Stress Management for Maintaining Positive Mental Health

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Date: 20th April 2020

What is Stress?



A certain amount of stress is absolutely normal. Without stress, the human race may well be extinct. Stress makes us feel fear, it may assist us to get up and move, and most importantly, it can stimulate us so we feel fully alive.

Sometimes it is healthy just to ride out the storm of a little stress and not overreact to it. After all, not every human emotion requires a counter strategy.

If, however, in these very strange times you know your stress levels are getting you down, then a few well-placed strategies will help you to stay on the positive side of your mental health spectrum. Anything could be stressing you right now or, several things at the same time, for example:

**Working from home:**

If you are used to a journey to work, various interactions and a sense of fulfilment via whatever actions your job allows and suddenly you remove that from your life, your mind is naturally going to wonder, ‘what is this all about?’, what are you doing?, you should be on a train, why are you making a long lunch that’s not normal? Your mind thinks it is protecting itself by making you worry, not realising that your actions have to change to stay safe.

**Worry regarding health**

You may not realise but your subconscious will be working overtime right now. Primarily because you are reading or seeing a very high volume of deaths that involves an illness that anyone can contract. Second, you may be wondering how to protect loved ones and more seriously, you or a loved one may fall into a risk category. Stress is about survival and during this type of crisis the job of your stress chemicals is to motivate you into actions that will keep you safe. For most that will be washing hands and following government advice, however:

**Unacceptable behaviours from members of our community**

There are a number of community members who have acted in criminal or selfish ways since the start of this pandemic. Although the large majority have stayed calm and followed advice, the few make our mind wonder onto what would happen if things become more serious and if you watch programs like the Walking Dead your mind will wonder even further.

**Loss of job and earnings**

The fear of losing your job and earnings is highly stressful for most people, and like the situations above, may cause you to release the stress hormones of adrenaline, noradrenalin and cortisol. Cortisol is a fear hormone to make us aware that we are in danger, to make us worry and fret.



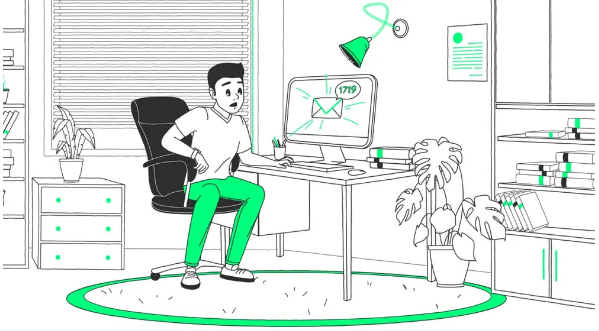
Even if you have not lost your job you may well still be releasing these powerful chemicals because of the fear of what will happen in the future. There is no point in me saying; do not worry, take a bath, everything will be fine etc. because the truth is, we do not know what is going to happen.

If, however we use the correct stress management techniques, we can at least keep our stress at bay so it does not damage us in the long-term.

**Your mind may have moved to survival mode.**

With what we are hearing regarding shops and their stock levels, our minds may well have gone to survival mode so this is where we shall begin the best strategies for surviving these surreal times.





Stress symptoms

There are many stress symptoms and for each of us they will be different. The common ones you may experience include:

* A strange feeling in your tummy or a stomach ache (caused by the brain slowing down the digestive tract to cope with our stress levels). Alternatively overeating to comfort ourselves
* Skin problems
* Headaches
* Exaggerated thoughts and strange dreams (some of you may have dreamt about water, packing to go away, missing flights all representing change)
* Seeing only the bad that is presently happening
* Struggling with your emotions and being snappy or, crying at unusual things (like someone eating the last bit of strawberry jam)
* Hiding away from family
* Not sleeping
* Feeling paranoid

Prolonged stress leads to:

* Premature aging
* High blood pressure
* Arthritis
* Heart problems and weight issues

Stress reducing strategies

**Action 1. Recognise the dangers around you, embrace them and manage them**

I think it is evident so far that stress is a survival mode and your brain will stay stressed unless it knows that you have things in hand. Your emails building up is one thing, but something much more stressful for your brain is not knowing where the basics for survival will come from.

Before you can even begin to manage stress, start by getting your home sorted.

* Clean and organise in a way that makes schooling, fun times and work time possible. Disinfect as well as you can and make this a daily habit.
* Organise your workspace
* Stop thinking that work must come first. It may have to at some point, but first, make sure you have everything you need to survive (i.e. batteries in case of power cuts, food, torches, candles, matches etc.). If you have a generator, make sure you have extra fuel.
* Put essential items you may need in a box somewhere, and then leave them knowing they are there if needed. Your mind can relax knowing everything is in place.
* If your manager is putting unreasonable stressors on you like hard to reach deadlines then email them and say: you are committed, but need a little time to get your family accustomed to the situation.
* Talk to children and adolescents to ensure they are okay with what you are doing. Explain your plans rather than allowing them to guess.

