

The stress management masterclass

by James Manktelow

Managing Stress for Career Success

The Stress Management Master Class

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Warning:

Stress can cause severe health problems and, in extreme cases, can cause death. While stress management techniques are conclusively shown to have a positive effect on reducing stress, readers should take the advice of suitably qualified medical examiners if they have any concerns over stress-related illnesses. These examiners should also be consulted before changing diet or levels of exercise.

About the Author... James Manktelow

James Manktelow has developed Mind Tools since 1995. The Mind Tools concept started with his research into the practical skills and techniques he needed to progress his own career - he found it frustrating that so many simple, but important, life and career skills were so little known and taught.

Mind Tools exists to help correct this. Since 1995, visitors have viewed more than 8 million Mind Tools pages on the Mind Tools web site at www.mindtools.com. Many have been kind enough to send us very positive testimonials on how the techniques we have helped to popularize have helped them in their daily lives and their careers.

Outside his work with Mind Tools, James is a Director of UK financial software house, CQ Systems Ltd. CQ provides Europe's leading leasing and loan systems. His career with CQ has spanned marketing, business development, strategy, production and project management, business and systems analysis, software development and consultancy. In this capacity, he has provided extensive consultancy for major corporations in most European countries. Clients have included DaimlerChrysler, Bank of Scotland, Ford and Capital One, among many others.

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Module 1:

Introduction

Managing Stress for Career Success

Mind Tools' Stress Management Master Class

Stress is everywhere...

A world of intense change

The stress of success

The structure of the course, and how to use it

Stress is everywhere...

Think for a moment about the life of the President or Prime Minister of your country.

Irrespective of how you feel about him or her, can you imagine the pressures and responsibilities that this person carries? Can you conceive of the demands placed on his or her time, and the number of critical decisions he or she makes in a day? In a normal week, how many unpleasant, malicious and rude things are said about this person? Ask yourself how many other people are doing their best to undermine this person or show him or her in the worst possible light?

Think about surgeons making life-or-death decisions on a daily basis, or air traffic controllers who must constantly be vigilant, knowing that an error could cause the death of hundreds of people. Think about advocates or barristers, whose reputations rest on quick thinking under intense pressure, or about Chief Executives, who must make critical decisions that affect the lives of thousands of people.

Think about the countless other people in difficult professions who experience intense stress on a daily basis. These are all people operating in difficult circumstances, and facing great potential stress.

While these people do occasionally fail, most often they do not. Most often they respond maturely, responsibly and effectively to the intense challenges and pressures they face.

A world of intense change

Think also about the tremendous forces of change currently unleashed in the world.

The information technology and communications revolutions are uniting the world in a way that has never before been possible. This course is one small example of this – it has been produced as part of electronic collaboration involving people from 27 countries. It will be available to people anywhere on this planet with access to the Internet.

This is true in many, many other areas. For example, reductions in the costs of air travel mean that people and goods can move around the world on a scale that has never-before been possible. The easy availability of capital and management talent means that an idea proven in one country can quickly be exploited on a worldwide basis. Improvements in medicine and agriculture mean that more and more people can use their time creatively, rather than just fighting for survival.

These changes bring intense competition: As barriers of geography and inefficiency come down, organizations can no longer rely on being the only player in small, local, protected markets. In many areas, companies must now lead the world if they are to succeed: If they do not, better companies will inevitably win away their customers as products and services become obsolete.

This change delivers huge benefits to each of us as competition drives down consumer prices, improves product quality and increases the range of goods and services available. All of this improves our lives as it eliminates the irritations, frustrations and hard labor that have often been our lot.

However, it also puts tremendous pressure on our organizations to succeed. On a human level, this can show as intense work-related stress. For people in the companies that do not survive, it shows in the stresses of unemployment and dislocation, as they change their lives and locations to find new work.

Even intrinsically local organizations, such as governments, are sure to be affected by this; once taxpayers have experienced the service delivered by the most successful global companies, they expect this as standard. Hence, anything less will not be acceptable.

The stress of success

This course assumes that you want to have a successful, enjoyable career that keeps you pleasantly stretched and interested. Perhaps you would like to lead part or all of your organization. Perhaps you want to achieve personal or professional recognition. Or, perhaps you want to make a difference to the world in some other way.

Unfortunately, part of the price of success is coping with the pressure of disagreeable events, just as you must cope with the stresses and pressures on your organization as it struggles to change, survive and thrive in this fast-changing world.

Good stress management is therefore crucially important for career success. Who wants to be lead by someone who falls apart under stress? Who values the opinion of someone who fails to think clearly when the pressure is on? Who respects a negotiator who loses his or her cool (unless for a very controlled purpose)?

This is strikingly illustrated by these excerpts from an article in Fortune Magazine:

In a recent study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, more than half the working people in the US viewed job stress as a major problem in their lives. That's more than double the percentage in similar studies a year ago. The number of people who called in sick due to stress has tripled in the past four years. Fully 42% of employees – double the percentage a year ago – think their coworkers need help managing stress.

In an annual survey released last month by workplace research firm Marlin Co., 29% of respondents put themselves in the highest category of stress-extreme or quite a bit – the highest percentage in the poll's six year history....

Dr. Scott Stacy, clinical program director of the Professional Renewal Center, estimates that the average executive will skate dangerously close to burning out two or three times in his career....

What's notable about today's wave of stressed-out workers is that it rises all the way to the top. Lack of control is generally considered to be one of the biggest job stressors, so it used to be thought that middle managers carried the brunt: Sandwiched between the top and the bottom, they end up with little authority. Powerful CEOs were seen as the least threatened by stress. But in today's tough new economy, top executives don't have as much control as they used to. Now that the corner suite has become scandal central, senior executives are complaining that they can't get anyone to listen to them – the very same stressor cited most commonly by those at the bottom of the ladder.

"Stress is just part of the job," says Alexandra Lebenthal, CEO of Wall Street securities firm Lebenthal & Co.... "Fortunately or unfortunately, [stress] is part of our character building," Lebenthal says. "But there is a moment when you think, I don't need any more character building. What I need is a vacation."

Being able to handle stress is perhaps the most basic of job expectations; it is at the core of not just doing good work but doing work, period. So among the corporate elite, succumbing to it is considered a shameful weakness. "I hear a lot of people saying 'it's tough.' But executives don't use the 's' word."

"In corporate America, especially, people often rise to the top by learning how to overcome stress."

*Cora Daniels, The Last Taboo, Fortune Magazine: Volume 146, Issue 8, 28 October 2002
Reprinted with the permission of Fortune Magazine*

So, why take this course?

So far, we have looked at the challenges and downsides of stress. Enough of this doom and gloom!

The purpose of this course is to help you perform successfully and happily under the pressures that inevitably come with a successful career. It will help you manage and adapt to the stresses you face, while helping you to build buffers against stress that will enable you to enjoy even the most challenging of jobs. More than this, it will introduce you to many of the important habits and routines that will help you to enjoy your career, even under intense pressure.

The techniques that this course teaches will help you to:

- Thrive in, and enjoy, challenging jobs.
- Understand where things can go wrong at work so that you can fix them.
- Work with powerful people to your mutual advantage.
- Live and work harmoniously and productively with the people around you.
- Change your environment to eliminate accumulations of small irritations.
- Understand negative thoughts and emotions like self-criticism, anxiety and fear, and challenge these and turn them around to be sources of rational, positive thinking.
- Build the social support networks and buffers against stress that will help you cope with situations you cannot manage.

The course provides you with a tool kit of practical skills and techniques that you can apply to deal with the most common stressful situations that you will experience. It also helps you to understand the research that has been done on stress; knowing this theory helps you to adapt these tools and improvise new ones to handle more unique situations.

The structure of the course, and how to use it

Supporting this, the course opens by helping you to understand what stress is and by identifying the sources of stress that you are experiencing. Once you have identified these, you can plan to manage these stressors appropriately. The modules that do this are explained below:

Module 2:	Understanding Stress:	This module explains what stress is, and where it comes from. It helps you to understand in detail what the negative consequences of stress are, and introduces the theory that lies behind stress management. By fully understanding this, you will be able to adapt existing stress management tools to unique situations, and will be able to develop new ones of your own.
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Module 3:	Pinpointing the Stress in Your Life:	The next module helps you to understand the sources of stress in your life. It introduces you to tools that help you to understand precisely where the stress you experience comes from, analyse your reactions, and identify how you can improve your reactions to stress.
Module 4:	Targeting Stress Effectively:	Once you understand the stresses that you face, the fourth module shows you how to plan to manage them. It then introduces you to a key that will guide you to the best techniques for managing different types of stress.

