Stress management – a masterclass: An inaugural lecture

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Stephen Palmer

This evening I will be looking at stress and its management. We will consider what the average person thinks stress is about. I am really interested in how people cause so much unnecessary distress for themselves. Finally, we will look at some stress-busting strategies.

Let's look at my recent stress study. Quite often psychologists confirm the obvious, so surprise, surprise, 50 per cent of us get 'occasionally' stressed. In other words, the average person becomes stressed occasionally. However, over 25 per cent of people are 'often' or 'always' stressed. Eight per cent are 'always' stressed. This is quite a high figure. The good news is that five per cent are 'never' stressed. At least that's what *they claimed.*

Now, what do we actually get stressed about? For the 181 participants in this study – work came out on top with family next, then financial problems, relationships, and time pressures. Interestingly, travel was only mentioned by 17 per cent. It was not as high as we thought. Another study released today on National Stress Awareness Day, by the International Stress Management Association (ISMA), showed that 45 per cent of respondents reported travelling in the rush hour as stressful. Therefore, when you look at statistics, the results may depend upon what questions you ask and whom you ask!

In my study, the 'often' and 'always stressed' group of people found virtually everything more stressful. They even found news reports more stressful. In other words, their whole perception of the world was more stressful.

We also looked at how people's age affects stress. Work is the main stressor, and this is an increasing trend until age 51. That includes under 18s where school was considered the equivalent to work. At the age of 51, the key stressor became the family.

Last month the International Labour Organisation (ILO) released some facts and figures, which are quite interesting. Three to four per cent of gross national product was spent on mental health problems in the EU. That's quite a high figure.

About 10 per cent of workers have depression, anxiety and stress in the UK, US, Germany and Finland. In Finland 50 per cent of workers reported symptoms of stress. Now, that is quite a high figure. Burnout, which is severe physical and emotional breakdown, affected seven per cent of Finnish workers. This is a ridiculously high figure. In the UK, three out of 10 employees experience mental health problems at some time in their life.

The ILO research also looked at the causes of occupational stress. From my experience of working in industry, from the late 1980s through to the beginning of the 1990s we saw the start of the main causes of stress in the UK. Downsizing – apparently the correct euphemism is 'rightsizing' – also 'delayering'. Essentially, organisations started shedding whole tiers of management and staff. Less staff, doing more work creates unrealistic deadlines.

The ILO also lists 'new technology' as a problem as well. However, the ISMA research reckoned approximately 52 per cent of people didn't think new technology was a cause of stress. However, in many organisations I've worked for, technology does trigger stress for many people. For example, in the UK, on average we get about 40 e-mails a day. In addition, when you are at work, you are easier to contact now in a way you never were before, by your family, partners, and relatives. We can send e-mails and ask people 'What are you doing this weekend?' My son has termed this as the 'e-nag'. Once upon a time, if you did a presentation like this, you might write a few notes, use the overhead projector and a few acetates. Now, you may spend a whole day doing a PowerPoint presentation like this, and you are trying to achieve more as well. I think it is interesting how we as a nation have tried to resolve this problem. We are now working the longest hours, compared to other countries in the EU. The average person is working just under 45 hours a week. That's how we are attempting to deal with this workload stress.

Many managers I see are working up to 90 hours. I wonder how many of you take work home? Probably about half of you do. I doubt that many of you get paid overtime to take your work home.

Now, one last thing the ILO put down on the list was globalisation, blaming the large international companies. I don't think it is that straightforward as there are so many other different factors involved. If we look for a moment at what triggers stress for people, and consider for example, an office where there are ten staff. We may find four of them quite stressed, four of them may be enjoying the challenge and two of them really don't care at all what's going on. As far as they are concerned, they want to be made redundant.

So, why is it that some people are stressed and some people aren't stressed? When you listen to people, so often they give you an old fashioned view of stress. They will say, 'My partner makes me angry' or 'My boss makes me depressed.' It's something out there causing stress and they respond in some kind of way. This old fashioned view of stress is sometimes called the 'stimulus/response' model, basically an old engineering model of stress, literally you squeeze something and it suffers strain. Patently, there must be something wrong with this model because it doesn't seem to apply to everybody. You must all know some people who are under pressure and seem to be thriving on it and others who are suffering a lot of stress.

