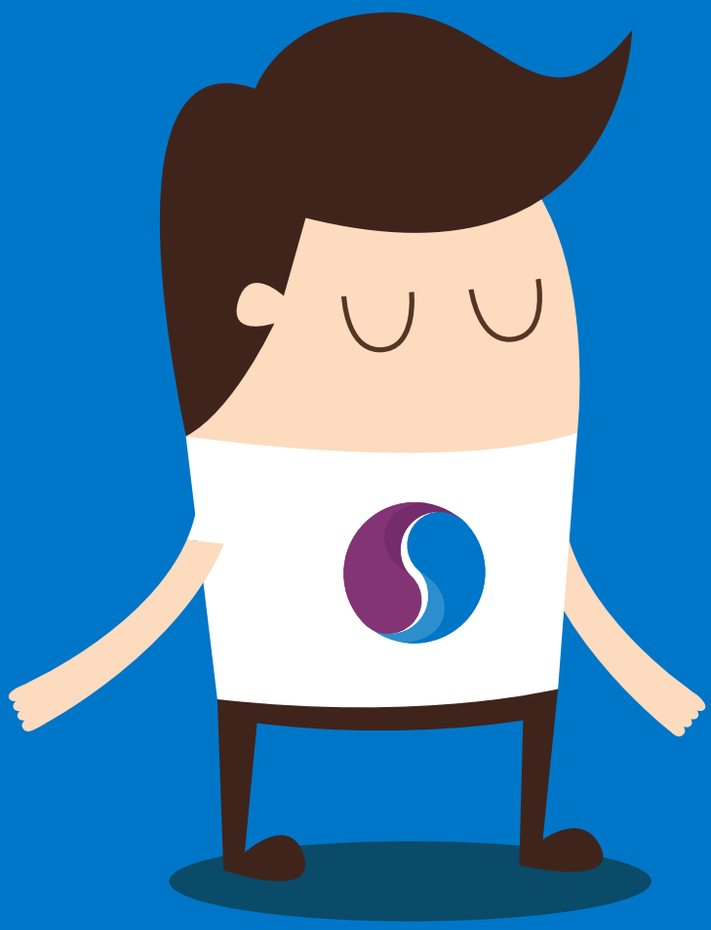
Stress Management Society
from distress to de-stress

Taking you from Distress to De-stress

A Guide
2016



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What is stress?

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where your to-do list seems endless, deadlines are fast approaching and you find yourself saying 'Eek! I feel stressed!'?

But what is stress really, and how does it affect us?

Firstly, let's debunk one myth: stress is not necessarily a 'bad' thing. Without this brilliant ability to experience stress, humankind wouldn't have survived. Our cavemen ancestors, for example, used the onset of stress to alert them to a potential danger, such as a sabre-toothed tiger.

Through the release of hormones such as adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine, the caveman gained a rush of energy, which prepared him to either fight the tiger or run away. That heart pounding, fast breathing sensation is the adrenaline; as well as a boost of energy, it enables us to focus our attention so we can quickly respond to the situation.

In the modern world, the 'fight or flight' mode can still help us survive dangerous situations, for example, reacting swiftly to a person running in front of our car by slamming on the brakes.

The challenge is when our body goes into a state of stress in inappropriate situations. When blood flow is going only to the most important muscles needed to fight or flee, brain function is minimised. This can lead to an inability to 'think straight'; a state that is a great hindrance in both our work and home lives. If we are kept in a state of stress for long periods, it can be detrimental to our health. The results of having elevated cortisol levels can be an increase in sugar and blood pressure levels, and a decrease in libido.

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Fight

When our body goes into a state of stress, you may feel agitated and aggressive towards others. This is because our bodies natrually go into a state of "fight", which can be a helpful reaction to ward off predators. In most situations of our modern day lives, however, it can negatively affect relationships and even ruin reputations.