The stresses you face will either come from situations that you have some control over, or will come from situations you are powerless to avoid. The next set of modules help you to actively manage and control the stresses you face:

Module 5:	Coping With Work Overload:	This module shows you how to thrive in and enjoy challenging jobs, and cope with work overload. It introduces tools that help you to understand how to be successful in your job, sharpen up your use of time, plan and manage your work so that you deliver what is needed consistently and reliably. It also explains how to get the help you need when you need it.
Module 6:	Surviving Problem Jobs:	Some jobs are just plain bad, often because they are new or badly designed. Jobs can have conflicting priorities, irreconcilable demands, or inadequate resources. They may require you to do things that conflict with your goals or ideals. This module helps you to redesign these jobs where you can, and survive them, or move on when you can't.
Module 7:	Working With Powerful People:	Module 7 helps you to understand what your clients or your employers want from you. It helps you to decode demands that seem unreasonable, and negotiate fair solutions that respect the rights of all parties. It also gives you a good framework for winning people around to support your projects and objectives.
Module 8:	Co-Worker and Team Stress:	This module helps you to understand some of the fundamental causes of team problems, and of team stress. By accurately identifying these problems, you can often solve them in a relatively painless way. It also introduces basic skills for improving teamwork, thereby reducing co-worker and team stresses.
Module 9:	Eliminating Environmental Stress:	A lot of stress comes from your environment. Examples of this include backaches that come from poorly adjusted chairs, eye strain from inadequate lighting, or headaches from office pollutants. While these seem to be small irritants, they contribute significantly to overall stress. They can also be very easy to fix.

There will be many areas in life where you do not have the power to manage your way out of stressful situations. Because of this, you must adapt to them or survive them. The next set of modules help you to do this:

- | | | |
|------------|---|--|
| Module 10: | Managing Performance Stress: | Everyone gets nervous before major performances, whether they are speeches, sales presentations or athletic performances. This module gives you useful techniques for managing adrenaline so that you can perform at your best. |
| | | It also introduces important stress management techniques like imagery, meditation, self-hypnosis and use of relaxation tapes that can help you to relax at times of intense pressure. |
| Module 11: | Reducing Stress With Rational Thinking: | Module 11 helps you to deal with the stress that comes from negative thinking. This can involve anxious worrying about events out of your control, irrational self-criticism, or negative reaction to things that could be viewed as positive challenges. This module teaches you to tune-in to your negative thinking, and to respect your emotions and your fears. It then shows how to understand them, and how to change them to give you positive problem-solving energy. |

The techniques we will look at in Modules 2 to 11 are techniques that can be deployed in a number of hours or days to improve individual situations. They are very useful for managing or coping with short-term stress.

There will be times in your career where issues are coming at you “thick and fast”. Life events may seem to conspire with work events to load pressure onto you. This is where long-term stress management becomes vitally important – remember the comment in the Fortune article (above):

Dr. Scott Stacy, clinical program director of the Professional Renewal Center, estimates that the average executive will skate dangerously close to burning out two or three times in his career....

The next three modules help you cope with the pressures of long-term stress that can lead to burnout:

- | | | |
|------------|---|--|
| Module 12: | Managing Stress with a Healthy Lifestyle: | We've all heard it before, but it needs saying. A healthy lifestyle with plenty of exercise, a good diet, minimal intake of toxins and plenty of sleep is essential for managing long term stress. |
| | | This module explains why these are important, but also shows the importance of spending time with your friends, and on relaxing pastimes, as ways of managing long-term stress. |

Module 13:	Sustaining Peak Performance Without Burning Out:	"Burn out" is quite rightly something that high achievers fear. This module shows you how to understand burn out and spot the early symptoms of it, so that you can take appropriate action to avoid it.
Module 14:	Maintaining Change:	Many programs like this achieve good success in the short-term, but then fail in the medium-term as their users forget the lessons and techniques they have learned. This module shows you how to ensure that change lasts so that you live a full, happy and successful life.

Module Structure

Modules typically open by explaining the background theory that underlies the purpose of the module. Sometimes this may be practical and self-evident. Other times there may have been extensive research carried out to get to the root of what may be difficult and confusing issues. The module introduction sections explain this theory so that you can confidently understand why the module's stress management techniques work.

Next, we look at the tools and techniques that you can use to manage the particular source of stress covered by the module. We explain how to use each tool and, where appropriate, follow this with an example of how the tool is used.

We then apply these tools to your life. We guide you through using the tools practically to give you a feel for the way that they work, so that you can draw on them when you need them. It is always tempting just to read through these exercises and not to use them, and if you do this, you will lose much of the value of your investment in this course. Take your time, and work through the exercises.

Finally, we give further information on our sources of information for the modules. We give you the links and additional information you need to follow-up with your areas of interest further, so that you can develop your skills as deeply as you want to.

Work through the modules one-by-one, exploring and trying out the techniques they teach. Give yourself the time you need to assimilate the information in this course. It will pay dividends throughout the rest of your working life.

In particular, take the time needed to work through the 'Applying This to Your Life...' sections at the end of each module. By taking these actions, you will make good stress management part of your life. If you do not, then there is a real danger that in time you will forget the skills you learn through this course, and will not draw on them when you need them.

Enjoy using the Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class!

Module 2:

Understanding Stress & Stress Management

Managing Stress for Career Success

Mind Tools' Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	This module helps you to understand what stress is, where it comes from, and the affects it can have on your health. It then introduces the important fundamentals of stress management.
Need:	It is important to understand the very real negative affects that stress can have on your health and performance, so that you take stress management seriously and make it part of your life. An understanding of the fundamental concepts also helps you to adapt tools to unique circumstances and helps you to create new tools for new situations.
Range:	The module covers the important theory on which the rest of this course is based.
Objective:	<p>After taking this module, you should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be able to understand the fundamentals of stress and the scope of stress management covered by this course;• Be able to understand some of the theory behind the stress management tools and techniques we use in later modules; and• Feel confident that this course and tools and techniques are based on sound research
Who should take this module?	<p>Everyone taking this course should take this module, either in overview or in detail. Take the module in overview if you simply want to know the key concepts before you get started. Skim through the detail sections and read the summary in detail. Expect to spend about 20 minutes doing this.</p> <p>Take the module in detail if you have the time and interest to study stress theory. Expect to spend 60 minutes doing this.</p>

Introduction

This module helps you to understand the current state of research into stress. We look at this so that you understand how soundly some of these ideas have been researched.

It also introduces you to the fundamental principles behind stress management. While the mind tools we introduce you to in this course cover the most common sources of stress, a good understanding of the fundamentals will help you to adapt these tools and create new ones to handle unique situations.

Much research has been conducted into stress over the last hundred years. Some of the theories are settled and accepted; others are still being researched and debated. This module helps you understand some of the key concepts and theories from current psychological research. These are the foundation on which this course and the tools and techniques within it have been designed.

We start by defining stress. We then look at the underlying mechanisms that cause stress. Next, we look at the nature of stress and consider the relationships between stress and health, and between stress and work performance.

We emphasize the importance of understanding and looking out for stress-related affects on your health. We see how stress can have very negative effects on your short- and long-term health, performance and career success, as well as on your personal happiness. This emphasizes the importance of good stress management.

Finally, we define stress management for career success, and look at the three types of approach to managing stress: action oriented (reducing stress by taking action); perception oriented (dealing with attitudes and emotional responses to stress); and survival oriented (living and coping with stresses that cannot be otherwise resolved). The concepts introduced here underlie the tools and techniques that you will encounter later in the course to help you manage stress constructively.

Note:

This module focuses on the sort of stress people can expect to experience as a normal part of a successful business or public service career. It does not consider in any depth the intense stress that will be experienced in life-threatening situations. Nor does it look at handling the effects of, for example, Depression or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. These are very real issues; however, they are outside the scope of this course.

What Stress Is... Definitions

This is a dangerous topic!

The literature of the last hundred years offers many different definitions of what stress is, whether used by psychologists, medics, management consultants or lay people. There seems to have been something approaching open warfare between competing definitions: Views have been passionately held and aggressively defended.

What complicates this is that intuitively we all feel that we know what stress is, as it is something we have all experienced. A definition should therefore be obvious...except that it is not.

One problem with a single definition is that stress is made up of many things: It is a family of related experiences, pathways, responses and outcomes caused by a range of different events or circumstances. Different people experience different aspects and identify with different definitions.

Hans Selye (one of the founding fathers of stress research) identified another part of this problem when he noted that different types of definition operate in different areas of knowledge. To a lawyer or a linguist, words have very precise, definite and fixed meanings. In other fields, ideas and definitions continue evolving as research and knowledge expands.

Selye's view in 1956 was that "stress is not necessarily something bad – it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental." Selye believed that the biochemical effects of stress would be experienced irrespective of whether the situation was positive or negative.

Since then, a great deal of further research has been conducted, and ideas have moved on. In particular, the harmful biochemical and long-term effects of stress have rarely been observed in positive situations.

Now, the most commonly accepted definition of stress (mainly attributed to Richard S Lazarus) is that **stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that "demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize."**

People feel little stress when they have the time, experience and resources to handle a situation. They feel great stress when they do not see themselves as being able to handle the demands put upon them. Stress is therefore a negative experience. It is not an inevitable consequence of an event: It depends a great deal on individuals' perceptions of a situation and their real ability to cope with it.

