

Understanding Stress and Coping

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Stress is a part of every day living. All people experience stress at some point in their lives. It is no longer a question of whether or not people are stressed, it is a question of how much stress people are willing to tolerate. It is also a matter of learning to do something about stress before it has too much of a negative effect on your life.

Understanding Stress

The word “stress” has many different meanings for people. Most ways of looking at stress contain an element of truth, but some ways of viewing stress present problems for understanding and treating stress. Therefore, before outlining ways to control stress, a brief discussion of the nature of stress is presented. The discussion will begin with a contemporary view of stress. Then this modern view of stress is compared with common, but incomplete ways of looking at stress. After that, a more complete discussion of the contemporary perspective is presented.

Stress Depends On A Person’s Point Of View

Researchers today have discovered that stress is a complex reaction that affects people’s physiology, behaviour, thinking, and emotions. It arises in situations where people **believe** that the demands they face are greater than their abilities to handle those demands. It is the belief that one is not able to handle the demands they are facing that begins to trigger a stressful experience (more on this later).

Stress Comes From The Environment (or does it?)

Some people view stress as part of the situations they experience. Students talk about exams making them stressed. Teachers talk about students making them stressed. Some people say their jobs make them stressed. Parents talk about their children making them stressed. Adolescents talk about their parents causing stress for them. The list could go on forever. The common point in all these statements is the belief that the cause of stress is the situation. The belief that it is the situation that creates stress and the person is more or less a passive recipient.

This view is not accurate. For example, we know that different people react to the same situation in different ways. If stress really was part of the situation, then the same situation should affect everyone in more or less the same way. But it doesn’t. Some people find public speaking stressful and others seem to enjoy it. Some people find rush hour traffic stressful and others don’t seem to mind it at all. In fact, the same person does not even react to the same situation, in the same way, all the time. Some days a person may find rush hour traffic very stressful and other days it doesn’t seem to be much of a problem, even though there are still lots of cars on the road. If stress really did come from the situation, then surely the same situation should effect the

same person in pretty much the same way on different occasions. But it doesn't. Obviously, the person in the situation plays an important part in determining how stressful the experience will be.

Stress Is The Same As Being Worked Up (but not really)

Another common point of view sees stress as merely a physiological or emotional response. Some people talk about being stressed out. Others talk about being so stressed they can hardly think straight. Others talk about being so stressed they're not sure they can hack it any longer. The common point in these statements is that stress is equated with the person's reaction to situations: stress is the feeling of being worked up.

Equating stress with being worked up, is not accurate. People often experience intense emotions that are not stressful. For example, winning a lottery, watching a hilarious movie, or doing a very good job delivering a speech, might all be accompanied by a feeling of being worked up, but would not be labeled by most people as stressful. Moreover, the goal in stress control is not to produce people who have no emotional reactions, it is to help people reduce the health impact of the stress they experience.

Stress Builds Character (many people don't think so)

Some people view stress as a character builder and a motivator. Some people talk about working better under stress. Others talk about being stronger for having gone through a stressful experience. It's as if stress is the only way to move people to action or that being forced into difficult situations makes people better equipped to handle other difficult situations.

This way of viewing stress also is not accurate. We all have had times in our lives when we began an activity just because we wanted to: no stress, just a desire to do the activity. Similarly, we may have started a particular task before the absolute final deadline, or did very good work, simply because we wanted to, not because stress was driving us. On the other hand, we all know people who are chronically stressed and do not seem to be building character, or getting stronger, or even getting better at handling the situation. Often, these same people end up with an ulcer or a heart attack, hardly the epitome of the slogan "stress makes people stronger."

Stress Buster Tip

Examine how you think about stress.
Are you a victim of circumstance or can you do something about it?

A Contemporary View Of Stress (Stress Depends on a Person's Point of View)

We know that people and the situations they experience BOTH play a role in stress. Let's revisit the definition given earlier.

Stress is a complex reaction that affects our physiology, behaviour, thinking, and emotions. It arises in situations where people believe that the demands they face are greater than their abilities to handle those demands.

The definition has two parts, one dealing with the nature of the stress reaction and the other dealing with the cause of stress.

The Nature of Stress

Stress affects all parts of a person: physiology, behaviour, thinking, and emotions.

When people are stressed, they are worked up physiologically.

- Heart rate increases.
- Breathing rate increases.
- Muscle tension increases.
- Sweat gland activity increases.
- Blood pressure increases.
- Hands get cooler because blood is shunted away from the extremities and towards the large muscle groups. This is part of the flight or fight response.
- Blood in the brain is channeled away from the rational, creative, problem-solving centers of the brain and towards the parts of the brain that control muscle movement. Thus, people end up thinking less clearly than they normally would and their muscle activity increases.

