

STRESS MANAGEMENT



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## 1 Introduction

Stress is sometimes called the 'black plague' of modern times. It is said to cost industry and the health services billions of pounds annually and is responsible for other social ills including accidents at work and marital breakdown. Modern life generally is potentially stressful because human ability to adapt to change is limited yet adaptive demands have risen and show no signs of abating. Fax machines, electronic mail and mobile phones may make communication swifter and easier but they also create work and imply greater intrusion of work into personal life and rapid obsolescence. For instance, to-day's 'state of the art' hand held computer is, almost literally, tomorrow's museum exhibit. Likewise, to-day's exemplary customer care facilities are outdone by competitors tomorrow. Many of to-day's professionals can expect to need to retrain at least once. Then there is the omnipresent sceptre of redundancy. No occupation can be considered safe any more. The world may be a global village but it means that some people are obliged to spend months of the year working thousands of miles from home leaving families to cope for themselves.

This booklet examines how stress can affect you as a student, why you should do something about it, and what you can do to manage stress. The contents include:

### Key Issues

- What is stress?
- Why is stress harmful?
- What causes stress?
- How can I manage stress for success?

### What is stress?

Let's begin by considering what IS meant by stress. The word stress derives from the Latin word *stringer*, meaning to draw tight. The concept of stress emanates from physics and engineering whereby pressure is seen as resulting in strain and ultimately fracture - hence, for example, 'nervous *breakdown*', or, 'the straw that *broke* the camel's back'. Modern behavioural scientists regard stress as:

- a person's *adaptive* response to any form of stimulus which places *excessive* psychological or physical *demands* upon them.

A **stressor** is any psychological or physical factor which places excessive demand upon the individual. It can be virtually anything, a sudden loud noise, an interruption, a piece of equipment failing through to the more chronic forms of stress like long hours and long commutes between home and work and, of course, studying for a professional qualification.

Stress results from:

- the difference between the demands placed upon the individual and the individual's ability to cope with these.

To put it another way, stress is the gap between what we feel can do and what everyone else expects us to do.

Note that the individual must experience the demand as excessive for stress to result. This explains why different people find different things stressful. For example, some people find it difficult to concentrate in noisy environments such as open plan offices, whereas others appear relatively unaffected.

### **Stress Patterns**

Evidence suggests that people respond to excessive demands in three phases as follows:

1. Alarm
2. Resistance
3. Exhaustion.

Stage one occurs when an individual encounters a stressor. Metaphorically speaking an *alarm* bell rings such as, 'I'll never finish this job on time'. The stressor then presents the individual with a choice between coping with the situation or avoiding it known as 'fight' or 'flight'.

The second stage, *resistance*, occurs when the person decides to try and cope with the situation. For example, they may brew a strong cup of coffee in an attempt to revive their energies. They may forgo their lunch break or decide to work late.

Sometimes the individual succeeds in meeting the demands placed upon them. Prolonged exposure to stress, however, can lead to *exhaustion*, however, as the individual's ability to cope crumbles.

Another way of conceptualising stress is as a mis-match between the individual and their particular environment. Individuals, it is suggested, attempt to maintain a stable relationship between their thoughts and emotions and their environment.

In this view, a person may be seen as possessing a 'range of stability' wherein they can cope fairly comfortably with the physical and emotional demands of their environment. A stressor is any factor which drives the individual beyond their 'range of stability' forcing them to respond in order to restore stability. This is known as the adjustment process or coping strategy.

## 2. Why is stress harmful?

However we define stress, what matters is that prolonged exposure to stress is associated with a long list of illnesses. There may be two reasons for this. First, stress can damage the body's immune system - rather like the AIDS virus, thus leaving the person vulnerable to life threatening illnesses including coronary thrombosis (heart attack) and strokes. Stress is also linked to numerous less threatening but nevertheless debilitating conditions such as headaches, ulcers, and insomnia.

Second, people experiencing stress may resort to excessive smoking or excessive alcohol consumption. Likewise they may find it difficult to find time for exercise or a proper meal, - resorting to a 'Mars Bar' for lunch, for example.

Stress can cause psychological as well as physical damage. In particular, depression is linked to stress. Evidence suggests that depression damages the ability of the body's immune system to protect itself against pathogenic processes which cause illness and disease. It is unclear whether altered immune function is caused by depression as such, or behavioural changes which typically accompany depression such as disrupted sleep patterns, poor appetite and increased alcohol consumption. One theory suggests that depression results from exposure to uncontrollable stressors. Another possibility is that depression is itself a stressor. What is clear, however, is that depressed people are susceptible to illness. They are also more likely to have an accident at work or endanger others.

Stress also affects our ability to make decisions. In particular, we are liable to narrow our focus of attention and miss the big picture. We are also more likely to take unwarranted risks when under stress. Organisations also pay a price for stress in absenteeism, turnover, poor quality and interpersonal conflict as stress spills over into working relations and undermines them.