This is the main definition used by this course, although we also recognize that there is an intertwined instinctive stress response to unexpected events. The stress response inside us is therefore part instinct and part to do with the way we think.

What Stress Is... The Underlying Mechanisms

There are two types of instinctive stress response that are important to our understanding of stress and stress management: the short-term “Fight-or-Flight” response and the long term “General Adaptation Syndrome”. The first is a basic survival instinct, while the second instinct is a long-term effect of exposure to stress. As we have discussed, a third mechanism comes from the way that we think and interpret the situations in which we find ourselves.

As we will see at the end of this section, these three mechanisms can actually be part of the same stress response – we will initially look at them separately, and then show how they can fit together.

“Fight-or-Flight”

Some of the early research on stress (conducted by Walter Cannon in 1932) established the existence of the well-known fight-or-flight response. His work showed that when an organism experiences a shock or perceives a threat, it quickly releases hormones that help it to survive.

In humans, as in other animals, these hormones help us to run faster and fight harder. They increase heart rate and blood pressure, delivering more oxygen and blood sugar to power important muscles. They increase sweating in an effort to cool these muscles, and help them stay efficient. They divert blood away from the skin to the core of our bodies, reducing blood loss if we are damaged. In addition to this, these hormones focus our attention on the threat, to the exclusion of everything else. All of this significantly improves our ability to survive life-threatening events.

Unfortunately, this mobilization of the body for survival also has negative consequences. In this state, we are excitable, anxious, jumpy and irritable. This actually reduces our ability to work effectively with other people. With trembling and a pounding heart, we can find it difficult to execute precise, controlled skills. The intensity of our focus on survival interferes with our ability to make fine judgments based on drawing information from many sources. We find ourselves more accident-prone and less able to make good decisions.

It is easy to think that this fight-or-flight, or adrenaline, response is only triggered by obviously life-threatening danger. On the contrary, recent research shows that we experience the fight-or-flight response when simply encountering something unexpected. The situation does not have to be dramatic. People can also experience this response when frustrated or interrupted, or when they experience a situation that is new or in some way challenging. This hormonal, fight-or-flight response is a normal part of everyday life and a part of everyday stress, albeit often with an intensity that is so low that we do not notice it.

There are very few situations in modern working life where this response is useful. Most situations benefit from a calm, rational, controlled and socially sensitive approach. Module 10 explains a range of good techniques for keeping this fight-or-flight response under control.

The General Adaptation Syndrome and Burnout

Hans Selye took a different approach from Walter Cannon. Starting with the observation that many different diseases and injuries to the body seemed to cause the same symptoms in patients, he identified a general response (the “General Adaptation Syndrome”) with which the body reacts to a major stimulus.

While the Fight-or-Flight response works in the very short term, the General Adaptation Syndrome operates in response to longer-term exposure to causes of stress.

Selye identified that when pushed to extremes, organisms reacted in three stages:

- First, in the *Alarm Phase*, they reacted to the stressor.
- Next, in the *Resistance Phase*, the resistance to the stressor increased as the organism adapted to, and coped with, it. This phase lasted for as long as the organism could support this heightened resistance.
- Finally, once resistance was exhausted, the organism entered the *Exhaustion Phase*, and resistance declined substantially.

Selye established this with many hundreds of experiments performed on laboratory rats subjected to extreme survival stress. However, he quoted a good human example of this that involved research during World War II with bomber pilots. Once they had completed a few missions over enemy territory, these pilots usually settled down and performed well. After many missions, however, pilot fatigue would set in as they began to show “neurotic manifestations”.

In the business environment, this exhaustion contributes strongly to what is commonly referred to as “burnout”. The classic business example comes from the Wall Street trading floor: by most people’s standards, life on a trading floor is stressful. Traders learn to adapt to the daily stressors of big financial decisions, and the winning and losing large sums of money. In many cases, however, these stresses increase and fatigue starts to set in. At the same time, as traders become successful and earn more and more money, their financial motivation to succeed can diminish. Ultimately, many traders experience “burnout”.

We look at this in more detail in Module 13, “Sustaining Peak Performance Without Burnout”.

Stress and the way we think

Particularly in normal working life, much of our stress is subtle, and occurs without obvious threat to survival. Most of our stress comes from things like work overload, conflicting priorities, inconsistent values, over-challenging deadlines, conflict with co-workers, unpleasant environments and so on. Not only do these reduce our performance as we divert mental effort into handling them, they can also cause a great deal of unhappiness.

We have already mentioned that the most common currently accepted definition of stress is something that is experienced when a person perceives that “demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.”

In becoming stressed, people must therefore make two main judgments: firstly they must feel threatened by the situation, and secondly they must judge whether their capabilities and resources are sufficient to meet the threat. How stressed someone feels depends on how much damage they think the situation can do them, and how closely their resources meet the demands of the situation. This sense of threat is rarely physical. It may, for example, involve perceived threats to our social standing, to other people’s opinions of us, to our promotion prospects or to our own deeply held values.

Just as with real threats to our survival, these perceived threats trigger the hormonal fight-or-flight response with all of its negative consequences.

Modules 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 look at practical methods for managing these stresses by tackling them at source. Module 11, "Reducing Stress With Rational Thinking", looks at a range of powerful tools for changing your interpretation of stressful situations, thereby reducing the perception of threat.

Pulling these mechanisms together – the integrated stress response...

So far, we have presented the Fight-or-Flight response, the General Adaptation Syndrome, and our mental responses to stress as separate mechanisms. In fact, they can fit together into one response.

The key to this is that Hans Selye's 'Alarm Phase' is the same thing as Walter Cannon's Fight-or-Flight response.

We can therefore see that mental stress triggers the fight-or-flight response, and that if this stress is sustained for a long time, the end result might be exhaustion and burnout.

Stress and Your Health

In earlier sections of this module, we considered the survival benefits of the fight-or-flight response, as well as the inherent negative consequences of this response on our performance in modern work-related situations. We saw also the negative "burnout" effect of exposure to long-term stress. These negative effects can impact your health – either as direct physiological damage to our bodies, or as behavioral effects that can also damage your health.

The behavioral effects of an over-stressed lifestyle are easy to explain. For instance, when under pressure, some people are more likely to drink heavily, or smoke, as a way of getting immediate chemical relief from stress. Others may have so much work to do that they do not exercise or eat properly. They may cut down on sleep, or may worry so much that they sleep badly. They may get so carried away with work and meeting daily pressures that they do not take time to see the doctor or dentist when they need to. All of these are likely to have a negative effect on health.

The direct physiological effects of excessive stress are more complex. In some areas they are well understood, while in other areas, they are still subject to debate and further research.

The linkage between stress and heart disease is well established. If stress is intense, and stress hormones are not 'used up' by physical activity, our raised heart rate and high blood pressure put tension on arteries and cause damage to them. As the body heals this damage, the artery walls scar and thicken, which can reduce the supply of blood and oxygen to the heart. This is where a fight-or-flight response can become lethal. Stress hormones accelerate the heart to increase the blood supply to muscles; however, blood vessels in the heart may have become so narrow that not enough blood reaches the heart to meet demands. If you experience this, and you are lucky, you will in turn experience chest pains, and will stop doing what you are doing and immediately seek medical help. If you are not lucky, you will suffer a fatal heart attack.

Stress has been also been found to impair the immune system, which explains why we are more prone to infection (including colds and flu) when we are stressed. It may exacerbate symptoms in diseases that have an autoimmune component, such as rheumatoid arthritis. It also seems to affect headaches and irritable bowel syndrome, and there are now suggestions of links between stress and cancer.

Stress is also associated with mental health problems and, in particular, anxiety and depression. Here the relationship is fairly clear: the negative thinking that causes stress also contributes to these.

The direct effects of stress in other areas of health are still under debate. In some areas (for example in the formation of stomach ulcers) diseases traditionally associated with stress are now attributed to other causes.

Countering this, regular exercise can reduce your physiological reaction to stress. It also strengthens your heart and increases the blood supply to it, directly affecting your vulnerability to heart disease.

Although this course focuses mainly on stress and work performance, many of the tools and techniques within it will help you manage stresses that would otherwise adversely affect your health. However, if you suspect that you are prone to stress-related illness, or if you are in any doubt about the state of your health, you should consult appropriate medical advice immediately. Keep in mind that stress management is only part of any solution to stress-related illness.

Take stress seriously!

Stress and Performance

So far, we have seen that stress is a negative experience. We have seen the short-term negative effects that stress hormones can have on your performance, and have seen how stress can contribute to burnout.

In some cases, however, the pressures and demands that may cause stress can be positive in their effect. One example of this is where sportsmen and women flood their bodies with fight-or-flight adrenaline to power an explosive performance. Another example is where deadlines are used to motivate people who seem bored or unmotivated. We will discuss this briefly in this section, but throughout the rest of this course we see stress as a problem that needs to be solved.