Stress effects the way people think. Typically, when people are stressed their thinking becomes distorted. They:

1. exaggerate the size and the nature of the demands they are facing.
2. put down their ability to handle those demands.
3. create catastrophes around the possible outcomes of the situation.
4. tend to go over and over an event in their minds, dwelling on the negative aspects of the situation and their perceived inability to cope with it.
5. set up a "self-amplification" loop, where the very perception of becoming stressed, increases stress level, where upon people notice that they are even more stressed than they thought, which further increases their stress level, and so on, often resulting a a feeling of out of control.

Of course people do not think this way deliberately. It is the result of blood being channeled away from the rational centres in the brain and diverted towards the parts of the brain that control muscle activity.

The increase in muscle activity accompanying the stress response typically produces more “hyper” behaviour. People generally tend to speed up when stressed. They experience the “hurry-up syndrome” referred to as Type A behaviour. They:

- walk fast.
- talk fast.
- eat fast.
- use frequent and punctuated hand gestures when talking.
- pit themselves against the clock.
- turn almost every event, even waiting in a super market line up, into a competition.
- generally get impatient with people who are slower than them.

Stress: An Integrated Response

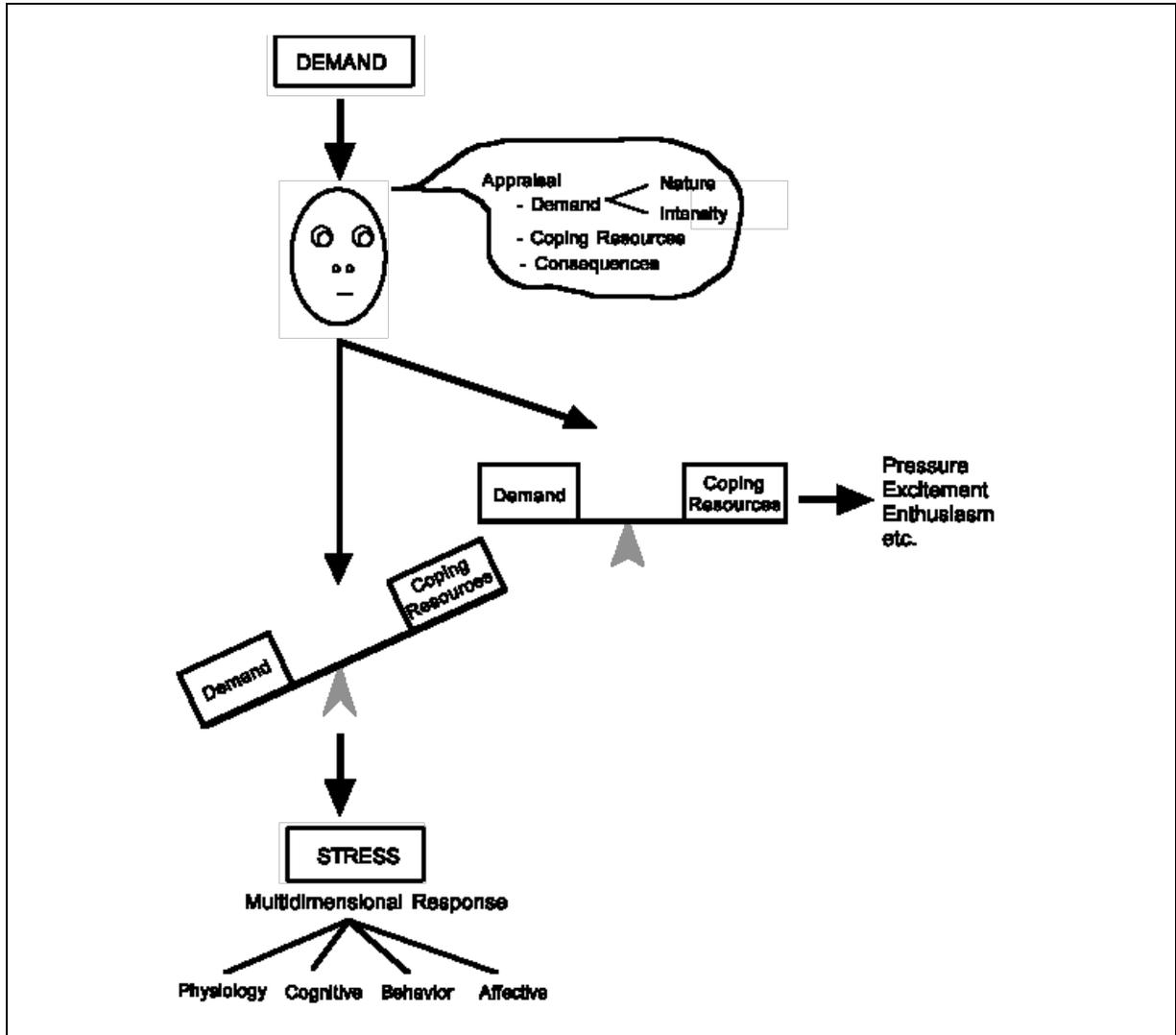
Usually, when people are stressed, their reaction occurs on all three levels. Their physiology gets worked up, their thinking becomes distorted, and their behaviour speeds up. This is what psychologists call an integrated response. When people are stressed, all systems react in concert. However, often, one part of the response is more exaggerated than the rest. Thus, some people tend to get worked up physiologically, while others tend to demonstrate more hyper behaviour, and others just worry a lot. In these cases, all systems are responding together, with one system being more reactive. A similar kind of phenomenon exists within the physiological system. When people are stressed, their physiology tends to react in the manner described earlier. However, often, one part of the physiological response is more exaggerated than the others. Thus, some people tend to get really cold hands, while others experience a racing heart beat, others sweat a lot, and others find their stomachs “tied in knots.” It is possible for people to pay attention to their reaction, discover which component seems to be the most reactive, and use that as an “early warning system” to help them spot stress early and take action to control stress if they want to. This concept is discussed in more detail in chapter 11.