Above all, stress undermines performance. Studying for a professional qualification can be stressful because of the increased demands study makes and the finite resources you have for coping with that. To compound matters you may already be under-taking a stressful job with the added stressors of family responsibility.

That is not to suggest you should be deterred from accepting those challenges, only that you should be prepared to take steps that will enable you to meet them effectively and without damaging your health and relations with other people.

### **Stressors**

Although people find different things stressful, evidence suggests that certain factors are almost bound to be stressful if you are exposed to them. These are:

- Working conditions
- Role related problems
- Overload
- Underload
- Your role in the organisation
- Career development

## **Working Conditions and Stress**

Inappropriate working conditions are a source of stress. Potential stressors include working fast, engaging in work which involves high levels of physical effort and/or long hours, work that is repetitive or otherwise monotonous or work involving risk and danger. The same applies to noise, fumes, and too much or too little light, environments that are too hot or too cold. What makes such stressors dangerous is that you may not be aware of their harmful effects but the damage to mind and body accumulates nonetheless.

Shift working is potentially stressful because it causes severe disturbance of circadian rhythms, physical and psychological ill-health, and, social and domestic disruption. Night shift working imposes greater adaptive costs than day time shift working because of the increased recovery time – even if you actually like shift working.

Too much work (quantitative overload) is potentially stressful. Examples of overload include time pressures, deadlines and arduous travel, noise, and frequent interruptions (open plan offices, for example,) all can increase the sense of strain. Work that is perceived as too difficult (qualitative overload) is also stressful. Long hours are another form of overload which can lead to ill health through becoming over-tired, physically and mentally, prolonged exposure to workplace stressors, and, inappropriate life style habits including smoking, heavy alcohol consumption, inadequate exercise and poor diet.

Evidence suggests that tiredness, (and depression and anxiety) increase risk taking propensity. For example, tired doctors in casualty are less likely to conduct a long series of time consuming tests for a potentially life threatening variant of an illness. Moreover, anxious individuals are more responsive to negative information and may spontaneously generate more negative thoughts and associations making negative outcomes seem even worse thus undermining the capacity for judgement and decision making. Research by psychologists further suggests that relatively small changes in mood can have dramatic effects upon risk taking, and, people are generally unaware of changes in risk taking propensity.

Work underload is another potential source of stress as it diminishes job satisfaction and results in increased sickness absence. Under load refers to situations where people are employed in jobs which are beneath their capacities. Underload includes:

- tasks which are too narrow or which lack stimulus, that is, are devoid of creativity, problem solving or social interaction, and
- tasks involving close attention but which provide little stimulation in return.

Office work can involve a significant component of under load such as filing or record keeping. Employees who are over-qualified for their jobs may also experience stress resulting from under load. The effects of under load are exacerbated where long periods of tedium are punctuated by sudden arousal. This is particularly true of police work but it occurs in other contexts including office work where you may experience hours of tedium followed by a sudden rush to prepare and despatch papers for a committee meeting.

Three role related factors have been identified by researchers as potentially stressful. These are:

1. Role ambiguity
2. Role conflict
3. Responsibility for others.

*Role ambiguity* arises when role requirements are unclear. For example, where standards are vague, where an employee is unsure about for what and for whom they are responsible. Elements of professional study can impose this form of stress, that is, where you are not sure what is required of you.

*Role conflict* arises when an individual is faced with:

- conflicting job requirements, or,
- averse role requirements, or,
- illegitimate role requirements.

Conflicting role requirements occur where specific elements of a particular job are inconsistent with one another. For instance you may be responsible for service quality yet required to meet output targets at the same time. People prone to anxiety tend to suffer more from role conflict than more sanguine individuals. They also react to it with more pronounced tension.

Adverse role requirements concern tasks which employees find unpleasant. For instance, staff in social services offices often have to deal with clients with low personal hygiene. The most averse role requirements in police work are facing unpredictable situations, confronting people with weapons and dealing with domestic disputes. Even the more congenial occupations may entail adverse role requirements – jobs that have to be done that we simply hate doing.

Illegitimate role requirements are demands perceived as outside the scope of an employee's contract or otherwise unfair, inappropriate or demeaning – like being required to do work that is the responsibility of more senior (and better paid) staff.

Relationships at work can be a source of support (see below) but they can also produce stress if there are unresolved tensions in the air. This applies whether the relationship involve one's hierarchical superior or colleagues. Broadly speaking evidence suggests that managers who score low upon consideration (that is, the more negative, exploitative and authoritarian types) tend to create job pressure which may engender stress. Sexual harassment is another potential stressor which is gaining increasing recognition. Sexual harassment includes:

- unwelcome sexual advances,
- requests for sexual favours, and,
- other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

Sexual harassment occurs where submission to sexual requests is:

- an explicit or implicit condition of employment, or,
- influences an employment decision, or,
- where behaviour is such that it interferes with work performance or creates a hostile or offensive work environment.

