

1. Introduction

One thing we can be sure of, each and every one of us has experienced stress. In fact, stress has become synonymous with modern day living. We take stress for granted, accept it as part of our lives and just hope and pray that we can cope. It is like treading water- we are constantly trying to do whatever it takes to keep our heads above water.

Stress infiltrates every part of our lives: we have work stress; family stress; marital or relationship stress; social stress; political stress; and of course, most of all, we have financial stress!

What Is Stress?

Stress means different things to different people. When I ask people on my workshops: "What is stress?" I get as many answers as there are participants.

We are all unique in our capacity to deal with stress and in our response to stress. For example, one person may cope with levels of stress under which their friend would simply buckle. Another person may be able to handle work stress but not relationship stress, or the other way around. Some people can handle anything as long as they have a healthy bank balance, however, if their finances are under pressure, the rest of their lives seem to unravel.

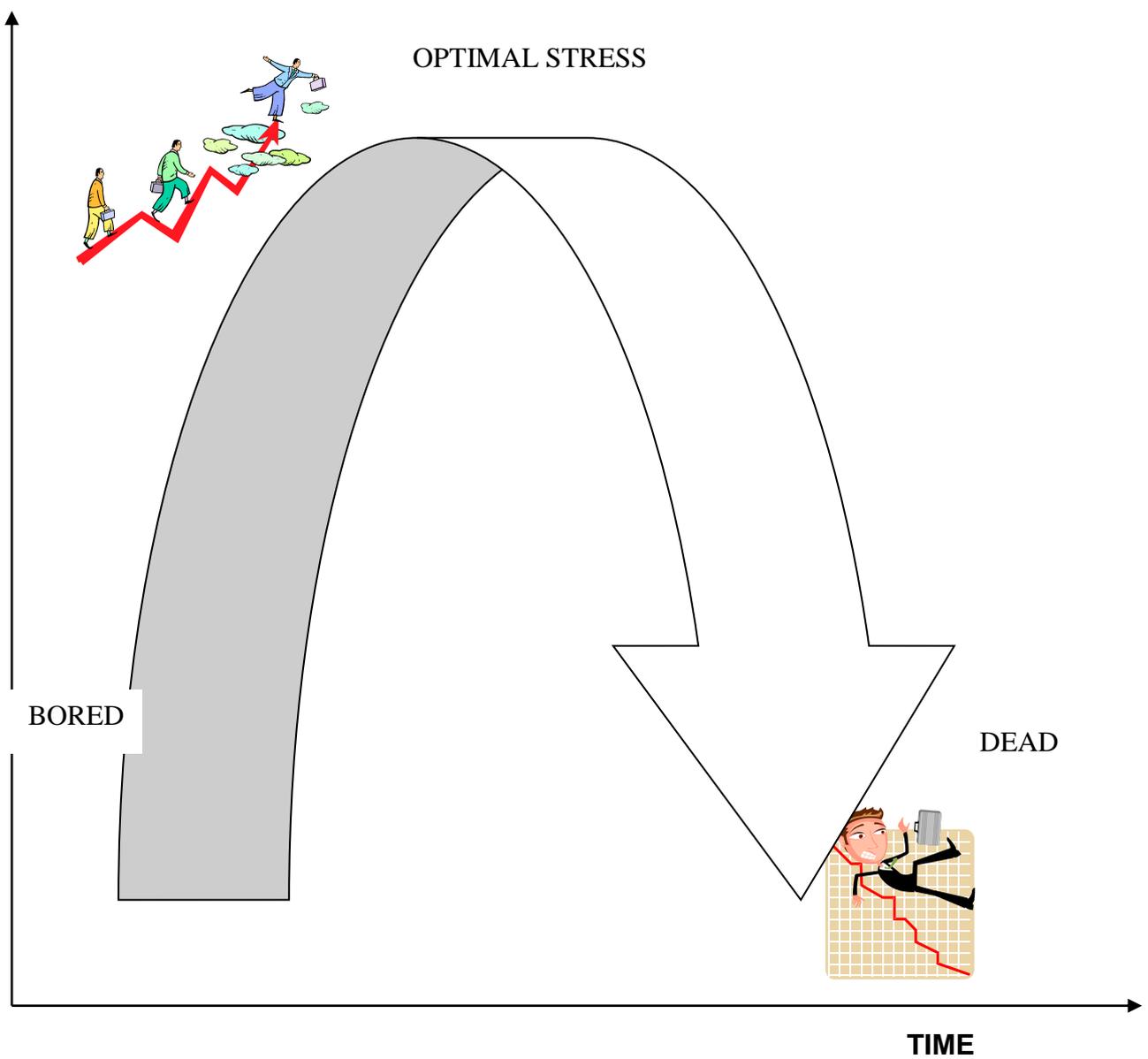
These are some ways we could define stress:

- Strain
- Pressure
- Emphasis
- Anxiety
- Tension
- Exhaustion
- Discord
- Panic

- Nervousness
- Tearfulness
- Unhappiness
- Excitement
- Powerlessness

Therefore, the term “stress” can be seen as an umbrella term to describe a whole range of behaviours and conditions.