What Causes Stress?

Current research findings suggest that the stress response is triggered not so much by the demands people face, but by their perceptions that they will not be able to handle those demands as well as they would like to. When people encounter a demanding situation they tend to make a judgment about the nature and intensity of the demand. They evaluate the resources they can draw on to handle the situation. This includes the skills and knowledge they possess as well as the other people they can draw on for assistance. They also speculate about the consequences likely to result, especially the consequences associated with not handling the situation as well as they would like to. If the result of this appraisal leaves them confident that they will be able to handle the situation to their satisfaction, then stress levels typically are low. However, if they decide they will not be able to deal with the demand as well as they’d like to, and especially if unpleasant consequences are likely to result, then stress levels will be high. The intensity of the stressful reaction will be a function of the degree of imbalance between the demand and resources for coping, coupled with the perceived severity of the consequences. When there is a perceived balance between demands and resources for coping with the situation, a person may still get worked up, but it likely will be a facilitative emotional experience, such as excitement,

motivation, or enthusiasm. It is when the demands are thought to overtax coping resources that stress occurs.

Figure below illustrates the process.

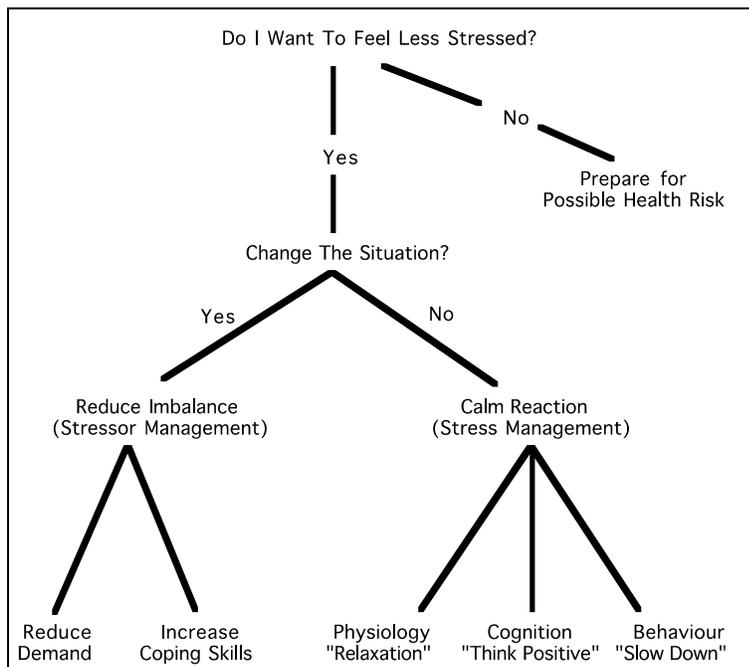


Most people can identify every day examples to illustrate the role that perception plays in people's stressful experiences. Probably, everyone knows people who are experiencing pressures or problems, coping with them very well, but feeling stressed because they think that they are not doing an adequate job. Conversely, everyone knows people who are coping very poorly with life's pressures, but think they are doing just fine, and as a result experience very little stress. The important point in these examples, and a point that has only recently come to light, is that people's perceptions of the situations they face, and their perceptions of their resources for dealing with those situations, play a central role in determining how stressed they feel.

Understanding How to Cope

The goal in stress control is not to eliminate stress, but to reduce ones stressful experiences to the point where they are less interfering. The first questions to ask is “Do I actually want to be less stressed, or do I harbour the believe that stress is necessary in order for me to function?” A few years ago a vice-president in a large corporation approached me with a question “I’ve made junior vice-president and I have my ulcer, now I’m wondering if I’ll make senior vice-president before I have my heart attack?” This person had come to believe that the stress he experienced and the resulting medical symptoms were simply “part of the territory” when he became an executive. It was like an “occupational hazard.” Needless to say, he was not a good candidate for a stress control program. He believed that reducing his stress would reduce his performance. In his mind, being less stressed meant that he would not achieve the job promotion that he wanted

I often meet students who believe that they work best when they are stressed. They think they need to be stressed in order to get their term paper finished. They believe that if they are more relaxed they will not do as well on an exam. All of the evidence (research and theoretical writing) on this topic is in agreement that people are more creative, work more efficiently, get more done, and it’s of higher quality, when they are more relaxed. It is important not to confuse stress with motivation, it is possible for people to be relaxed and still motivated to do something.