Evidence suggests that sexual harassment is widespread. Estimates suggest that in the USA, one in every two women will suffer harassment during their working lives – though it does occasionally happen to men. Many acts of harassment are minor in

themselves. It is their cumulative impact which leads to stress which may be reflected in increased absenteeism and turnover. Sexual harassment can also harm an employee's relationships with colleagues and supervisors. For instance, avoidance strategies can create tension where the victim's work requires frequent interaction with the person who is harassing them as it can be perceived as 'not pulling your weight'.

Career stress refers to job insecurity, perceived obsolescence, performance appraisal, impending retirement and blocked promotion. Although career stress can affect employees at all levels, those in middle-age are perhaps the most vulnerable. Middle age is the time when promotion opportunities generally decrease and the individual faces competition from younger people. Middle-age may also be a time where the cumulative impact of other stressors begins to take its toll.

Organisational climate refers to factors like opportunities for participation and a sense of involvement. It is closely related to culture which can be an oblique, unspoken way of controlling people. For instance, a culture of long hours can be extremely stressful or cultures where people are afraid to take their full holiday entitlement for fear of being perceived as insufficiently committed to the organisation.

### **The Home/Work Interface**

The old adage of employees being required to leave their troubles at the factory gate is unrealistic. Events in your private life can also lead to stress which spills into the workplace. Besides, as we shall see the division between work stress and non-work stress is seldom distinct, each can influence the other.

The sources of non-work stress are potentially infinite. For convenience they may be grouped as follows:

- life transitions
- 'daily hassles'
- the impact of personality, and,
- the home/work interface.

Life transitions refers to major turning points in your life. Death and divorce are at the top of the list. Deciding to study for professional qualifications is also a major life transition though not as acutely stressful. Stressfulness is defined as the magnitude of adjustment required. For instance, change implies disruption of attachment bonds which can prompt depression. Studying means that you may have to adjust to not seeing as much of the family as you would like. It may also entail other changes such as to eating and sleeping habits. It can even result in a major rupture like divorce or separation. Pleasurable events can be just as stressful as bad ones. This is because even things like buying a new car call for adaptation. Imagine winning the lottery. You might think it would be the best thing that could happen to you – you could give up studying for a start. In fact it could ruin your life by depriving you of all sense of meaning and purpose in your life. Fortunately the contingency is a remote one.

'Daily hassles' refers to the every day interruptions and disruptions that beset us all unless we happen to live in a monastery. Missing the bus, train running late, children sullen and uncooperative, central heating boiler not working – you name it, it happens every day. Moreover, these never ending 'hassles' are actually more stressful and therefore damaging than major life transitions. It is not difficult to see why. These pressures constantly challenge our ability to deal with things that are important to us, and they are largely uncontrollable which adds to the sense of

helplessness.

Certain types of people may be more stress-prone than others. Researchers have identified two personality profiles known respectively as Type A and Type B. Type A personalities are defined as competitive types who do everything rapidly. They are the sort of people who have at least two telephones on their desk, cram their diaries full of appointments. They typically work long hours and regularly take work home. Type A personalities feel under constant pressure to perform. They set themselves high standards which almost invariably elude them. They are impatient with people and can be abrasive. Type B personalities tend to be the opposite. Unsurprisingly Type A people may be more prone to heart disease than Type B types because of the underlying anger and hostility felt by Type A personalities.

The inter-face between home and work is another potential source of stress. More specifically, job and family conflict can be conceptualised as a lack of fit at the interface of work and family roles. Lack of fit can occur in two ways as follows:

1. Where work interferes with family life.
2. Where family life interferes with work.

Work/family conflicts are associated with heavy alcohol consumption - that is, five drinks or more a night. Although it is unclear whether workplace stress is transmitted from one person to another, there is definite evidence that partners communicate their moods to one another to such an extent that the well being of a cohabiting partner can be under-mined. Family/work conflict appears to have the most damaging effect upon individuals' health. The precise links are unclear, however. One suggestion is that employees who are distracted by family demands (such as caring for a sick child) suffer a loss of self-image because they feel inadequate to the job. Loss of self-image may trigger depression which then harm's the body's immune system thus rendering the individual susceptible to illness.

Potentially debilitating conflict can arise in other ways. In many middle class families the wife bears most of the responsibility for managing the home even though she too has a full-time and demanding job. In some such households husbands are often abroad for long periods. Relocations are frequent and mandatory. The wife may be required to entertain business colleagues, attend social functions in connection with work and the like. Dual career's where both husband and wife work can be so exhausting that partners become ineffective in both roles - though usually it is the woman who bears the brunt of the pressure.

