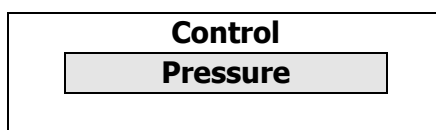


Stress Management

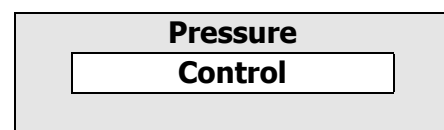
What is stress?

It has become common for people to say they are 'suffering from stress', or 'stressed out'. Although some of these people may be stressed in a medical sense, the majority of people are using it as a convenient word to describe feelings such as tired, disappointed, pressured, etc.

Everyone is under a certain amount of pressure from sources at work, at home, and elsewhere, but a certain amount of pressure is good for us, and helps to raise our performance – many people say they do their best work under pressure. True stress arises when the amount of pressure on you exceeds your ability to control it, which results in unwanted physical or mental effects.



Result = efficiency



Result = stress

Causes of stress

It is often said that the most stressful events are bereavement, divorce, and moving house. However, any circumstance or event that has an impact on you can cause stress. Many of these you can control – if you are given new sales targets that you believe you can achieve, this will create pressure, but not stress, as it is within your control. The same applies to pressure from other areas of work, from your partner, family, or social relationships, and from outside events such as a burst pipe at home, or a flat tyre in your car. If you can fix these latter two events they will be inconvenient, but not necessarily stressful; they only become stressful when you cannot get a plumber or mechanic to fix them.

The effect will also be influenced by your own attitude. If you are a generally calm person, the events above will not have such a strong or immediate impact on you, although the pressure will build up and may eventually 'explode' over the smallest additional cause. If however you are generally an emotional person, you may find that the slightest additional pressure may 'tip you over the edge'. For some people, too little pressure can also be stressful!

Effects of stress

When under stress, our body reacts. For instance, adrenaline is produced, heart rate increases, digestion stops. This is in preparation for the 'fight or flight' reactions that were so useful to our ancestors. However, most of the time these reactions are not appropriate, and if there is nowhere for the build up of bodily reactions to be released, internal pressure will result and increase the stress.

Relationships, job performance, and health may all suffer. The table below gives some of the more common physical and mental reactions; you may be able to think of more. If you believe you are stressed, try checking off how many of these apply to you each day, week, or month.

Physical Effects

- Muscular aches
- Not sleeping properly
- Unexplained indigestion
- Lack of energy
- Long-lasting or frequent headaches
- Raised blood pressure
- Feeling nauseous or dizzy
- Increased use of alcohol or coffee
- Skin rashes or boils
- Increased smoking
- Unable to relax & switch off

Mental effects

- Feeling unable to cope
- Anxiety
- Feeling irritable
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Feeling isolated or misunderstood
- Difficulty concentrating
- Decreased commitment
- Worrying about health, the future
- Self dislike
- Withdrawing into self
- Feeling oppressed or victimised

Experiencing one or more of these symptoms does not automatically mean you are stressed! However, experiencing many of them frequently or long-lasting could be an indication, when taken with other factors.

Remedies for stress

The only true remedy for stress is to remove the root cause of the undesirable pressure. This is not always practical, so the next best thing is to have a plan for managing the pressure.

Physical

One way of doing this is to combat it with a different kind of pressure, such as exercise, even if it is the last thing you feel like! Any exercise is better than none, but a well thought out and followed through exercise plan will help. By doing this, you will raise your body's ability to cope with physical exertion, and your general resilience. Even by concentrating on calm deep breathing and gentle stretching, you will help your body to relax.

A carefully chosen diet will also help, both by providing the essential nutrients to support your health, and by restricting alcohol and caffeine. This and the exercise may also help you to sleep better, which help you to manage the pressure.

Mental

You may be able to deal directly with the cause of the stress by practising assertiveness techniques to limit the amount of pressure that you receive, working on the principle that prevention is better than cure. You may also be able to combat the mental effects of stress. Many people find visualisation techniques useful, where you shut out external input for a while, and imagine yourself somewhere peaceful and relaxing. Try to find time for yourself, where you can turn off, unwind and relax; some people find relaxation techniques such as yoga of help. One helpful ingredient here is laughter; if you can find something to make you laugh it will help to de-stress you both physically and mentally.

One of the most helpful remedies is simply to talk about it. This might look like talking the situation through with a colleague, a mentor, a friend, or your partner, who is a good listener and may have had similar experiences themselves. An alternative would be professional advice or counselling, available from a variety of public bodies such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, Relate, Victim Support, Employee Assistance Programme, or others such as a registered financial advisor depending on

the context. Try to establish a support network of people who can help, whether formal or informal.

Precautions for the future

It is important not to pass your stress on to others. By managing the effects of pressure on yourself, you are less likely to snap or shout at other people, both in and out of work, and this will prevent matters escalating. If this does happen, the stress you pass to others will return to you, sooner rather than later, and probably at a more intense level.

Some of the techniques described here will be of use to prevent stress re-occurring, or to minimise its effects if you feel yourself becoming stressed. However, awareness of the effects on you will be the greatest benefit, as then you stand a chance of recognising the symptoms and doing something about them before they escalate to a more serious level. The most positive change you can make is to resolve to keep matters in proportion, and avoid becoming stressed in the first place!

Coaching is a short term investment for long term gain. It is not about instruction, training, or telling people what to do; it is a process where you help and encourage people to work things out for themselves. Coaching uses questions about real current situations as learning and development opportunities; every time you delegate a task, provide guidance, and discuss progress you have an opportunity to coach. It may be defined as:

For related topics see Top Tips:

- **Change Management**
- **Conflict Management**