



*'The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.'*

*William James*

### ***Stress Management in Everyday Life***

Stress affects everyone from young children to the elderly. It is one of life's 'guarantees' as we live in an increasingly stressful world that appears to be working to the motto of 'more for less'. People are expected to do more, think more, give more, be more continuously. There is no time to stop and process how you feel about it, no time to rest and refuel. This perpetual motion leads to many different types of stress and if left unchecked, ill health.

### ***What is stress?***

Stress is defined as 'a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances' (Oxford Dictionary). According to Dr Butler<sup>1</sup> stress is defined in three ways: stress resulting from pressure - the greater the pressure, the greater the likelihood of a person succumbing (this is a stimulus-based definition). Secondly, 'stress as a response to noxious or aversive stimuli' (this is a response-based definition). There is a definition of dynamic stress that takes into account the influence of individual difference, circumstances, coping mechanisms, resilience and the interaction of internal and external factors on their lives.

### ***What causes stress?***

Stress can be caused by a multitude of factors on their own, or when they interact with other factors in a person's life. For example, being over-stretched at work, home or both, ill health, leading to not being able to work, causing financial hardship and possible loss of a job, relationship, home, etc. This includes the impact of these events on a person's self confidence and self esteem. These are some very general issues, individual experiences and reactions will vary greatly.

Stress-reaction is also down to how an individual has learned to deal with stress in their lives. \*\*Learned helplessness occurs when an individual's coping strategies are defective or completely ineffective. When a person is exposed to large amounts of stress on a regular and sustained basis, and where they feel they cannot impact the stressor at all, they will experience a sense of inability related to their (disempowered) world view.

### ***How does the body respond?***

The mind and body respond differently to different type of stress. This is perhaps the most important aspect of this paper.

*Emotional reactions to stress may include:*

- anger, (fight of the fight, flight, freeze approach)
- numbing, (freeze)
- withdrawal from day to day activities that were once enjoyable (flight and freeze)
- tearfulness
- anxiety/ extreme anxiety responses such as panic attacks
- fear
- shame
- vulnerability
- depression
- powerlessness
- hostility
- outbursts
- panic
- emotional arousal leading to hyper vigilance
- fatigues exhaustion in severe cases

*Behavioural reactions or responses may include:*

- engaging in, or increasing addictive behaviours for example, drinking, smoking, drugs, sex, viewing pornographic material
- taking risks for example driving too fast
- arguments
- fights
- withdrawing from work or relationship
- avoidance of important activities for example keeping in touch with friends and family, going to work
- changes in regular patterns, for example eating, drinking, sleeping etc
- difficulties in day to day activities for example talking, not being able to articulate oneself, not being able to find the words

*Cognitive reactions may include:*

- increased concentration 'focussing'/ arousal, in some cases can also lead to hypervigilance,
- decreased attention
- increased distractibility

- irrational or catastrophic thinking
- in extreme cases, inability to function efficiently

It is important to note that the different types of reactions will be interacting with each other to produce the final experience/s within an individual.

### ***The psychological face of stress: a brief look at theories***

Hans Selye (1956) proposed a stress reaction theory he called General Adaptation Syndrome. This theory stated that there are three distinct responses to a stressor:

- a. the body responds to a threat with an alarm reaction
- b. 'a' triggers the release of adrenaline into the body to prepare for fight or flight - this is the autonomic system preparing to deal with the stress and to resist stress or 'coping'
- c. if the stress continues beyond the body's ability to deal with it, this leads to exhaustion - the body becomes fatigued and depleted leading to physical exhaustion, illness and inability to cope with day to day functioning and in extreme cases, death

Often, the body is able to deal with most stresses at 'b' above and continues to function normally until the next episode of stress.

Building on Selye's theory, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed that cognitive factors played a significant part in how stress was perceived by an individual. In addition to this, an individual in a stressful situation would also evaluate the nature and level of stress, and their ability to deal with it depending on the resources available to them. So stress was defined through an individual's perception of it, their environment and their judgement of their own ability to deal with the level of stress present. This theory relies on an individual being able to recognise what is stressful in their lives and identify their resources. One person's idea of stress may vary significantly from another's, therefore stress is a very subjective concept, and one by its very nature, stressful! Other theories have suggested that different personality types react differently to stress. (You are welcomed to explore this at your own leisure using the web).