In most work situations jobs, our stress responses cause our performance to suffer. A calm, rational, controlled and sensitive approach is usually called for in dealing with most difficult problems at work. Our social interrelationships are just too complex to withstand the damage that an aggressive approach causes without negative consequences, while a passive and withdrawn response to stress means that we can fail to assert our rights when we should.

Before we look further at how to manage stress and our performance, it is useful to consider the relationship between pressure and performance in a little more detail, first by looking at the idea of the "Inverted-U", and second by looking at flow, the ideal state of concentration and focus that brings excellent performance.

Pressure & Performance – the "Inverted U"

The relationship between pressure and performance is well summarized in one of the oldest and most important ideas in stress management, the "Inverted-U" relationship between pressure and performance. This is shown in figure [2.1](#) below. The Inverted-U relationship focuses on people's performance of a task.

The left hand side of the graph is easy to explain for pragmatic reasons. When there is very little pressure on us to carry out an important task, there is little incentive for us to focus energy and attention on it. This is particularly the case when there may be other, more urgent, or more interesting, tasks competing for attention.

As pressure on us increases, we enter the “area of best performance”. Here, we are able to focus on the task and perform well – there is enough pressure on us to focus our attention but not so much that it disrupts our performance.

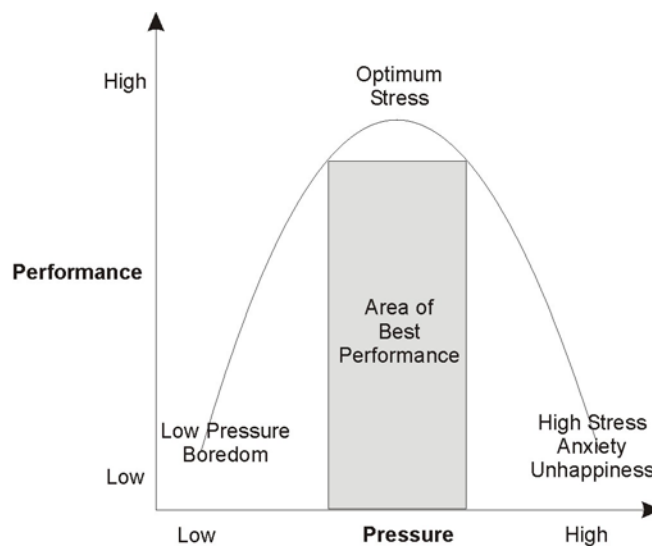


Figure 2.1: The Inverted-U relationship between pressure and performance

The right hand side of the graph is more complex to explain.

We are all aware that we have a limited short-term memory. For example, if you try to memorize a long list of items, you will not be able to remember more than six to eight items unless you use formal memory techniques. Similarly, although we have huge processing power in our brains, we cannot be conscious of more than a few thoughts at any one time. In fact, in a very real way, we have a limited “attentional capacity”.

As we become uncomfortably stressed, distractions, difficulties, anxieties and negative thinking begin to crowd our minds. This is particularly the case where we look at our definition of stress, i.e. that it occurs when a person perceives that “demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.” These thoughts compete with performance of the task for our attentional capacity. Concentration suffers, and focus narrows as our brain becomes overloaded.

As shown in the figure, this is something of a slippery slope: the more our brain is overloaded, the more our performance can suffer. The more our performance suffers, the more new distractions, difficulties, anxieties and negative thoughts crowd our minds.

Other research has shown that stress reduces people's ability to deal with large amounts of information. Both decision-making and creativity are impaired because people are unable to take account of all the information available. This inability accounts for the frequent observation that highly stressed people will persist in a course of action even when better alternatives are available. It also explains why anxious people perform best when they are put under little additional stress, while calm people may need additional pressure to produce a good performance.

Notes on the research behind the Inverted-U:

While this is an important and useful idea, people's evaluations of stress and performance are by necessity subjective. This has made it difficult to prove the 'Inverted-U' idea formally. Also, for ease of explanation, we show a smooth curve here. In reality, different people have different shaped and positioned inverted-U's at different times and in different circumstances. This is all part of "life's rich tapestry".

Flow

When you are operating in your "area of best performance", you are normally able to concentrate, and focus all of your attention on the important task at hand. When you do this without distraction, you are able to enter what Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Chicago University describes as a state of 'flow'. This involves *"being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost"*.

You perform at your best in this state because you are able to focus all of your efforts, resources and abilities on the tasks at hand. While you are sufficiently motivated to resist competing temptations, you are not so stressed that anxieties and distractions interfere with clear thought.

This is an intensely creative, efficient and satisfying state of mind. It is the state of mind in which, for example, the best speeches are made, good software is developed, and the most impressive athletic or artistic performances are delivered.

One of the frustrations of management is that managers can feel that they lose the 'right' to these periods of deep concentration when they must be readily available to others, and be able to deal with constantly changing information, decisions and activities around them. Studies of good managers show that they rarely get more than a few minutes alone without distraction. This alone can be frustrating, and can contribute strongly to managerial stress.

In jobs where concentration is a rare commodity, there are various solutions to creating the periods of flow that sustain good performance. Solutions include working from home, or setting aside parts of the day as quiet periods. Another solution might be to delegate the activities that require the greatest levels of concentration, allowing the manager to concentrate on problems as they arise, serving to create a flow of its own.

One of the key aims of this course is to help you manage stress so that you can enter this state of flow, and deliver truly excellent performance in your career. This career-related stress management is the subject of the remainder of this course.

Introducing stress management

So far, we have looked at what stress is, how it affects our health, and how it affects our performance. This is where we start to look at how we can manage it so that you can rise above all of the stresses that your career will bring.

There are three major approaches that we can use to manage stress:

- **Action-oriented:** In which we seek to confront the problem causing the stress, often changing the environment or the situation;
- **Emotionally-oriented:** In which we do not have the power to change the situation, but we can manage stress by changing our interpretation of the situation and the way we feel about it; and
- **Acceptance-oriented:** Where something has happened over which we have no power and no emotional control, and where our focus is on surviving the stress.

To be able to take an action-oriented approach, we must have some power in the situation. If we do, then action-oriented approaches are some of the most satisfying and rewarding ways of managing stress. These are techniques that we can use to manage and overcome stressful situations, changing them to our advantage.

Modules 5 to 10 of this course focus on action-oriented coping. These modules introduce skills that help you to actively manage your job, work well with your boss and co-workers, and change your surroundings to eliminate environmental stress.

If you do not have the power to change a situation, then you may be able to improve things by changing the way you look at it, and feel about it, by using an emotionally oriented approach. These are often less attractive than action-oriented approaches in that the stresses can recur time and again; however, they are useful and effective in their place. Module 11 explains powerful techniques for getting another perspective on difficult situations.

Sometimes, we have so little power in a situation that it is all we can do to survive it. This is the case, for example, when loved-ones die. In these situations, often the first stage of coping with the stress is to accept one's lack of power. Module 12 looks at building the buffers against stress that help you through these difficult periods.

The definition of stress we used at the start of this module was that it is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.

These different approaches to stress management address this definition in different ways: the action-oriented techniques help us to manage the demands upon us and increase the resources we can mobilize; the emotionally oriented techniques help us to adjust our perceptions of the situation; and the acceptance-oriented techniques help you to survive the situations that you genuinely cannot change.

Modules 5 to 11 focus on managing short-term stress. Modules 12 and 13 help you to cope with the long-term stress that can lead to burnout, and to harmful stress-related illness.

The final part of stress management, introduced in module 14, shows you how you can make good stress management an ongoing part of your life.

Summary

This module discusses the fundamental ideas behind stress management. By understanding these ideas, you can see how the tools in this course work for most common sources of stress, and can understand how to adapt them or create new tools to handle unique situations.

It introduces the debate over the definitions of stress, and gives the most commonly accepted definition: that stress is experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources that the individual is able to mobilize. It also brings in the intertwined instinctive responses to unexpected events and threats that are so much part of stress.

We then looked at these instinctive responses in more detail, firstly looking at the fight-or-flight response that helps us to respond explosively to immediate threat, and then looking at the General Adaptation Syndrome and burnout. We also saw the way that the normal day-to-day stressors of overload, frustration, conflict and deadlines can trigger small-scale fight-or-flight responses.

Next, we looked at the negative effects of long-term stress, first from a behavioral perspective, and second, by looking at its contribution to disease. We saw that stress has a well-established link with heart disease, but that relationships with other diseases were still not fully established.

We then looked at the "Inverted-U" relationship between pressure and performance. We saw that when pressure is low, performance is normally low as other activities compete for attention. When pressure and stress are high, anxieties and disturbances can overload our thinking, reducing our ability to concentrate on a task, and thereby reducing our performance. However, we saw that there is a medium level of pressure, at which we can concentrate effectively. At this level of pressure, we can enter a state of intense concentration or 'flow', in which we do our best work. The goal of stress management is to help us to manage stress so that we can maintain this state of flow and deliver exceptional performance.