Aggression

Flight

Another natural reaction is to go into a state of "flight", which can be a useful mode of survival, for example, when we find ourselves in dangerous surroundings. In everyday life, however, we are often unable to run away and when we do, we realise that the stressor is quick to catch up with us.

Run Away

Freeze

For some people, becoming stressed sets the stage for 'dysregulation'. In this case, the energy mobilised by the perceived threat gets "locked" into the nervous system and we 'freeze'. This response sometimes reveals itself when we breathe. Holding our breath and shallow breathing in stressful situations are both forms of freeze. The occasional deep sigh is the nervous system catching up on its oxygen intake.

Deer in headlights

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Recognising Stress

A useful analogy to explain stress is that of a bridge.
When a bridge is carrying too much weight, it will eventually collapse. However, before this happens it is possible to see the warning signs, such as bowing, buckling or creaking. The same principle can be applied to human beings. It is usually possible to spot early warning signs of excessive pressure that could lead to breakdown.
That 'bridge collapse' in a human being can take many forms:

- Mental and Emotional Breakdown
- Taking one's own life
- Serious health issues including:
  - Cardiovascular disease: The heart is the first organ in the body to experience stress. The No. 1 killer on the planet today is heart disease and it's no coincidence that as we find ourselves living under higher and higher levels of stress the instance of heart disease is increasing.
  - Stress has a profound impact on how your body's systems function. Health experts are still sorting out whether stress actually causes cancer. Yet there's little doubt that it promotes the growth and spread of some forms of the disease. Put simply, stress makes your body more hospitable to cancer.
  - Stroke: Stress can cause a rise in blood pressure. The main cause of haemorrhagic stroke is high blood pressure, which can weaken the arteries in the brain and make them prone to split or rupture.

The key message is that if we are able to recognise when we have too much demand on our bridge then we can take action to prevent ourselves from getting anywhere near the bridge collapsing, which thankfully most of us will never experience or see.

Some signs of a bowing and buckling bridge to look out for:

Being more accident prone

Forgetting things

Showing a negative change in mood or fluctuations in mood

Avoiding certain situations or people

Using more negative or cynical language

Becoming withdrawn

Showing a prolonged loss of sense of humour

Becoming increasingly irritable or short-tempered

Having more arguments and disputes

A tendency to suffer from headaches, nausea, aches and pains, tiredness and poor sleeping patterns

Indecisiveness and poor judgement

A problem with drinking or drug taking

Looking haggard or exhausted all the time

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How does stress affect us?

One of the difficulties with stress is that people experience it in different ways. This contributes to stress manifesting differently as well. So it would be wrong to overgeneralise when giving advice on how to identify stress in others. However, what we can say is that because stress has negative effects, it will usually manifest itself one way or another.

It isn't always possible to prevent stress, so a key action in order to minimise risk is to identify stress-related problems as early as possible, so that action can be taken before serious stress-related illness occurs.

There will be changes in the stressed person. These changes may be emotional, physical or behavioural, or a combination of all three. So the key thing is to look out for negative changes of any kind. Bear in mind that the negative changes are also likely to have knock-on effects e.g. reduced performance at work.

Of course, we all experience 'bad days', so we are really talking about situations where people display these negative changes for a period of time (e.g. 5 days in a row).

Prolonged stress undoubtedly makes people ill. It is now known to contribute to heart disease, hypertension and high blood pressure, it affects the immune system, is linked to strokes, IBS (Irritable Bowel Syndrome), ulcers, diabetes, muscle and joint pain, miscarriage, allergies, alopecia and even premature tooth loss.

The first step should be to look at ourselves and to understand how we react to stress. Once we are mindful of the effects of stress in ourselves, we are in a better position to recognise it in others.

