

10 STEPS TO MANAGING STRESS

How in control are you?

Current society can place demands and expectations that can leave people experiencing a state frequently described as 'stress' or perhaps more accurately, feeling out of control, which leads to behavioural and physical 'signs' and 'symptoms' of being under pressure.

This state of feeling under pressure, stressed or overwhelmed is a common issue experienced by many at some point in their lives; that is, unless they have discovered that it can be controlled, perceived differently and prevented.

Want to feel differently? Then let's begin the discovery....

1. Understand and believe that you are in control

The first and most important step to freeing yourself up and becoming more relaxed and healthy is to understand that you *are* in control of stress. Yes, just to reiterate.... YOU are IN CONTROL. Believe and accept this idea and you will be ready to step into action towards conquering it, notice different choices that you have and to feel far more calm, relaxed and well..... in control!

So refuse to accept stress, there are plenty of things you can do to prevent and manage it, both within your circumstances and by how you choose to respond to it. By not allowing it to control you, *you* control it. It is from this place of power that the rest becomes possible.

2. Know what causes you to feel overwhelmed

This may be apparent, but if it's not, spend some time considering the cause(s), as well as gathering other options and perspectives from your friends and family. Look for causes within your external circumstances such as work, home pressures, how much you choose to take on, relationships, caring for others, time management, ability to prioritise and so on. If it is work related, a stress assessment can help you to troubleshoot causes and manage any necessary changes.

Take some time to put plans in place for the longer-term. This will help gain much needed perspective about how your current situation fits in with the bigger picture as well as over time. It also gives you steps to keep you on track, which is needed if you have a tendency to get caught up in the day do day tasks and ball juggling.

As importantly, in fact I'd be as bold as to say MORE importantly, it is time to look at internal causes, which will help now and in future prevention. The way you think about what you experience, what you perceive and how you respond to situations are all internal causes that people respond to differently. Have you noticed how others seem to take everything in their stride or thrive on a busy lifestyle? They will have a different way of perceiving and dealing with pressures in their life. You can too, so start considering 'what' you perceive as stressful. The moment we tell ourselves that we are stressed, that is how our mind and body respond. How could you think about it differently? Try it out, and notice how you feel differently as a result.

3. Maintain a healthy lifestyle

Although it sounds like common sense, health is one of the first things that is neglected when under pressure. By eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly and ensuring you get adequate sleep and rest, your body and it's

immune system is healthier and better able to cope with any pressures that you encounter. Additionally, exercise releases natural endorphins within the body which enhance the state of mind, as well as giving you space to focus on something other than any pressures you may be facing.

Avoid alcohol, nicotine and caffeine as coping mechanisms. Long term, these faulty coping mechanisms will just add to the problem. Alcohol is a depressant in itself, so although it may feel like a good way to temporarily self-medicate, it will worsen your mood long-term, as well as producing hangover effects; both of which reduce your clarity of thinking. Caffeine & nicotine are stimulants and the body reacts to them with the body's chemical stress response, which in turn increases the stress symptoms and can contribute to causing anxiety symptoms.

4. Use your time to its optimum

If you are under pressure it can be harder to prioritise with a clear mind. Yet pausing to collect your thoughts and prioritise your day will help you feel far more in control and purposeful in your actions. This takes self discipline, because common habits of checking email, texts and so forth often take preference, but is rewarded by an increased sense of calm and focus. Most importantly, it reconnects you with *what matters*. What can you drop for the benefit of you and others around you? What *really* needs to be done?

To do lists

Having a long 'to-do' list can be a huge source of pressure, so use the following prioritisation strategy for your work to have maximum effect:

Categorise each task/job by difficulty (e.g. easy, medium, hard) and then by potential impact (e.g. large, medium or small). Select the jobs that are both easy and will have a large impact and prioritise these first.

If some unpleasant jobs come up as the priority, do them first.

Avoiding them will only add to your pressures and reduce your mood; knowing that they are still looming and will have to be done at the last minute. By doing them first, the pressure is off, and you can reward yourself by knowing the impact they have had.

In most cases, you'll achieve 80 percent of your goals by only doing 20 percent of the work, which is a huge stress reducer.

Additionally, track **how long your tasks and jobs take**. In most cases, the actual amount of time it takes to do something is more than you initially estimated. By clearly understanding how long an activity "really" takes, you can better control your schedule and commitments.

Anticipate problems

Try to anticipate when issues could arise and deal with them head on, before they spiral out of control. The easiest and quickest way to avoid big issues is by addressing them when they are small.

5. Manage Expectations

Get to know your personal limits and boundaries alongside what constitutes a safe and healthy work-life balance to you. Unreasonable expectations of what you're capable of accomplishing are a huge source of pressure regardless of whether those expectations come from yourself, from your boss, family and friends or clients. Couple this with today's business environments and there can be pressure to work (or at least be available) 24 hour a day.

Review your role, regardless of whether it is your work role or role as mother, carer, partner etc. Consider what is expected of you (and equally – by whom) in comparison with you what you are actually taking on. What can be dropped? Where can you seek help from?

Expectations of yourself

What pressures are you applying to yourself? How much of the cause of the stress is self-perpetuated?

Spend a moment considering what are *realistic* expectations of yourself. Where are you drawing these expectations from? Whom are you comparing yourself to? Is that realistic?

Consider your expectations compared to what you would expect of others and what others actually expect of you. Are there any differences?

If the pressures and stressors come from your own unrealistic or exceptionally high expectations of yourself, it is time to consider the consequences of these expectations in the long run. How will you be in ten, five, two years time? Consider what would happen to yourself and your loved ones if you continue life with these same expectations of yourself. Re-assess how you wish to live your life and how you can protect your health, in order to remain well and live it fully and happily. Change your expectations accordingly – right now.

