



Mountains Into Molehills

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Mountains Into Molehills aims to build understanding of self and others. It integrates relevant theory with practical step by step guides to coping with stressful situations, and handling difficult situations assertively.

Chapter Two - Stress Management

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To visit Brian's home website page at www.brianamartin.co.uk simply click this link

To return to www.selfhelp.brianamartin.co.uk page simply click this link

Access my other book 'The Anger Management Programme' at
www.angermanagementprogramme.co.uk .

FOUR BOOKS IN ONE

Module One: Anger Management & Impulse Control

Module Two: Anger Release & Self Calming

Module Three: Conflict Resolution Skills for Couples

Module Four: Advice for Couples in Conflict

A Prayer

*Thank you, Lord, for being with me
so far this day.*

*With your help I haven't been impatient,
lost my temper, been grumpy,
judgmental, or envious of anyone,*

*But I will be getting out of bed
in a minute and
I will really need your help then*

Amen

2. Stress Definition

'Feelings of being unable to cope now or in the future. Feelings of being overwhelmed'

'Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, depression, pessimism about the future'

'Anxious reactions to situations perceived or real'

'When our perception of the demands upon us exceeds our perception of our capability to meet those demands'

Burn Out

When burn out/ breakdown happens our cognitive processes become insufficient for us to function. Some of our brain functions shut down temporarily to escape overload.

3. Beware The Stress Build Up

Initially *ALARM*

Energy is spent worrying that you cannot cope and cannot do everything you are supposed to do. This is the stage most of us ignore. It does not last long.

Leading to *RESISTANCE*

This can last for months and is damaging to your health. You don't want to cope but you know you have to. Your body is working hard, even raising your blood pressure to keep you going.

Ultimately *EXHAUSTION*

This stage affects your entire body system including your digestion, your immune system, your heart rate. You are now prone to breakdown.

The system likely to collapse first is the adrenal glands which regulate your hormones. If you cannot control your body temperature – you may feel hot and then very cold – and if you wake up in the small hours and cannot get back to sleep, you may already be suffering from adrenal stress and should get help.

Prolonged stress is believed by many to be at the root of 80% of all illnesses because it takes its toll on the immune system which should be working to protect you from disease. Stress is now accepted as the Number One threat to health and safety in the workplace!

Why personal stress must be taken seriously

- Health is threatened
- Mental functioning is impaired
- Anger and frustration increase
- Relationships are damaged
- Self esteem is damaged
- Quality of life is impaired
- Anxious situations and feelings of panic occur more frequently

4. The Drivers of Stress

Stress impact is increased or reduced by our unique personal 'Map of The World', that set of beliefs about ourselves, others, and the world which we use in coping with life [See Chapter One: 'Understanding Self And Others']

The unique way each of us looks at the world causes considerable variation in the way our experiences impact on us, and on our ability to handle them. For example, a major career setback may be taken by one person as a temporary set back. After grieving over the setback for a short time write that person may be able to put it down to experience, and get on with reformatting and rebuilding their career.

Another person may see a similar setback as an irreversible failure, abandon career aspirations, and drop out. A third person might find the setback further proof that they are worthless, be driven to the depths of depression, and become very ill.

A similar event, but three different ways of experiencing it.

For those with low self esteem, sufferers of depression, those plagued by anxieties and self doubt, life's experiences are so much harder to bear. Their pessimistic 'Map of the World' is low is coping responses and problem solving abilities.

'Stress is a matter of perception'.

'Its not events that cause the problems. Its our perception of events'

*'Stress' covers a wide range of emotional states
and depths of emotional states.*

Stress Level One

Stress is at its least severe when we are in good emotional shape but find ourselves facing too much to do, a big event, or having to do things we have no appetite for. 'Feeling harassed' might best describe this state. At the other extreme lack of challenge and not enough to do can also be significant stressor.

If we are like a car engine in good condition, in good shape emotionally and physically, we can handle quite high levels of stress for a long time without any serious damage. All we need to learn to do is 'switch off the engine' regularly, by practising some simple Stress Management Techniques [especially relaxation techniques] or treating ourselves to relaxation therapy such as massage, aromatherapy, etc

There are thousands of self help books which will help you to teach yourself simple relaxation techniques and advise you on alternative therapies. The reading list at the end of this article offers some choices. *I always recommend learning relaxation techniques since no-one can fail to benefit.* If you haven't already, start reading one of the self help books this week.