The figure at the left is a useful guide for deciding which approach to stress control will be most useful. Participants in the field-testing of this program have affectionately referred to it as the “chicken foot” model of stress control.

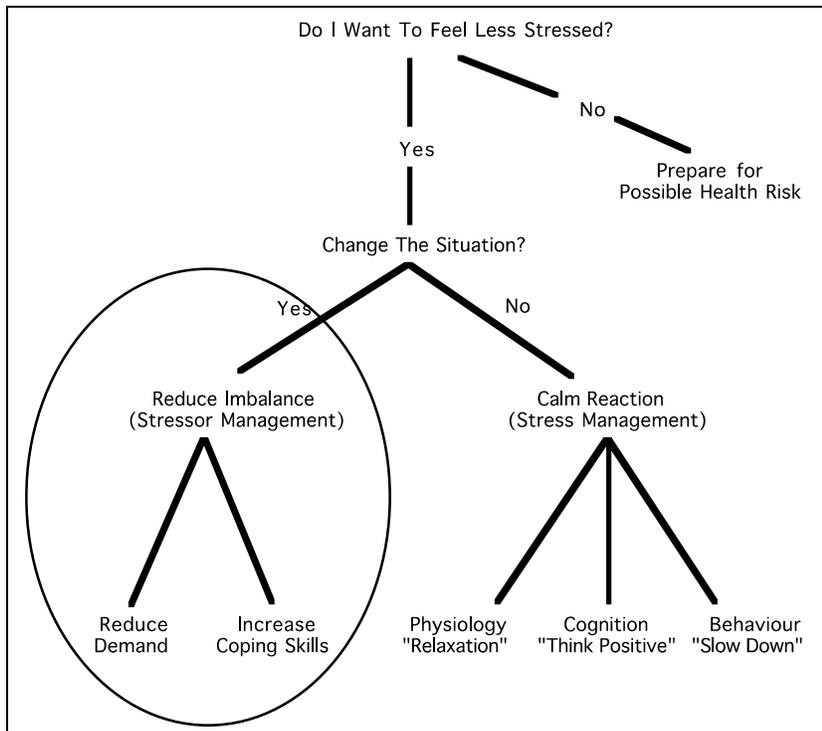
In order to experience success with attempts to control stress, as a first step, the answer to the question “Do I want to feel less stress?” must be a definite “Yes!” People need to acknowledge the role they play in the stress they experience and want to reduce their stress.

For people who do want to reduce their stress, the next step is to identify the stressors they face and decide whether they want to try to do something about the situation or just try to calm their reaction to the situation. In **stressor management** people try to do something to reduce the imbalance between the demands and coping resources. In **stress management** people leave the situation alone and focus on remaining more calm in a situation in which they are overtaxed. Most often, a combination of both approaches is most effective.

Most writers suggest beginning by monitoring the situation in which you experience stress. Ask yourself, “What exactly is it that is creating the stress for me?” Sometimes the stressor will be some aspect of the situation that we find overwhelming. Other times, it will be the thoughts we experience in the situation that are the prime causes of our stress. The more insight you can get about what exactly it is in the situation that is producing the stress, the easier it will be to develop a plan for reducing the stress.

The next step in a stress control program usually involves examining the situation to see if there are things that can be done to reduce the imbalance between demands and coping resources. This is known as stressor management and it usually is the “first line” of a stress control program. The back-up resources in a program to control stress usually are the stress management strategies. With stress management, the person still is in a situation that is overtaxing, but their focus shifts to reducing their physiological and emotional reaction in the situation. For most people, it makes sense to try and do something about the situation first, and if that is not successful, then focus attention on remaining more calm in a situation that is out of control.

Stressor Management



Stressor Management tries to help control stress by restoring balance between the demands people face and the resources they have for coping with those demands. There is an old saying: “If you have a sliver in your finger try to pull it out before you enroll in a pain control course.” The same is true when trying to reduce stress--first, explore ways to **reduce or change demands** so they are more manageable. Are all of the demands necessary? Which demands could you eliminate or change in order to reduce the load?

Sometimes it is possible to do things like: arrange work schedules so it is not necessary to drive in rush hour traffic, resign from committees, get help with a special project, change job duties with a colleague so your part of the project is one which you have better skills to handle, increase lighting in your work space, or have sound barriers or special air filters installed to reduce the impact of environmental demands. Sometimes students who experience exam stress simply register in courses with no exams and people with public speaking anxiety do not take on

responsibilities that involve addressing large groups of people. All of the above examples illustrate how people can reduce or change some of the demands they face and reduce the possibility that the demands will overtax them.