Others expectations of you

What is realistic for the amount of time and skills that you possess? Does this enable you to have 'down-time' and balance in your life? Are expectations and pressures fairly distributed? If others expectations are too high, take back control and tell them what is realistic. Look for other options, they will be there. Trying to cope unsuccessfully and not informing others is the equivalent of setting yourself up to fail. Remember that you are in control of what you do and how you respond.

There are times of course that others expectations of you are too low. Again, take control of this to prevent low mood and feeling undervalued. You are more than capable and worth far more, aren't you?

Your expectations of others

Communicate your expectations of others clearly and ensure they understand and are capable of reaching them. Expecting people to fulfil your unspoken expectations is bound to lead to unwanted pressures. How do you or they, know what is required and whether it will be met. Dealing with unmet expectations is a huge source of stress.

Also, review whether your expectations of others could be too low. Are you not sharing the load as you assume they will not be able to meet your standards of complete the task successfully? What does that say about your standards? Holding on to too much control is just as detrimental as not believing you have any. Both are immense causes of stress, overwhelm and illness. It's simple; you cannot do it all and maintain your health. What are other options?

6. Take time out

Take time out by using relaxation techniques and attending classes such as yoga, meditation or a hobby that you find is soothing; alongside taking holidays and breaks from work, ideally 10-14 continuous days at a time.

Stress hormones are released when you are under pressure so the body needs relaxation and pleasure to release serotonin, which counteracts these hormones. Failure to do this increases the stress hormones to a level where you are permanently in fight or flight mode, leading to hypervigilance, inability to think clearly,

concentrate and sleep and anxiety. Longer-term the effect on your physical and mental health can lead to life threatening illness and mental breakdown.

Having 'you time' and time to just 'be' and relax will pay you back tenfold. After time out your clarity of thought, resilience and energy levels will be improved, meaning you can cope with the pressures better and be more productive, rather than feeling like you are chasing your tail. If you are reluctant to do this, again, consider what use you will be to others and the consequences should you become ill.

So whilst immersed in whatever the cause is of your stress, take regular time out. Additional measures for work related stress are disciplining yourself to shut down your computer and your mobile not just while you sleep, but also an hour before and after you sleep. Anyone (or yourself) that expects you to be working at these hours has unrealistic expectations of you.

Find time to meet friends and family that you enjoy being around. They can be a source of support and help us see things in a different way. Engage in activities with them. New experiences combined with being active will help relax and is usually accompanied by laughter, the best mood enhancer there is!

7. Know what's controllable

There are always events that you simply can't control: the economy, traffic, other people's emotions, other's decisions to name a few.

While it can be useful to notice and predict these types of events in order to know how to react to them, once you know how to deal with them, it causes unnecessary stress to continue to focus on them.

Feeling anxious about things you can't control makes no difference to the outcome, but has a negative impact upon your health.

Know what you actually have influence over and find a way to let the rest of it go. This is usually as simple as making the decision to....just let it go. The thing you do have control over is how you choose to respond and what you allow to impact upon you.

Accept things that you cannot change

Change is a natural part of life. If there is nothing you can do to influence it, it is far healthier to recognise and accept things as they are and focus back upon all that you do have control over including your own mental state. Acceptance creates a calmer state of mind and body.

8. Minimise contact with situations that make it worse

Conflict is never helpful for interpersonal relationships or stress levels. You can't change other people, but what you can change is how you respond to them. Effective, open and honest communication is always the key to prevention. Should a situation come up and it is important to maintain the relationship, seek to establish common ground. More support and coaching for finding solutions for conflict are available via our website.

You will be aware of the types of things that may cause conflict between yourself and others. Unless it is something really important to you, learn to let it go.

Other Stressed People. It may feel comforting to seek solace with others that are going through the same as you. A degree of understanding from others is certainly helpful to prevent any feelings of isolation and to feel understood. Yet it is well known that we sense, and to a certain degree 'take on' the mental state of the person we are with, so if you surround yourself with other stressed or anxious people it will compound your sense of feeling stressed as you will naturally start behaving similarly.

So, as far as possible, limit your contact with such people, at least until you're in control of your own state. People that are well, relaxed and in control will be able to offer a far more productive perspective for you and will be in a position to provide you with support.

Present yourself as being calm and in control. When you present yourself in this manner, it has a natural impact within your body and state of mind. By slowing everything down you will feel more in control, calmer and more confident, both of which will reduce any pressure you feel.

Lastly, if you are aware that you are feeling stressed, avoid sensitive news such as on television, in the internet or newspapers. It will only compound any negative emotions that you are experiencing.

9. See things differently, focus on how you want it to be

Practice viewing stressful situations from a different perspective. What you focus on is where your energy will go and your body will respond accordingly. So for example, rather than feeling stressed about sitting in traffic, look at it as an opportunity to pause and re-gather your thoughts, knowing that it is not within your control.

So place your energy into things within your control and avoid focusing on what you don't want. Instead, focus on how you want things to be, how you want to feel and the positive effects of that.

10. Seek support

Be assertive with people about what you are able to do and how you are feeling. If you are overwhelmed it is essential to seek early help and support from whoever is best placed to in that context to provide help.

Talk things over with somebody that is in a good position to help before it gets out of proportion.

By following these principles, you are on track for a calmer, stress free life where you are back in the driving seat. If you find you are still not coping, seek professional help in order to take back control, learn to manage your state and thinking patterns and regain your health. Involve your GP, seek practical help for the causes of stress and obtain the guidance of a professional with expertise in managing stress and overwhelm.

Fresh Insight Coaching specialises in NLP Coaching and Hypnotherapy for people who are not coping in their lives. You can find more information including a guide to the signs of stress at:

www.freshinsightcoaching.com