Good vs. Bad Stress



The term “stress” immediately gives rise to negative connotations. We tend to think stress is bad. However, stress can be good. Stress can be a motivator. It challenges us to excel and succeed. If we were never challenged life would be boring. We would become complacent. In order to grow and develop, we need a certain amount of pressure. We need the opportunity to push up against something in order to reach new heights. Sometimes that pressure comes from our internal strivings, while other times its source is external. But whatever its source, pressure is necessary for our growth and development.

Our response to stress is instinctive, and it kicks in when we are threatened. This is called the fight/ flight instinct. It lets us know when we are in danger and puts us on guard so that we can protect ourselves either by fighting the threat or by fleeing from the threat.

Therefore, in certain situations stress can be considered normal and healthy. However, there is a very thin line between healthy and unhealthy stress. Stress is good for you when it is propelling you forward, encouraging you to push through perceived barriers to your own success. Stress only becomes unhealthy when there is ***too much repeated or prolonged stress or when the output required exceeds our current resources***. This can tip the very fine balance that exists and create a negative downward spiral.

Our systems need to be kept in balance, in a state of homeostasis. Therefore, when we are being pushed to further ourselves we need to balance that with the appropriate care and nurturance. We need to keep ourselves healthy so our bodies and minds have enough energy and resources to cope with the added output needed during times of stress.

Just like a car needs petrol and servicing, if you continue to push yourself to the limits and do not replenish yourself, your body takes strain and eventually seizes up.

So, I see this as a scale that needs to be kept in balance in order to stay healthy and function optimally. If you increase your stress levels you

need to balance that situation with more self-care. The more stress or pressure you add, the more time and focus you need to give to your well-being. If you allow your stress levels to mount without balancing them with the appropriate self-care, the scales will tip totally out of balance. You will see this reflected in your life as you start to feel out of sorts, out of equilibrium, and unable to cope. Your life will spin out of control. Once this happens, you may have very little inner resources and energy left with which to rectify the balance. You may find yourself getting physically ill or facing a major trauma like the break up of your marriage.

Therefore, it is important to manage your stress levels carefully and to become aware of how much stress is good for you and what you need to do to keep yourself in equilibrium. You need to start recognizing the signs telling you your stress levels becoming too high.

So how do you know if you are too stressed....?

Everybody copes with stress in different ways. People exhibit varying symptoms of stress according to their unique make-up and particular weak points. If you are not managing your stress well, you will develop certain physical, emotional, mental or spiritual symptoms (see list). Take some time to read over these symptoms. Make a mark next to the symptoms that you frequently experience. This will help you become more aware of your own unique stress response. Perhaps the next time you have a headache or become ill you may ask yourself: "Is my body trying to tell me I am stressed? Do I need to slow down or do something to bring down my stress levels? Am I close to breaking point?" This awareness is extremely useful. The next time you are irritable or snap at someone, it may be a warning signal that your stress levels are mounting.

Physical Signs And Symptoms Of Stress

According to the American Psychological Association's online Help Center:

- 43% of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress.
- 75 to 90% of all physician office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.
- Stress is linked to the six leading causes of death -- heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide.

It is widely accepted in the medical world that three quarters of all illnesses are related to stress.

Here are some of the physical signs and symptoms of stress.

If you tick four (4) or more symptoms in the last column or eight (8) or more symptoms in the middle column it is an indication that your stress levels are unacceptably high. It would be highly recommended that you employ stress management techniques to reduce your stress as well as seek the appropriate help, medical or otherwise.

R= Rarely; S= Sometimes; O= Often

	R	S	O
abdominal pains			
anxiety attacks			
appetite loss			
chest pains			
cold hands and feet			
constipation			
diarrhoea			
dry mouth or throat			
eczema			
eye strain			
facial tension lines			
fatigue			
grinding of teeth			
headaches			
heart palpitations			

high blood pressure			
indigestion			
itching			
loss of or excessive libido			
migraines			
nausea			
perspiration			
High cholesterol			
Shortness of breathe			
sleep disturbances			
Recurring colds, coughs, flu			
Hair loss			
tension back, neck, jaw			
trembling			
twitching			
ulcers			
urinary hesitancy			
vomiting			
TOTAL			

Emotional Signs and Symptoms of Stress

Too much stress also takes its toll on the way we feel about ourselves, about others and about the world around us. Stress wears us down and robs our energy, depleting our inner resources and upsetting our coping mechanisms. When we are stressed we have very low tolerance levels. We become moody and bad tempered, and tend to see things very negatively.

These are some of the emotional signs and symptoms to look out for. Make a mark next to the ones you tend to experience.

If you tick four (4) or more symptoms in the last column or eight (8) or more symptoms in the middle column it is an indication that your stress levels are unacceptably high. It would be highly recommended that you employ stress management techniques to reduce your stress as well as seek the appropriate help, medical or otherwise.

	Rarely	Occasionally	Often
irritability			
outbursts of anger			
anxiousness			
defensiveness			
depression			
helplessness			
loss of hope			
insecurity			
hostility			
jealously			
restlessness			
withdrawal			
diminished initiative			
feelings of unreality (dream-like)			
lack of interest			
tearfulness			
critical of others			
low self-esteem or self-deprecation			

nightmares			
impatience			
negativity			
narrowed minded			
conflict in your intimate relationship			
over-sensitivity			
loneliness			
TOTAL			

Cognitive Signs and Symptoms of Stress

Stress also affects the way we think and see things. The more stressed we become, the more negatively we think. The more negatively we think, the more stressed we become because we feel more hopeless and helpless. This becomes a vicious cycle which is difficult to end.