In doing this, there are three different stress management approaches that we can use:

- Action-oriented
- Emotionally-oriented
- Acceptance-oriented

An action-oriented approach is often best used when you have some power to change a situation. These approaches are described in modules 5 to 10. Where you do not have power, it may be appropriate to take an emotionally oriented approach. With this approach, you seek to change your understanding of and response to the situation. These approaches are described in module 11. Lastly, when you have no power, and a changed appreciation of the situation is not appropriate, then an acceptance-oriented approach may be best. Module 12 describes these in more detail.

Modules 12, 13 and 14 show you how to manage long-term stress, avoid burnout and make stress management part of your daily life.

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Module 3:

Pin-Pointing the Stress in Your Life

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	This module introduces you to important tools that help you to understand the sources of stress in your life. It also helps you to analyse your reactions to stress, and identify how you can improve the way you manage it.
Need:	<p>The tools in this section are fundamental to good stress management. They help you to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognize the extent to which major life events can increase the stress in your life;• List the sources of short-term stress that you are experiencing;• Make full use of the stress management resources you have available to you; and• Understand where you react well to stress, and where you need to improve your stress management skills. <p>The techniques in this module give you the basic information needed for Module 4, "Targeting Stress Effectively".</p>
Timing:	This module will take approximately one hour to read and work through. Keeping your Stress Diary will take around 15 minutes a day, for two weeks. Analyzing your Stress Diary and carrying out a Stress SWOT Analysis will take approximately 2 hours.
Range:	<p>The module covers use of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Schedule of Recent Experience• Stress Diaries• Stress SWOT Analysis
Objective:	The objective of the module is to identify the most important stresses in your life, appreciate how these stresses affect you, and understand how you react to them.

3. Pinpointing the Stress in Your Life

In the last module, we introduced the idea of 'flow'. Flow is a state of mind in which you are completely focused on what you are doing, and in which all of your efforts and mental resources are working together to deliver the very best performance possible.

Flow is a deeply rewarding and enjoyable state of mind. It is the one in which you do your best work. It is also one that is highly vulnerable to stress because when anxiety, problems and distractions are flooding your mind, they disrupt your concentration and degrade your ability to think clearly and perform well.

From now on, this course will look at ways to help you manage stress so that you can concentrate fully on the job in hand, and truly enjoy the work you do.

3.1. Why this module is important

This module helps you to understand the stress in your life. The next module shows you how to plan to manage it. The following modules deal with managing stress in the different areas of your life.

The first part of managing stress is to understand the stresses you experience so that you can anticipate, and prepare for, stressful situations and learn to use the stress management techniques that are most appropriate for each situation.

You will obviously be aware of the immediate points of stress in your life, whether these are over-demanding deadlines, problems with your co-workers, worries or anxieties, or many, many other possibilities. This module helps you to build up a full and comprehensive picture of these so that you can do something about them.

What you may not be as aware of are the deeper, longer-term stresses in your life. For example, the transition from college to a new job involves radical changes in lifestyle, location and personal status that can be deeply stressful. As another example, anyone changing jobs or roles will experience a formidable array of new challenges and difficulties – all of these can be intensely stressful. Similarly, the joys and upsets of relationships and families also have their stresses. Remember, all of these will have an impact on your ability to cope.

Just from your normal life experience, you will have developed useful ways of coping with many of these stresses. Others you will not be as good at. This module helps you to identify where you need to learn new skills.

Finally, remember from the previous module that different people perform well under different levels of stress. This module will also help you to identify the level of stress that you are happiest with, so that you can manage your life appropriately.

3.2. Introducing the Tools...

The first technique we will look at is the “Schedule of Recent Experience”. This helps you to understand the longer-term stresses you are experiencing in your life. It sets the broad context of your approach to stress management, and helps you to understand how to bring the overall stress in your life within manageable bounds.

Next, we look at keeping and analyzing a Stress Diary. Stress Diaries help you to understand the day-to-day stresses in your life so that you work out how to manage them.

We will then use a variant of SWOT Analysis to look at your use of stress management techniques. In its normal usage, SWOT Analysis is used to look at your Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats in a situation. This variant will help you to understand where you are good at managing stress, and where you need to improve your skills. It also helps to ensure that you are using all of the resources you have available to you.

3.2.1. Tool: Assessing Longer Term Stress – The Schedule of Recent Experience

Introduction:

The first of these tools is the Schedule of Recent Experience (SRE). This is a good technique for understanding the levels of longer-term stress that you may be experiencing.

The principle behind the SRE is that it looks at the major life events you have experienced during the last year, and allocates an appropriate score to each of these. These scores are then added together, giving a total that shows the amount of major stress you have experienced during the year. The higher the total, the more likely it is that you will experience burnout, stress-related problems and illnesses.

This scale is useful because it helps you to understand your capacity to take on additional stress – if you show a very high score on the SRE, then you should take great care to keep your life as stable and stress-free as possible. If you fail to do this, then you risk stress-related illness and burnout, as well as experiencing all of the normal unpleasantness and loss of performance that comes with high levels of stress.

Theory:

The SRE was developed by Dr Thomas Holmes and his fellow researchers in a series of studies that compared patients' health outcomes with the life events they had recently experienced.

In Dr Holmes' study, people with a score of less than 150 had a low likelihood (30%) of illness in the near future, while those with a score of over 300 had a very high likelihood of illness (80%).

Many subsequent studies by other researchers have broadly supported the approach of the SRE. While this approach is constantly evolving, and more specialist scales are used in e.g. clinical settings, the SRE is a useful tool for our purposes.

Using the Tool:

The SRE is a table showing the 42 most important stresses that people experience in normal life. These are shown in figure [3.2.1](#).

To use the tool, work through this list of life stresses, identifying those that you have experienced in the last 12 months.

There are two easy ways of doing this. Either:

- Work through Figure 3.2.1 below on paper and calculate values manually; or
- Download the [template](http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/Figure3-2-1.xls) from <http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/Figure3-2-1.xls>, and fill in values appropriately on the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet – this will automatically calculate scores for you.

As you work through, enter the number of times that the event has occurred in the last year in the 'Number of Times' column. If an event has happened more than four times during the year, give it a score of 4. For example, if you have been fortunate enough to go on vacation five times during the year, enter '4' in row 37.

If you are calculating this manually, multiply the number of times the event has happened by the number in the 'Mean Value' column. This gives you your score for that event type. Total this to give your score. In the example above, you will suffer a score 52 points on the SRE if you go on holiday five times in a year.

Different people cope in different ways, and to a different extent. However, scores of 200 or more on this scale may show that you are experiencing high levels of longer-term stress. You may be in danger of burning out, or of negatively affecting your health. This is particularly the case if your work is routinely stressful. Scores of 300 or more mean that you should take particular care.

Figure 3.2.1 Schedule of Recent Experience

Reproduced with the permission of The University of Washington Press. This scale must not be used in any way to cause harm to an individual's professional career.

Event	Number of Times	Mean Value	= Your Score
1. A lot more or a lot less trouble with the boss.	x	23	=
2. A Major change in sleeping habits (sleeping a lot more or a lot less or a change in time of day when you sleep).	x	16	=
3. A major change in eating habits (eating a lot more or a lot less or very different meal hours or surroundings).	x	15	=
4. A revision of personal habits (dress, manners, associations, and so on).	x	24	=
5. A major change in your usual type or amount of recreation.	x	19	=

Event	Number of Times	Mean Value	= Your Score
6. A major change in your social activities (e.g., clubs, dancing, movies, visiting, and so on).	x	18	=
7. A major change in church activities (attending a lot more or less than usual).	x	19	=
8. A major change in the number of family get-togethers (a lot more or a lot fewer than usual).	x	15	=
9. A major change in your financial state (a lot worse off or a lot better off).	x	38	=
10. Trouble with in-laws.	x	29	=
11. A major change in the number of arguments with spouse (a lot more or a lot fewer than usual regarding child rearing, personal habits, and so on).	x	35	=
12. Sexual difficulties.	x	39	=
13. Major personal injury or illness.	x	53	=
14. Death of a close family member (other than spouse).	x	63	=
15. Death of spouse.	x	100	=
16. Death of a close friend.	x	37	=
17. Gaining a new family member (through birth, adoption, oldster moving in and so on).	x	39	=
18. Major change in the health or behavior of a family.	x	44	=
19. Change in residence.	x	20	=
20. Detention in jail or other institution.	x	63	=
21. Minor violations of the law (traffic tickets, jaywalking, disturbing the peace, and so on).	x	11	=
22. Major business re-adjustment (merger, reorganization, bankruptcy and so on).	x	39	=
23. Marriage.	x	50	=
24. Divorce.	x	73	=

Event	Number of Times	Mean Value	= Your Score
25. Marital separation from spouse.	x	65	=
26. Outstanding personal achievement.	x	28	=
27. Son or daughter leaving home (marriage, attending college, and so on).	x	29	=
28. Retirement from work.	x	45	=
29. Major change in working hours or conditions.	x	20	=
30. Major change in responsibilities at work (promotion, demotion or lateral transfer).	x	29	=
31. Being fired from work.	x	47	=
32. Major change in living conditions (building a new home or remodeling, deterioration of home or neighborhood).	x	25	=
33. Spouse beginning or ceasing to work outside the home.	x	26	=
34. Taking out a mortgage or loan for a major purchase (purchasing a home or business, and so on).	x	31	=
35. Taking out a loan for a lesser purchase (a car, TV, freezer, and so on).	x	17	=
36. Foreclosure on a mortgage or loan.	x	30	=
37. Vacation.	x	13	=
38. Changing to a new school.	x	20	=
39. Changing to a different line of work.	x	36	=
40. Beginning or ceasing formal schooling.	x	26	=
41. Marital reconciliation with mate.	x	45	=
42. Pregnancy.	x	40	=
Total Score			=

Applying this tool:

Some of these stresses can be avoided. Others cannot.