### **Are you feeling burned out?**

How do people respond to prolonged stress? Burnout occurs where the individual's emotional and physical resources are depleted to such an extent that they are no longer able to cope with the demands of the job. Burnout is characterised by:

- emotional exhaustion,
- feeling distanced from others, known as de-personalisation, and,
- diminished personal accomplishment.

Research upon the topic of burnout started from the assumption that work involving high levels of emotional arousal (health care professionals, for example), could be damaging. *Emotional exhaustion* is sometimes known as 'compassion fatigue'. It is characterised by inadequate energy and a feeling that one's emotional resources are consumed. Emotional exhaustion may be accompanied by feelings of frustration or tension as employees feel unable to respond to clients needs, feeling unable to give any more and dread at the thought of returning to work for another day.

*De-personalization* is characterised by unfeeling attitudes towards clients, co-workers and the organisation. Clients cease to be people and instead become objects. Visible symptoms of de-personalization include:

- the use of derogatory or abstract language or jargon,
- imposing a rigid division between professional and personal life, and,
- withdrawal behaviours.

*Diminished personal accomplishment* refers to a tendency to engage in negative self-evaluation. The individual feels that they are becoming progressively less competent and are achieving less and less.

Although burnout is most strongly associated with the caring professions like nursing and social work, it can apply in *any* job involving frequent and/or intense inter-personal contact with clients. The risks of burnout are increased where client contact is direct, frequent, of long duration and involves dealing with chronic as distinct from acute problems and where feedback from clients is generally unrewarding, that is, either non-existent or negative. Overload and role ambiguity also increase strain.

Employees who are over-achievers or who have unrealistic expectations and high ideals are among those most prone to burnout. Such individuals not only expect a lot from themselves but also the organisation that employs them. Burnout is also more probable amongst employees for whom work is central to their lives. Such employees are prone to emotional exhaustion because they see work and its consequences as extremely important.

### **3. Managing Stress**

Some stress can be healthy in that it galvanizes us into action and we may enjoy the sense of achievement that comes from rising to a challenge and beating the odds.

*The more you do, the more you find time to do*

You probably know the old adage, if you want to get something done in a hurry give the job to someone who is busy. To a point pressure is healthy and you may be pleasantly surprised by just how much you can get done in a day.

*Stop it before it starts*

There is a fine dividing line, however, between the kind of stress that is productive and the kind that becomes destructive. Moreover, once you cross that line, you risk setting in motion vicious circles. The key, then, is to aim to shield your self from stress as much as possible.

*Know thyself*

If I was allowed only one bullet point this would be it.

Recall a stressor is anything that threatens something important to you. Self-knowledge is vitally important precisely because different things stress different people. A little self-analysis can be helpful here – what things do *you* find stressful?

It does not matter what the answer is. The list may contain trivial items like 'clutter' and 'wires all over the place' as well as weightier ones like 'deadlines' and 'being dependent on other people'. The point is, once you identify the prime sources of stress in your life you can anticipate them and take avoiding action.

*Lead from strength*

A very positive way of grappling with stress is to identify your own formula for success. Just as some race horses prefer soft ground whereas others are more successful when the going is hard there are certain conditions and approaches that favour us. The trouble is at school and university we are taught 'one best way' of doing things when in fact there may be many ways of reaching the same goal.

#### **Find your winning formula**

To find the winning formula you should proceed as follows:

1. Think of an occasion when something went really well for you. It may be very simple such as cooking a nice meal or a presentation to colleagues that was successful.
2. Now jot down a list of adjectives that describe behaviours on your part and other factors that contributed to your success. It may be that you were very well organised, or spontaneous, you may have been enthused by others, you may have slept well the night before.
3. Now cross out anything on that list that you don't like about yourself.
4. Next eliminate the factors that basically duplicate one another, for example,

- 'good planning' and 'careful organisation,' are virtually synonymous with one another.
5. Next try and reduce the list to not more than three key factors, that is, those that seem most directly connected to your success.
  6. Couple those adjectives into a slogan about yourself. For example, 'energising for results' or, 'planning, planning, planning'.

You now have the biggest anti-dote to stress of them all, that is, your own winning formula for high performance. By applying it when you approach potentially stressful tasks you will magnify your effectiveness in a fashion that is truly effortless.

#### *Plan ahead to get the odds on your side*

Although you are unlikely to be able to eliminate stress completely, you can significantly reduce it by careful planning before embarking upon a course of study.

The important thing is to recognise the challenge and take steps to meet it in advance. Discuss and agree with your partner how the requirements for home work and possibly college attendance will be handled. For instance, will they look after the children two or three nights a week or at the weekends, and if not, why not? Also, ask yourself, where will you work and what will you do where facilities at home are unsuitable or just non-existent?

