

QUICK-FIRE GUIDE: TO MANAGING STRESS

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“Stress is the state arising when an individual perceives that the demands placed on him or her exceed (or threaten to exceed) his or her capacity to cope.”

Dr Paul Martin

If left unchallenged chronic stress affects the health of your body - with insomnia, migraines skin complaints, cancer, anxiety, depression - and it affects your mind - by compromising decision-making, memory, communication, creativity and focus.

Successful stress management skills are sustainable, and will affect all areas of your life-style and mind-style.

Here is a simple overview of things you can do to immediately improve how you feel and function.

LIFE-STYLE



1. EXERCISE

Take 20 minutes of daily aerobic movement, preferably in the fresh air, putting you in contact with nature. This will raise your serotonin levels.



2. DIET

Cut down drastically on caffeine and processed foods. Fill a litre bottle with fresh water every day and try to drink as much of it as you can.



3. SLEEP

Go to bed at a decent hour. Disconnect from digital screens an hour before that. Make sure the bedroom is dark, well ventilated and free from electronic devices. Remind yourself not to use bedtime as problem-solving time.

MIND-STYLE



1. FIRST AID BREATHING TECHNIQUE

('7/11' for short). Sit down for 5 minutes and make your out-breath ("11") longer than your in-breath ("7"). This immediately taps into your body's natural calming mechanism and will enable you to think more clearly.



2. PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

Find a style to suit you and do this for 10 - 15 minutes daily.



3. TACKLE PERFECTIONISM

...By embracing vulnerability and openness to learn, by making mistakes and being curious. Before you get there, allow yourself the luxury of allowing most things to be 'good enough'.



4. CHANGE YOUR THINKING

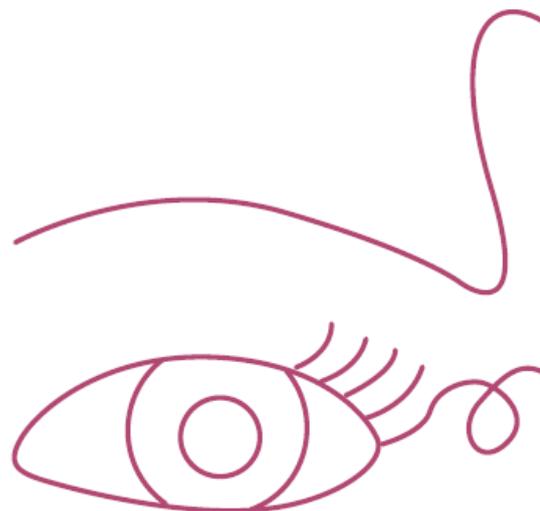
Negative thoughts feed straight into the stress cycle.

- Become aware of negative self-talk and replace it with a kinder and more generous attitude towards yourself.
- Catch yourself jumping to conclusions about other people. Try to see the world through their eyes.



5. CULTIVATE GRATITUDE

What you focus on, is what you get. Think of a few good things that happened every day and feel yourself grateful. Watch the rippling out effect of this daily habit.



EMOTIONAL NOURISHMENT

Once you have calmed down, look at the bigger picture and examine to what extent your emotional needs are being met in your life. They are the nourishment that allow you to feel safe, to grow and develop your potential so that you can give back to the world.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS:



SECURITY. This is vital for our development and ability to contribute.



CONTROL. The power to make decisions.



STATUS. An acknowledgement that we matter to those around us.



PRIVACY. Down-time, when you are not accountable to anyone else and can absorb and integrate what's going on.



ATTENTION EXCHANGE. This is a two-way process without which we cannot develop.



COMMUNITY. Being part of a group of people with whom we share our model of reality.



INTIMACY. Having at least one other person who accepts us unconditionally.



ACHIEVEMENT. A sense that our efforts are worthwhile.



MEANING. This comes when we feel stretched through learning, by giving or feeling committed to something bigger than ourselves.

The better our emotional needs are met, the more stress resilient we become.

BE AWARE

Let this shorthand acronym remind you of what to do, when you're on the go.

A

ACCEPT what's going on. Recognise your symptoms, acknowledge them, without letting them override everything else that's going on. No put-downs.

W

WATCH what's going on. Score the stress levels on a scale of 1-10 to see how they vary. Keep breathing your 7/11.

A

ACT (NORMALLY). Keep going if you need to, while imagining yourself 'calm and collected'. Pace yourself.

TAKE ACTION and put the stress reduction skills listed above, in place.

R

REPEAT AND REHEARSE

REPEAT the **A-W-A** if you're in a stressful situation and watch your stress score coming down.

Also, **REPEAT** the stress reduction activities over time; slow and steady will win the race. (Be the tortoise, not the hare.)

REHEARSE - mentally rehearse yourself being back in control, feeling calm and collected, leading your life in a way that nourishes all your emotional needs.

E

EXPECT THE BEST. Every crisis is an opportunity for change - not to go back but to find a way forward that is more rewarding for who you are now and want to be.

PATTERN IN THE PROBLEM?

If you still find yourself getting upset too quickly, if you take things personally, don't feel heard, back off too often or fly off the handle more than you'd like, consult a good **solution-focused therapist** who can help you deal with what is called a 'sub-threshold trauma'. By clearing up a reaction pattern that has long passed its sell-by date, you'll feel liberated and free to move on and do yourself more justice.