

Stress and you:

a short guide to coping with pressure and stress

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, wavy lines in various colors (blue, green, orange, yellow, purple) that flow across the bottom half of the page.

Healthy workplace, healthy you
Job design



Introduction

Welcome to the useful short guide to coping with pressure and stress. Whatever your role and however long your experience, we all face times when we struggle with the pressures upon us. In this guide we'll help you understand the nature of pressures and stress and how we can start to build our resilience.

Does pressure help or hinder?

Pressure is part of our everyday lives. It can be useful to drive our performance and keep us working at our best. We usually have a sense of having achieved 'a good day's work' and feel good about ourselves when we have worked successfully under pressure. We can feel excited and exhilarated about the challenges the day has brought and perhaps the learning or experience we have gained during the day.

However, if we have a short episode of very intense pressure, or a longer period of excessive pressure, our defences or resilience can be overcome and we find ourselves feeling stressed. This can come with an array of feelings, psychological and physical symptoms. Often we feel exhausted and have uneasiness or raised alertness.

Definitions of stress

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) describes stress as:
"The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed upon them. It arises when they perceive that they are unable to cope with those demands."
(Health and Safety Executive, 2008)

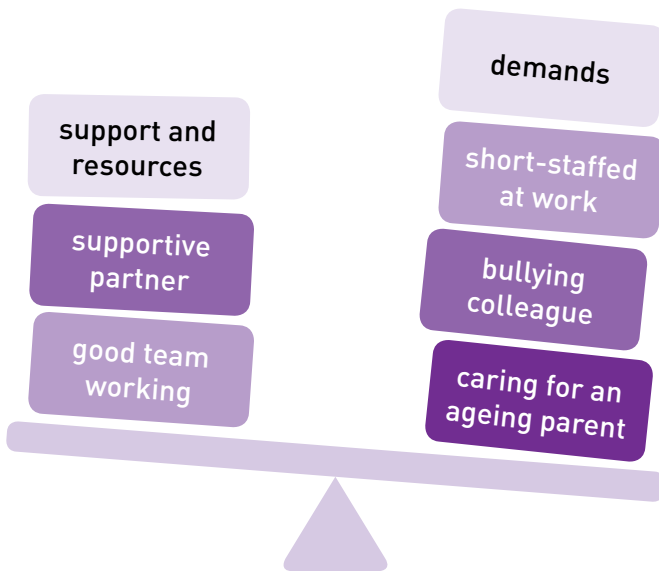
This is useful as it makes reference to the important aspect of stress happening when there is a perception of not being able to cope. This can help us understand why the same pressures can affect people differently. There are a number of reasons for this, but one is about that point in time

when we decide we can't cope anymore. Therefore, if we can change the way we interpret or think about events or our body's reaction to events, we can start to have more control over stress in our lives. Studies show that people who learned to reframe stress felt less stress and had a different physiological response.

Try revisiting how you interpret the 'butterflies in your tummy' type symptoms and reframe them as your body preparing to meet a challenge, rather than your system breaking down.

The HSE also describe stress as a balancing act:

"Stress arises when the demands upon us outweigh the resources we have to deal with those demands".



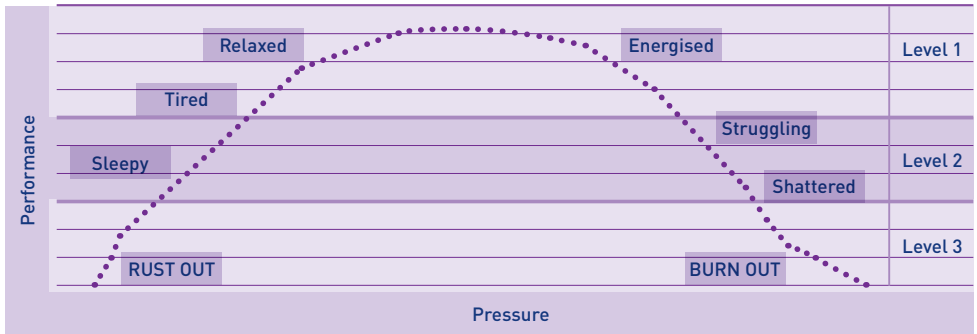
This indicates that we are in an unsustainable situation and therefore something needs to change to rectify the situation.

These two definitions are both useful in helping our understanding.

So, where are you on the pressure scale?

Look at the performance curve below. Note how our performance increases with pressure, up to the tipping point, when pressure becomes stress. After this point we become less effective. If the stress is unrelieved we can become unwell. Draw a line where you feel your performance level is currently at. Then draw in a line where you would like to be.

Pressure/performance graph



Is there a difference?

If there is, it's time to take action.

If you are under-challenged, indicated as 'rust out' in the graph, this can be very unsatisfying. Consider what additional responsibilities or role you could undertake and make plans about how to move this forward. Discussing your thoughts with your manager is likely to be helpful.

If your performance is reduced due to stress there are some useful information, hints and tips to help you overleaf.

Stress

Stress is experienced as a result of different things for each of us. The things which trigger you to feel stressed, may not affect your colleagues in the same way. So it's important not to assume people know how you are feeling. Try to let your manager know if you are struggling at work. Your employer will be aware of the risk of stress-related ill health caused by work and carries a responsibility for you health and safety at work, which includes your emotional/mental health as well as your physical wellbeing. Employers should take measures to reduce the risk of work-related stress.

Stress may show itself in very different ways. Below are some of the symptoms you may have experienced.