The same applies to smaller things. If you are attending evening classes make sure you get a proper meal before the sessions start so that you are alert and fortified and therefore able to concentrate.

#### *Time is more important than money*

Money can be replaced. In contrast, elapsed time is gone forever. We cannot recall the last five minutes never mind the last six months. If during study you face a choice between expending money or expending time to achieve the same object, opt for spending money. For instance, why wait say half an hour for a bus after an evening in college just adding to the general stress of it all if you can afford a taxi?

#### *Choose a healthy discipline and stick to it*

Studying demands effort and it is easy to let things slip. Set aside time for study and stick to it – no matter how tired you feel. The same applies to the rest of your life. Set aside times for exercise, relaxation, spending with the children and so forth and try not to let study or the other demands of work intrude.

#### *Feeling guilty helps no one*

Studying for a professional qualification demands sacrifices and may involve unusual working hours. The biggest enemy is often guilt – the feeling that you are stealing time and attention from other people. Guilt is as natural as it is unhelpful. Remember, this is not forever, and, the people you are feeling guilty about are going to be the long term beneficiaries of your efforts. You are not being selfish. You are simply trying to put in place the foundations of building a future.

There are bound to be low moments on a demanding course of study but mood is a transient phenomenon. Left to your own devices you will recover. The trouble

is people who tell you to stop worrying and cheer up make you feel guilty about how you feel. That then becomes the real source of depression. Just remember feelings do not harm anyone – only behaviour can do that.

#### *Don't confuse linear time with quality time*

Intuitively we tend to imagine that the quality of our relationships with people is a function of the length of time we spend with them. Actually, the quality of that time is more important. Would you rather spend twenty minutes with someone who is listening to you intently or two hours with someone who talks at you all the time?

Whilst you may need to restrict the amount of time you spend with friends and family whilst studying you can make sure that the time you do spend with them is time well spent, that is, where they command your attention one hundred per cent.

#### *Cling to your anchors*

Major life transitions happen. To the extent that they are controllable, however, try and ensure that a period of study coincides as much as possible with a period of stability in your life.

In other words, postpone major changes like moving house or moving job until qualified. To do otherwise is to sacrifice the things that are anchoring you socially and emotionally.

#### *Create favourable working conditions*

Great composers and painters may have been obliged to work in dark freezing cold garrets. Unless you happen to be an exceptionally poor student – you should not have to. It may seem trite to mention the importance of good working conditions. There is nothing to be gained and everything to lose by shunning comfort. Indeed if Mozart had taken better care of himself he might have lived to complete his Requiem.

To the extent that stress is caused by poor working conditions it can be eliminated by creating a place to work that is warm, well lit and quiet. The Chinese emphasis upon Feng Shui may seem far fetched but a tidy well organised study is an asset that should not be under-estimated. You cannot study for a professional examination in front of the television. Freedom from distraction is an absolute requirement.

#### *Banish interruptions*

Interruptions are a major source of stress. At best constant interruption explains why nothing gets done in organisations. In fact research by psychologists shows that they are major factor in accidents – including air crashes. Try and make sure that you will not be interrupted when you are working. Switch off mobile phones, for example.

#### *Stopping keeps you going*

Beware fatigue. Fatigue is corrosive. Once it sets in it distorts and generally depresses your outlook on life such that small problems become grossly distorted and you start to over-react to trivial irritants. The answer is a short but *complete* break.

Fatigue also undermines concentration so try and reserve as study time, the times when you are most likely to feel reasonably rested. If that is impossible try cat napping before commencing work. Doctors recommend fifteen to twenty minutes but I have a busy colleague who sleeps for an hour and then starts work at ten o'clock at night and works through till one am – without suffering any ill effects.

Some people find aroma therapy useful in reducing fatigue. Combining rosemary and peppermint oils are recommended for improving concentration. As regards playing music by Mozart, the actual scientific evidence that improves concentration and subsequent exam performance is sketchy but if you find it helpful then play it. I find Byrd masses played very quietly helpful to concentration and Glen Gould's 1950's recording of the Goldberg variations useful when I need to rattle along on a computer. Some days though I find any form of music a distraction.

#### *Get yourself into the right frame of mind*

Being in the right frame of mind is an essential pre-requisite to effective study and an important component of stress management. It is also one that many students under-estimate.

#### *A tranquil mind is a receptive mind*

Before you start work, think about what you are going to do before you start doing it. There is no need to disappear into a monastery for a week (though there may be something to be said for it) – rather it is a matter of clearing the mind and disposing of agitation before embarking upon study.

#### *Stress hates exercise*

Exercise is also very effective in banishing stress and getting yourself into the right frame of mind. Most of us fail to exercise enough. We forget that our forbears got rid of their tensions by beating carpets and other heavy forms of house work.