What's important is the person's perception. When you look at the cognitive model of stress, we discover it's over two millennia old. Stoic philosophers such as Epictetus observed: 'People are disturbed not by things but by the views which they take of them.' The idea is that it's not so much the situation but what we bring to the situation, our mental attitude and our appraisal of it, is largely the problem. Marcus Aurelius wrote in his *Meditations* that 'Everything is what your opinion makes it, and that opinion lies with yourself.' More recently Shakespeare noted in *Hamlet*, 'Why, then 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.' So, this cognitive

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view has been there for many, many centuries, but in the last century, there was a hiccup – we developed the stress-strain model. The Health and Safety Commission published a discussion document last year focusing on stress and asked members of the public and organisations to send in their ideas. Interestingly, it used a definition of stress that corresponded to the old engineering model – 'excessive pressures cause stress'.

Let's consider some of the things I hear when I am seeing my stressed-out clients and people I am coaching. These are typical ones: 'My boss or manager makes me angry.' 'My partner makes me depressed.' 'The tube gives me panic attacks'. Let's briefly consider the last one. If the tube causes panic attacks, every time we travel on the tube everybody on the tube would be having a panic attack. Well, as I witnessed travelling into London in the aftermath of the storms this week, even though everybody was squashed like sardines, they were not all having panic attacks!

So, what is stress? If you look at the stress literature, there must be dozens of different definitions and explanations. However, when you're working with people, or you're talking to a member of your family or a colleague, it's best to use a simple definition. One by R.S. Lazarus and S. Folkman is, I think, very good: 'Stress results from an imbalance between demands and resources.' However, I'd say it's inaccurate because you've got real demands and real resources, but also it's your perceptions about those demands and resources, which I think, are quite important.

Another definition I developed is, 'Stress occurs when perceived pressure exceeds your ability to cope.' Well, that's reasonably accurate, but again, there's real pressures in the work place, and there's perceived pressures. For example, there are people who can give presentations but their perception of their ability is quite poor. They think, 'I'm going to screw up, I haven't the skills'. So, the perceptions even creep into the perceived pressure, your perceived resources and ability to deal with things. As you are beginning to realise, it's quite a complicated issue to go into an organisation and attempt to deal with stress.
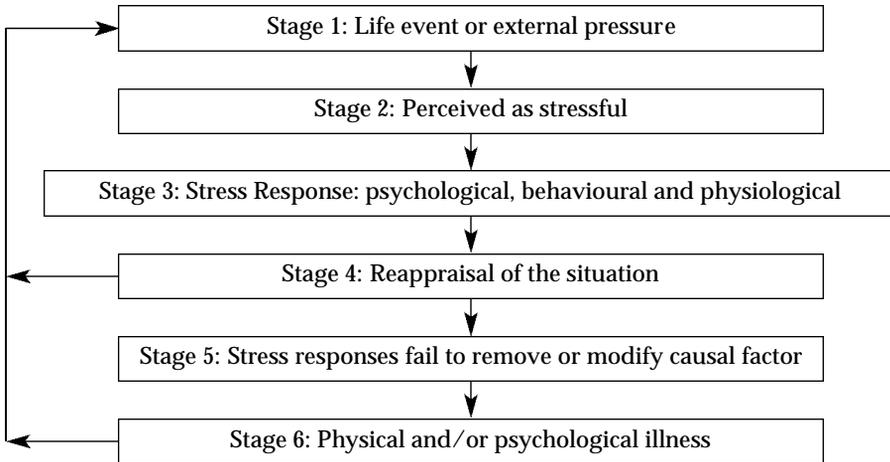
I want to consider a very simple five-stage model (see Figure 1) that I developed with my colleagues (Palmer & Strickland 1995; Cooper & Palmer, 2000). Now, to make this come alive for you, it's probably an idea if you think back to the last time you were stressed. What went through your mind in that situation? What happened? When I sit down with clients, they rarely say to me, 'Aha, I perceive this as a threatening situation.' In fact, they normally sum it up in one or two words. What was the very first word that went through your head at Stage 2 that helped you to instantly appraise the situation? To give you some clues. Blaspheming is a very common one: people frequently say 'Oh my God.' Notice they don't usually say 'This situation is stressful.' They just sum it up it very quickly. Other appraisals are, 'Oh no', or 'I can't do it,' and only at that point do they become quite stressed out.