Cognitive

Memory Problems

Poor Judgement

Inability to Concentrate

Indecisiveness

Emotional

Frustration

Aggressive

Judgemental

Depression

Mood swings

Irritability

Physical

Frequent Colds

Teeth grinding

Headaches & migraines

Chest Pain

Rapid Heartbeat

Aches and Pains

Behavioural

Loss of sense of humour

Demotivated

Loss of pride in appearance

Increase Intake in Alcohol, Cigarettes and Caffeine to Relax

Isolating Yourself from Others

Sleeping too Little or too Much

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Stress At Home

Stress is different for everyone. It all depends on the individual and their circumstances. For instance, some may find moving house stressful, while others may thrive on change.

Although everyone's stressors are different, we all still encounter stress throughout our entire lives. We can't avoid it: situations arise on a day-to-day basis which make physical, mental and emotional demands on us. There may be decisions that need to be made, deadlines that need to be met and lessons to be learned.

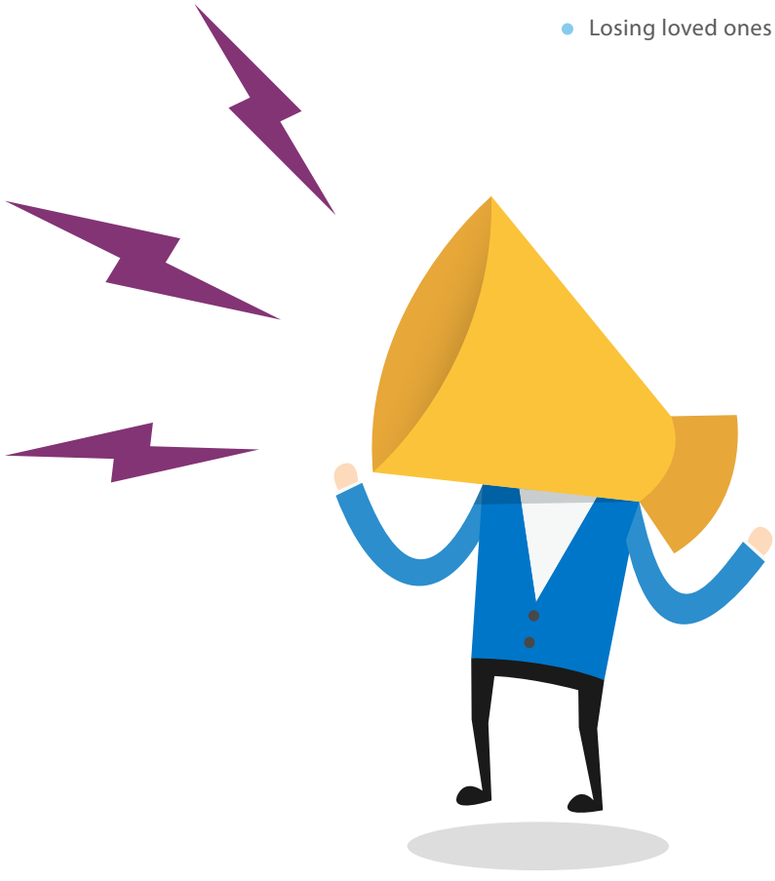
Pressure itself is not always bad – in fact, many excel under pressure - but when demands exceed a person's ability to cope, problems can arise. At this point, we need to make changes to our stress levels, either by reducing pressures or by learning coping strategies, or ideally a combination of the two.

When our bodies interpret a situation as dangerous or threatening, feelings of tension, apprehension and worry occur. They may also be accompanied by physical changes associated with anxiety, such as trembling, palpitations, dizziness, tremors, etc.

The major reason for stress is significant change that requires adaptation. The most common causes are environmental (for example moving house) or technological (for example being constantly connected to devices).
Internal conflicts can also cause stress. For instance, if you have an internal dialogue swinging between 'I want' and 'I shouldn't', or 'I don't want to' versus 'I should'.

Examples of significant change:

- School exams
- The physical and emotional challenges of adolescence
- Moving house
- Getting married
- Having children
- Relationship break downs
- Losing loved ones



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Stress At **Work**

Workplace stress is a serious issue for UK employers. It is an issue that has no respect for position or seniority – it is just as likely to affect a new recruit in the post room as the chief executive.