#### *Coping With Overload*

Overload, in the context of studying for professional examinations, is likely to be the most prominent source of stress. Given that the amount of work you are required to complete is fixed, and given that timescales are finite and potentially pressurised, the only variable in the equation that you can influence in any large degree is in how you approach the work.

#### *Go slow to go fast.*

At first sight it might seem silly to say to someone trying to cope with the problems of overload, 'slow down'. Indeed, the intuitive response is to speed up, and, if you follow your intuition you may solve the immediate problem. I say 'may' because there is a danger of either running around in pointless circles, or, succumbing to what psychologists call 'threat rigidity' where the individual becomes so stressed that they almost literally 'freeze', that is, become incapable of taking any effective action.

If you speed up, your efforts will almost certainly obey the law of diminishing marginal returns. For example, the extended concentration loaned by every cup

of strong coffee is likely to get shorter and shorter. Moreover, ultimately you run the risk of doing long term damage by becoming exhausted.

The trick of managing overload is to begin by proceeding as *slowly* as possible – even to the extent of doing nothing for a few minutes. Then write down a list of absolutely everything you have to do. The list does not need to be in any particular order – just let the items flood onto the paper as they come into your head. Now add a few more like ‘sharpen pencil’, ‘re-fill pen’ ‘get A4 pad from bag’ and so on.

*Start by doing a few very easy things*

Having drawn up your list, mark the most important items with a highlighter pen. Do not tackle these immediately, however. Instead, begin with a few easy jobs – like ‘switch on computer’ – and cross them out as you going along. Before long you will have made substantial inroads into your list!

Of course what you are actually doing is building your own confidence through creating a sense accomplishment and engaging motivation theory. It also starts to build concentration.

Motivation theory predicts that people speed up as they get nearer to their goal. This self-generated form of motivation is much better than frantically rushing at tasks precisely because it is self-generating. If you push yourself you end up slowing down. By engaging self-motivation you will naturally go faster and faster.

*Discriminate between the urgent and the important.*

The urgent, it is said, drives out the important. Look again at the items you have highlighted and prioritise them according to what matters most.

*Deal with first things first.*

Next refine your priorities. Novices studying the martial arts practice scenarios involving multiple assailants – as if being attacked by a gang, for example. They learn to deal with the assailant who is closest first precisely because their physical proximity means they are best positioned to inflict damage. The principle works well for coping with overload too. Start with the tasks where the deadline looms closest.

*Wood bends*

Although some deadlines like exams are fixed and immovable a good many are more flexible than they might seem. Rather than feel overwhelmed by too much work, try and re-negotiate deadlines.

Emphatically this is not a sign of weakness but strength. Most managers would far rather that a member of staff came to them to seek an extension than leave things to the last moment and then rush things or disappear on sick leave.

*Learn to expect lows*

Recall, qualitative overload is work that is too difficult. Being faced with this kind of overload does not mean that you are dense and destined never to qualify. Professional courses, by definition, involve mastering prescribed knowledge where choice is highly constrained or even non-existent. Almost inevitably, therefore,

there will be parts of the course that you find difficult.

It pays to seek help from a tutor or other source of advice sooner rather than later – rather than grapple for hours with the problem yourself. If you are thrown back upon your own resources, however, you will need to overcome the difficulties. The first thing to remember is that although professional examinations are challenging, they are not rocket science. If they were, no one would ever pass.

You must expect times when progress seems to be slow. Just keep going and you will get through it.

#### *Never take refuge in tomorrow*

We are all human and therefore prone to the temptation to put off until tomorrow that which should have been done yesterday. This is precisely the kind of behaviour that leads to last minute exam panic. Confront problems, don't ignore them and hope they will go away. Otherwise it becomes a case of tomorrow and tomorrow.

#### *Divide and conquer*

The first thing to do with large and seemingly intractable problems is to break them down into their component parts. Proceeding in that way makes it easier to gain a grasp of parts of the subject – which in itself starts to contribute to scoring marks. Besides, once problems are sub-divided they seldom appear anywhere near as daunting as they did at first.

#### *Aim for a little often*

Whilst it may seem overly optimistic to suggest that you can master just about anything by devoting fifteen minutes a day to studying it, it is nevertheless surprising what knowledge you can amass in short frequent bursts. It is also a way of minimising the strain and coaxing yourself along. Bear in mind also that the brain goes on working on problems when you are not actually focussing on them. By working on the principle of 'a little often' you maximise this effortless route to learning.

Incidentally, it is sometimes said that the art of teaching is to say the same thing in many different ways in the hope that one of them will sink in. If, having applied these techniques, understanding still eludes you, try different learning materials. Look for text books and other sources that cover the syllabus in a way that you find user friendly.