Furthermore, stress has a physiological affect on our ability to think and perceive things. These are some of the signs and symptoms:

If you tick four (4) or more symptoms in the last column or eight (8) or ,more symptoms in the middle column it is an indication that your stress levels are unacceptably high. It would be highly recommended that you employ the techniques in this book to reduce your stress as well as seek the appropriate help, medical or otherwise.

	R	S	O
playing conversations and situations over and over in your head			
forgetfulness			
preoccupation			
blurred vision			
errors in judging distance			
reduced creativity			
lack of concentration			
diminished productivity			
lack of attention to detail			
orientation to the past			
Poor reflexes			
attention deficit			
disorganization of thought			
negative self-esteem			
lack of control/need for too much control			
negative self-statements			
negative attitude			

poor decision making			
poor listening skills			
procrastination			
inconsistent communication			
more 'ego' centered and less group centred			
Stuttering/ speech difficulties			
TOTAL			

Behavioural Signs And Symptoms Of Stress

Stress affects our behaviour. Under times of stress we tend to turn to 'artificial coping mechanisms' They help us feel better temporarily, but make us feel worse in the long run. We also tend to lash out in an attempt to unleash all the negative energy we are carrying. These are some of the behavioral signs and symptoms of stress.

If you tick four (4) or more symptoms in the last column or eight (8) or more symptoms in the middle column it is an indication that your stress levels are unacceptably high. It would be highly recommended that you employ stress management techniques to reduce your stress as well as seek the appropriate help, medical or otherwise.

	R	S	O
increased smoking			
increased alcohol use			
drug use			
aggressive behaviours			
reckless / aggressive driving			
carelessness			
under-eating or over-eating			
withdrawal			
listlessness			
over talkative			
nail biting			
general fidgeting			
drumming of fingers			
nervous shaking of the leg			
foot tapping			
fiddling with hair			
hostility			
accident-proneness			
sexual affairs			
nervous laughter			

compulsive behaviour			
impatience			
relationship conflict			
Rigidity (strict and intolerant)			
TOTAL			

Lifestyle Assessment

Lifestyle	Assessment	Goal
Do you eat a balanced diet?		
How much fresh fruit and vegetables do you have per day?		
Do you drink 6-8 glasses of water per day?		
How many cups of tea or coffee do you have per day?		
How much alcohol do you have per day/ week?		
How many cigarettes do you smoke?		
How many teaspoons of sugar or sugar substitutes do you have per day?		
Do you spend at least half an hour per day doing something for yourself? Relaxation/ quiet time...		
How many nights per week do you get sufficient and restful sleep?		
Do you do cardiovascular		

exercise at least 30 mins three times per week?		
How often in the week do you laugh and have fun?		
Do you spend sufficient quality time with your family?		
Do you have a base of good friends?		
How often do you socialise?		
Do you have a hobby?		
Do you spend time on your spirituality?		

Diet

You have heard the saying: “You are what you eat”. This is true! It is important to keep our bodies as healthy as possible. When we eat the wrong foods it puts our body under strain, which in turn robs us of energy and health. Try eating as naturally as possible. ***Eat lots of fresh (preferably organic) fruit and vegetables.*** Raw fruit and vegetables have the highest vitamin and minerals content of any other food. They help detoxify the body and eliminate stored waste. They also provide us with easy access to energy because they are easily absorbed into the body. Our body does not need to work hard to digest it. It is often recommended to go on a raw diet to detoxify your body. This spring cleans the body, restores the correct PH balance and leaves you feeling healthy and energized.

Avoid fatty foods.

Our bodies find it very difficult to digest fatty foods unless they are natural fats, high in essential fatty acids. The processed fats that we eat today have been chemically modified to such an extent that our body can not make proper use of them. They form a fatty layer around our red blood platelets causing them to stick together and clog our arteries. This causes degenerative heart disease and high cholesterol. Because the body can not use these fats they get stored as fat, usually around the hips, buttocks or abdomen. The essential fatty acids found naturally in fruit and vegetables are essential to our health and well-being. We need them to lubricate our systems and keep our hormones in balance. These are found in avocados, nuts and cold-pressed oils.

Avoid foods with preservatives and colourants.

So often today our foods are packed with additives such as preservatives, colourants, stabilizers, anti-caking agents and emulsifiers to name but a few. These have been shown to aggravate the body and cause stress. Illnesses such as asthma and ADHD (Attention Defecit Hyperactivity Disorder) have been linked to the consumption of these additives. As a rule, natural is best. Our bodies can not cope with all these chemical additives.

Avoid fast foods or convenience foods. Fast foods are generally high in fat and additives. They may be convenient and taste good but they are very bad for your health and well-being. It is tempting in our stressful lives to eat on the move or buy fast foods or ready to use meals. Time savers, right? Well, while they may save time in the short term, in the long run they will create more stress and illness. It is really not worth the consequences. That is not to say, 'never eat fast food' but rather: 'everything in moderation'.

Avoid refined sugar and caffeine. Both sugar and caffeine are regarded as what I call 'roller coaster foods'. They perk you up and then just as quickly let you down. Often they leave you even lower than before. This often gets people into a vicious cycle of consuming more sugar or caffeine to pick themselves up from the depths that the last dose of sugar or caffeine left them. We become reliant on these artificial stimulants.