Stress Level Two

This arises when we are in good emotional state but the level of demand on us is such that we worry about our ability to cope and fear the consequences of not coping. This level of stress responds to self help reading and relaxation skills training. Sharing your concerns with a friend or with your partner will help.

Stress Level Three

Imagine now that you are in good shape emotionally, coping with Stress Level One or Two and suddenly something happens to make your stress engine run at a much higher rate of revs. We move up to Stress Level Three when our emotional state is seriously affected by a serious crisis or devastating event. There are a whole list of things that might happen to raise the stress pressure of any human being. No-one is exempt! E.G:-

- Any traumatic event
- Bereavement or loss
- Conflict in important relationships
- Family problems
- Illness of someone close
- Mid life crisis
- New boss from hell
- Being bullied or harassed
- Collapse of a dream
- Divorce
- Financial crisis
- Menopause
- Moving home
- Verbal, physical, or sexual abuse

Any one of these events is capable of raising your stress significantly. Any combination of two or more is capable of raising your stress level to a serious level. Relaxation techniques and relaxation alternative therapies will, as ever, be a big help, but you may need professional advice to help you through the crisis period.

Stress Level Four

You are not in good emotional shape: some possible contributors:

- Childhood trauma unresolved
- Cognitive dysfunction – unhelpful thinking
- Lack of confidence in specific situations
- Low self esteem
- Social skills deficiency
- Damaging Relationships
- Unresolved grief
- Constant feelings of anxiety
- Neuro chemical deficiencies
- Unresolved anger
- Unresolved trauma
- Ill health

As with all levels of stress [except Post Traumatic Stress Disorder where relaxation techniques are contra indicated] Stress Level Four responds to developing relaxation skills. Self help reading and sharing your concerns with a friend or with your partner will help. However without professional help it is unlikely that you will overcome your difficulties.

Stress Level Five

You are normally at Stress Level Four and additional stress factors from Stress Levels One, Two, or Three, or Four arise. You need professional help without help you could become seriously ill.

You need professional help if you normally run at high stress levels and some big additional stressor hits you. The chapter on Counselling [Chapter 10] will help you decide how best to proceed, how to choose a Counsellor, and lists the questions you should ask before choosing your counsellor. The chapters on the Transactional Analysis approach to counselling [Chapter 11] and Hypnotherapy [Chapter 12] are also relevant.

Hypnotherapy can be very helpful, particularly when linked to Counselling or Personal Coaching. Hypnotherapy can help you uncover repressed past events which may be contributing to the way you are, help you develop self confidence, and teach deep relaxation exercises.

Sometimes Personal Coaching is a helpful adjunct to therapy and will help improve life skills, improve relationships, and be more assertive

Medication

You should always consult your GP first if you are experiencing stress. Medication at Stress Level Three, Four or Five is often helpful, but prolonged medication alone may actually block your recovery by encouraging you to defer dealing with the emotional issues behind your stress.

5. There are two big problems in getting stress management help

Big Problem Number One - When we are dangerously stressed we usually don't know how dangerously stressed we are, as illustrated by the sad case of the boiled frog.

The Sad Case of the Boiled Frog

I'm reliably informed that if you take a frog and place it in a beaker of tepid water it will sit there quite calmly. Place the beaker and frog on a tripod over a Bunsen burner with a very low flame and the frog will continue to sit there.

As the temperature steadily increases up to boiling point, the frog will remain in the beaker until it is boiled to death - this in spite of the fact that it could easily have jumped out at any time.

The temperature has changed so slowly that the frog is unable to recognise that what was originally a benign situation is developing into a very dangerous one.

So it is with stress. The build up of stress can happen gradually and imperceptibly so that we are running at dangerous levels of stress, in danger, just like the boiling frog, without realising it. Even when we are painfully aware that we are stressed, we can remain unaware when it is approaching risk of breakdown stress level.

Big Problem Number Two - We are very reluctant to admit to ourselves that we are dangerously stressed and need professional help. We are even more reluctant to let other people in on our stress problem.

To get help we need to be prepared to admit it to ourselves, and to others. Admitting that our emotional health is not robust is very scary; fear pushes us into denial. Men find it particularly difficult to admit that they need help.