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| Fast Facts |

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77 %

Of people experience stress that affects

their physical health

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48%

Of people have stress which affects their sleep

**TASK:** To help you achieve Action 1, you may want to undertake the exercise below. I have filled in an example of the types of survival issues our minds *may* worry about. They say that we are all in this together but it is not a bad time to remember that we are all in different situations. From those completely alone, to those with no access to outside space. Please do not feel bad if your worries are different to what everyone else is talking about.

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| **Worries** | **How they can be solved** |
| The shops may be full now but will they be in the future? How can I feed my family? | 1. There may be some items that are no longer available but the UK is rich in arable land and farmers are working overtime to keep the shops filled 2. Buy some frozen food that can be used later if not now 3. Start using some of the old baking ingredients in the cupboard 4. Until funding comes through, contact a food bank and have some essentials delivered |
| I read there may be power cuts and I am really worried about my elderly mother. She will be alone in the cold | 1. Get the old box of candles from the attic 2. Make sure the old torch is out of the shed and is working 3. If needed, I could order a Calor gas fire on wheels for mum to move around her bungalow and arrange for it to be delivered to her door so she can stay warm. Double-check she still has a methane alarm as well |
| My children argue a lot, I am alone with them and I am scared we will implode | 1. Sit down as a family and all agree on the best way to look after each other 2. Have a walk every day. Make sure children have space |
| I think any food deliveries could have COVID-19 on them | 1. Disinfect all goods that come into your house. Have a disinfecting station set up and ready for deliveries with a clean and dirty area |
| I was never very good at school and now I have to homeschool alone. My children may fall behind | 1. Use textbooks provided by school and Google what I do not know 2. Use online learning and let tutors online teach the children 3. Use the evening meal to teach maths 4. You may have to calculate the family money so this maybe a good lesson 5. You could read together then watch the film adaptation and compare differences 6. Maybe children could learn how to do housework. This is a great time to learn life skills and cooking on a budget |
| I feel so alone and I have little access to the internet | 1. Have daily calls with various members of the family 2. Keep music or the TV on in the background 3. I can chat to Francis over the garden fence 4. Call my local parish council as they may be able to help |

Please remember, if you are on your own with children 24/7, or even just during the day, your subconscious will be even more worried as you alone are carrying the responsibility of your family’s wellbeing. Although hard, the tasks identified here are even more important for those in this situation.

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| **Worries** | **How they can be solved** |
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**2. Concentrate on the good without hiding from reality**

This may sound rather bizarre, but sometimes if you think something, your mind can become confused and believe it has genuinely happened (hence why thinking negative thoughts leads to more negative thoughts). With the amount of negative news, you may be viewing right now, your conscious mind and more importantly, your subconscious mind could be in a state of worry.

**TASK:** To combat this, literally talk to your mind and explain your grand plan (as written out above). Then start to concentrate on the positives. Once you have filled this in, revisit it when needed.

**In this box, write everything in your life that is a positive (i.e. being with family, food in the cupboard, knowing your family members are safe, having time with family, not having to go on the train during rush hour, being able to make proper meals).**

**3. Those who have lost loved ones, those who are ill or, do not have the ability to be mentally well in this environment, will not want you to waste your valuable time while at home.**

Now is the time to be wise and to think carefully, but now is also the time to laugh, have fun, play games with your children, spoil your partner or yourself, if you live alone, and make the most out of your time. A few simple tips which appear as play but are also very good relaxation techniques include:

1. Press flowers
2. Have taster games where family members have to guess the object by its taste
3. Tell them how great it is to spend time with them (instead of ‘I really do not like home working’)
4. Make a wigwam together and think about the respect native Americas had for nature
5. Picnics in the garden or spoil yourself by making a special lunch just for you
6. Put puzzles together
7. Make recordings of each other doing daft things
8. Skype call with loved ones or friends especially if living alone
9. Make a scrapbook documenting what you do on each day. Take photos, draw and write and just before bedtime, children can update their scrapbooks. This is a good way of getting children into a bedtime routine.
10. Read together while cuddling then just chat about the chapter
11. Walk
12. Have a weekly chart with points and then have random competitions where points can be won. Winner can choose the film to watch on Saturday night
13. Make pizza together from scratch
14. Organise clothes, toys together
15. Garden together or alone
16. Write a family diary together at the end of each evening stating the good and what you have learnt. Very young children can join in.

