

Instant Stress Management

Sample

By Brian Clegg

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To my children who are experts at both causing and banishing stress.

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Table of Contents

1 - Stress - what's all the fuss about?	7
Instant stress management	7
What stress is	7
The brain in action	8
We need stress	8
Stress in excess	8
Doing something about it	9
2 - Stressors	11
Where stress comes from	11
Internal stressors	12
External stressors	12
Why me	13
Medical stuff	13
3 - Stress control	15
Control and relief	15
Physical control	15
Emotional control	16
Spiritual control	16
Stress defences	17
Keeping the balance	17
This book	17
4 - Assessment Exercises	19
4.1 Control freaks	19
4.2 The big stuff	20
4.3 How do you react?	21
4.4 Emotion log	23
4.5 Physical checks	24
4.6 Emotional and spiritual checks	25
4.7 Depressed?	26
4.8 Life lottery	27
4.9 More than tangible	28
4.10 Are you assertive?	29

5 – Destressing Exercises	31
5.1 Little successes	31
5.2 Handling confrontation	32
5.3 Don't bury yourself	34
5.4 Capture ideas	35
5.5 Stress workout	36
5.6 Environmental stuff	37
5.7 Laugh!	38
5.8 Unloading	39
5.9 You are what you eat	40
5.10 Breaks	41
5.11 Rage	42
5.12 Touchy-smelly	43
5.13 Ritual relaxation	44
5.14 Mentor mine	45
5.15 Stage fright	47
5.16 Pushing waves	48
5.17 Breathing is good for you	49
5.18 Low-stress travel	50
5.19 It's good to talk	51
5.20 Pat on the back	52
5.21 Don't do that	53
5.22 Medicinal reading	54
5.23 Sulkers	55
5.24 Hitting target	57
5.25 Listen well	58
5.26 Commuter hell	59
5.27 Play!	60
5.28 Relaxing by numbers	61
5.29 I agree ... ish	62
5.30 You can't take it with you	63
5.31 Café life	64
5.32 Get away	65
5.33 The spiritual path	66

5.34 Bureaucratic bounce-back	67
5.35 Because I'm worth it	69
5.36 E-mail it away	70
5.37 Walkies!	71
5.38 Sharing chores	72
5.39 Sleep!	73
5.40 I did that	74
5.41 Broken record	75
5.42 Coherent discussion	76
5.43 Music soothes the savage breast	78
5.44 Fall-out shelters	79
5.45 Pet solution	81
5.46 Life, the universe and everything	83
5.47 Nemesis	84
5.48 Natural release	85
5.49 Information overload	86
5.50 Honesty	87
5.51 Different values	88
5.52 Stimulants stink	89
5.53 No news is good news	90
5.54 The timescales game	91
5.55 Setbacks	92
5.56 Boomerang compliments	93
5.57 Children	94
5.58 Meditation	95
5.59 Pareto	96
5.60 Bully off	97
5.61 Pampering	98
5.62 Coping with change	99
5.63 Integral exercise	100
5.64 Going solo	101
5.65 Doing drugs	102
5.66 Phone control	103
5.67 Let the sunshine in	104
5.68 Low power dressing	105

5.69 Go with the flow	106
5.70 Half full or half empty	107
6. More stress management	109
Finding out more	109
Books	109
General	109
Business specific	109
Time Management	110
Tangential	111
Music	111
Pre-classical church music	112
Classical	112
Folk etc.	112
Modern 'serious' music	112
Relaxation CDs	113
On-line	113
Appendix - The Selector	115
The Random Selector	115
Techniques in timing order	117
Techniques in frequency order	120
Techniques in physical control order	123
Techniques in emotional/spiritual control order	125
Techniques in defence order	127
Techniques in fun order	129

1 - Stress - what's all the fuss about?

Instant stress management

Stress is a recognised killer and a major contributor to workplace illness. Companies worry about stress because it leads to reduced effectiveness; individuals find that the impact of stress blights their health and happiness. Yet stress is a complex phenomenon. It can't be painted in black and white. We all need a degree of stress to drive us on to achieve. Neither total lack of stress nor stress to excess is good for you.

The ideal is to be able to understand your response to stress and to have an armoury of stress removal techniques and stress defences to employ when the going gets tough. The 'Instant' format is ideal for this topic - suffering from stress usually means that there is pressure on time. The ability to take a gradual approach to stress management that helps modify your attitude to life without becoming an irritating chore is very appealing. Stress management also suffers from being associated in some quarters with alternative lifestyles and airy-fairy concepts - by putting stress management in a down-to-earth series like the Instants, I hope to show that it can be a straightforward, business-like proposition.

Instant Stress Management is built around more than 70 exercises, mostly taking five to twenty minutes, which can be used to control stress. There is also a shorter section of exercises to help assess how stressed you are and where that stress is coming from. Each exercise has a star rating showing particular usefulness as physical control, emotional & spiritual control, and defence, plus a fun rating.

What stress is

The trouble with stress is that it's not a matter of right or wrong. We have been conditioned to see stress as purely negative because of handy slogans like 'stress kills'. But you can't live a slogan - and in this case you wouldn't want to. Stress is the impact of a demand on a human being. The source can be external or internal. The demand can be positive or negative. Arguably there is no life at all without stress.

At the physical level we have a pretty good understanding of what stress is about. When the brain senses a demand for exertion it signals the release of various hormones from glands around the body. These active agents, like adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol prepare the body for action. Muscles tense up, the heart beats faster, the blood supply is concentrated where it is needed, moving away from 'low need' areas like the digestion and the skin. All this is designed to provide a wave of energy to enable you to react appropriately to the trigger: to fight or to run away. To survive.