If you don't like presentations, you don't have to have these words going through your head to become stressed. Think back to the last time that you were asked to give a presentation. What sorts of pictures go through your mind? Public ridicule, is a very common image, and perhaps everybody laughing at you, people getting bored or walking out? (Speaker asking the audience.) Anything else? 'Nothing working' – oh, the machines, the bulb blowing as well! Not knowing what to say is a very common one, too. For some people it's being asked difficult questions. However, just picturing the event can make a person stressed.

I would like to wire up Professor David Rhind (the Vice-chancellor of City University) at this particular stage in the talk and demonstrate this to you. Within a second of getting stressed or aroused, we start to sweat. I'm wiring David up to a biofeedback machine that will be measuring indirectly how much he sweats. It emits a sound. As David starts to relax, the pitch will go down, and as he gets

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Figure 1: MODEL OF STRESS
Adapted from Palmer & Strickland, 1996

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│ Stage 1: Life event or external pressure                       │
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│ Stage 2: Perceived as stressful                                │
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│ Stage 3: Stress Response: psychological, behavioural and physiological │
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│ Stage 4: Reappraisal of the situation                          │
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│ Stage 5: Stress responses fail to remove or modify causal factor │
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│ Stage 6: Physical and/or psychological illness                 │
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stressed, the pitch will go up. Hopefully you can hear the noise. David, think of something stressful. (Pitch of sound rises.) Now he's stressed, what we need to do is see how quickly it takes him to relax. Now, try and imagine yourself somewhere you find relaxing. Perhaps being in a pub, walking down the road, in the country-side. (Pitch of sound decreases.)

Basically, what David demonstrated was that within a second or so, you can get the stress response going very quickly. He has also demonstrated that you don't have to be in the situation. You only have to think about it. So just thinking about travelling in a crowded tube train is enough to trigger stress for some people. That's an important key point. (Volunteers from the audience were also connected to biofeedback instruments.)

Let's look at how you respond. This is Stage 3 of the model. There are three main responses: psychological, behavioural and physiological. The psychological response may manifest itself with anxiety or anger – very unhelpful emotions if you are trying to deal with issues in the work-place. Now, with the original fight or flight response, it was very useful if you were running away from a tiger, but when stuck in the office, with your computer crashing or 50 e-mails to download, it doesn't really help you. Another psycho-logical aspect of stress is the worrying ruminations.

The behavioural responses are quite interesting. One of the key things we see in the workplace when people are under pressure, apart from irritability, is that they procrastinate. It's amazing how they

Vice-Chancellor Professor David Rhind (left) in the process of being wired up to a biofeedback instrument by Professor Stephen Palmer (right).

Members of the audience using their 'biodot' to monitor their stress levels.

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do it. You ask them to do an important job, and what do they do next? They clean their desk, they tidy up the in-trays, they rearrange the e-mails on their computers, and they complete unimportant tasks. Why do they do this? Procrastination or displacement behaviour temporarily helps their stress levels go down, then, an hour or two or a day or two later, when you realise you've lost all that valuable time, what happens to your stress levels then? (Asking the audience.) Yes, you're right! They shoot up because you've suddenly realised, 'Oh no! I've lost two days of time'. It's no different for the youngsters in your house. They've got an important exam on Monday and what do they do on previous Friday night? They go out to a party and have a few drinks. So, of course, come Saturday morning with their hangovers, they can't revise for their exams. They are usually stressed because they fear failure yet their behaviour becomes self-defeating.

Let's look at the physiological responses. Let's use some more biofeedback. You've all got two cards placed in front of you, called 'biodots'. Pick the one that says, 'low temperature biodot'. It has a black greyish dot in the middle of it. Put your finger and thumb on the dot, just for five seconds, and let's see how you're responding to my lecture at the moment. Perhaps you're stressed about it! OK, now if you take your finger and thumb off, hopefully it will be a purple colour. Now, if you are stressed, as a part of your stress response, the blood is being diverted away from where it's not needed. So, it's taken away from your surface skin area, your gut, your stomach, and it's been diverted to your muscles, heart and lungs where it's needed.