Admitting stress problems to others in a workplace setting has its own additional difficulties. It is an unpalatable fact that within the typical workplace there is a stigma attached to stress casualties. People at work, particularly managers, admitting to stress can be seen as weak and inadequate. Ambition adds to stress, but ambitious people have the most to lose from admitting that they are struggling with stress - definitely not helpful to career progression!

Many of us have the following tendencies:

- A. Denial of our stress problem.
- B. If we do accept that there is a stress problem we underestimate its severity.
- C. If we do recognise its severity we try to keep it a secret – carry it alone.

Too often this results in breakdown and the need for long term recuperation.

What is a breakdown like?

One manager who was recovering from a breakdown talked about ‘a wave that suddenly came over me, and then my brain wouldn’t work anymore’.

A female employee found herself sitting for two hours after the moment of breakdown staring at a can of aerosol she had been using. She couldn’t work out what it was.

Neither of these people had any idea how close to breakdown they had been. With hindsight, both could see that the danger signals were clear.

Breakdown may be viewed as the start of the brain’s recovery process. Our brain seems to decide to protect itself by switching off from some normal functions in order to take a rest and recuperate. In breakdown we cannot function normally. Most people make a complete recovery in time, although a change of occupation and lifestyle is sometimes involved.

Learning To Switch Off The Motor

Good stress management is about learning to 'switch off the motor' more often, about recognising when you need to seek help, and about being prepared to accept help.

6. How Stressed Are You?

The Danger Signals

Mark Yourself on each of these.

0 = Not me 1 = Occasionally 2 = Often 3 = 'This is me'

- Binge eating
- Blowing things out of proportion
- Computer road rage
- Difficulty in making simple decisions
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Dread of the day ahead
- Feeling panicky
- Feelings of being under pressure
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Headaches
- Impatient
- Increased alcohol or cigarette consumption
- Increased forgetfulness
- Increased procrastination
- Indecisive
- Irritable: Aggressive
- Life is hard work
- Loss of appetite
- Loss of confidence
- Loss of energy
- Loss of sense of humour.
- Loss of sex drive
- Making more mistakes than you used to.
- Nightmares
- Obsessive thoughts
- Obsessive behaviours
- Tummy upsets.

These are some of the key indicators of stress

- If you score over thirty five
- Have lots of items scored at 2 or more,
 - Or have any 3's,

You really should do something about it.

7. Symptoms of Stress

Physical Signs

Aches and pains	Breathlessness	Clenched fists or jaw
Cramps /muscle spasms	Diarrhoea	Eczema
Excessive sweating	Fainting spells	Feeling tired all the time
Frequent minor illnesses	Increased heart rate	Indigestion/ heartburn
Muscle twitches	Nausea – feeling sick	Neck/ shoulder tension
Nervous twitches	Nail biting	Palpitations
Rapid weight gain/loss	Constipation	Skin irritation/rashes
Susceptibility to allergies		

Mental Signs

Impaired judgement	Less intuitive	Insensitivity to others
Easily distracted	Muddled thinking	Persistent negative thoughts
Short term thinking increase	Tunnel vision	Worrying

Emotional signs

Cynical	Demotivated	Depressed
Feeling drained	Feeling anxious	Feeling tense
Feeling unable to cope	Feeling under attack	Feelings of alienation
Feelings of pointlessness	Inappropriate humour	Irritability
Job dissatisfaction	Less satisfaction with life	Loss of confidence
Low enthusiasm	More fussy/ picky	More gloomy
More suspicious/ paranoia	Reduced self esteem	Suppressed anger

Behavioural signs

Accident prone	Anti-social behaviour	Bad driving
Disturbed sleep or insomnia	Ill thought out decisions	Impaired speech
Increased relationship problems	Loss of appetite	Overeating
Excessive sex	Low productivity	Poor time management
Restlessness	Tearful – easily upset	Unable to switch off
Unsociability	Rushing from one unfinished task to another	
Withdrawal	Voice tremor	

8. The physiology of stress

- Electro chemical activity in brain increases
- Production of adrenaline stimulated
- Respiration increases - oxygen to muscles
- Heart rate increases
- Arteries constrict
- Blood pressure rises
- Metabolism speeds up
- Muscles tense
- Stomach acid increases
- Blood sugar increases
- Cholesterol increase
- Pupils dilate

In extreme stress

- Stomach ejects contents
- Bowels empty

Why does our physiology adjust under stress?