The brain in action

Stress is always a balance of the physical and the mental. It helps in managing stress to have a basic understanding of the brain's activity. The electrical activity of the brain has been typified by psychologists in four different categories. These are specified in the somewhat illiterate sequence of delta (0-3 activities per second), theta (3-7 activities per second), alpha (7-14 activities per second) and beta (14-28 activities per second).

In delta state the brain is hardly active at all. This is deep sleep, when the body seems to be undergoing physical repair activities. Theta is the state where rapid eye movement sleep takes place - the condition required for dreaming. This is thought to happen when the brain is reorganizing its information for more effective use. Alpha and beta are waking states. Alpha is unfocussed - it's where you are daydreaming or letting your mind wander. Alpha is the creative state. Beta, on the other hand, is focussed. It's the state you move into to things done, to follow a plan.

The importance of all this for stress is that being in too high a mental state for a desired action is stressing. At the extreme, as your brain activity gets faster and faster, it can end up thrashing about, incapable of making decisions or solving problems. This is not helped by the fact that it is much easier to switch up to a higher state than to switch down, hence the need for stress-relieving techniques to help us switch down a state in a controlled way.

We need stress

Stress has an important function. There are times when it is a genuine aid to survival - escaping a burning building or an attack. More often it is a driver to get the extra mile. You might be an athlete or an actor, a manager giving a business presentation or a fire fighter. In any role, stress can make all the difference. Everyone who has ever gone on stage knows too well that feeling in the pit of the stomach that says 'why the hell am I here?' - but without that stress there wouldn't be the huge return that makes it all worthwhile.

Positive stress is the fuel that drives us beyond the commonplace. The very concept of being 'driven' implies a sort of stress. Without any stress, life would be reduced to the level of a grazing animal with everything supplied. No wants, no worries, no interests - not much of a life.

Stress in excess

If things were that simple, stress management would be all about getting more stress, but there's a price to pay that means most of us suffer from too much stress rather than too little. There are two contributory factors. One is the added complexity and pace of life. Our bodies were designed for

stress as a special case, but all too often it's the norm. The other problem is the nature of stressors. When we get the surge of adrenaline and other hormones, all too often we don't do anything to make use of those changes to our body. The requirement is not to fight or to run away - we just have to sit and take it. This happens with stresses as widely separated as the rigours of driving and bringing up children.

One-off examples of such stresses aren't as much of a problem, it's the combination of stress without a physical response and frequent, almost constant exposure that does the real damage. Someone who is constantly on the edge of stress can be easily tipped into over-reaction by trivial incidents - road rage is a classic example. And the body simply isn't built for long-term stress-heightened activity. Without an outlet, the outcome can be increased risk of heart disease and other medical conditions.

The impact of such harmful stress differs widely from individual to individual. Some of us have a more laid-back attitude to life; others will fly off the handle at the least provocation. As well as such internal inclination or disinclination to respond to stress, our position in life can have a significant effect. Research in the civil service has shown that there is a very strong correlation between stress levels and degrees of self-determination. Senior civil servants, who are very much in control of what they are doing from day to day, have a much lower rate of stress-related illness than cleaners and other staff whose workday is pre-programmed. The executives may have a huge amount of pressure in their jobs, but still they are significantly less stressed than the manual workers – that's the impact of control.

Doing something about it

It is reasonable to ask if there is anything we can actually do about the problems of stress, or whether, like death, we had better accept it because it's a certainty. There are limits to how much you can change your personality in order to reduce your bad reaction to stress. However, there is still a lot to be done. For example, the studies that have shown stress to be related to level of self-determination explain the link in terms of attitude. If you have a positive attitude, helped by control, you are less liable to be badly stressed than if you have a negative attitude, always finding fault and never happy with the situation.

It's also necessary to bear in mind that the aim of stress management is not to eliminate stress totally. The good stress that gives you the edge when you need it is something you'll always want, it's the negative stress that has to be controlled. This can be approached in a number of ways. You can defend yourself from the stressors, stopping them ever getting to you. You can counter the effects of stress physically, using exercise or drugs to counter the attack. Or you can resort to emotional and spiritual relief, bringing a calm to the inner self that results in less likelihood of developing a negative stress response.

This book can't provide all the answers. In some circumstances it will be necessary to get professional help, or to look to others to help deal with your stress. But *Instant Stress Management* will give you a toolkit of anti-stress techniques to help in most circumstances.

5.3 Don't bury yourself

Preparation - none.

Running time - 10 minutes.

Resources - diary.

Frequency - once.

Almost everyone is guilty of procrastination. We put off the evil day when we have to make a decision. We put to one side the problem that is hanging over us because it is too unpleasant to deal with. We avoid giving someone bad news. The result is that we have a constant, nagging worry, stressing us from within. Because of the way the brain works, any such nagging concern is likely to keep resurfacing, disrupting the other things that you need to do.

Spend a few minutes thinking through your personal goals and requirements. Do you have any nagging worries at the moment? Are there decisions you really need to make, or actions that simply have to be taken? You can't do all these in 10 minutes, but you can decide when you are going to do them and make a note to remind yourself. Just the action of planning when you will do something removes a lot of the associated stress.

Feedback - Do not confuse procrastination with living for today. Although, of course, you need to plan and there's nothing wrong with enjoying your past, the only point you can actually live is now. If you are constantly thinking of the future you are totally missing out - and building up stress. Living for today implies that you don't worry about lots of things that might be. Yes, plan and take action, but then forget the future until it is necessary to take action. This is quite different from procrastination, where you are constantly worrying about which action to take, but never actually doing anything.

Outcome - Avoid procrastination and the stress that is its inevitable baggage - but remember to live for the day.

Variations - None.

Physical control

Emotional/spiritual control

Defence

Fun