So, for those of you who are relaxed here tonight, you've got a change of your biodot colour. Possibly, it actually went from black up to green, maybe, to purple if you're lucky. Now, try the high temperature one, which is a more accurate one. Those of you who have been heavy smokers may have had slight damage to your peripheral circulation, so you may have more difficulty with this exercise. These biodots are reusable and the idea is to practise on the low temperature ones first of all, and then go on to the high temperature ones.

Let's move on to the Stage 4 of the stress model. A few days later when you look at the situation, you realise you've wasted time and you reappraise it. Hopefully, you tell yourself, 'Yes, I've got down to my job and I'm getting there. I'm going to reach the target'. At this point, you don't feel stressed and the whole stress response stays switched off. However, if you've been wasting time, then as you reappraise the situation, you might think, 'I've lost two days of time, oh no'!, and you become stressed again.

Ongoing stress tends to lead to a range of physical or psychological illnesses (Stage 6). There's a whole range of reasons for this occurring. However, one of the reasons is a chemical, cortisol, being released every time you're getting stressed and it has a long-term detrimental effect on the immune system.

The key problem with long-term stress tends to be cardiovascular disease. Psychological disorders such as clinical depression and anxiety can occur too. At the moment, I am giving you the view that you can cognitively reappraise situations and, therefore, not suffer from stress. But that's not strictly true for the more severe stressors, for example, being assaulted or being involved in a car accident. In these cases, many people are likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. With very severe stress, death may ensue. For example, during earthquakes, more people than usual die from heart attacks.

But how do you manage stress? Our research found that the key stress management strategy is watching television. Then, of course, we had socialising which is quite beneficial. Another good strategy was exercise. However, the other strategies were smoking and drinking alcohol. Some of the other strategies were walking and comfort eating. Some of you may have weight control problems. If a person is under stress a lot of the time, they may comfort eat and subsequently, they put on weight. Reading is quite a useful technique. Some people reported undertaking

relaxation and meditation exercises, which we'd recommend.

Other strategies included having a bath, listening to the radio and medication. We assumed when we did the study, that the people who were 'often' or 'always stressed' used less stress management strategies than the other participants did. So, we almost didn't bother to analyse the data further. Fortunately we did. We looked at the difference between the 'occasionally stressed' person as opposed to the 'always' and 'often stressed' and the results were different. Apart from exercise, they virtually did every other strategy more to manage their stress. So, for example, 24 per cent of the 'occasionally stressed' watched TV, compared to 40 per cent for those people who were 'often' or 'always stressed'. This is an example of psychologists finding a result that is contrary to intuition. Medication was used by only two per cent of the 'occasionally stressed'. But as soon as we looked at the 'always' or 'often stressed', it went up to 10 per cent.

However, watching the television, drinking alcohol, smoking, etc., may not help them deal with their stressors? If they've got problems at work or problems in their relationships, they may not be facing up to them. So, yes, they may be undertaking more stress management in their opinion, but I think they are using unhelpful stress management strategies.

The three key stress-busting strategies are psychological, behavioural and physiological.

Let's focus now on the psychological. When I listen to people, there's a whole range of things they say to themselves when they're getting stressed. I am just going to give you the key ones I hear, and you may recognise these or some variation of these in yourself. 'I must perform well.' This is so common – people demand 'I must perform well'. Now, that is a severe internal pressure people put on themselves. Yes, employers may want you to perform well, but in reality often the pressure is coming from within the person. They want to do 110 per cent, which is difficult, when they are suffering from a lack of resources, especially with the rightsizing of the 90s.

So, what else might they say to themselves? Often they label or globally rate themselves, 'if I don't perform well, therefore I am a total failure', or 'I'm totally stupid, I'm an idiot.' I wonder how many of you recognise any of these ideas? Now, this is a real pressure to put yourself under. Another phrase I hear clients say is, 'I can't stand it, *I really can't stand it any more.*' (Speaker collapses onto the floor demonstrating the effect of this belief.) It's amazing how stressed they can get with this kind of thinking. When you say that in a stressful situation, you are lowering your tolerance for dealing with it. Instead of saying, *'yes, maybe I'll do my best to deal with it'*, you say, *'I can't stand it any more'*, and so you're less likely to deal with it. And, of course, you get more frustrated and more stressed. We have nicknamed this as 'I can't stand it itis'. Another belief that follows on from here is, *'Oh my God, it's awful.'* This is called 'awfulising'. Although the situation may be bad, they describe it as 'really awful, terrible'. Then when you ask the person, what is so awful, you discover that they have only missed a deadline. It was not life or death after all.