If you have a high score on the SRE, then do your best to avoid additional stresses. Ensure that you make good use of the stress management techniques explained in this course. Take care of yourself.

Summary:

The Schedule of Recent Experience (SRE) is a well-validated technique for assessing the amount of longer-term stress that people are experiencing. Although it has been superseded in some areas, it is useful in predicting the likelihood that people will experience burnout or illness (including mental illness such as depression) based on the level of longer-term stress that they are experiencing.

To use the SRE, work through the table in figure [3.2.1](#), entering into the "Number of Times" column how often you have experienced particular stressors in the past year. Next, work through each row of the table multiplying this by the value in the "Mean Value" column. Write the result in the "Your Score" column. Finally, total the "Your Score" column.

Different individuals have different abilities to cope with stress. If, however, you score more than 200, then you should be aware that longer-term stress is something you need to pay careful attention to. If you score more than 300, then you should take great care, and should urgently try to minimize the amount of stress in your life. This also includes looking at the shorter-term stresses in your life identified with the next tool, Stress Diaries.

3.2.2 Tool: Identifying the Short Term Stress in Your Life – Stress Diaries

Introduction:

Stress Diaries are important for understanding the causes of short-term stress in your life. They also give you an important insight into how you react to stress, and help you to identify the level of stress at which you prefer to operate.

The idea behind Stress Diaries is that, on a regular basis, you record information about the stresses you are experiencing, so that you can analyse these stresses and then manage them. This is important because often these stresses flit in and out of our minds without getting the attention and focus that they deserve.

As well as helping you capture and analyse the most common sources of stress in your life, Stress Diaries help you to understand:

- The causes of stress in more detail;
- The levels of stress at which you operate most efficiently; and
- How you react to stress, and whether your reactions are appropriate and useful.

Stress Diaries, therefore, give you the important information that you need to manage stress.

Using the Tool:

Stress Diaries are useful in that they gather information regularly and routinely, over a period of time. This helps you to separate the common, routine stresses from those that only occur occasionally. They establish a pattern that you can analyse to extract the information that you need.

To use the tool, either:

- Use the worksheet shown in figure [3.2.2](#) to keep a paper-based Stress Diary (best if you do not have routine access to a computer – print off as many pages as you need); or
- Download and use the [template](#) from <http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/StressDiary.xls>.

Make regular entries in your Stress Diary (for example, every hour). If you have any difficulty remembering to do this, set an alarm to remind you to make your next diary entry.

Also make an entry in your diary after each incident that is stressful enough for you to feel that it is significant.

Every time you make an entry, record the following information:

- The date and time of the entry.
- How happy¹ you feel now, using a subjective assessment on a scale of -10 (the most unhappy you have ever been) to +10 (the happiest you have been). As well as this, write down the mood you are feeling.
- How efficiently you are working now (a subjective assessment, on a scale of 0 to 10). A 0 here would show complete inefficiency, while a 10 would show the greatest efficiency you have ever achieved.
- How stressed you feel now, again on a subjective scale of 0 to 10. As before, 0 here would be the most relaxed you have ever been, while 10 would show the greatest stress you have ever experienced.
- The most recent stressful event you have experienced
- The symptom did you feel (e.g. “butterflies in your stomach”, anger, headache, raised pulse rate, sweaty palms, etc.).
- The fundamental cause of the stress (being as honest and objective as possible).
- How well you handled the event: Did your reaction help solve the problem, or did it inflame it?

You will reap the real benefits of having a stress diary in the first few weeks. After this, the benefit you get will reduce each additional day. If, however, your lifestyle changes, or you begin to suffer from stress again in the future, then it may be worth using the diary approach again. You will probably find that the stresses you face have changed. If this is the case, then keeping a diary again will help you to develop a different approach to deal with them.

Analyze the diary at the end of this period.

¹ Be careful not to say to yourself “I am stressed, therefore I must be unhappy” – this may not be the case. Recording this helps you to explore the levels of stress you are happy to tolerate.

Figure 3.2.2. Stress Diary

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Date & Time	Happiness & Mood (-10 to +10)	Efficiency (0 to 10)	Feeling of Stress (0 to 10)	Most Recent Stressful Event	What Did You Feel?	Fundamental Cause	How Managed?

Analyzing the Diary

Analyze the diary in the following ways:

- First, look at the different stresses you experienced during the time you kept your diary. List the types of stress that you experienced by frequency, with the most frequent stresses at the top of the list.

Next, prepare a second list with the most unpleasant stresses at the top of the list and the least unpleasant at the bottom.

Looking at your lists of stresses, those at the top of each list are the most important for you to learn to control. The next module (Module 4), shows you how to plan to deal with these stresses, and how to identify the techniques that are most effective for managing them.

Working through the stresses, look at your assessments of their underlying causes, and your appraisal of how well you handled the stressful event. Do these show you areas where you handled stress poorly, and could improve your stress management skills? If so, list these.

- Second, compare the values you entered for “Happiness” and “Efficiency” against the values for “Feeling of Stress”. You may find, for example, that you are most efficient when you are moderately stressed.
- Next, look through your diary at the situations that cause you stress. List these (later in this course, in Module 10, we will show you how to prepare for these situations so that you can manage stress effectively).
- Finally, look at how you felt when you were under stress. Look at how it affected your happiness and your efficiency, understand how you behaved, and think about how you felt. Module 11 will show you how to improve your mood and manage your emotions.

Having analyzed your diary, you should fully understand what the most important and frequent sources of stress are in your life. You should appreciate the levels of stress at which you are happiest. You should also know the sort of situations that cause you stress so that you can prepare for them and manage them well.

In addition to this, you should now understand how you react to stress, and the symptoms that you show when you are stressed. When you experience these symptoms in the future, this should be a trigger for you to use appropriate stress management techniques.

The next module (Module 4) will show you how to identify the stress management techniques that are most appropriate for managing these stresses. It will also help you to develop a self-sustaining program for managing the stress in your life.

Summary

Stress Diaries help you to get a good understanding of the routine, short-term stresses that you experience in your life. They help you to identify the most important, and most frequent, stresses that you experience, so that you can concentrate your efforts on these. They also help you to identify areas where

you need to improve your stress management skills, and help you to understand the levels of stress at which you are happiest, and most efficient.

To keep a stress diary, make an entry on a sheet like the one in figure [3.2.2](#) on a regular basis. For example, you may do this every hour. Also make entries after stressful events.

Analyze the diary to identify the most frequent and most serious stresses that you experience. Use it also to identify areas where you can improve your management of stress.

Module 4 helps you to identify the best stress management technique to use to tackle these stresses, and shows you how to plan your stress management program.

Your Stress Diary also provides important information for the next technique, Stress SWOT Analysis:

3.2.3 Tool: Understanding Your Unique Stress Position – Stress SWOT Analysis

Introduction:

[SWOT Analysis](#) is an important technique used for understanding an organization's strategic position. It is routinely used to identify and summarize:

- **Strengths:** The capabilities, resources and advantages of an organization.
- **Weaknesses:** Things the organization is not good at, areas of resource scarcity and areas where the organization is vulnerable.
- **Opportunities:** The good opportunities open to the organization, which perhaps exploit its strengths or eliminate its weaknesses.
- **Threats:** Things that can damage the organization, perhaps as people exploit its limitations or as its environment changes.

The Stress SWOT Analysis tool is a variant of this technique, focused on helping you to understand your unique strengths and weaknesses in the way you manage stress. It also helps you to identify the resources you have available to you, and points out the consequences of managing stress poorly.

Using the Tool:

A [template](#) is available at <http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/StressSWOT.xls> to help you use this tool.

Strengths:

To use the tool, start by listing your strengths. Write down:

- Your personal strengths – things you are good at and people respect you for, your areas of good experience, etc.;

- Your support network – family, friends, professional or other networks, government services, powerful contacts, co-workers, your team, etc.; and
- The resources you can draw on – money, assets, power, etc.

Next, work through your stress diary and look at the times where you managed stress well. Write down the practical skills you used to do this – these are likely to be your stress management strengths.