Stress Buster Tip

Examine the demands in your life.

Are all of them necessary?

Which demands could you eliminate or change in order to reduce the load?

However, many of the demands that people face are ones that cannot be avoided or changed. In these cases it often is possible to **acquire greater resources for coping with the demands more effectively**. Sometimes it is possible to get help dealing with demands. For example, work tasks can be delegated, temporary help sometimes can be hired at peak times, or a part-time house-keeper can be hired to deal with household chores. In other cases, it is possible to learn new skills to handle stressful situations more effectively. People who experience public speaking stress often can reduce their stress by enrolling in a public speaking course or joining a club like Toastmasters where they can learn better public speaking skills. People who experience a lot of time pressure find the pressure goes down substantially when they learn better time management. Sometimes parents who feel hassled by their children need to learn better parenting skills, not relaxation, to help them deal with their children more effectively. They find that when they learn better skills for developing non-coercive ways to achieve cooperative and mutually respectful family interactions, their stress is reduced. Similarly, teachers often need classroom management training, not relaxation training, to help them deal with stress associated with student misbehaviour. A useful approach is to look at the skills that are needed to deal effectively with the demand and then recruit other people with those skills to help out. Alternatively, it may be possible to take some training to develop the skills needed to deal with the demand more effectively.

The list of skill training courses that could potentially help reduce stress is substantial and includes:

- budgeting courses to help deal with financial stressors
- communication skills to deal with interpersonal anxiety
- public speaking skills to help deal with public speaking stress
- assertiveness training to avoid stress associated with dealing with demanding or unreasonable people
- conflict resolution skills for dealing with interpersonal hassles
- parenting skills for dealing with hassles with children
- classroom management training for dealing with disruptive students
- study skills for dealing with academic stress
- job search programs to help deal with unemployment

The important point to emphasize in this discussion is that helping people cope more effectively with the demands they face (and thereby reducing the likelihood that the situation will overtax them) is an important and legitimate way to control stress that often is overlooked in stress control programs.

Stress Buster Tip

Examine the demands in your life.
Can you get help with any of them?
Which demands could you learn to handle more effectively,
perhaps by reading a self-help book, enrolling in a skill-training course,
or watching someone who handles the demands effectively?

Common SENSS Stress Control

Some further ways to reduce the possibility of experiencing an imbalance between demands and coping resources are: sleep, exercise, nutrition, and social support. These are common approaches that most people can do with very little training. Thus, the name, “Common SENSS: Sleep, Exercise, Nutrition, Social Support.”

Sleep is a great way to control stress. Most people have observed that on days when they are well rested, they have a greater capacity for dealing with the minor trials and tribulations that occur. Often simply getting enough rest can produce a substantial reduction in stress. The operative words are “enough rest,” rather than “more sleep.” Most people know how much sleep they need in order to function best. Getting more or less than that usually is not productive. This is especially true when people are in periods of high demand. When the demands are increasing, it should be a signal to get the proper amount of rest, rather than rob yourself of sleep in order to try and get more done.

Regular Exercise helps to control stress in three ways. First, when people exercise, especially in repetitive activities like swimming and jogging, they often experience a mental tranquillity similar to meditation. This pleasant mental state helps many people regain their equilibrium after being stressed. Second, when people engage in regular exercise that improves their aerobic functioning, they experience a more rapid recovery from stress. They may still get stressed in some situation, but they return to normal more quickly. Third, vigorous exercise helps people reduce the level of stress hormones in the blood stream and return to normal when they are stressed.

Nutrition is another area in which people can help prevent a demand-coping imbalance. This can be accomplished in several ways. First, reduce caffeine intake. Caffeine is a well-documented arousal inducer. It gets people’s physiology worked up. The most common sources of caffeine in Western diets are coffee, chocolate, and cola beverages. Often people feel worked up and jittery simply because they have had too much caffeine. When they reduce the amount of coffee or cola they drink, they find they are more relaxed generally speaking, and often experience a reduction in stress-related symptoms such as heart palpitations. A second nutritional consideration is Vitamin B. Because Vitamin B is utilized in helping people return to normal after they have been stressed, sometimes, people who experience frequent stressors have depleted stores of Vitamin B. As a result they recover from stress more slowly than they usually would. Eating vegetables rich in Vitamin B or taking a daily Vitamin B supplement will make sure that Vitamin B levels are adequate and stress recovery time is not prolonged. Chapters 4, 8, and 10 in this manual are devoted to a detailed discussion of how people can manage their nutrition to reduce stress. A third consideration is refined sugar, which tends to slow down the

rate at which people recover from stress. A high sugar diet, especially when combined with low levels of Vitamin B, can produce a condition where people take a long time to get over a stressful experience. This increases the chances of them encountering another stressor before they have fully recovered from the previous one. When this happens, people notice their stress levels building over time, so that it takes less and less to get them worked up. Chapter 4 in this guidebook contains more specific information about the way in which nutrition can be used to control stress.