Now as we saw with David when he was wired up to the stress monitor, he just has to think of something stressful and the stress response goes into action. What I'm describing is no different. This type of belief in your head sets the whole stress response off. The situation becomes far worse than it needs to be.

Finally, I hear what psychologists call 'all-or-nothing thinking'. For example, 'I'll never get that promotion.' Now there's been some research undertaken with teachers, a profession that suffers high levels of stress with many external pressures. It seems that teachers who regularly use 'all-or-nothing thinking' suffer more stress-related symptoms. So, this type of inflexible thinking seems to create more stress for people. However, perhaps when people are under stress, they tend to use this kind of thinking more, and I think it is important to bear that in mind, too.

So, how can we help people develop more helpful thinking patterns? There's a number of key ways. People can start analysing their thinking. When you're getting stressed, 'It's awful, it's the end of the world', 'I can't stand it', you are not, necessarily thinking in a logical manner. So you could ask yourself, 'Is my thinking logical? How does failing at a task make me a total failure?'

Another approach we find useful is getting them to ask their friends, whether their thinking is realistic? Is it empirically correct? I find logical and realistic questions quite useful with engineers and scientists but for the average person, the pragmatic question is helpful. Ask yourself, where's my belief getting me? Does it help me achieve my goals? Now, if you're saying, I must perform well and if I don't, I can't stand it, it's awful, etc., it's very likely that your anxiety levels will increase which will negatively impact upon your performance.

One way you can help yourself with this is to draw up a pros and cons form. Take a piece of paper and write down the performance interfering thought or 'Pit' at the top: 'I must perform well, otherwise I am a total failure'. Then divide the sheet into two columns, pros and cons, and look at the advantages of thinking this way – there's probably a few, and then look at the disadvantages. It will help you to analyse whether your thinking is constructive and helping you or not?

Imagery skills are quite useful. The people I see who have lost their jobs become de-motivated. If you're de-motivated, become depressed, does it help you get a job? So, one of the key techniques is motivation imagery. I ask them to imagine spending the rest of their life de-motivated, not applying for jobs. Obviously, they're less likely to get a job. The result would be they spend the rest of their life not doing what they want to do. So, they consider all the negative aspects of their lack of action. Then we go onto motivation imagery. Let's take someone who has been made redundant. I get them to imagine sitting down after I have seen them, writing up a CV, sending it out to people and then, what the impact will be upon them, their family, their future career. I find motivation imagery very useful for people who have become de-motivated by the stress of life.

Another technique I find useful is coping imagery, getting people to imagine coping with situations. Now, when you ask people about the kind of imagery they use when they are stressed, they normally have catastrophic imagery. They either think of everything going wrong, which causes so much stress, or they use positive imagery, seeing everything being absolutely 100 per cent positive. Either way they stay stressed. So, I ask them to use coping imagery. They share with me the things they fear going wrong, such as being late, people not liking what they're doing, not reaching the deadline, etc. Next, I ask them to visualise how they can cope with that situation should it arise. So they imagine turning up late for a meeting and actually see themselves dealing with it, as opposed to getting stressed out by turning up late. They rehearse in their mind, how to deal with adversity.

When looking at behavioural strategies, the research shows that social support can be a good buffer against stress. However, when I listen to clients, I think sometimes they are not being selective. Often, when the people I work with in organisations, have a bad day at work, they go down to the pub or wine bar with their colleagues and they whinge to each other. Although that's very supportive and can be very useful but if you're doing that day after day, it doesn't help you deal with the problem at work. If you've got a difficult manager, it may be you will need to work as a team to manage your manager. You may need to have a more practical, problem or task-focused approach. Therefore, it is important to be selective over your social support, picking the right person for the problem. So, if you've gone through a recent bereavement you may want to see somebody who has got a good listening ear and who is very happy just to listen to you. If you've got a work place problem, you may want to speak to a colleague who can give you more guidance or share their experience with you.