Finally, look back into the past, and think about times when you handled intense stress successfully. Again, write down the skills you used to do this.

Weaknesses:

Next, list your personal weaknesses and the limitations in your position. Write down:

- Personal weaknesses – areas where you are aware that you are not strong, or things that people fairly criticize you for;
- Lack of resources – where other people at your level have access to these resources, or where the absence of resources is impacting your situation; and
- Bad situations – where you are experiencing problems with your job or relationships, or where you have a poor living or working environment.

Challenge these weaknesses rationally to ensure that they are fair and genuine, and that you are not being excessively harsh and self-critical. At the same time, challenge whether you could realistically expect more resources to be available.

Then work through the stress diary again, looking at the times where you did not handle stress well. Identify where you have problems managing stress. Again, look into your past at stressful situations. Where you think you handled stress poorly, write down why you think this was the case.

By cataloging all of these, you are identifying possible areas of change in your life, and are spotting where you need to develop new skills. In the next module, we will bring these into your Stress Management Plan.

Opportunities:

In the Opportunities section, [brainstorm](#) the opportunities you have available to you.

First, work your way through the strengths you have identified. Next ask yourself how you can draw on these strengths to help you manage stress. For example, are there people whose job it is to help you? Are there people whose help you could call on? Could you pay people to take on tasks you do not have time for? Are you fully using the tools or assets you have available? Could you use your skills and strengths in one area to help yourself in another area?

Second, work through the weaknesses you have identified. These are opportunities for positive change and for development of new skills.

Finally, consider the real world, practical opportunities that would be open to you if you took advantage of these opportunities to improve your stress management.

Threats:

In the threats section, consider the consequences of leaving your weaknesses uncovered. Consider the damage to relationships, career and happiness that would come from failing to manage stress.

Use this consideration of the downside as a spur to ensure that you take stress management seriously!

Summary:

A Stress SWOT Analysis helps you to understand your unique position with respect to stress management.

By looking at strengths, you ensure that you recognize all of the personal strengths, skills, resources and social networks that can help you manage stress. By looking at your weaknesses, you identify areas you need to change in your life, including new skills that you need to acquire.

By looking at opportunities, you should be able to better see how you can take advantage of your strengths to help manage the stress in your life. You should also understand the rewards of good stress management. By looking at threats, you should recognize the negative consequences of managing stress poorly, and this should be a potent source of motivation!

3.3. Applying This to Your Life...

The three tools we have covered in this module are important techniques for understanding the stress in your life, for learning about your ability to cope with it, and for identifying areas where you need to improve your skills. However, these tools will only benefit you if you use them.

Now is the time to start!

First, decide how you want to use the Stress Diary ([3.2.2](#)) – either on paper or as a spreadsheet. If you want to keep it on paper, print off all the sheets you need now (30-40 should do), and make your first entry. If you want to keep it on a spreadsheet, download this form from the web now, and make your first entry in it. Keep your Stress Diary for two weeks and then analyze it appropriately.

Next, complete the Schedule of Recent Experience ([3.2.1](#)). The easiest way of doing this is to download it as a spreadsheet from the web. It will do all appropriate calculations for you.

Finally, after keeping your Stress Diary for two weeks, carry out your Stress SWOT Analysis ([3.2.3](#)).



STOP!

Do not go any further until you have done this!

You will not get the full value of your investment in this course unless you actually use these tools!

3.4. Further Information

The Schedule of Recent Experience is explained in more detail in the “Manual for the Schedule of Recent Experience” by M E Amundson, C A Hart and T A Holmes, 1986, University of Washington Press

Stress Diaries are explained in many different books on stress management. Two good stress management books with information on stress diaries are:

- [The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook](#) by Martha Davis

This is a practical, well-respected stress management workbook filled with insightful self- assessment tests and clearly explained stress reduction techniques. The book is grounded in good quality research, and written in a refreshingly non-sensational style.

- [Stress Management for Dummies](#) by Allen Elkin, Ph.D.

Like so many of the other books in the Dummies series, this is a good, straightforward, accessible introduction to stress management.

Module 4:

Targeting Stress Effectively

Managing Stress for Career Success

Mind Tools' Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	By this stage, you should have a good idea of the sources of stress in your life. This module helps you to plan how to manage these.
Need:	This module helps you to your stresses, and develop a plan for managing them. By doing this, you can tackle the most important problems first, and bring your life back into balance as quickly as possible.
Timing:	It will take approximately 30 minutes to read through the module. The exercises will take an additional hour to complete.
Range:	<p>The module covers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stress prioritization• Knowing where to get help• Action planning for stress management• Scheduling of stress reviews
Objective:	The objective of the module is to help you create, and use, a stress management plan – one that will help you to control the stresses in your life as quickly and effectively as possible.

Targeting Stress Effectively

Introduction

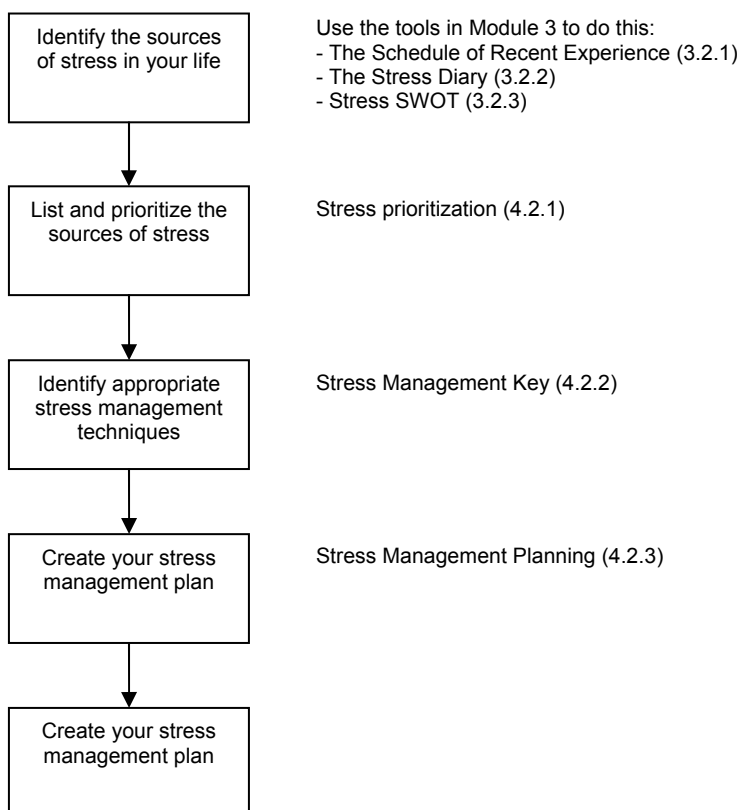
In module 3, we looked at the Schedule of Recent Experience, Stress Diaries and Stress SWOT. These important tools should have helped you to understand the sources of stress in your life.

In this module, we use the self-knowledge you have gained to plan how you can manage these sources of stress. By planning your stress management program, you can focus your attention on the most serious sources of stress in your life, and bring these under control as quickly and effectively as possible.

Introducing Your Stress Management Plan

Figure 4.1 below shows the stages of the stress management planning process:

Figure 4.1: The Stress Management Planning Process



We looked at the first stage of this process in Module 3, and if you have used the tools we discussed, you should already have identified the most important sources of stress in your life.

The next step is to these sources of stress so that you can separate the important stressors that must be dealt with from the minor, infrequent irritations that do not deserve real attention. Once you have done this, you need to work out how you will manage these stresses. We look at a simple key that will guide you through the most appropriate tools for doing this later in this module. Finally, we look at bringing all of this together into a Stress Management Plan. This plan will show you how you can manage the stress in your life, serving to bring your life back into balance in the quickest, and most effective way, open to you.

Identifying the Most Important Sources of Stress

In Module 3, we looked at using the Schedule of Recent Experience (see [3.2.1](#)), Stress Diaries (see [3.2.2](#)) and Stress SWOT Analysis (see [3.2.3](#)) to identify the key sources of stress in your life. What you need to do now is prioritize the stressors you identified so that you can see clearly which sources of stress need to be dealt with as a priority, and which sources are relatively unimportant.

To do this, start with the Schedule of Recent Experience worksheet that you prepared in 3.2.1. Work through the schedule, and list the events that cause you stress now.

Next, look at the two lists you prepared during the analysis of your Stress Diaries. The first of these showed the most frequent things that caused you stress on a day-to-day basis, while the second list showed the most unpleasant ones. Add these to your list.

Then, look at the weaknesses and threats that you identified during your Stress SWOT Analysis. Do any of these cause some of the stress that you are currently experiencing? If so, write these down.

Check through the list, and consolidate items that have the same underlying cause so that each source of stress appears only once on the list.

Now, work through the list you have created and rank each item from 1 (very low) to 10 (very high), according to the severity of the stress that it causes you. Strike out the causes of stress that you do not need to manage – these might be things that you do not expect to happen again, or could be things that are so minor that you would not normally worry about them. Then, put the remaining items into priority order, with the most important stressors at the top of the list and the least important at the bottom.

