress reactivity and the stress response.

$$\text{stress} + \text{stress reactivity} = \text{stress response}$$

Case Examples (The examples are fictitious due to client confidentiality.)

At work, John (41 yrs.) views a computer problem as a challenge. He is energetic and highly motivated to plan his strategy. He spends time working late at the office and frequently brings work home.

Dave (52 yrs.) constantly faces deadlines to meet at the office. He is upset by computer problems and sees them as set backs. These cause him distress, frequent headaches and difficulty sleeping. He is irritable with his wife and children.

Ann (9 yrs.) is complaining of stomach aches and is reluctant to go to school. The doctor does not find any physical/medical explanation. At school the teacher notices that Ann has difficulty concentrating on her work. Ann's parents separated recently.

Mary (39 yrs.) works full time and is also caring for her mother who has serious health problems. Mary has gained 15 pounds, and is experiencing problems concentrating on work.

Janet (47 yrs.), a manager of her department in a large company, is demanding of herself and the workers around her. She easily loses patience with her staff for the smallest error.

Do you see yourself in any of these situations? Are there any similarities with the way you cope with stress and the examples that have just been described?

Symptoms of Stress

The symptoms of stress can take several forms: physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and interpersonal. How does stress affect you? Examine the following checklist.

Symptoms of Stress				
Physical	Emotional	Intellectual	Spiritual	Interpersonal
Cardiovascular symptoms	Apathy	Forgetfulness	Loss of purpose and meaning	Blaming others
Respiratory symptoms	Depression	Poor concentration	Feelings of despair	Nagging
Gastrointestinal	Nervousness	Confusion	Feeling	Using people

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symptoms			alienated	
Muscular symptoms	Mood swings	Lack of confidence	Full of doubt	No time for family/friends
Skin symptoms	Impatience	Memory blank	Cynical attitude	Overly argumentative
Immunity symptoms	Panic attacks	Closed mindedness	Lack of forgiveness	Putting others down
Metabolic symptoms	Frustration Frequent anger Excessive worrying	Pessimistic outlook Negative self-talk Losing train of thought	Need to prove oneself Loneliness Lacking serenity	Overly competitive Too defensive Self-absorbed

What are your symptoms of stress?

What life events may create stress? Marital separation, divorce, death, birth of a baby, change of a job, change of a school are just a few examples of life changes that can impact on your level of stress. What changes have occurred in your life over the past year?

How do you cope with your stress?

Do you have positive or negative coping strategies to handle stress?
 Let us first examine some negative coping strategies to stress.

Negative Coping Strategies	
Alcohol	Drink to change mood: use alcohol as your friend
Denial	Pretend nothing is wrong: ignore the problem
Drugs	Abuse medications and/or take illegal drugs
Eating	Eat food to console you: binge/diet
Fault-finding	Have a judgmental attitude: complain and criticize
Illness	Develop headaches, nervous stomach
Indulging	Stay up late, sleep in, buy on impulse
Passivity	Procrastinate: wait for a break
Revenge	Get even: talk mean or sarcastically
Stubbornness	Be rigid: demand your way
Tantrums	Yell, mope, pout, swear, throw things, drive recklessly
Tobacco	Smoke to relieve tension, smoke to be "in" or adult
Withdrawal	Avoid the situation, skip school or work, keep your feeling to yourself
Worrying	Imagine the worst, play the "what if" game
Changing	Change jobs, residences, spouses, having unnecessary surgery
Self-Abuse	Cutting, picking at skin

As you read through the list do you recognize some behaviours that you practice to cope with your stress? How beneficial do you feel these behaviours are in successfully alleviating some of the pressure that you are feeling? Are there some behavioural

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changes that you would like to implement? My professional advice to you is to try to eliminate these negative strategies.

Look at the following checklist of positive coping strategies to stress. How many do you practice? Are there some new behaviours that you can try that will be helpful to you?