#### *Once you accept something is going to take a long time, it speeds up.*

There is a saying in poker that money flows from the impatient to the patient. Think about it.

Western culture is obsessed by time. You only have to look at the proliferation of clocks in our lives. Not only is everything we do regulated by time, clocks are everywhere, in computers, mobile phones, micro wave ovens, televisions – all telling us the time.

The upshot of our pre-occupation with time is that we expect things to be done quickly and to precise timings. It is a major source of stress and yet other cultures function without it. For instance, in some cultures instead of saying the

meeting will be at nine o'clock the understanding is that the meeting will take place some time in the morning. Paradoxically, once we accept that something is going to take a long time it usually gets done faster.

Why this should be so is a mystery but I suspect it has something to do with doing one thing at a time. Many people confuse activity and effort with accomplishment.

#### *Do one job at a time*

Also, when we are stressed we are more likely to start umpteen things – remember go slow to go fast. It is better to start one job and finish it than start six and finish none.

#### *No one lives long enough to complete their 'to do' list*

To manage stress you need to be firm with yourself and yet at the same time gentle.

In particular do not be hard on yourself if you fail to get through everything on your 'to do' list so long as you concentrate upon essentials. Research by psychologist's shows that as human beings we systematically over-estimate our ability to control our lives and that includes our estimates of how much work we can get through in a day.

#### *Be good to yourself*

Recall, underload is either not having enough to do, or work that is under challenging – boring in other words. Again it is virtually inevitable that you will find some parts of the course some parts are more interesting than others. The principle of 'a little often' will help here too.

Another stratagem is to enhance motivation by rewarding yourself for work completed. The nature of the reward is immaterial (within reason) whether it is a cream bun or a shopping expedition to buy a new coat. What matters is that it is something you value – though a many small rewards are likely to be more effective than one big one. Gentle firmness is recommended, that is, you only get the reward on completion of the task – and not until.

### **Coping With a Hostile Climate at Work**

Next to partners and spouses, employers are likely to be the biggest obstacle to study – sending you abroad during the week you have set aside for revision, transferring you to another part of the country just as you have settled into college.

#### *Adapt and survive*

An organisational climate is difficult to change and therefore the best advice is to adapt in order to survive. This means taking on the colour of your surroundings, just as the Russians did at Stalingrad and defeated the mighty German Sixth Army – a victory that altered the course of the war. The Russians wore clothing designed to withstand extreme weather conditions of minus twenty Fahrenheit whereas many German soldiers literally froze at their posts. The Russians also dressed in white so they could move across the terrain unobserved.

As far as possible, try and go with the flow. By all means try and negotiate your

own way round your employer's demands but try and avoid offering overt resistance. Remember your priorities and those of your employer are likely to be different. Before you act, step back from your (possibly) single minded commitment to passing your exams and try and see things from your employer's point of view. This broader viewpoint will make you a much more effective negotiator.

#### *Cultivate your support networks*

Social support may not prevent stress but it can help to manage it. Having the support of friends, family and colleagues is important. Be active in building *and* maintaining your networks. Remember other people are likely to be stressed too so be prepared to give as well as take.

Sometimes when we feel stressed the last thing we want to do is listen to other people and their problems for fear of making our own stress worst. Actually the reverse is more likely to be true.

If studying in organised classes the support of others can be very helpful. You might want to set up small study groups, help one another out with notes, text books, sharing your feelings about the onerous parts of the course – it all helps to get the odds on your side by reducing the stress that results from isolation.

#### *Change your behaviour to create virtuous circles*

Some exposure to stress is virtually inevitable. You do have a choice in how you react to it, however. Some people make things worst for themselves by flying into rage rather than dealing with the situation and therefore making it worst. In the end it becomes a pattern of 'flight' rather than 'fight' characterised by reality avoidance. Next time you feel like 'flying off the handle' when something goes wrong change your approach from a destructive one to a constructive one. For example, imagine you are en route to a job interview and the car has a puncture or the train is late, just say to yourself, 'bad day for this to happen' and then telephone ahead with a message. It may sound obvious but it is surprising how easy it is to slip into a behaviour pattern that helps no one – least of all you.

It is more than that, however. By changing your behaviour, you take control. Recall, stressors do damage because they are uncontrollable. Once you start to take charge a virtuous circle is set in motion as gaining command of one situation enables you to take command of another – and so on.

The same goes for destructive habits like responding to stress via smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. They are not compulsory and, although they may afford short term relief, the long term disadvantages are likely to outweigh the short term gains. Exercise takes time but for every half hour spent in exercise – even if it is just a walk you probably lever another two for study. The same goes for taking time to plan your work. It is like Robinson Crusoe never having time to do anything on his desert island because he was too busy catching fish. He decided to break out of this vicious circle by going hungry for a day and making a net.