We are expected to work longer hours than ever before, with many of us at the mercy of '24/7' technology like emails on our smartphones. This is leading to a growing imbalance between our home and work lives and can spiral into a vicious cycle of working longer and sleeping less. This, in turn, reduces our ability to function productively, meaning we have to work even longer to finish all our tasks.

If you consider yourself stressed at work, it is important to do something. It is not worth risking your health for your job. After all, no-one at the end of their life ever said "I wish I'd spent more time at work".

If you work with other people, it is also helpful to learn to recognise the symptoms of stress in others and, if necessary, refer the problem upwards to someone who can deal with it. Not only is it the ethical thing to do as you are helping a colleague, but it will also benefit you as you are improving your working environment.

In the UK over 9.9 million working days are lost every year because of STRESS

Absences related to STRESS cost the UK industry £12.47 billion each year

STRESS is believed to trigger 70% of visits to doctors and 85% of serious illnesses

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Recognising Stress At Work

Certain factors at work may indicate a potential problem:

An increase in absenteeism (sick leave)

Presenteeism (attending work while sick)

Leavism (taking leave to catch up on work)

Arguments and disputes with colleagues

A tendency to work late and not take breaks

A loss of sense of humour, replaced by irritability

A decrease in work standards

Indecisiveness and poor judgement

A problem with drinking or drug taking

More accidents at work

A tendency to suffer from headaches, nausea, aches and pains, tiredness and poor sleeping patterns

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A guide
to coping with stress

Get enough sleep

Sleep is essential for the body to function properly. If you skimp on sleep you probably won't remember how it feels to wake up fully rested. A routine can help you get to sleep. Think of how children are put to bed – adults can adopt similarly helpful sleep-enhancing routines. For example:

- Have a relaxing bath
- Avoid anything stimulating, such as an exciting TV programmes or games
- When you are lying in bed, inhale for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 7 seconds, and exhale for 8 seconds
- Whether you're thinking of tasks, worries or silly thoughts, write them down. This will help you set them aside and you can rest assured that you'll deal with them in the morning

If you're ill, rest

When you're ill, working will tire your body and prolong the illness. Recognise you have limits and don't carry on as if you were firing on all cylinders. Not resting while you are ill prevents the body from recovering and can cause your illness to last longer.

Listen to music

Music can be used in many situations to help reduce stress and create a calming atmosphere:

- Use classical music to concentrate as it is peaceful, harmonious and doesn't have lyrics. Keep the volume relatively low so it doesn't distract you
- Music can also be a reminder to take breaks. Make a playlist that lasts for approximately 1 hour, once the music stops, take a moment away from what you're doing. Making a playlist also stops you from searching for songs, helping you to focus on the task without distraction
- When using music to help you relax before sleep, choose soothing music with monotonous repetition, such as sounds of nature or ambient music

Learn to say 'no'

Simple, but effective. Where a 'no' is the appropriate response, say it without guilt. 'No' also doesn't have to be a decline, it can also be a 'negotiation opportunity', e.g. " I can't do that now, but I can fit it in next week".

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Work off stress with physical activity

Pressure or anger releases adrenaline in the body. Exercise helps to reduce it, and produces 'good mood' substances in the brain. This doesn't mean we recommend running a marathon; just going for a brisk walk around the block when you feel tense can help.