Positive Coping Strategies	
Interpersonal	
Assertiveness	State your needs and wants; learn to say “no”
Affirmation	Believe in yourself; trust others
Expression	Show and share your feelings
Contact	Make new friends; touch; listen to others
Limits	Develop your personal boundaries; accept your own limits; drop some involvements; accept others limits
Linking	Share problems with others; ask for support from family and friends
Mental	
Problem-solving	Attack the problem not the person; seek help if necessary
Time management	Work smarter than harder; focus on priorities
Organizing	Do not let things pile up; make order; do not get sidetracked
Life Planning	Set clear goals; plan for the future
Re-labeling	Change perspective; change dysfunctional thoughts
Imagination	Anticipate the future; look for the humour; practice guided imagery for relaxation
Physical	
Exercise	Pursue physical fitness; walk, jog, swim, bike
Relaxation	Learn gross motor relaxation: tense and relax the muscles; learn yoga; take a warm bath; get a massage; breathe slowly and deeply
Self-care	Strive for self-improvement; look your best; keep neat and clean
Nourishment	Eat healthy; limit fatty foods and alcohol
Biofeedback	Listen to your body; know your physical limitations; get enough rest
Balancing	Balance time at work and at home
Conflict resolution	Learn to communicate, to accommodate, to compromise, to negotiate
Cooperation	Family members share in household responsibilities
Togetherness	Take time to be together; build family traditions, express affection
Flexibility	Stay open to change; take on new family roles
Esteem-building	Focus on personal strengths; build good family feelings
Networking	Make use of community resources; develop friendships with other families

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Diversions	
Hobbies	Develop interests; gardening, painting, writing
Learning	Take a class; read; join a club
Getaways	Spend time away from home and work; see a movie; daydream
Music	Listen to music; sing; play an instrument
Play	Play with your child; go out with a friend; play a game or sport
Work	Tackle a new project; volunteer
Spiritual	
Meditation	Set sometime each day for reflection and thought
Worship	Share beliefs with others
Surrender	Let go of problems; let go of the past; learn to live with the situation
Prayer	Confess; ask forgiveness; pray for others; give thanks
Faith	Find a purpose and meaning; trust God
Commitment	Take up a worthy cause; invest yourself meaningfully

Are there any suggestions in the list above that you may adopt to better cope with the stress in your life? What goals can you set for yourself? There are concrete steps that you can take to alleviate some of the tension in your life. Learning to develop a healthy lifestyle to handle stress will have a positive impact on your life.

When would it be advantageous to seek professional help?

It is important to look at the effect or impact that stress has on your work and home life. A professional therapist – psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker or counselor can assist in this process. Being able to learn appropriate strategies to handle the various stressors is an important function of the role of the professional. Because you are feeling stressed and vulnerable, the professional can offer different perspectives on the situation and work with you to learn how to better cope with the stressors.

What to expect when you meet with the professional therapist?

After a comprehensive initial assessment, you will have an understanding of the symptoms of your stress: physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and interpersonal. Examining the changes within the last year and the anticipated changes in the next year will give you an appreciation of the various issues that have had an impact on you.

Sometimes a therapist will tell you that your feelings, thoughts, and behaviour are quite normal. This can be reassuring to you. This is particularly important if you have sometimes reflected that you thought you were “going crazy”. The therapist will work with you to develop a treatment plan. This plan utilizes the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive processes to handle stress. The plan may include:

- relaxation (gross motor and imagery)
- assertive communication skills

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- conflict resolution
- anger management
- organizational skills for home and work
- exercise program
- cutting back or eliminating caffeine rich foods/drinks
- cognitive restructuring

If the therapist is doing psychotherapy using a cognitive behavioural framework, you will learn how your cognitions or thoughts can effect your emotions and behavioural responses. Learning productive thinking strategies can effect both the body, the mind, and the emotions. You will begin to feel that you have more control. You will develop a sense of well being and self-empowerment. The techniques are not complicated but do require you to “unlearn” old thinking patterns. Negative self-statements are an accumulation of self-limiting mental statements that are unconstructive and can create and maintain stress.

One of the case studies described Janet, a perfectionist. She is hard-driving and intolerant of mistakes made by herself and others. Stress is generated by the continual self-thoughts that “my efforts are not good enough”, “I should be working harder, “I can’t make a mistake”.

The favourite expression of this type of person is “I should”, “I have to”, “I must”. The most effective way to handle negative self-talk that effects your stress is to counter the statements with positive supportive statements. Countering involves writing down and/or mentally rehearsing positive statements which refute the negative self-talk. Since stress can be created through negative self-talk, you can change the way you feel by substituting positive self-talk. This takes practice, lots of practice and, of course an awareness of how your thoughts affect your stress.

When you become aware of when you are engaging in negative self-statements and then counter with alternative positive supportive statements, you are on the track of turning your thinking around. With practice and consistent effort, you will change not only the way you think but also the way you feel.

How to access professional help?

To find a professional therapist contact your employee assistance program or your family physician. There is a list of counselors or therapists that are registered with your provincial or state professional associations. This office can give you the names of appropriate professionals in your geographical area.