Both sugar and caffeine work in similar ways in that they stimulate the adrenal glands. These are the glands that operate the fight/ flight instinct. So when we consume sugar or caffeine it puts our body on alert. That is why we perk up and get extra energy. However, too much sugar and caffeine cause the adrenal glands to overwork which eventually causes exhaustion.

In the refining process, sugar is stripped of all its nutritional value. It is what we call 'empty calories' and only serves to help us put on weight. Furthermore, sugar has been seen to decrease the immune system making us more susceptible to illness as well as to cause a number of degenerative diseases. High sugar intake affects our insulin production and

can lead to diabetes. It has also been linked to a number of psychological disorders such as depression and hyperactivity.

Caffeine is a drug. It is regarded as a stimulant and has an effect on your body, your mind and your mood. One cup of coffee provides you with 90 to 150mg of caffeine. Pharmacologists would consider regular caffeine intake (2 or more cups of coffee a day) as considerable dosages of caffeine. Furthermore, produces acid in the body and increases your blood pressure.

Reduce meat intake. It is a fallacy that we need to eat large amounts of protein. It is our carbohydrates that provide us with energy. That is not to say that protein is not important. Your body needs protein for amino acids, muscle building and hormone production. It is essential for our metabolic processes, for growth and tissue maintenance and repair. It is the amount of protein that is under dispute. We tend to eat far too much protein. Especially in the form of red meat or animal flesh. What you must understand is that once protein is heated it is broken down. So when we cook meat we destroy most of the protein. Furthermore, animals are fed growth hormones and antibiotics. When we eat animal flesh, we take in these chemicals. There is a school of thought that says that this is the reason why girls are starting to menstruate at a younger age. Some also feel that eating particularly red meat can make you more aggressive. This is also due to the amount of adrenalin pumping through the animal's system during the slaughtering process.

Reduce Alcohol and Smoking

People often resort to alcohol or cigarettes to help them cope in times of stress. The truth is that they numb the effects of stress and help you to avoid the real issues. Ultimately this does not help. It only serves to make things worse especially because of their addictive nature. These substances are extremely harmful on the body (alcohol on the liver and cigarettes on the lungs) as well as the mind.

Breathing

Breathing is essential for living. We all know that. However, most of us do not breathe properly. You may wonder how anyone can not breathe properly. We all breathe and that process happens unconsciously. We are not aware of each breath we take. We just breathe. Right? Wrong! Most of us breathe very shallowly. When we breathe shallowly we do not take in enough life force. Shallow breathing is a sign of fear and tension as a result of a constricted diaphragm.

Our breath is our life force. It gives energy to our body .We need to *breathe in and out as deeply as possible*. This oxygenates the blood, bringing more oxygen to the brain. The more oxygen that we give our brain, the more clearly we are able to think.

Breath Awareness

Bring your attention to your breathing. Notice how you breathe. Are you breathing slowly and deeply or are you breathing quickly and shallowly?

Now take a deep breath. Breathe in fully, filling the whole of the lung area, and breathe out fully, making sure that you have emptied your lungs. What do you notice? Do you notice how difficult and uncomfortable it is to breathe in fully? We are not used to filling our lungs. You may also notice how you do not empty your lungs completely when breathing out. This causes us to hold onto toxins and negative emotional and mental patterns. That is why we find it so hard to let go of our 'issues'.

Breathing is profoundly connected to our emotional and mental state. Your breathing when you are relaxed is different to your breathing when you are scared or excited. Your breathing rhythm changes when you are angry or in love. Conversely, if we change our breathing pattern, we can change our mind set and our emotions. Just breathing deeply calms you down immediately. Speeding up your breathing puts you in a state of arousal. Try it!

Deep Breathing

Practice deep breathing- breathe in fully and breathe out fully. Breathe in through the nose and out through the nose. Feel the air filling your lungs. Focus on bringing the air down into the bottom of your lungs. You can place your hands on your sides. You know you are breathing properly when you can feel the bottom of your stomach expanding as well as your rib cage expanding outwards. Also focus on the out breath. Breathe out fully. Empty your lungs completely. Remember, when we do not breathe out fully, we hold onto toxins and negative emotions.

Try to become conscious of your breathing as often as possible and slow your breathing down. Try to make your breathing rhythmical. That is, the in breath should take more or less the same time as the out breath. As you become more aware of your breathing, and as you become more practiced at breathing deeply and slowly, you will notice that you are becoming more calm and relaxed.

Breathing Your Stress Away

This is a very easy, quick and effective technique to use to instantly calm yourself down in trying times.

Whenever you feel yourself getting stressed:

- *STOP – take a moment to recognize that you are feeling stressed.*
- *TAKE A DEEP BREATH IN – as you breath in imagine all the parts of yourself coming back towards yourself. When we are stressed we often feel 'fragmented' or 'stretched' or 'pulled in several directions'. If you could imagine your energy at this time you would see ribbon-like fragments of energy coming out of your body.(See pic 1.) This is because we are scattered, we have lost our centre.*

So as you breathe in, imagine these ribbons or pieces of energy coming back to you. The parts of yourself that have been lost, or given or taken away, coming back to you. (See pic 2) Feel yourself becoming whole and centred. Feel yourself being filled with yourself. Feel the strength and security you derive from feeling yourself becoming fully present in your body.