#### *Instead of filling your mind, try emptying it*

Eastern philosophy has a lot to offer when it comes to managing stress. Part of the aim of study is to add to knowledge by filling the mind with new things. The technique of stress management is to empty it for a while – rather like leaving a field fallow. I practice this by listening to Radio 3 in the morning. No matter how busy I am, how early I have to get up, the day does not begin until I have

consumed at least one pot of coffee and listened to whatever is being played. Listening to music automatically empties the mind because you cannot think about anything else. It is surprisingly refreshing because when the time comes to engage in rigorous thinking and analysis the mind feels well and truly rested even though the actual exercise may have lasted for only twenty minutes or so. If tired in the evening listening to an opera via the head phones works just as well.

Meditation is a formal version of this technique. The difference is that it has to be learned but if the idea appeals to you – try it.

### **Would it help to talk to someone?**

Self-help can enable you to deal effectively with low to moderate levels of stress. Situations can arise, however, where stress becomes severe. If you reach a point where you are say drinking to excess or experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression you may be well advised to seek help from a properly qualified counsellor.

This advice applies particularly if you are experiencing one or more of the symptoms of burnout because burnout is the end result of prolonged exposure to stress.

There is no disgrace in seeking help. In fact it is often the most successful people who are most in need of it.

An experienced counsellor can help you identify precise behaviour patterns that are contributing to stress and suggest ways forward that can alleviate unnecessary suffering. If nothing else counsellors listen in a world pre-occupied with talking – as suggested earlier talking alone can be immensely therapeutic.

Many employers offer confidential counselling services precisely because they recognise the demands made upon employees and the costs of untreated stress. Such 'employee assistance programmes' as they are sometimes known may be treating the symptoms rather than the under-lying causes of stress but they are certainly better than nothing. Counsellors say that most people who come to them say they wish they had done it earlier.

### **A Final Philosophical Note**

The Tao proverb teaches, '*Not until you abandon all thoughts of seeking something will you be on the right road to the gate.*' At first sight this enigmatic statement seems to be saying 'in order to qualify, abandon all thoughts of qualifying'.

If only it were that easy! Either that or the statement just seems silly.

What it really means I think is that sometimes we put ourselves in danger of failing by trying too hard. We try too hard because we feel there is so much at stake – and not just financially either. Employers, colleagues, partners, relatives may have made sacrifices to enable us to study – how can we let them down by failing?

The answer is that most of this is in your mind.

Ask yourself what you would do if you failed. By developing contingency plans in this way, you make failure less likely because the very act of searching for and generating alternatives shows you that although gaining a qualification is important, it is not *that* important. Thus do you open the golden gate to success.

#### 4. Stress Management Summary

1. A **stressor** is any psychological or physical factor which places excessive demand upon the individual.
2. Stress results from the difference between the demands placed upon the individual and the individual's perceived ability to cope with these.
3. Stress can undermine people because it is associated with illness, increased risk of accident and other counter-productive behaviours.
4. The principal sources of work related stress are:
  - working conditions
  - role in the organisation
  - relationships at work
  - career development, and,
  - organisation structure and climate.
5. Potentially stressful working conditions include:
  - environmental factors such as dirt, noise, inadequate lighting and exposure to physical danger,
  - shift working, especially at night,
  - work overload, qualitative or quantitative and excessive hours,
  - work underload.
6. Potentially stressful role related factors include:
  - role ambiguity,
  - role conflict including conflicting, adverse, and illegitimate role requirements, and,
  - responsibility for others.
7. Potentially stressful workplace relationships include those characterised by:
  - inconsiderate management, and,
  - sexual harassment.
8. Career development stressors centre upon job insecurity.

9. Organisation structure and climate refers to opportunities for participation.
10. People also experience stress in their private lives which can affect the organisation. The principal sources of non-work stress are:
  - life transitions
  - 'daily hassles'
  - the impact of personality, and,
  - the home/work interface.
11. Burnout occurs where the individual's emotional and physical resources are depleted to such an extent that they are no longer able to cope with the demands of the job.
12. Burnout is characterised by:
  - emotional exhaustion,
  - de-personalisation, and,
  - diminished personal accomplishment.
13. Burnout is associated with the so called 'helping professions' such as social work but may affect anyone whose job involves inter-personal demands.
14. Stress can provide an enjoyable challenge but you need to protect yourself against the effects of stress by managing yourself and engaging in appropriate life style behaviours including:
  - Leading from strength
  - Time management and organisation
  - Proper eating and restraints upon excess alcohol consumption and smoking
  - Exercise, meditation, and taking time to yourself
  - Cultivating social networks and support groups
  - Breaking out of destructive behaviour patterns
  - Creating appropriate working conditions
  - Task management – make yourself a net
  - Reward yourself
  - Be realistic about what you can achieve
  - A gentle self discipline – enjoy the journey