An important area to briefly explore here is the concept of learned helplessness. This very simply can be described as the frog in the slowly boiling pot, it feels the water getting hotter, but will not jump out to save itself. In humans this is due to the fact that a person feels that they have no control over the situation and accepts their 'fate'. This is often preceded by experiences of extreme stress caused by events out of the person's control combined with psychological fatigue, i.e. not having the emotional strength to fight. For some, they have observed parents or significant others behave in a power-less way and have simply learned to react that way.

### ***Stress Management and regaining control of your life***

The most important approach in stress management is perhaps the most powerful, and that is to adopt the right attitude. Our thoughts create our realities, and so if we are able to become aware of our thoughts and

what they are, we then have the power to change them and by default, our felt realities. This is a very simplistic view, yet the most difficult because as humans we are still stuck in the 'causal-effect' paradigm of Newtonian physics. Whilst there is indeed a global shift towards enlightenment and an openness to explore other, perhaps less scientific ideas, there is still a deep resistance in individuals accepting their power and choice.

## **REBT**

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) is a clinical approach to deal with irrational behaviours that often lead to stress, depression and high levels of anxiety. The core concepts of REBT are as follows:

### 1. The ABCDE of REBT are:

- A - the **actuating** event or trigger - what caused the problem?
- B- what are the rational or irrational **beliefs** about this problem?
- C - what are the **cognitive**, emotional and behavioural responses to the problem?
- D - **disputing** the irrational beliefs related to the problem
- E - the **effects** of disputing
  - it is important to be aware of how you describe the problem
  - what you think about it
  - how you interpret it
  - what your speculation or reasoning is about the problem
  - and how you evaluate it (positively or negatively)

### 2. Let us now look at **Belief** pairs in REBT:

<b>Rational</b>	<b>vs</b>	<b>Irrational</b>
Preferences e.g.'I would prefer to..'		Musts e.g.'I must...
Anti-awfulising e.g. 'this is a rubbish situation, but I can deal with it'		Awfulising e.g. 'this is completely unacceptable, it is awful, I can't stand it'
High frustration tolerance e.g. 'ok this isn't how I'd like it, but I'm going to work with it'		Low frustration tolerance e.g. 'why me?! Why does this always have to happen? I can't stand it!'
Self/other acceptance 'hey it's ok, we all make mistakes!'		Self/other downing 'you are so stupid, how could you do that? Can't you think?!'

### 3. The rational beliefs of REBT include asking yourself (with the above table in mind):

- how flexible is this belief or thought?
- how consistent is it with reality?
- how logical is it?
- does it promote psychological well-being and help you in the pursuit of your goals?

The ultimate aim of REBT is to help you question the irrationality of your thoughts and bring you to

a place of 'peace' with your issue, in that it allows you to get on with enjoying your life without hindrance.

4. Let us now identify an issue you wish to work with and create a specific problem statement for example 'I want to stop feeling anxious every time I want to do something new'
5. what are your core irrational beliefs about 'anxiety' - for example
  - 'if I get anxious I will':
    - make a fool out of myself by...
    - feel embarrassed because...
    - not be able to cope etc because...
6. Go to step 1 and answer those points with reference to the issue you just listed (the ABCDE)
7. Now look at step 2 above and see where your issue fits in - is it rational or irrational?
8. Go to step 3 and answer those questions in relation to your thoughts
9. Now try and think about how you can change the irrational thoughts to the rational ones, so from 'I must' to 'I would prefer to'. Pay special attention to working towards the Rational side of the table. Be aware of what you think, and catch irrational thoughts early and actively change them over. Check them against step 3 each time.
10. Remember, this technique is very good but requires you to really practice and challenge yourself continually - no pain, no gain.
11. For deeper issues, talk with your counsellor.