Breathe

Taking a few deep breaths allows more oxygen to reach the brain, helping you become calm and restore concentration and focus:

- Take a nice slow deep breath in through the nose and fill the belly up with air
- Hold at the top of the breath for 5 seconds and then slowly exhale through the mouth, pulling the navel to the spine

Manage your time optimally

Stress often results from difficulty in coping with day-to-day problems and conflicting responsibilities. A useful strategy for dealing with a sense of being overwhelmed by all the things that need attention is prioritising and diarising:

- Make a list of all the things that you need to do; list them in order of genuine importance; note what you need to do yourself and what can be delegated to others; note what needs to be done immediately, in the next week or next month, etc.
- Create time buffers to deal with unexpected emergencies – this is a great way to prepare and avoid excess stress
- Arrange your workload to match your energy levels, e.g. if you know that you have an energy boost in the mornings, use that time for high energy or creative tasks

Hobbies

Activities outside of work and home can be a great way to break up the week and alleviate stress. If you don't know where to start then think about what you enjoyed as a child, e.g. reading, playing football, painting, etc.

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Avoid nicotine, alcohol, caffeine and refined sugar products

They are all stimulants, which prevent you from feeling calm. If you are stressed, steer clear of them. This can be difficult if you associate them with relaxation or comfort. However, you can benefit from the sense of relaxation without relying on the stimulant. For example:

- When you go for a cigarette you usually walk outside and away from anything that may be stressing you out — try going outside for a fresh air break instead
- When you go for an alcoholic drink after a long day, you also socialise with friends/family and talk about what has bothered you throughout the day. Talking about your stressors can help get things out of your system and in turn help you relax. Try changing the setting and sit down with a cup of tea to discuss whatever is bothering you
- Going to make a cup of coffee or going to the cupboard for a chocolate bar also gives you a break from work, especially if you spend a lot of time at your desk staring at a screen. Try grabbing for fruit instead of biscuits or chocolate, so you still give yourself a short break without the negative effects of refined sugar and caffeine

Talk to someone

We've all heard of the saying "a problem shared is a problem halved" and, like most clichés, it's founded on a grain of truth. If you are troubled by something, don't supress it. Instead:

- Speak to a friend or family member
- If you don't feel comfortable speaking to a loved one or if feel you stress is putting you at risk, visit your GP. They can signpost you to the relevant help
- If you want to speak to someone anonymously, contact the Samaritans:
  - 08457 90 90 90* (UK) *Calls will cost 2p per minute plus your telephone company's access charge
  - 116 123 (Republic of Ireland) - Free to call
  - http://www.samaritans.org/

Take Breaks

Taking breaks away from a stressful task can help you stay calm. Working in 90-minute cycles with breaks in-between can help optimise productivity and can help you shorten the time it takes to complete a task.

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About The Stress Management Society

The Stress Management Society is a non-profit organisation dedicated to helping individuals and companies recognise and reduce stress.

Stress is a much used (and abused) term these days. You frequently hear people say "I'm stressed" or "I'm depressed", yet there is still much confusion about what these terms actually mean and how best to tackle them. This is where we can help. We are the UK's leading authority on stress management issues, which is why you will regularly hear us talking about this topic in the media.

For years, we've been empowering individuals to take charge of their wellbeing through our workshops, guides and regular updates. We also act as a trusted advisor for many companies such as British Airways, Allianz and Shell, guiding them through the mental wellbeing solution maze.

Our story

The Stress Management Society was founded in 2003 by Neil Shah, best-selling author and award-winning entrepreneur. While today he is a happy, healthy, calm and relaxed individual, this wasn't always the case.

When his multi-million pound IT recruitment business was failing, Neil found himself on the verge of a breakdown. He was extremely stressed, exhausted, depressed and physically ill. He tried therapy, life coaches, counsellors and healers.

Overwhelmed and under pressure, he realised he needed help to get his wellbeing back. The problem was, he couldn't find anything or anyone to give him the specific support he so desperately needed. So he began his own personal journey to bring together tried and tested, practical, accessible resources for individuals like himself, leading to the birth of The Stress Management Society.

Today, Neil and his committed team are dedicated to leading effective universal change by maximising your resilience, happiness, productivity and success with our passionate approach to reducing stress and promoting wellbeing.

For more information about how we can help you contact us on:

www.stress.org.uk
0203 142 8650
info@stress.org.uk

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