Assertiveness training can also help. So often at work, it is about saying 'no'. It is very difficult if you are a 'people-pleaser'. But if you are not very good at assertiveness, you're going to have problems with time management too. Now, obviously, everybody knows you need to prioritise, write lists. However, when I see people who are suffering from occupational stress, they blame it on being given too much work. Yet, I estimate that over three-quarters of the people I see haven't actually communicated this to their manager. I ask them if they can expect their manager to mind read what's going through their head? Interestingly, quite often when they decide to share their workload problem with their manager, the latter can become upset, as they had not recognised that there was a problem. Also, they are concerned that a member of staff wasn't able to share the problem with them. Obviously, I don't always recommend this approach in all situations.

The physiological interventions. Of course, I recommend exercise but some clients I see have done too much. When I see them, they experience difficulty walking up the stairs to my office as they have done too much running on pavements, which can be quite damaging to the knees and ankles. So, you need to get the right amount of exercise for you. If you are overweight or maybe over 35, get checked out first by your GP. And, in addition, build up the exercise programme slowly and steadily. Often people just rush into it. In fact, I think it's far better to incorporate exercise into your daily routines, for example, walking to work, getting off one station earlier if you're travelling by tube, or walking up escalators.

If you're a 55-year-old playing squash and you're still trying to beat people who are half your age, then I don't recommend it, as it's a sport that raises blood pressure excessively. In fact, I would not suggest too much exercise or anything too vigorous as we age. If you are an older person, the research is quite interesting. If you are 60-years-old or older, if you walk one-and-a-half miles a day you reduce your chances of dying by a stroke and cancer. If you walk vigorously two miles a day, then your mental abilities have been shown to improve, so you can think more quickly.

Many of the people I see in the workplace are not eating well. They're eating – if they eat at all – on the job. They're eating in front of their VDU screen, they're running from meeting to meeting – in fact many have back-to-back meetings. If they do have a sandwich, the majority, consume white bread. I think that many of us are aware of the importance of fresh fruit and vegetables but it is important to have a balanced diet.

Every time I see a client who has got a weight problem, they usually expect me to put them on a diet. They may have tried as many as 12 diets yet the research shows that only six per cent of diets actually work. The empirical evidence, normally sitting in front of me in the session, shows that despite many attempts at dieting they still have not lost weight. I then explain that I would rather use a more psychological intervention and help them understand when and why they comfort eat. The key beliefs are often, 'I can't stand this situation', or 'I can't stand these unpleasant feelings', 'I must eat what I want', and to take the edge off things, they eat food or snacks, usually at the wrong times. Often they don't have breakfast, so when they do eat, the blood sugar levels are affected, and of course, they overcompensate. I help them to understand how they can deal with of stress, and also those unpleasant feelings that they get sometimes when they're performing tasks. They learn to take the edge of things by saying, for example, 'I don't like this but I can stand it.' Diet is mentioned last of all, as I know I'm going to waste their time if they just want to go on a straightforward diet without the psychological skills to maintain the weight loss.

Let's look at relaxation methods. The research from the US has been quite interesting regarding meditation. People who meditate were actually shown to visit the hospital as an out-patient or an in-patient 50 per cent less, apart from pregnancy, of course. However, techniques, such as meditation or relaxation, don't always

deal directly with the problem at work, or at home, but they do seem to help people.

The biodots you've been holding are a form of biofeedback, it's giving you feedback to what's going on in your body at this instant and it helps you to redirect your blood flow, thereby reducing your blood pressure.

Benson relaxation response is a Westernised version of meditation. All you have to do is close your eyes and on every out breath, just say a number, of your choice. Benson suggested the number 'one'. Try it now. Just say the number one, in your mind, on every out breath and just breathe normally. It is a very useful method because it stops those unwanted thoughts from intruding, those things that create a lot of stress.

Those of you who have negative pictures in your mind replace them with a positive picture instead. Positive relaxation images are very useful. Some people need to learn how to switch off and, whether it's having a bath, reading a book, going for a walk, these are all useful things that help you to physiologically relax.

Finally, there are a few more suggestions. If you are male and you are over about 40, I would recommend you donate blood. Some research has found that donating blood once every three years can reduce your chance of having a stroke. If you just drink two cups of tea a day, you reduce your chance of having strokes. If you drink five cups of tea a day then you benefit even more. Coffee does not appear to have the same benefits.