- *BLOW YOUR BREATH OUT THROUGH YOUR MOUTH – Actually blow the air out your lungs as if you were blowing up a balloon. As you do this, imagine yourself blowing all the negative, stressful and unpleasant feelings out of your body. Visualise the negative energy leaving your body in any way you see fit. (See pic 3) You may visualize it as a dark cloud that you are blowing away. When I do this I always think of that movie ‘The Green Mile’ where they portray the negative energy that the prisoner takes from other people and releases through his body as maggots flying out his mouth. It doesn’t matter what you visualize as long as you can feel the unpleasantness leaving your body.*
- *REPEAT- repeat this process until you feel strongly centered in your body and until you feel that all the anxiety and negativity has left your body.*

Sleep

Getting enough, quality sleep is an essential ingredient to stress management. Sleep regenerates our body and mind and soul. When we sleep we breathe deeply and slowly, our heart rate decreases, blood pressure lowers, our digestive system quietens and our brain waves become synchronized. In this state we are wonderfully relaxed and at peace. Our body takes the time to make anti-bodies and to repair damaged tissues and cells.

Often during times of stress we tend to have sleep disturbances. Either we cannot get to sleep or we wake up during the night or early morning. If we do not get enough sleep we become irritable, forgetful, clumsy and depressed. Lack of sleep can even cause a kind of psychosis.

Try to get a minimum of 6 hours of solid sleep per night. Here are some tips to help you sleep better:

- **Exercise before you go to bed.** This helps you to release the stress and it also tires the body. When your body is tired you tend to sleep well. If you go to bed after doing paperwork or working on the computer you may find it hard to sleep because your mind is still wired. Often we cannot sleep because our mind is active and we have a lot of nervous energy that stops us from relaxing properly.
- **Avoid stimulants.** Try to avoid drinking coffee or alcohol before going to bed. While coffee will stimulate you and keep you up, alcohol might help you get to sleep but it tends to wake you in the early hours due to its effect on the liver.
- **Take a warm bath.** A warm bath will help your body relax especially if you add some relaxing aromatherapy oil such as lavender or chamomile. As your body relaxes so your mind relaxes. Light some candles and put on some soft music. Allow yourself to completely relax and unwind.
- **Read a relaxing book.** A light read will take your mind off your troubles and help you relax. Especially if you wake up during the night, do not lie in bed trying to fall asleep. This will only frustrate you. This is the time to read that book. It will help you fall asleep quicker.
- **Drink a glass of milk.** This old wives tale has a lot of truth to it. Milk contains a chemical called tryptophan which helps produce the serotonin needed in order to sleep well. It is also a muscle relaxer.

- ***Write out your worries.*** It is a good idea to regularly write out your worries. Especially if you cannot sleep because your mind is racing or you are worried about something. Write down whatever is on your mind. It does not need to be eloquent or poetic. It does not even need to make sense. You can jump from topic to topic or thought to thought. You can swear and bitch and moan. It is not for anyone else to see and serves only as an emptying process. By writing out your worries you are emptying your mind and emotions of toxic thoughts and emotions. It is your rubbish bin!
- ***Practice a relaxation or meditation technique.*** We will discuss relaxation techniques and meditation in detail in the chapters to follow.

Physical Exercise

Exercise is one of the most important stress management techniques. When we exercise we speed up our heart rate, which causes us to breathe more deeply, bringing more oxygen into our bloodstream. This oxygen is then used to break down and eliminate lactic acid and other stress inducing toxins from our bodies, which helps us let go of stress, anxiety and other toxic emotions we have been carrying. Moreover, it has been proven that when we exercise, endorphins get released into the bloodstream. These endorphins are nature's 'feel good' hormones which put us on a natural high. So not only does exercise reduce stress, it also makes us feel good. In fact, you often see people becoming addicted to the positive effects of exercise. Those are the people who cannot wait to get to the gym at the end of the day.

Exercise also builds stamina and discipline. In our busy lives it takes a lot of commitment to one's well-being as well as discipline to take the time to exercise regularly. There are so many demands placed on our time that we

sometimes tend to put our needs last on the list. It is important not to do this. When we exercise our body, we exercise our mind. The more disciplined we become in our exercise, the more disciplined we become in our lives. When we exercise we feel so good about ourselves that we begin to take ourselves more seriously. We do not want to fill our body with junk food anymore. Rather, we want to feed our body food that nurtures and sustains us- healthy food. We start to think more positively about ourselves and the world. We feel better about our bodies and our self-esteem goes up. The stamina we develop also helps us to build stamina in our lives. It helps us to keep going even when times are tough.

Exercise is also a good, socially acceptable way of letting off steam. We all pick up frustrations during the day and need to do something to release these. If we don't we land up shouting at the kids, or kicking the dog or swearing at someone in the traffic. We will talk more about this in the 'Managing Anger' chapter of the book.

Therefore, it is important to have a regular exercise programme in order to reduce stress. It is recommended that everybody do at least half an hour of aerobic (heart-pumping) exercise at least three times per week. It is important to take this time that you spend on keeping yourself healthy very seriously. It is as, if not more, important than putting in those extra hours at work. This is time scheduled to make sure that you can keep performing at your best. Make it a priority. Write it in to your diary and do not be tempted to shuffle it around. Treat it as a meeting with the boss or a major investor. It is a meeting you cannot afford to miss!