**4. Self-hypnosis**

Unless you are very well practiced, hypnosis will not put you in a deep trance but it will relax you. Watch the accompanying video and I can teach you how to do this.

**5. Let your brain know that the future is coming**

For some of you, your minds will need to know that the ‘now’ is not permanent. We will, of course, be back on our trains, our alarms will once again be ringing in the wee hours of the morning and our Sunday’s will return to the chaos of getting ready for the week ahead. Until then, let us start to pre-prepare for how we will embrace time after isolation. However, this time around, how about we do things slightly different. Is there anything you would like to change? For example:

* Are your coffee habits expensive?
* Are you a negative thinker?
* Are you obsessed with perfection?
* Do you always do everything at the last minute and freak all your colleagues out?
* Do you self-sabotage?
* Is your job boring?
* Do you wish you could spend more time with your family?

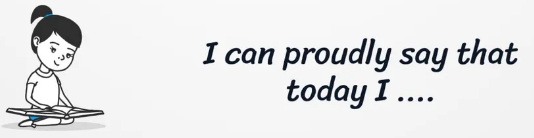
Choose your bad habit or decide on something that you would like to change and start to make a plan. This will calm your brain by moving it into a vision of the future (a positive vision).

**My awful habit is:**

**Why is it awful?**

**My new habit for one week will be:**

**Then after that I will:**



**6. While at home, try to do activities that keep you on the correct side of stress without even trying.**

**Tick the activities you regularly do:**

* Drinking alcohol every day
* Overreacting to minor situations
* Eating the wrong foods
* Never talking about issues
* Using TV as your only entertainment
* Worrying
* Having no new challenges
* Failing to have set sleep times
* Never chilling
* Obsessing over cleanliness to the point that it disrupts your life
* Being highly competitive over material goods
* Excessive shopping habits
* Gambling
* Living in excessive clutter
* Having a lack of control over your life in every single aspect
* Unkindness to others
* Lacking the ability to forgive
* Obsessing over your appearance
* Spending too long on gadgets that omit radiation
* Always having to be right
* Too much reality (i.e. always reading about animal cruelty, child abuse and inequalities)

If you wish to do any of the above, that is your choice. We are human after all and very few people are able to live the life of a Monk. In fact, to many, the life of a Monk is a recipe for pure stress!

However, if you have to do the above, try to do them in moderation and try not to tick every single one on the list because any of these could lead to minor stresses on our body or mind.

At this point in time, when we are in isolation, think very carefully about your habits because they could be the difference between good and poor mental health.

**Would be better if you could …**

* Enjoy a glass of alcohol while staying within government safe drinking limits
* React, decide on a plan and carry out the plan
* Act for fun, make plays at home
* Crafting
* Miming
* Dancing
* Reflecting
* Housework/ironing/gardening/DIY
* Making family albums
* Cleaning the car
* Shopping within the limits you can afford
* Laughing
* Chilling to the extent that works for you
* Having a challenge that does not stress you
* Watching a fair amount of TV
* Letting people help you and give up control over some aspects of your life
* Any type of exercise
* Getting closer to nature
* Reading
* Signing or playing an instrument
* Walking
* Playing like a child
* Having one treat a day (like some of our favourite chocolate)
* Gaming no more than one-hour-a-day
* Applying for a job you never thought you would do such as fruit-picking. A job such as this may take you back to your student days!

It is about getting the balance correct, you have to decide what works for you. A little of many different things often works.

What balance do you require for positive mental health?

**If your stress is severe, remember you are not alone**

If your stress is being caused by something much more serious than we have mentioned today, such as living with aggressive, violent or controlling people, you may need to reach out. You can call refuge on **0808 2000 247** available 24/7. They will listen and provide advice, but they will not make you do anything.

If it is an emergency dial **999.**

If you are in fear for a neighbour’s child, do not allow them to feel alone. Call the NSPCC on **0808 800 5000**. Again, if you feel it is an emergency dial **999**. You can also call the NSPCC if you are living with a child who is being violent towards you while you are in isolation, and they will guide you to someone who can help.

If you are struggling with your mental health, have extremely low feelings or are suicidal, please do not carry this burden alone. You can call the Samaritans on **116 123**. They are available 24/7.

Please remember that if your stress is extreme because of an extreme situation you have found yourself in, there are 1000’s of people across the UK willing to be of assistance.

If your issue is less severe, but you feel you need help of some kind, please email HR and they will direct you to the appropriate assistance.

**Important note**

The information in this course is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment. Any person with a condition requiring medical attention should consult a medical practitioner.