Social Support has a well-documented positive effect on stress. People who have a strong social support network are far less likely to be overtaxed by the demands they face. The size and composition of the support group and how often or where it meets does not seem to be important. The mere fact that the group is available, serves to reduce stress. However, the focus of the group must be positive. Groups that spend time complaining, focusing on problems, or offering cheap advice do not reduce stress. On the other hand, having one or more friends that a person can turn to for a pat on the back, a word of comfort in times of trouble, or to ask for suggestions on how to solve a problem (no free advice, only suggestions when they are asked for), seems to help reduce the possibility of being overwhelmed by the demands one faces.

The bottom line in Stressor Management

is that people who have well-developed coping repertoires experience less stress.

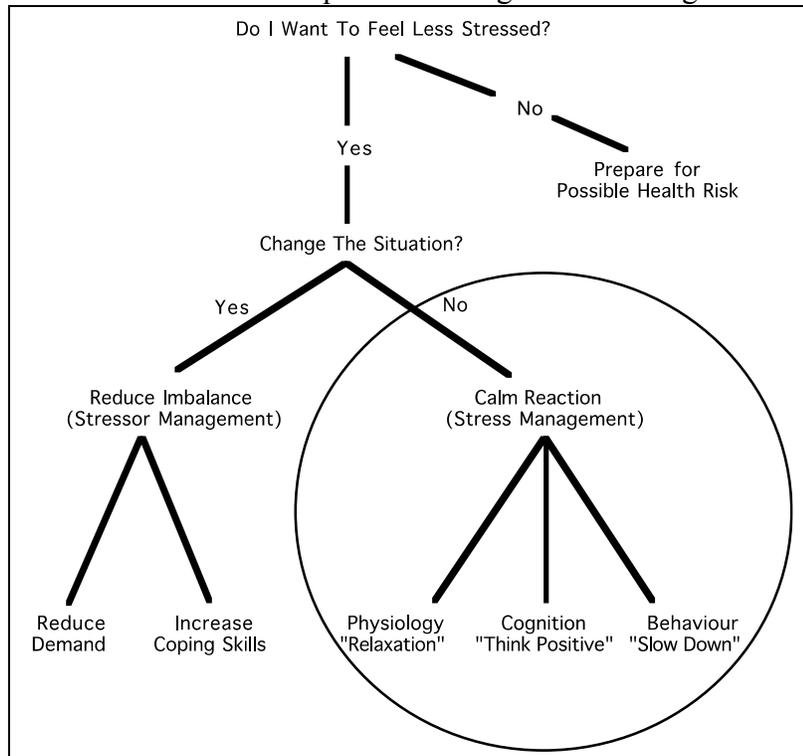
It is important to examine the demands you are facing and see if the resources you have at your disposal are adequate for meeting the demands.

This is a proactive and preventive approach.

We recommend that this is the best place to start in a stress control program.

Stress Management

Some situations are so entrenched that they cannot be changed. In other cases, the effort or amount of resources required to change a demanding situation may be so great that it is not sensible



to try to change the demand. It is also true that some demands are so powerful that they overtax everyone's coping ability. In such cases, stress may be unavoidable. Given the nature or intensity of the demand, it is virtually 100% certain that we will be overtaxed. In these types of cases, a person may not be able to avoid becoming stressed, BUT it still is possible to reduce the intensity of their reaction and the potential medical impact of the experience on the person. This is done by developing skills that help people stay calm when they are overtaxed. This is referred to as **Stress Management**.

Stress Management helps people change their reactions to situations. People may not be able to change the situation, but they can change the way the situation affects them. This is done by learning skills that help control the physiological, cognitive, and behavioural components of the stress response.

Physiological approaches. Herbert Benson used the term relaxation response to describe the physiological opposite of the stress response. When people experience the relaxation response they demonstrate:

- decreased heart rate
- decreased respiration rate
- decreased muscle tension
- decreased sweat gland activity
- increased skin temperature in the hands and feet as blood flow to the extremities is restored
- restoration of blood flow to the rational and creative centres of the brain

Several techniques have consistently demonstrated success in training a relaxation response. Some of the techniques can be easily learned through self-help books or from a friend, however others may require a skilled professional, such as a counsellor or a psychologist. The list of techniques include:

- Transcendental Meditation (TM)
- Yoga meditation
- Self-hypnosis
- Progressive Relaxation
- Autogenic Training
- Biofeedback Training
- Herbert Benson's Relaxation Response

When people spend 20-30 minutes each day using one of these forms of relaxation, their general level of physiological arousal is lowered. In a very real sense they become a more relaxed person. Because they are generally more relaxed they are less reactive and find that they are able to take minor irritants in stride.