Calming exercises such as yoga, tai-chi and pilates are also recommended to promote a sense of calmness and well-being. Most gyms tend to offer these types of classes. It is recommended that you try them. A lot of people don't regard these types of activities as exercise. I disagree. These activities employ the mind and the body. They focus on becoming very conscious of each breath, each movement. They require a lot of strength and stamina. Moreover, they leave you feeling strong yet extremely peaceful and in touch with your body. The positions in yoga are specifically designed to

keep our bodies healthy, inside and out. Many postures are designed to give our internal organs a massage. I will include some basic yoga postures in the book for you to practice at home. However, I would recommend that you try a yoga class.

Think Positive

Effects of Negative Thoughts

The world is made up of energy. Therefore, we are made up of energy. Just as we have a physical body, we have an energy body. This is our blueprint. Our energy body creates a magnetic field around us, which draws people and experiences to us like a magnet. This is how we create our reality: by attracting people and situations to us in order to help us learn and grow.

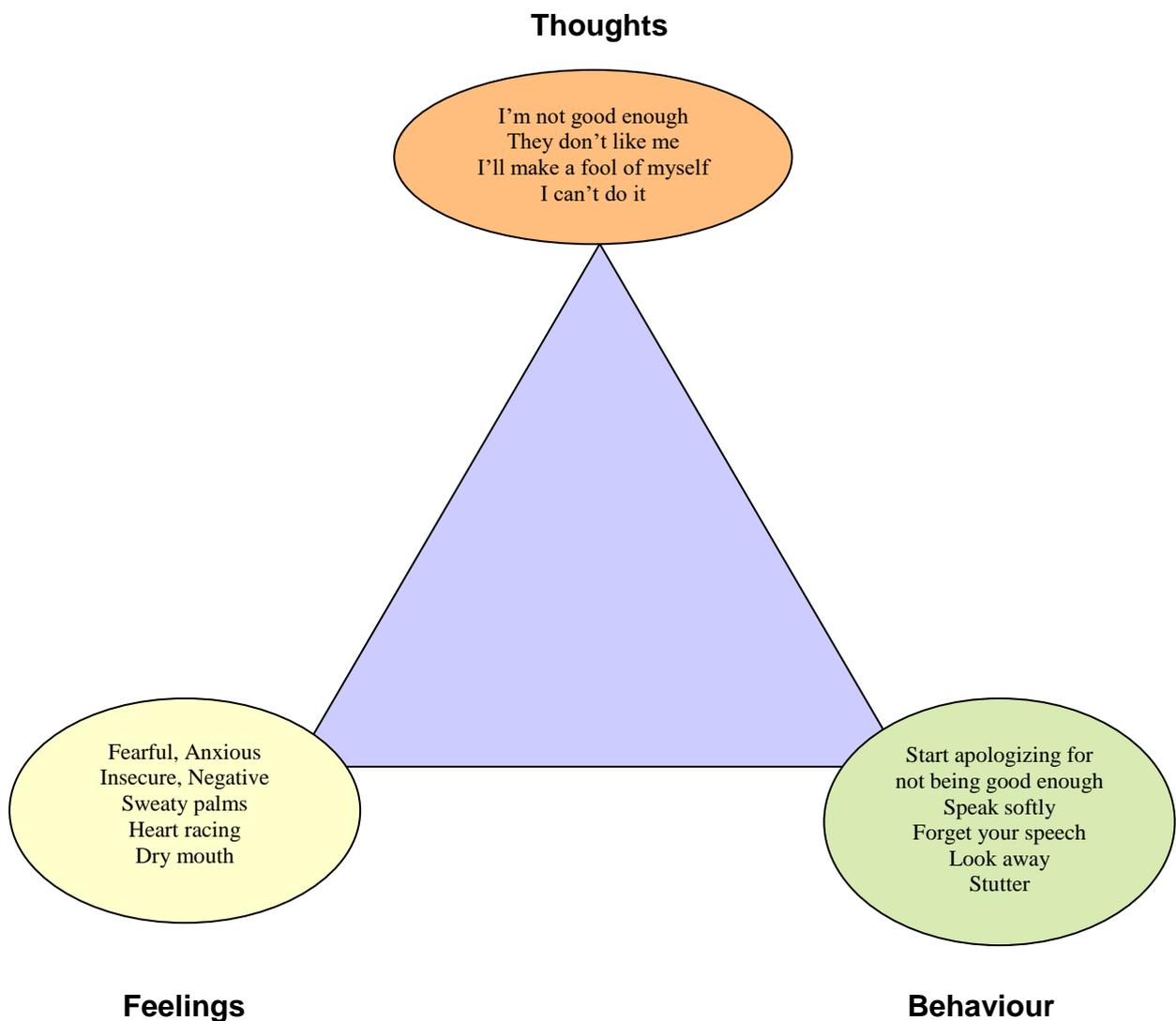
Because we live in a scientific world, we are taught anything we can't see doesn't exist. Energy is not visible to our naked eye, so we don't believe how influential it is in our lives. However, if you open yourself to the possibility that you have an energy body that creates a magnetic field around you, you will begin to see how you attract certain people and situations into your life. You may have noticed that when you are in a good mood or when you are in love, everything seems to flow effortlessly. Your whole day is filled with wonderful people and amazing situations. However, when you are in a bad mood, everything seems to go wrong. Your day is filled with problematic people and situations. This is because of the energy you are putting out.