- Because we are programmed to be in best shape for fight or flight [or freeze]
- Fear is a defence mechanism
- Our genetic programming is telling us to run, fight [or freeze]
- When we cannot obey our 'hard wired' genetic programming of fighting or running away, when we are trapped in a stressful situation we are stuck where we don't want to be – and stewing in our own hormones

9. Are You Stress Prone?

1. Do you usually do several things at once?
2. Are you very competitive?
3. Do you dislike, or feel guilty about relaxing?
4. Do you get bored when other people are talking?
5. Do you often interrupt people, finish their sentences?
6. Are you always in a hurry?
7. Do you find it hard to wait patiently in a queue
8. Do you speak emphatically, forcefully?
9. Do you find it hard to delegate?
10. Do you do things quickly, eating, walking?
11. Are you irritated by people who dawdle?
12. Do you find it difficult to relate to other people's interests?
13. Do you have few interests outside work?
14. Do you find it hard to take things one at a time?

*The number of 'yes' answers indicates your tendency towards what is described as a **Type A - Aggressive Communication Style** and prone to stress, heart attack, and premature death. The number of 'no' answers indicates a tendency to one of the healthier communication styles which is great - so long as it doesn't indicate Passivity. **Passive Types** are not good at expressing themselves and getting their needs met. This often leads to high stress which is bottled up and just as dangerous as Type A behaviours. Whether you are Aggressive or Passive you would find it helpful to learn to be Assertive instead [see Chapters Seven: 'Assertiveness' and Chapter Eight 'Difficult Conversations'] .*

10. Reducing Stress

Reducing 'Normal' - Applicable to everyone

- Learn relaxation breathing [See Chapter Six and Chapter Nine]
- Remember - mind and body are one system – when you relax your body you relax your mind – and vice versa
- Remember - lasting stress reduction is achieved cumulatively over time. Persistence in approach is necessary
- Develop your personal stress awareness - learn to spot and counter your stress build up [See Chapter Nine 'Managing Anger']. Learn how to use the 'Instant Calming' approach [Chapter Six]
- Develop regular exercise and sensible eating & drinking habits
- Take at least one hour each week to develop your Deep Relaxation Skills [Chapter Six]
- Do self help reading including 'The Big Book Of Calm' by Paul Wilson – a compendium of relaxation techniques
- Share your concerns with a friend

For deeper stress problems

- Construct a Personal Stress Management Plan [following page]
- Take a Stress Management Course at your local college
- Develop your assertiveness [Chapters Seven and Eight]
- Develop your conflict management skills [Chapter Four]
- Develop awareness of 'Unhelpful thinking' which levers up stress [Chapter One]
- Learn to prepare for anxiety provoking events [Chapter Six]
- Create a sanctuary real or imaginary– a special place where you can escape to, find calmness. [Chapter Six]
- Learn to use affirmations to boost your self esteem and self confidence [Chapter Six]
- Learn to release your anger safely without hurting yourself or others [Chapter 9]
- Get Time Management training [Chapter 3]
- Have a Personal Goal, something difficult and worthwhile you intend to achieve.

11. What additional support is available to you that you have not been using, or you could use more of?

12. Overall - what is the biggest change you intend to make?

Reading List

Face The Fear & Do It Anyway

By Susan Jeffers

A world best seller about escaping the prison of fear

The Feeling Good Handbook

David D Burns MD ISBN 0-452-28132-6

A world best seller with advice on conquering anxiety and self defeating attitudes.

The Big Book of Calm

Paul Wilson Penguin Books 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4

A summary of over a hundred calming techniques and approaches

Managing Anger Gael Lindenfeld ISBN 0 7225 2715 2

Dealing positively with hurt and frustration:

Managing and controlling your anger

The Mind Guide To Managing Stress ISBN 1-874690-43-X

And, also from mind

Surviving Working Life ISBN 1-874690-91-91-X

Mind [National Association For Mental Health]

15-19 Broadway, London E15 4BQ www.mind.org.uk

Tackling Work Related Stress ISBN-O-7176- 250 – 6

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