## ***Relaxation Methods***

### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is a very basic skill to take control of our thinking, however, one that takes practice. There are some basic steps which include:

- **Witnessing:** becoming aware of what you are actively thinking, moment by moment as a bystander without judgement. Learning about your thinking by observing how you think allows you to prevent your mind from hijacking your thoughts. Like REBT, it is important to be aware of what you are thinking and how the thoughts are framed. For example thinking 'I feel so depressed, I can't stand it. I can't cope with the way I am feeling' feels very powerless. Instead, mentally note 'I really feel depressed, I feel like I can't cope **right now**, but I am not powerless, although it feels like I am. This feeling will not last forever.' You are simply describing what you are experiencing and this allows you to 'see' the process versus focussing only on the felt emotions or judgement about them. Become aware of how it feels to do this exercise, and try to do it with other aspects of your life in order to practice.
- **Informal mindfulness** - being mindful of whatever you are doing moment to moment, allows you to really become aware of what you are thinking and how these thoughts affect you.
- **Formal mindfulness** enables you to hone your skills through regular mindfulness rituals or practices. For example:
  - Counting breaths for a period of time

- Purposefully focussing on a particular thought or feeling
- Purposefully focussing on something you have read or heard
- Observing a particular thing - e.g. a bird in the garden, a squirrel exploring its surroundings, dogs in the park, ripples in a pond etc.
- If your attention wanders, gently bring it back to this moment without judgement or criticism. Focussing on the immediate moment allows you to have a 'break' from worrying about the past or the future, it enables you to reserve energy to deal with the here and now.

### **Light and breath meditation**

Meditation is a powerful method to find stillness from your busy world. It is simple and free and has been proven to aid health and wellbeing.

- Find a quiet, calm, warm space, light a candle and place it in front of you at a comfortable distance.
- Wearing warm, comfortable clothes, sit in front of the candle and focus on the light.
- Take a slow, deep breath and let it out slowly.
- As you exhale, be aware of the tension around your body, be aware of any worries, concerns, fears you may have, and just let them be.
- Take another slow, deep breath and exhale slowly. Repeat this throughout the meditation.
- As you breathe, starting at the top of your head, become aware of any tensions or stress and work your way down each part of your body as if you were scanning it, just becoming aware of any stresses and tensions.
- Keep breathing slowly, focusing on the flame of the candle.
- Once you reach your toes, take a long deep breath and hold for 5 counts. Exhale very slowly.
- Now returning to the top of your head, imagine breathing in the light, more and more with each breath. As your body fills with light, it slowly pushes out the stresses and tension in your body downwards and out through the soles of your feet on the ground and you begin to relax.
- Keep breathing deeply as you imagine each cell in your body filled with healing light. If this feel too much, just return to deep breathing with a gentle focus on the flame. Practice this for a few minutes each day and observe the calmness you feel, once you are practiced, you will be able to scan and relax anytime, anywhere in a few moments.

### **Create your perfect world**

Finding a quiet, calm space, take a deep breath. Now imagine your most favourite place, real or imaged. Really focus on that place, smell the air, feel the warmth or cold, hear the environment. This is your place, exclusively for you, it can be anything, anywhere without limit and only you are allowed there whenever you wish. You can of course invite people to your sacred space, but only if you choose to share it with them! This space is for you to come to any time you choose to. It is filled with warmth, peace and safety. You can take it wherever you go. You can retreat into it anywhere you are, work, home, the supermarket.... Your world is perfect, there is nothing wrong there, it is where you can go to recharge.

### ***Humour***

Laughter has been repeatedly shown to alleviate the symptoms of stress and in some cases has positively impacted on cancer for example. Make time for laughter each day, buy a joke-book, go online and find things to amuse you (obviously outside of work time!), pull up videos of comedians online and watch a few minutes of something silly and funny. Laughter works all the muscles, it allows fresh oxygen transactions in your body, it increases blood flow and the release of endorphins. For the weight-conscious, laughter is one of the best cardio-vascular exercises minus having to go to the gym.

### ***Exercise***

Like laughter, exercise has incredible health benefits. Stress builds up gradually, and if not 'released' from the body, it will cause problems in the future. Exercise allows the body to recharge and replenish itself. It is also an opportunity to 'work it out' of your system. Research has shown that those taking part in regular exercise have a greater resilience to stress and illness. Exercising is time for you to spend with your body, remember, we only have the one until we finish our journey on earth.