Improving your mental wellbeing

As we find different things stressful, we also find different things help us to improve our mental wellbeing and resilience.

Below is a list for you to consider. Activities you may find useful include:

Lifestyle management

- Maintain a balance between work and play – do you live to work or work to live?
- Use leisure time to recharge your batteries, exercise regularly, socialise in person.
- Maintain a healthy diet, be mindful as some stimulants such as alcohol, caffeine and nicotine can exacerbate stress responses.
- Plan regular holidays and take them at home if finances are tight.
- Build and maintain your support networks.

Become your own expert

- Take time out to reflect and to be as objective as you can.
- Identify your main sources of stress – try anticipating stressful periods and plan accordingly.
- Assess how effective your current coping strategies are – are there any different strategies that can be applied, discussing them with people you trust can be helpful.
- Ask 'What is in and what is out of my control?' 'Am I able to influence?', and if you cannot influence ask 'How can I accept?'
- Make use of online resources such as the NHS Choices website – www.nhs.uk

Managing your personal work environment

- Take time to regularly review and plan – learn to improve time management skills.
- Plan regular breaks. Thirty minutes not working increases your effectiveness later on.
- Negotiate and if possible delegate, use 'let me get back to you', 'no', 'not now' especially when you sense that others are offloading their work onto you.
- Learn to recognise your needs and be assertive in stating them – do not feel pressured into overtime that you know you cannot do or do not want to do.
- If you feel underworked then consider additional responsibilities, support your colleagues or seek out new challenges to keep you stimulated.
- If the adjustments you are making are not working then make use of one-to-ones, appraisals and clinical supervision to address your current situation.
- Career advice may be useful if you are stressed and frustrated with your career development, career guidance can help you gain greater awareness of your career values, interest and needs.



Consider you thinking skills

- When stressed be mindful of 'unhelpful thinking habits' for example, 'I must be perfect, I must never make a mistake' – find ways of thinking more realistically 'I am doing the best that I can in difficult circumstances'.
- Avoid mind reading, jumping to conclusions, black and white thinking, catastrophising, likewise avoid generalisation, for example, 'this always happens to me', ask yourself 'where's the evidence, what are the facts?'
- Challenge pressure you put on yourself by turning musts, oughts and shoulds into likes and preferences from 'I must complete this task today' to 'I'd like to complete today and I will do what I can'.
- Learn to identify what you can and can't control and acknowledge what can't be avoided. Why waste energy banging your head against a brick wall that is not going to give way? Much better to invest the energy into finding a way under or around the wall!

Managing your personal perceptions of stress

- Use constructive self-talk and avoid putting yourself down – acknowledge your achievements and regularly give yourself a pat on the back.
- Maintain a sense of proportion and remember that you have managed to get through difficulties before.
- Think about what helped you through a previous difficulty – how did you do that? It may give you some clues and instil hope that there is a way forward.
- Remember too that you are not superhuman!

Other helpful measures

Breathing techniques

These can be done anywhere and at any time. Try breathing in for a count of 7, then paying attention to the surface(s) supporting you, breathe out for a count of 11. Within 3-4 breaths the adrenaline response associated with stress related symptoms will calm and enable you to focus on your priorities or the task you are undertaking.



Relaxation scripts

Some people find these useful and there are various types available on DVD or YouTube.

Use your networks

When going through a difficult time, support networks are useful. Consider talking to your occupational health department and/or employee assistance scheme if you have one. Your GP/practice nurse, or the RCN counselling service may also be helpful. If your stress is caused or made worse by work then talk to you can talk to your RCN workplace representative or RCN Direct for advice (contact details on page 12).



Top tips

- Aim for the healthy tension between being relaxed and energised.
- Regularly assess your stress response and the current stresses as stress can creep up unawares.
- Plan ahead for expected increases in stress.
- Find out what works best for you in terms of reducing and managing your stress.
- Try out new ideas that may work well for you.
- Remember, feeling stressed does not equal not coping.
- It is OK to seek help when stressed.
- Remember that your employer carries a responsibility for your health and safety at work, which includes your emotional/mental health as well as your physical wellbeing.



Further information and support

NHS Choices

www.NHS.uk

MIND

www.mind.org.uk

International Stress Management Association

www.isma.org.uk

Samaritans

www.samaritans.org

RCN Direct

On line advice at www.rcn.org.uk/direct

Telephone 0345 772 6100

RCN Membership Support Services

Contact the counselling service on 0345 408 4391 seven days a week 8.30am-8.30pm to make an appointment or email mss@rcn.org.uk

For more information visit www.rcn.org.uk/mss

If you want to find out more about coping with pressure and stress read our longer guide *Stress and you* (RCN 2015) which can be accessed at www.rcn.org.uk/publications and search for publication code 004967

References

Health and Safety Executive (2008) *Working together to reduce stress at work – a guide for employees*, Sudbury: HSE available at www.hse.gov.uk/stress (accessed 25 June 2015)

Royal College of Nursing (2015) *Stress and you* available from www.rcn.org.uk/publications and search for publication code 004967



Notes







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September 2015

RCN Online
www.rcn.org.uk

RCN Direct
www.rcn.org.uk/direct

0345 772 6100

Published by the
Royal College of Nursing
20 Cavendish Square
London
W1G 0RN

020 7409 3333

 www.facebook.com/royalcollegeofnursing

 www.twitter.com/thercn

 www.youtube.com/rcnonline

Publication code: 004 966



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