Any of these relaxation procedures can be used to develop a "Relaxation Cue." A Relaxation Cue is a signal that produces the relaxation response whenever it is used. People who have a strong Relaxation Cue can monitor their stress levels, catch themselves when they are starting to get worked up, and use their Relaxation Cue to stay calm. With both procedures they have a winning combination. Regular use of the relaxation response helps them be more relaxed generally speaking and use of the Relaxation Cue helps them deal with unexpected stressors. But, in order to maintain the effect they must continue to spend the 20-30 minutes in relaxation at least five times per week.

The key to developing a relaxation response is regular practice. For most people, 20-30 minutes each day is needed. It is an investment to help immunize people against the effects of stress and reduce the potential health impact of being over-taxed.

A beginner asked the yogi master:
"Master, which is better, 20 minutes of meditation each day or 60 minutes?"
The master thought for a moment and then replied,
"Three hours is better, but 20 minutes done is better than 60 minutes contemplated."

Cognitive approaches. On any given day we spend more time with ourselves than we spend with anyone else. If the person we spend most of our time with is constantly hassling us, telling us how we'll likely mess up, how we are such a loser, how we've never been any good at anything, then we are likely to end up feeling stressed. On the other hand, if the person we spend most of our time with is giving us encouragement, telling us how hard we are trying, reminding us that we are doing our best, then we are likely to feel less stressed and accomplish more as well. The goal of cognitive approaches to stress management is to help people learn to be an encouraging friend to themselves, i.e., to talk to themselves in a way that is supportive and encouraging.

Some simple procedures can be used to promote this positive self-dialogue. The first might be called a "pro/con" or a "+/- card." Divide a small index card in half, marking one side "+" and the other side "-". Each time you say something to yourself (or think a thought about yourself) place a check mark on the card. Place it on the "+" side if the thought is positive, self-supportive, or encouraging, and on the "-" side if the thought is negative, critical, or a put-down. After counting thoughts for a couple of days to see what your typical pattern is, set a goal of increasing the number of check marks on the "+" side. As the "+" side increases the "-" side will automatically go down. On days when there are many checks on the "+" and only one or two on the "-" side, most people feel very little stress.

Another simple way to help train positive thinking is to place positive reminders in prominent places. The reminder might be a poster with a positive message ("I am lovable and capable")

rather than “It’s hard to soar with the eagles when you work with a bunch of turkeys”) or a list of 5-10 positive personal characteristics (“I am a hard worker”, “I have a good sense of humor”). Appropriate places to post these reminders might be on a hall mirror, above the light switch to your office, beside the telephone, or anywhere that you will notice it frequently. Very often people are almost constantly aware of their faults and the problems they are having, but overlook the good things. The purpose of these “positive reminders” is to help shift a person’s focus away from the faults and problems, and on to the positive things that will help resolve the problems.

Sometimes people experience such constantly recurring negative thoughts that they have trouble putting them out of their minds. In such cases, it does not help to try and not think of the bothersome situation. This only focuses the persons attention on the bothersome thought. What is needed is a way to stop the thought or substitute a more pleasant thought for it. “Thought Stopping” and “Thought Substitution” were developed for that purpose. To use this method, simply yell “STOP!” whenever bothersome, repeating thoughts occur. Be sure not to say “STOP Stupid!” or some other put-down. Simply say “STOP!” and then focus your thoughts on something pleasant. The pleasant, or substitute thought will help to keep the bothersome thought from returning. Of course if you have a strong habit of repeating bothersome thoughts in your mind, you may have to yell “STOP!” and focus on something pleasant more than once in order for it to work. But if you persist, then you will start to develop a new habit of not dwelling on the bothersome ideas.

The bottom line in cognitive approaches to stress control, and the common theme uniting the above examples, is to develop some way for teaching people to be more self-accepting and less self-critical. People who are more self-supportive are less stressed.

Stress Buster Tip

Take a positive break.

Stop every 2 hours or so and think about what you have done that was nice, and tell yourself
“Well, done. It feels good!”

Behavioural approaches. A common slogan says: “The hurrieder I go the behinder I get.” Often the hyper behaviour that is part of stress not only leaves people rushing around when there is no need to rush, but results in them making mistakes which in turn create additional demands. Another common saying is: “You may not have enough time to do it right the first time, but you always have enough time to do it over.” Simply slowing down the pace and working more systematically can reduce the harried feeling that accompanies stress and at the same time increase productivity. To be specific you may consider doing things such as:

- walking slower,
- talking slower,
- taking a few minutes more to eat lunch, especially on busy days,
- completing tasks one at a time rather than trying to do everything at once, or
- stopping for a short break mid-morning and mid-afternoon. This often helps to enhance a feeling of peacefulness and calm.

