

Identifying your stressors

Written by Richard Hawkey
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In the second instalment of his series on practising safe stress, RICHARD HAWKEY looks at stress self-awareness – identifying your stress levels and personal stressors as the first step toward managing them.

The exact definition of “stress” is the subject of much scholarly debate, but the important thing to understand is that stress is a response; it’s about how our bodies and minds respond to stimuli (events, situations, items), whether they are perceived or real.

What causes one person stress won’t necessarily have the same effect on someone else. And not all stress is bad – “eustress” is that positive, motivating stress that keeps us moving forward; we feel it at the start of a new project, or when asking someone out on a date. Unfortunately, our modern lifestyles are often characterised by distress, hyper-stress (over-stimulation) and occasionally hypo-stress (under-stimulation).

The first step to managing stress and building resilience is to be aware that you are (negatively) stressed in the first place. “Although it may be difficult to recognise that you are stressed, once you are familiar with the signs, you will be able to recognise them early on and can manage and reduce your stress sooner,” says Dr Monica Mercer, homeopath and general practitioner. “Research shows that an individual’s responses to stress remain the same irrespective of the cause for their stress”.

Once you acknowledge that you are stressed (having a response), you can then work on identifying the causes (the stimuli). Let’s look at both of these in turn.

The physiology of stress

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Stress affects every system in the body. As a species, we are programmed to survive. We have an in-built mechanism known as the “fight or flight response” which, when we detect danger, readies all major systems in our bodies to either fight the situation or to run from it. Our bodies are flooded with powerful hormones such as adrenalin, noradrenaline and cortisol, and these have fundamental and significant effects on our bodily functions:



Note: this is not an exhaustive list. Always consult a healthcare professional should you experience any unexplained symptoms.

- Our heart rate increases (all the better to pump more blood to our large muscle groups so that we can fight more ferociously or run faster);
- Our pupils dilate and our field of vision narrows (to focus more acutely on the threat, be it perceived or real);
- The bronchi in our lungs expand to absorb more oxygen (which travels through our blood to the large muscle groups), and;
- Our digestive and reproductive systems go offline and our immune system suppresses its functioning, as our bodies direct resources away from “non-critical” systems and functions.

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The problem occurs when we experience the “fight or flight response” to situations that are not life-threatening. As much as we like to believe we are sophisticated creatures, in this one area, our survival mechanism supercedes our intellectual or cognitive abilities. We react instinctively before we analyse. And the real problem comes in when we are totally unaware of this reaction – getting angry sitting in traffic, getting upset because your dinner guests are late, or feeling nervous before a performance review. Imagine your “fight or flight” response kicking in 20, 50, 200 times every day, and it’s easy to understand why the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that two-thirds of all visits to a general practitioner are stress-related.

Clinical psychologist and scientific chair of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, Dr Colinda Linde, paints this powerful picture: “If we drove our cars like we drive our bodies – 24/7, over-revving, in the wrong gears, without regular services – there would be very few left on the road! We need to remember that our bodies and brains are vehicles, which will signal wear and tear and become less efficient if we do not rest and refuel them when they need it.”

Your stress symptoms are your body and your mind’s way of trying to tell you something is wrong – and you need to learn to listen. Symptoms can be broadly categorised as being physical, cognitive (of the “thinking brain”), emotional or behavioural.

Identifying your stressors

Armed with a better understanding of the physiology of excess negative stress, let me now share with you a simple technique for helping you identify some of the main things that cause you stress. Remember, only you can control your stress; don’t outsource responsibility to someone or something else. Take control and act.

Over the next few weeks, take some time to think about the three statements below and start building your own list, identifying your own personal stressors:

- I don’t like doing ... (for example, grocery shopping or housework)

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- These things make me sad ... (such as being taken for granted at work or cruelty to animals)

- These things make me angry ... (rude drivers, your boss, and so on).

In the next article, I will introduce four key strategies for dealing with stressors – you will be able to apply these to the personal stressors you identify over the next few weeks.

Take the test, and start stressing less

As a reader of SHEQ MANAGEMENT, you can take a confidential stress self-awareness survey that was compiled by several doctors. Go to www.vitalstest.com & enter “sheq759” as the “employer code” and follow the simple on-screen instructions. Towards the end of this series of articles, we will bring you the aggregated results – but don’t worry, your confidentiality is assured; your answers will be known only to yourself.

Richard Hawkey, author of *Life Less Lived* and founder of *equilibrium solutions*, spent many years pounding the corporate treadmill until literally falling off; diagnosed with burnout and clinical depression. Now, Hawkey has combined his general management and leadership experience with lessons learnt from mismanaging stress, to become a self-styled anti-stress evangelist. He specialises in identifying stress in oneself and others; the personal and professional impacts; and how one can break out of the negative spiral and emerge vigorous and vital to realise quantifiable benefits.