When we are in a positive state our energy field expands, our consciousness expands, our vibration increases and it is from this state we attract positivity, love and abundance into our lives.

When we think negatively, our energy field withdraws and our vibration lowers. We are no longer open to love, positivity and abundance. Instead we attract more negativity to ourselves. We attract the very things we fear.

If you break down or categorize emotions, all emotion can be broken down into either LOVE or FEAR. All positive emotion is based in love. All negative emotion is based in fear. If you are thinking negatively, you are stuck in fear.

The Power of our Mind



Our society has given far too much importance to the intellect. Our intellect is supposed to be a tool to help us in our lives. It is not meant to dominate us. Yet, we give our thoughts too much power. This can create

stress because in general our thoughts tend to be are far more negative than positive.

Exercise:

Try paying specific attention to your thoughts over the next couple of days. At regular intervals, write down the thoughts that are going through your mind. What you are most likely to find is that you have a basic core of thoughts that tend to repeat themselves. These thoughts are generally negative. We tell ourselves that the situation is hopeless; that we are not good enough; that we are not trying hard enough; that we will never amount to anything.

This is meant as a protective mechanism. Our mind tries to keep us safe from pain, humiliation, and criticism. It is like a critical parent who constantly puts you down and reprimands you “for your own good”. But in doing this it bullies us into submission. It makes us fearful and insecure.

Our minds create movies, dramas, and nightmares around potential issues we need to face. Before we have a chance to deal with a situation, our mind has often created a scenario so scary that we are too afraid to face it. We become stressed and anxious.

When we are forced to face the situation head on, it is rarely as bad as our mind led us to imagine it would be. A classic example of this is the child who is afraid of the dark. He lies there immobilized by fear. Now he can hear a noise. His mind tells him it must be a monster coming to eat him up. He is terrified, but he cannot move. He cannot even yell to his mommy for help because then the monster would know where he is. He is completely immobilized and terrified. However, if he can muster up enough courage to quickly jump out of bed and switch on the light, he will see that there is actually no monster and the noise he was so afraid of was just a branch of a tree knocking against the window.

Facing our fear is never as bad as our mind makes it out to be!

It is not particularly the situation that causes stress, it is our reaction to that situation that determines our stress levels. Different people will react

differently to the same situation, depending on their mental outlook. For example: a man hears a rumor that his company will be retrenching workers. He immediately believes he will be retrenched. His mind starts creating scenarios in which he will be unable to find another job because of his age; his children will starve; his wife will leave him; he will lose his house, his car etc.... All this happens even before he knows whether he is one of those being retrenched. He will then start to behave in an insecure manner, as if the decision has already been made.

All that fear really is is:

False

Expectations

Appearing

Real

When something happens we have a choice about how we think about that event. Most times we unconsciously immediately fear the worst. This creates a negative spiral, because we create our reality and we tend to draw our fears to us. If we can decide to think positively about the situation, we can avoid the negative stress. We can remind ourselves of our talents and strengths. We can comfort ourselves in the knowledge that we do not get dealt anything that we cannot handle and that everything happens for our highest good. We could look for the potential lesson or gift in the situation that we are facing. What possible opportunities could come from this situation? Remember, worry is a waste of time and energy. Focus instead on staying positive: on breathing and staying calm so that you attract better energy to yourself.

In reality our thoughts have no power. We give them power by giving them energy. If you do not focus on a thought, it cannot survive. When a thought enters your head, you can choose whether to become attached to that thought or let it go. If you allow yourself to become attached to it, it will play over and over again in your head like a broken record. That thought will spark other negative thoughts which create a negative spiral.

What we dwell on grows!

If you let the thought go, it vanishes. A thought cannot survive on its own for more than a couple of seconds. Try it. The next thought that comes to mind, let it go. Do not pay it any attention.

We need to become masters of our lives. We cannot let our minds control us. We need to control our minds. Our minds are the tool to help us think of the pro's and cons but, ultimately, your heart knows what is best for you.

Your mind rules with fear. Your heart rules with love.

Releasing negativity through the breath:

- Become aware of your thoughts.
- Every time you find yourself thinking negatively- STOP-
- Take a deep breath in- visualize your energy coming back to you- centre yourself
- Breathe out- Release the negative thought – visualize the negativity leaving your body
- Then - THINK AGAIN- how can you think more positively? How can you be more loving? Less critical, less judgmental, less angry and unforgiving. Remember, being loving means first and foremost being loving to oneself. Sometimes we have to say NO to someone in order to love to ourselves. We cannot constantly put other people's needs before our own.

Keeping A Journal

It is often helpful to put our thoughts on paper, especially if we are experiencing anxiety and confusion. By doing this we often see things more clearly. It is like looking into an internal mirror. It helps us acknowledge certain feelings that may be influencing our decision yet also gives us a detached perspective. It helps us to externalize internal processes. Through this we gain insight and clarity. It is like talking to a good friend to whom you

can tell all your dreams and aspirations, as well as your fears, with which you can share your dark side and know that you will not be judged. It is like having a wise mentor, who sits there quietly in support and acceptance of you, while you go backwards and forwards until you find the solution that best suits you. No hidden agendas.