Forcing yourself to slow down is especially important on days that are tightly scheduled. In a related vein, sometimes it is useful to simply leave a stressful situation briefly in order to regain one's composure and then try again to resolve the situation. Stress has sometimes been called the "Hurry-Up Syndrome." People can help combat the tendency towards hyper behaviour that is part of the stress response simply by slowing down. Often simply slowing down will help people get more done and get it done with less stress.

Stress Buster Tip

On a day when you are feeling stressed, try slowing down.
If you are 2 seconds late for your meeting, the roof likely will not fall in.
Walk slower, look around, smell the flowers.
You'll be surprised how much more calm you end up feeling.

Summary: Putting it all Together

If you want to reduce stress, it is probably best to approach it in a systematic manner. A good way to begin is to keep a log of the situations where you feel stressed. In the log, make a brief record of the events leading up to your stressful experience, what was happening in the environment, what was going on in your head, how were you feeling, etc. This usually will give you a more clear idea of what factors are primarily involved in your stress. Some questions you might want to ask yourself are:

- Is the demand primarily a physical demand?
- To what extent is your thinking making the situation more demanding than it actually is?
- What role do other people play?
- What is the role of your thoughts and perceptions about what the other people should or should not be doing?
- What is the primary component of your reaction? Is it physiological, cognitive, or behavioural?

After you have a better understanding of the nature of your stress, you are ready to develop a systematic plan for reducing stress in your life. It probably is best to proceed through a logical sequence of decisions using the "chicken foot" figures as a guide.

Step 1. Ask whether you really want to feel less stress. If the answer is "NO," the stress control program is finished. Recall the story earlier in this chapter about the business executive who was convinced that stress "went with the territory." Often people believe that it is necessary for them to be stressed in order to get any work done (even though research studies in this area consistently demonstrate the opposite). Such people are poor candidates for learning stress control because they believe stress is necessary in order for them to succeed. However, if you want to control your stress level and reduce the probability of stress-related medical disorders then proceed to step 2.

Step 2. If you want to reduce stress, then ask what can be done to reduce the possibility of a demand-coping imbalance. Decide what specifically can be done to reduce or alter the demand so as to make it more likely to lie within your ability to cope. Alternately, you might explore ways to increase the skills that can be brought to bear on meeting the

demand. If nothing can be done to manage the stressor more effectively, then go to step 3.

Step 3. If the situation cannot be changed (or if an individual does not wish to change the situation or learn new skills), stress control must focus on changing the person's reaction to the situation. In these cases the demand will continue and the person likely will continue not coping effectively with the demand, however the goal now becomes to feel more calm in spite of that. Some combination of behavioural, cognitive, or physiological approaches will likely be effective in promoting this goal. With this kind of framework, it is possible to approach stress control in a way that promotes success.

Home Practice

In the previous chapter of this book, we suggested that you take a close look at your lifestyle in order to get a more clear idea of what specific changes you would like to make. With the information in this chapter, it is possible to build on that start by identifying specific goals and action plans. An important first step is to make sure you chose manageable goals. Therefore, we recommend that you chose one, or two, or perhaps even three goals to work on. Don't try to work on more than three goals. Most people find that if they try to work on too many things at once, they do not make much progress.

After you have chosen the goals you want to work on, the next step is to prepare an **Action Plan**. Most people find that when they develop a specific action plan they increase the chances of getting to their goals. Developing a specific action plan usually involves several steps:

1. State the goal in general terms.

Do step 1 now

The remaining steps are covered in later chapters.

2. Subdivide the goal into a series of activities, such that completing each activity in sequence will result in the goal being met. Make sure these activities are specific/observable, incremental, and realistic.
3. Attach specific time frames for each of the activities in #2.
4. Identify the evidence that will indicate that the activity has been completed.
5. Identify any learning barriers that you will need to address in order that you do not inadvertently undermine your attempt to complete the activities.
6. Identify what you will do to keep up your motivation to complete the activities that will accomplish your goal.
7. Identify some tangible reward that you will give yourself for accomplishing all of the activities and meeting your goal.

The Action planner on the following page is useful in helping construct your action plan.

Remember that it is important to set realistic goals. Therefore, the focus initially should be only on Step 1. Pick one or two lifestyle areas that you want to work on, and make one goal for each of area. Do not have more than three goals altogether.

Stress Buster Tip

It is best to start slowly,
making 100% certain that the goals you set can be accomplished.

Stress Buster Tip

If you are having trouble identifying the stress you face, you might want to follow the SUDS self-monitoring program described in the Appendices or use the checklists at the end of Chapter 10 to help you identify the stress triggers in your life.

Action Planner

Action Plan for

(write in name of lifestyle area you want to work on)

General Goal

(write in goal statement)

	Action steps	Date completed	Evidence	Finished (check)
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				

Special learning barriers to overcome	Plan to overcome the barriers

Plan for sustaining motivation

Reward for completing goal