***'Training gives us an outlet for suppressed energies created by stress and thus tones the spirit just as exercise conditions the mind' Arnold Schwarzenegger***

Think about what you like doing, are you a gym person, or long rambly walks? What interests you, do you have friends or family you can go with? This is also an exceptional opportunity to socialise and do 'normal' things that allow you to reground yourself. If fast-paced exercise isn't your cup of tea, consider yoga or swimming. These gentle but supremely effective exercises will allow healing of mind, body and spirit.

Remember, too much of anything is also detrimental.

### ***Sex***

Sex is perhaps the greatest of all exercises and stress relief. It is nature's way to enable two consenting individuals to (re)connect in an exclusive relationship and has health benefits across the board. Making love allows you to bond emotionally, physically and mentally with your partner at the deepest level of human consciousness. Again, this is time for you and your partner to leave the world outside and just be.

### ***Talking***

Sharing problems and concerns is a powerful stress management tool and a gift for the stressed. Being able to share allows you to listen to your narrative, your story and hear yourself speak. Sometimes this allows us to verbalise and challenge our own thinking and begin finding our own solutions. Talking to a trusted friend, colleague or companion will allow you the time and space to tell your story, to hear it and to being to challenge negative, unhelpful thinking. And if you can't challenge yourself, your listener just might - ask them for what you need before you speak about your stressors, they won't have a magic wand, but they may

have a strategy that you might not have thought of. Exploring these strategies is a powerful approach to dealing with stress.

### ***Writing***

This is the free, unique, freeing, empowering and completely confidential tool that has been used for thousands of years to explore thought, to reason with and to share ideas and ideals through. Writing is as limited as you allow it to be. It is one of the most powerful tools available to us. Writing allows the tangible connection of thought and matter through the medium of a writing instrument.

Get a few sheets of paper and sit down somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed and where you can think clearly without distraction. 20 minutes is often ample time, but the longer the better. Allow your mind to be still and begin to write freely without restriction. Let whatever thoughts that appear be put down on paper. There is no right or wrong. As you do this exercise over days weeks or months, you will begin to see patterns emerging, patterns of worry, thoughts you weren't consciously aware of. Just allow them to flow. (see my *Writing as Therapy* document for alternative exercises at [www.bhavnaraitathaconsultancy.com](http://www.bhavnaraitathaconsultancy.com))

### ***Healthy Eating***

People who are stressed rarely eat well. There is an automatic reaching for fatty or sugary 'comfort' foods that in moderation are fine, however in excess (and instead of healthy, balanced meals) can add to the body's stress-load and inability to function fully. Stay mindful of how you are feeling and what your body is craving. Take steps to nourish your body with healthy foods.

### ***Therapy***

Counselling is an opportunity to explore stressors and stress reactions with an objecting professional without fear of judgement or ridicule. It is a place to explore how you have arrived at your current position and also how to reach your ideal outcome. (Check out [www.bhavnaraitathaconsultancy.com](http://www.bhavnaraitathaconsultancy.com) for further information)

#### ***Resources and reading material:***

Tipping, C., (2010), **Radical Forgiveness: A Revolutionary Five-Stage Process to Heal Relationships, Let Go of Anger and Blame, and Find Peace in Any Situation**, SoundsTrue Inc. ISBN: 1591797647

This work is also available on audiobook and is a very powerful approach to dealing with anger using the three distinct approaches put forward by Colin.

Dijk, S. V., (2012), *DBT Made Simple*, New Harbinger Publishers. ISBN:9781608821648

#### ***Websites:***

[www.colintipping.com](http://www.colintipping.com)

You might enjoy listening to Karyn Buxman, an incredibly funny motivational speaker - her videos are available on YouTube.

---

<sup>i</sup> Dr Butler's full article can be viewed at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2560943/pdf/occpaper00115-0007.pdf>

***Whatever the case, there is always someone you CAN talk to explore these issues. Please get in touch to book an appointment.***

**07946 423 787**

**[puretherapy1@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:puretherapy1@yahoo.co.uk)**