A couple of glasses of wine a day, so long as they are not large glasses, can be beneficial as alcohol makes your blood less 'sticky'. You are less likely to suffer from blood clots or strokes. It is interesting when we look at some of the research. The people that end up having heart attacks who drink alcohol, assuming they haven't drunk too much, may have gone a day or two without drinking alcohol. So it may protect you for 24 hours, but when you go for 36 hours without alcohol, you may encounter problems!

Dark chocolate is another food that is good. Of course, there are many fats in chocolate but in dark chocolate you have much higher levels of catechin. This is very good because it reduces cholesterol levels, that very fatty stuff that literally sticks around the arteries and really furs them up.

So, donating blood every couple of years, some exercise, drinking tea, a glass or two of wine and consuming dark chocolate will help mitigate the physiological impact of stress. Sounds easy!

Let's consider emergency stress-busters, as I call them. 'De-awfulise'. Just remember, when you go into the office on a Monday morning that's when you're most likely to die of a heart attack or stroke in the workplace. Of course, if you were a shift worker it would be a different time! Often, heart attacks occur within two hours of an anger outburst, so watch out for Monday morning stress. Just, de-awfulise, remember life at work may be a hassle, but it seldom is a horror.

'Musts' and 'shoulds' create so much stress, and if you are one of these people that's constantly 'shoulding' on yourself or others, such as your colleagues or staff, you could be quite a stressful person to work with, or even live with, of course. So, you may want to change those 'musts' to strong flexible preferences instead.

Labelling – remember, the next time you get really angry with your manager, instead of thinking, 'My manager is a totally stupid so-and-so', what you could do is de-label, be realistic, be logical, just look at the evidence, and remind yourself, 'My manager is a fallible human being exhibiting management skills deficits.' If you do that, it's more difficult to get so overwhelmingly angry, thereby giving yourself high blood pressure, bringing on your Monday morning heart attack! Obviously de-labelling is a difficult skill to practise, because, naturally, we want to say, 'He or she's totally stupid.'

This evening, we have quite a few people here from industry, and I just want to quickly go through some of the key factors we have found useful to help manage occupational stress.

Stress audits – the problem with stress audits is that if you look at the research

most of the organisations, who have undertaken stress audits responded by doing very little! Alternatively, they may offer their staff relaxation training, lunchtime walking clubs or other forms of exercise. But do they address the real problems of role overload, too many deadlines or insufficient staff or training? Not usually! Some of the key stressors that people are suffering from, such as the demands, too much work, the long hours culture, are not being looked at, and where they are it is only by a small minority of companies. When they do react, essentially they target their staff for change, and send them to stress or time management workshops, which are very useful but do not focus on the real problems. It is important to involve everybody from the top down, from the managing director right down to the person on the factory floor or in the offices. One of the problems we find is that the managing director often says, 'Oh, I'm too busy to be involved.' Now, unfortunately, this does not legitimise stress and its management in the organisation.

Improving communications nearly always comes up as a problem. Stress management training and coaching is very useful as a part of a whole preventative programme. However, in the UK, management by fear is more common than management by reward. Realistic deadlines and workloads, and increased control, are also important. A reduction in unnecessary meetings is important too. In some organisations people receive many e-mails of very little importance. For example, does it matter if you're working hundreds of miles away from an office, to be told not to drop litter in the office car park?

Employee assistance programmes with counselling services can be quite useful. However, they can be palliative, because they don't always focus on eliminating the real causes of occupational stress.

Recently, I read some research about office plants. Plants in the workplace seem to help people perform better especially in windowless environments. If you are going to commit a crime, when you go to Dartmoor Prison, ensure you have a view of the moors from your cell. The research shows that, if prison inmates have a natural view, they are less likely to report for sick call than those who looked out on the prison complex. Of course, many offices are similar to open prisons! So, just your view of plants and vegetation, may be relaxing. However, when we go into many offices we find shrivelled up yellow plants in the corner, dying, because nobody has the time to water them!

I like Scott Carmichael's comment (adapted): 'It's not the hours you put in, but what you put into the hours that really count.'

To sum up, the mental attitude we take into the workplace is often as important as the problems that arise. Both issues need addressing. A challenge for the 21st century.

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Correspondence

Centre for Health and Counselling Psychology
City University
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB.