

Managing and reducing Stress in Your Life (PDF)

Research from the area of habit change teaches us that the best way to approach making positive change in your life is to make small, very achievable goals and then build up over time to bigger ones. For example, if you know you need to include more exercise in your life you might make the goal to go for a small walk around a park, instead of trying to run 5 kilometres straight away, or even better you might decide to walk to the train station instead of driving, or use the stairs instead of the lifts. The smaller and easier the behaviour, the more likely you are to implement it. In the table below are some recommended strategies you can think about putting in place to help manage the stress in your life.

Stress Reduction	
Take some time to assess your daily life and have a look at what is creating stress. Look for things you can do to reduce stress triggers, or get rid of things in your life that wear you down. Here are some ideas:	
Phone & Device Use	Delete apps on your phone that are causing distractions or misery (like Facebook/twitter etc). You can still have your account but you have to login, this means it can be too hard to do, so you don't do it so much!
	Keep your phone in the kitchen at night while you sleep. This stops you from looking at it, or thinking about the emails when you're trying to sleep.
	Don't take your work phone with you everywhere. Take real time away from work.
	Consider deleting the email app from your work phone, if you get sucked into emailing after hours.
	Have a look at what you are watching on TV or playing on gaming apps. Are these negative? Miserable? Dark? You might like to reduce anything you are watching or doing on an app that might be contributing to a negative mood.
Scheduling	Look at your weekly schedule and remove one thing you regularly do that is a hassle (e.g. maybe the kids don't need three sports activities!)
	Move your meetings to where it suits you best (if you are a morning person, move to the morning – that way you are not trying to think when you are tired, or fuzzy).
	Pull out of activities that are overloading you (apologise to who you need to but cancel your role on smaller projects or activities that are wearing you down)
	Research shows that good time management has a strong relationship with wellbeing. So the better you plan and schedule the less stressed you will be.
Junk Food	You may love that chocolate bar or burger, but look for ways to cut out some of the unhealthy food in your life. Don't get rid of it all – just cut out one small thing each day.
Relationships	If you have friends that lean on you too much for support, when you are having a tough time yourself, you might need to call in extra help from mutual friends to help spread the load, or let your friend know that you are not in the best place to be their sounding board right at the moment. If you can't do that, then just find a way to reduce the amount of time you spend with people that drain you.

Things you can do

As well as cutting things out or reducing things that stress you out you can make positive changes towards introducing things that will improve your ability to cope with stress. The research tells us that if you are fit and healthy then you are much more able to cope with the everyday stressors that come your way. Here are some activities you could think about including into your week that will improve your feeling of wellbeing, and improve your reaction to stress triggering activities:

Relaxation	<p>Mindfulness Practice: try the many available apps that help you implement a mindfulness habit</p> <p>What relaxes you? Find the thing that you love to do that restores you; going to a spa, cooking a great meal, baking, reading etc. Try and find an activity that doesn't involve a screen or device as these can also sap your energy, or impact your sleep.</p>
Exercise	<p>Walk, swim, run, cycle, weights, yoga, dancing. Exercise is an absolute must have for good brain health and general wellbeing. Find an activity that you enjoy.</p>
Social Connection	<p>Even if you are an introvert, social connection is key to our general wellbeing and management of stress. Connect with someone you love or care about. Research shows that when we hug someone we care for our brain releases the chemical called oxytocin. Oxytocin is a protective hormone that restores heart health – it protects us from the long term impacts of other stress hormones!</p>
Eat Well	<p>It can be hard to maintain a good diet when you're busy, but go for the easy wins. Try to introduce eating just one more piece of fruit a day or take nuts to work instead of taking a chocolate bar</p>
Sleep	<p>Sleep is crucial for managing stress. Do one small thing that will improve your sleep, like stop using devices straight before bed or try to go to bed ten minutes earlier each night. Get support from your doctor if sleep is a problem for you.</p>
Hands on activities	<p>The brain needs stimulation to keep itself sharp. When the brain is occupied with a practical task such as playing an instrument, building a cabinet, sewing a dress, it has a wonderful effect of keeping your attention on the task at hand as opposed to worrying about the future or dwelling on the past. It is a form of healthy mindfulness, to go and do an activity that you enjoy that requires your attention. If you learn a new song on your instrument, or try a new project then that is even better, as your brain will be fully focused on working things out at the same time as staying active and growing as it learns.</p>

Attitudes to Stress

Having the right attitudes and mindset is going to go a long way to helping you cope with the everyday ups and downs of life. As we talked about earlier, the belief that stress is bad

is an example of an unhelpful attitude or mindset that can make things worse. Learning that stress can be a useful indicator that we need to take action will help us break out of the stress cycle. A technique you can use to start changing your attitudes or mindset is called ‘reframing’. It is where we take a thought or concept and reframe it to be more useful. Here are some examples you can use which relate to stress:

Examples of reframing our thoughts about stress	
‘I am so worried about this upcoming meeting’	‘I am feeling anxious about this meeting, and that is a sign that this meeting is important to me. This anxious feeling is telling me to prepare thoroughly’
‘I have too many things on my plate, and I am feeling overloaded’	‘This feeling that I am overloaded might be a good cue that I need to cut away some activities’
‘My kids are driving me crazy! Why won’t they do what I tell them to?’	‘My frustration around the kids is a good indication of how much I love them, and how I want them to learn to take care of themselves’

To be clear, reframing doesn’t get rid of the source of the stress, or change the fact that we still need to act. It doesn’t even get rid of the churning feelings. What it does is break the cycle around being stressed about stress. As a society we need to learn to be comfortable with our negative emotions and feelings. Being worried about something, or frustrated is completely normal. The idea is not to remove all worry, frustration, anxiety and stress, the idea is to make room for it, acknowledge that it is normal and accept that it is part of life and is useful in telling us what to pay attention to.

If we change the way we wrestle with our thoughts and feelings we can start to develop more helpful beliefs and mindsets about how the world works. There are two mindsets in particular that are a great place to start when you begin the journey to master stress. These are your attitudes towards what you can control and your mindset around failure.

Our attitudes to control

You may have heard of the serenity prayer used in the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 step program it is:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

Courage to change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference

We could just as easily substitute the word ‘change’ for the word ‘control’. A great deal of the stress that you are experiencing in your life, may be around your own belief systems or attitudes that you need to be able to control everything. This can manifest in things like needing your kids to *always* behave. You may find that children leaving toys out or unmade

beds gets you way more worked up than it should. If a messy house in particular is a stressor for you, this could be due to your desire to have everything always in its place – an underneath that is the need to control your environment.

The need to control can also manifest in the workplace with needing control of what your subordinates or colleague are doing – we call it ‘micromanaging’. It is not necessarily that you think they can’t do it, it is often just they won’t do it exactly the way you want it, so you take control. You can live successfully like this for quite some time, but the reality is controlling your environment all the time, controlling your colleagues and your kids takes its toll and impacts your perception of how stressed you are. Learning to let go of that control can be tough! Leaving the kids dirty socks on the floor may in itself be more stressful to you than picking it up, but learning to be comfortable with not having all the control you can in an imperfect environment will help you manage stress in the long run.

Our beliefs about failure

Another stress inducing mindset is the belief that any failure you have or mistake you make is a reflection of your inherent worth. Some people may feel that if they fail at something then they have found the limits of their ability. Or if they fail then they are just generally no good. Researcher Carol Dweck¹ referred to this as a ‘fixed mindset’. Someone with a fixed mind-set believes that their basic abilities, like intelligence, are fixed traits. With a fixed mind-set you may believe you can get better, smarter or faster but only to a small degree. You may believe that a great deal of your talent or your performance is determined by things outside of your control, like your genetics. People with a fixed mind-set may be afraid to take on challenges for fear they will fail. When they fail they often internalise this with a belief that they have reached the extent of their abilities. If you spend your time worrying about making a mistake at work, or doing something wrong this can increase your general anxiety and will likely contribute to an overall feeling of being stressed. There is an alternative mindset – that Carol Dweck calls a ‘growth mindset’. This is the belief that our ability isn’t fixed, and that failures and mistakes are just an opportunity to learn and grow. With a growth mindset failures will not paralyze you, they will motivate you to try a different approach, or give it another go.

Changing your mindset

If you want to change your mind-set towards a particular development area, there are a few steps you need to go through that will help you first identify the unhelpful thoughts, then play around with them so that you can become more flexible in your thinking. The following method is founded in cognitive behavioural therapy and is generally considered a robust method. This method is also taught in NZDF mental skills training as **‘Flexible Thinking’**. It does require some work though.

First think about what thoughts you are having that are currently contributing to your sense of stress or overload. This might be thoughts about something you are struggling to control,

¹ Dweck, C (2006) Mindset: The new psychology of success. New York: Random House.

a failure, mistake or piece of feedback you received. Once you have identified the thought that is plaguing you, you need to recognise it for what it is – a thought! It is your thought about that situation. You are not your thoughts, you are separate from your thoughts. For example “I am stressed” is a thought, or ‘I am stupid’ is a thought. But when you think it, it can feel real, ‘*I am stupid!*’. You can help yourself by recognising the words and images in your head for what they are – just thoughts. To do this just add a simple little statement at the start ‘I am having the thought that...’ For example; “I am having the thought that I am stressed” or “I am having the thought that I am stupid”. This provides a little distance between you and the thought, and gives you the ability to recognise that you can change that thought. After adding a bit of distance, talk back to the thought with a growth mindset ‘The thought that I am stressed is telling me I need more training, or I need some help from a colleague’. This is more useful! Then the final step is to make a plan; “I am going to catch up with John tomorrow and get him to talk me through what steps I can take to get on top of this project”.

Mind-set voice

What I am telling myself that is

“I can’t do this, I feel so overwhelmed, all of this is over my head!”

Recognise that this is a thought (I am having the thought that...)

“I am having the thought that I am overwhelmed, I am having a thought that I don’t have all the tools I need to do this”

Talk back in growth mind-set voice

“Feeling overwhelmed when you have a lot on is normal, it does tell me something useful, that I need help with this project, and maybe I should find a good course”

What is your action plan (what are you going to do next)?

“I am going to take new steps towards action, and sign up for that project management course”

Now it is your turn! Think about what beliefs or attitudes you have that you might want to change, then fill in the boxes.

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Recognise that this is a thought (I am having the thought that...)

Talk back in growth mind-set voice

What is your action plan (what are you going to do next)?

Don't forget to breathe!

Working on your mindset is a great way to start mastering how you deal with stress. Another great way, which works well addressing the real time physiological impacts of the stress response is to work with your breathing. The flight or fight response mentioned earlier is a complex bodily response that is controlled by your sympathetic nervous system. As part of this response, when you perceive a threat your body will increase both your heart rate and your breathing. Once again this is a functional and useful aspect of dealing with stress, if it helps you escape those hungry wolves or grab that toddler with the grubby fingers before they touch that white couch. However if you learn to work with your breathing, notice it and where appropriate slow it down, this can help calm your system and move your body into its rest and recovery functions. Below are some breathing activities you could try they may help you manage your stress response.

Rhythmic Circular Breathing for Sleep² -

This method of breathing is useful for those people who find it difficult to switch the mind off the problems of the day. The mind becomes anchored to the rhythm instead of the problems and so the natural sleep centre is encouraged to take over. Make yourself comfortable in the position in which you want to sleep because at the end of this procedure you will be asleep. Close your eyes and settle down for sleep. Now breathe deeply but gently in the same way you would for diaphragmatic breathing.

Feel the breath filling up slowly from the diaphragm through the chest to your mouth, then, as you breathe out, imagine yourself blowing the breath out of your mouth, round in a circle back and through an imaginary hole in your tummy to the diaphragm. Take the rhythm fairly slowly. Now you understand the principle, try it. Breathe in from the diaphragm slowly through the chest to the mouth, counting to four and blow it back to the diaphragm in another count of four. Pick your most comfortable, fairly slow, rhythm. The most important part of this is the full involvement of the mind in the circular process of breathing. Keep a mental picture of the circle in your mind and follow it round at all times, making sure that the mind concentrates on and thinks only of this circular rhythm. Then, as there is nothing more interesting going on, you will fall asleep.

You should rarely have to go beyond ten circles before you succeed. You will find that your eyes will automatically follow the circle from the mouth out and back to the diaphragm, and this is good, showing the mind is involved. If you do wake during the night, know that you can get to sleep again quickly with this method.

Calming Breathing

² From: Livingston Booth. A (1985) Stressmanship. London: Severn House Publishers.

Sit back comfortably in a chair. Drop your shoulders down naturally and feel them widen from the spine outwards to your arms. This is to allow full, wide lung expansion. At the same time pull gently up as if a string attached to the top of your head is pulling you up. This is to expand the lungs upwards. Look straight ahead as if looking at a point on the wall opposite you. Make that position feel comfortable - do not strain it. Now your whole chest cavity will be able to expand naturally and allow your lungs to fill with air from the top to the bottom. So, to recap. Sit comfortably with a wide expanded chest cavity, dropped shoulders and an easy feeling. Now take five slow deep but gently steadying breaths. Having done this, you are ready to start calming breathing.

Breathe in easily and gently to a count of three and out just as easily and gently to the same count. Think of the three lobes of a lung and give a count to each one. Keep it all very relaxed and gently expand the chest outwards rather than trying for depth of breathing. Remember that this breathing should not be noticeable to others; the only external sign should be your calmness. It is not as deeply relaxing as when you are practising a more advanced form of deep relaxation.

It is an opportunity for quietly dampening down the stress response by saying to your chemical and nervous system in effect, "There is no need to come to my aid. I am coping with this easily and calmly." So breathe away gently and slowly, 1-2-3 in and 1-2-3 out. As this is gentle, expansive breathing you can keep it up, for example, throughout a difficult interview. Once practised you can dispense with the preliminaries and breathe away gently and calmly whenever you need to, regardless of where you are.

When to use calming breathing:

- When driving in heavy traffic your pulse rate can go up to 136 and higher. Bring it, and your blood pressure down with calming breathing.
- When facing something that you know will put up your blood pressure such as facing a difficult interview, making a speech, dealing with awkward people, chairing a stormy meeting.
- Whenever you need a cool clear head, as when being interviewed or taking a test.
- When facing a hectic day, particularly when you feel harassed and need to reduce the stress arousal levels, use it frequently.
- Whenever you feel yourself getting uptight, bring down the tension with calming breathing.

More Stress Management Advice

We have really just scratched the surface of dealing with stress, if you need any more handy tips, advice or principles to follow when dealing with stress, we have compiled some for you. There are a range of tools and tips outlined on the following pages that will help manage anxiety and switch off stress reactions more quickly as well as help manage some of the longer term impacts such as disrupted sleeping patterns. Everyone is different and different things will work best for different people.

Find something that you enjoy and that suits you. If you don't like it, you're NOT going to stick with it!! If you're someone who hates running, don't pick going for a run as your form of stress management. Physical exercise is good as it 'burns up' the stress response, but do something like going for a walk, yoga, golf (a driving range is a good stress release!), etc. if you don't like running.

Be patient and take time to change. Don't expect the stress or stress symptoms to go away overnight just because you start applying some stress management. Often it's been over a relatively long period of time that our stress reactions have built up, so we have to acknowledge that they will take a bit of time to disappear too.

Approach stress management one step at a time. Change one thing at a time and only try one stress management technique at a time. Often stress is as a result of a build up of a lot of little things so you don't want to then start 'throwing' a whole lot of other new things into the mix!! Try one stress management technique, persist with it for a few days or a week and if it's not working, that's OK, try another one.

Try to maintain as much consistency in your life. Get into a routine as quickly as possible so you feel you have some sense of control over your life. Human beings tend to find change a stressful thing to deal with. When you've got one big change, try to maintain as much consistency as possible in all other areas. Establish your new routines as early as possible, then stick to these. Routines provide familiarity, security and stability.

Enlist the support of others as they can be one of the best stress management tools you will have. Other people who are going through what you are, will understand and empathise with your situation. Old adage of "a problem shared, is a problem halved" is very true!!

Confront stressors with a positive attitude. Your attitude in situations will often determine whether it is stressful or not. Try to approach things as challenges not problems.

Staying present. Often under stress we feel a heightened sense of unease, anxiety or rumination. A useful technique is to keep your mind focused on the present by concentrating on what is going on around you – what are the sounds I can hear?, what colour is the pen in my hand? What will I have in my sandwich for lunch? It keeps the 'executive functioning'/reasoning side of the brain connected and helps turn off our stress response.

Balanced lifestyle ... this means not letting one part of your life (e.g. work) rule you, at the expense of other things.

Recreation ... doing things you enjoy and value in your spare time. Seek out activities to do when you get any spare time, rather than electing to stay at work.

Time Out ... getting physically away from a stressful situation to give you the chance to take a deep breath, unwind and reassess the situation.

Letters/diaries/emails : good for letting frustrations and feelings out ... writing things down gives you the chance to get things off your chest. If you have vented a number of frustrations,

you may not want to send it to anyone, but it helps to 'get it all out' on paper. Just screw up the letter or press the delete button and throw it away! Hopefully you will also be throwing away the frustrations.

Time Management... organising your time so you feel you have control over what you do and so use your time more efficiently. This can be applied both when you are extremely busy and when you have little to do at work.

Talk... talking about your feelings, worries and frustrations to others. If someone talks to you, just listen. Don't feel you have the responsibility of solving others problems and don't judge. Listening is normally all that is required.

Team Support... particularly important for everyone. Look out for each other, support each other and listen to each other.

Practice Coping Skills ... rehearsal for the real life events you find stressful (e.g. confrontation and negotiation). You may also want to learn or practice new skills e.g. being more assertive, communication, and negotiation.

Catching unhelpful self-talk ... replacing our unhelpful self-talk with more useful statements. E.g. replacing thoughts like "I should be competent at everything I do" with "we all have strengths and weaknesses".

Humour ... a great way of reducing stress. When you laugh it's almost impossible to feel down.

Professional help ... is available when you need a helping hand, don't try and go it alone. Stress is a commonly experienced challenge and sometimes when you are in the thick of things it is hard to see a way through.

Attitude... the most important!! Be positive and look for all the positive things you can gain from the situation, whatever the situation.