The mind is a tricky thing:

Our mind is a tricky thing. It works in contradiction.

- Sit with eyes closed and try to clear your mind of all thought. Impossible isn't it? The more we try not to think, the more we encounter thought. It is like someone telling you not to think of a pink elephant. Of course you will now think of a pink elephant.

- Now sit with your eyes closed and instead of trying to clear your mind of thoughts, welcome every single thought. All thoughts welcome. Amazing, isn't it! Your mind is now still.

What we resist- persists!

Therefore, do not fight your thoughts. Be aware of what you are thinking and choose whether you want to give that thought energy. If not, lovingly let it go and choose again.

Guided Visualisation

Guided visualization and relaxation exercises are extremely helpful in reducing stress and reducing the control that our mind has over us in order to create negativity in our lives.

The benefits of meditation are numerous. Meditation has been shown to:

- decrease stress (the number one cause of illnesses),
- enhance creativity,

- increase vitality,
- and facilitate self-healing.

Meditation is an important tool for self-empowerment and healing. It allows you time-out, to focus on yourself. We have such busy lives that we rarely take time out to re-charge our batteries. We are constantly putting our energy out there and we often forget how important it is to take time to replenish ourselves. We also forget that the most important relationship one has is with oneself. Meditation allows you to touch base with yourself- to give yourself much needed time, care and attention.

Negative emotions, thoughts and events are stored in the cells of the physical body and in the energy body. Meditation creates a space where the body can let go of these toxins in order to facilitate healing. This healing can occur on many different levels: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Meditation leaves one with a sense of lightness, vitality and well-being. A feeling of bliss!

I am sure you have heard the phrase: “you create your own reality”. While this is true, it is often very difficult for us to see and accept that what we are experiencing in our lives is of our own creation. The outer world is a reflection of our inner world. However, we seem to think the opposite. So when things start to go wrong in our lives, we immediately try to control and dominate the outer world. This is doomed to fail and robs us of energy.

By quietening the mind, we are able to see what it is deep within ourselves that is being reflected in our outer world. It is in this state that we are able to shut off the conscious mind in order to see the symbolic messages that life is presenting to us, and to allow our souls to guide us towards our highest good.

Once you are in a meditative state, you have gone beyond a physical reality into energy or spiritual reality. In this reality anything is possible- you are limitless. They have done studies on the power of visualization and imagination. Your mind can not tell the difference between an imagined event and a real one. When professional tennis players have been asked to

visualize themselves winning a major tournament, the body responds physiologically exactly the same as when a tennis player really does win the tournament. If we can imagine it, we can be it!

Exercise:

- Stand with your feet firmly planted in one spot.
- Straighten your arm out in front of you and then twist your body and your arm back as far as you can without moving your feet.
- Make a note of how far you were able to turn.. Make sure that this is as far as you are able to go.
- Close eyes and visualize that you are made of rubber and can twist your body round and round. See yourself pointing even further back than you did before.
- Now as you are imagining yourself as rubber, twist as far back as you possibly can.
- Open your eyes and see how you were able to twist even further.

Enjoy the feeling that you are left with after meditation and radiate it throughout your day. Notice how the quality of your day: your work, relationships with colleagues, friends and family will flow more effortlessly and joyously.

For maximum benefit, create a daily relaxation ritual. Guided visualization is like a muscle that needs to be developed. We are not used to using our minds in this way and it takes time and effort to keep ourselves healthy. However, the benefits of a daily relaxation ritual will be life transforming.

Stress Awareness

Get yourself a diary. Note down your stress levels and how you feel throughout the day. In particular, note down stressful events. Record the following information:

- At a regular interval, for example every hour, record routine stress. Note:

- the time
- the amount of stress that you feel (1 to 10)
- how happy you feel (1 to 10)
- how efficiently you are working (1 to 10)
- What thoughts are going through your head?

When stressful events occur, write down:

- What the event was
- When and where did it occur?
- What important factors made the event stressful?
- How stressful was the event?
- What thoughts are going through your head?
- How did you handle the event?
- Did you tackle the cause or the symptom?
- Do you think you dealt with the stress correctly?

The benefits of using a stress diary

Keeping a stress diary helps you become more self-aware. It helps you:

- find out the stress levels you prefer
- to know how effectively you operate under pressure
- understand the things that cause you stress
- to see how effective your stress control strategies are

Once you have kept a stress diary for a number of weeks, you will be in a position to analyze it and develop an action plan to control stress. Keeping a stress diary is an effective way of finding out what causes you stress, the level of stress you prefer, and your effectiveness under pressure.

Analyzing the Diary

After a few weeks you should be able to analyze this information. You may see some interesting patterns emerge, like a particular time of day that causes stress or a certain task or person. You may be able to make important connections. For example, you may find that you get agitated after your coffee break; this may have to do with the caffeine you have just ingested. You may also find that you get tired or irritable mid-morning or lunch time. This could be due to low blood sugar, especially if you have not had a good breakfast. You may find that you are less stressed on the days that you meditate in the morning before work or on the days that you exercise. It may also be interesting as you carry out the analysis to note down the outcomes of the jobs you were doing when you were under stress.