The items at the top of the list are the most important for you to resolve, while the ones at the bottom of the list can wait until you have the time to deal with them.

Tip:

If you create this list using a spreadsheet, it will be much easier to sort the list into the correct order without a lot of tedious redrafting.

Working Out How to Manage Each Source of Stress

Once you have identified the most important sources of stress in your life, the next step is to identify the best stress management techniques to use to deal with each source of stress.

A good way of doing this is to work through the most important stressors on your stress priority list one-by-one. For each source of stress, work through the Stress Management Key in figure 4.2. This will route you through to the course module containing the most relevant techniques. Look through this and see which tools are helpful for managing each source of stress. If you cannot find any technique that is directly appropriate, adapt tools or use the knowledge of stress you gained in module 2 to create your own. Note that some causes of stress can be quite complex: You may need to use the key several times before you have found all of the tools that can help.

Also, think about what you learned about yourself when you used the Stress SWOT Analysis in 3.2.3. As part of this, you will have identified people or resources that can readily access for help in managing stress – co-workers, friends, mentors, team members or many other people, or additional resource. Make sure that you make appropriate use of all of the people, skills and resources that you have access to. Also, make a note of the skills that you need to acquire to manage stress effectively.

Write down the steps that you are going to take to manage stress for each of the important sources of stress that you have identified.

Bringing This Together: Your Stress Management Plan

Bring all of these steps together to create your Stress Management Plan. Write down exactly what you are going to do to manage all of the important sources of stress in your life, and when you are going to do it.

As you do this, make sure that you do not over-stretch yourself. The last thing you want is to get stressed-out by failing to meet the timetable of your stress management plan!

Next, make entries into your diary reminding you to review your plan, and keep it fresh in your mind.

When you reach this stage, you should know exactly what you have to do to manage the stress in your life. All you then have to do is implement your plan!

Moving On... The Rest of This Course

This module helps you to pinpoint the most important sources of stress in your life so that you can start to manage and control them as quickly as possible. If you are experiencing problems with stress, take the time to do this so that you can improve your quality of life as soon as possible.

Once you have done this, work through the remaining modules of the course so that you can learn how to manage the many work-related stresses you will experience in your career.

Figure 4.2 Stress Management Key

Note that some stresses can be complex and can be made up of many different factors. For these stresses, work through the key below as many times as are necessary to deal with all facets of the situation. If the problem is still not fully solved, then use your knowledge of stress to improvise an appropriate solution.

To use the key, start at row 1. If your answer to the query in the 'Question' column is yes, follow the instructions in the 'If Yes...' column. If your answer is no, do the same with the instructions in the 'If No..' column. The key will quickly route you to the area of the course most likely to help you.

#	Question	If Yes...	If No...
1	Do you feel exhausted, run down or disillusioned with your career?	Go to module 13 , then go to row 2	Go to row 2
2	Do you have any power to change the situation?	Go to row 3	Go to row 11
3	Is the importance of an upcoming event the main source of the stress?	Go to module 10	Go to row 4
4	Does the stress come from relationship difficulties with other people?	Go to row 5	Go to row 7
5	Does this person/do these people have some significant power over you?	Go to module 7	Go to row 6
6	Are you experiencing relationship difficulties with your co-worker(s) or team member(s)?	Go to module 8	Review module 7 and 8 and see if any techniques are helpful. If not, improvise. Go to row 9
7	Are you overloaded with work or does stress come from the design of the job or inconsistencies with it?	Go to row 8	
8	Does your job seem rationally and consistently designed, and does it have clear career paths?	Go to module 5	Go to module 6 , then to module 5 .
9	Are you experiencing stress, discomfort or distraction from your environment?	Go to module 9	Go to row 10
10	Are you living a healthy lifestyle and getting enough sleep?	Review module 5 to 12 and see if any techniques help. If not, improvise.	Go to module 12
11	Are unhappy or negative thoughts associated with the stress you are experiencing?	Go to module 11 , then to module 12	Go to module 12



STOP!

If you are currently experiencing severe stress, do not go any further until you have created and started to implement, your Stress Management Plan!

Module 5:

Coping With Work Overload

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	<p>Successful organizations often have intense, hard-driving cultures – these cultures contribute strongly to their success.</p> <p>People within these organizations often become very successful themselves, as they gain the rewards of contributing to their organization's success. However, long hours and stress are often accepted as the price of this.</p> <p>This module gives you good techniques that help you survive the pressure that comes with challenging jobs, while still maintaining the quality of life that you desire.</p>
Need:	<p>This module teaches the basic skills needed to thrive in a challenging job. Unless you can use these skills competently, you will be overwhelmed by conflicting priorities, will fail to achieve important targets, and will not get the job satisfaction that you desire.</p>
Timing:	<p>This module will take approximately one hour to read. The job review will take two hours. Other activities will take 15–20 minutes a day, on an ongoing basis.</p>
Range:	<p>This module helps you to cope with overload, tight deadlines and impossible demands. It covers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understanding how to deliver good performance in your job;• Managing time so that you can get the most out of it;• Negotiating the time and resources you need; and• Task and project planning
Objective:	<p>The objective of the module is to help you understand what you need to do to achieve success in a challenging job, make the most of the time and resources available to you, and successfully negotiate more of these where they are necessary to achieve success.</p>

5. Coping With Work Overload

5.1. Why this module is important

Because the best organizations in an industry tend to handle the most interesting and lucrative projects in that sector, they can often be extremely rewarding places to work. Good jobs in these organizations are keenly competed for. Jobholders have to produce good results to remain in place.

This makes for hard-driving cultures, in which people work extremely hard to get and keep good jobs. This further builds the success of these organizations.

It also means that stress can be intense, and that stress and hard work can be seen as the prices of success. This was shown in the quote from Fortune Magazine we looked at in Module 1:

Being able to handle stress is perhaps the most basic of job expectations; it is at the core of not just doing good work but doing work, period. So among the corporate elite, succumbing to it is considered a shameful weakness. "I hear a lot of people saying 'it's tough.' But executives don't use the 's' word."

"In corporate America, especially, people often rise to the top by learning how to overcome stress."

Cora Daniels, The Last Taboo, Fortune Magazine: Volume 146, Issue 8, 28 October 2002

This module introduces you to the mindset and the skills that are needed to manage the heavy workload that comes with a successful career. Successful workload management is vitally important for your job satisfaction – work overload is a major source of intense stress.

The module shows you how to understand your job in detail, so that you can focus on the key activities that will make you successful. It shows you how to cope with overload, tight deadlines and intensely challenging demands. It also introduces the skills needed to negotiate for additional time and resource, and discusses the very basic delegation skills needed so that you can work with other people to meet your commitments.

5.2. The Hardy Mind-Set

In section 3.6.1, we looked at the idea of 'Hardiness'.

This contrasted the health outcomes for a group of individuals with a negative view of life with those of a group who had a more positive approach.

We saw that people who approached long-term stress with anxiety, depression and hostility were significantly more likely to experience real ill health. By contrast, people who took a more committed

approach to their work, and took a positive view of challenges, were more likely to remain healthy, even under severe pressure. Other studies have shown that optimistic people are much more likely to remain healthy than pessimistic people.

That is not to say that positive, optimistic people should ignore pressure and stress as an issue! Even in people with the most positive attitudes, continual pressure can accumulate and can cause the problems of stress, burnout and ill health. **Hardiness just helps with stress resistance – it is not a guaranteed protection against it.**

[Module 13](#) explains how to spot the signs of burnout within yourself, and how to guard against it.

Similarly, the experience of stress is often a “wake-up call” that something is wrong. Whenever you experience stress, use the stress analysis techniques in Module 4 to get to the root of what is causing the stress.

Theory:

The idea of “Hardiness” is based on research published by S C Kobasa in 1979, in which she divided a large group of executives who had experienced intense pressure into those who had suffered a lot of ill health and those who had not.

She found that the healthy executives were significantly more likely to be committed to their jobs than those who had experienced ill health, that they believed that had more control over their work, and that they were more likely to see change as a challenge and an opportunity for growth.

Next, we look at the tools that help you survive these challenging jobs.

5.3. Introducing the Tools...

The first tool we look at, Job Analysis, helps you to look at your job and to fully understand what you should do to deliver peak performance. This gives you the information you need to the tasks in front of you.

The next set of tools we look at are Time Management skills. First, we look at time management as a subject to introduce the overall frame of mind needed to use time efficiently. Then, we look at specific time management techniques – use of a time valuation tool, activity logs, and d to-do lists. These help you to cut away inefficient, unproductive tasks, and to concentrate on the high value jobs that will deliver the greatest returns. This helps you to increase your productivity, and your increases your ability to handle a punishing workload.

This is followed by a brief introduction to task and project planning. These skills help you to make a credible assessment of the amount of time that will be needed to complete complex tasks, and to manage these along with your other ongoing work. This is important because it helps you to “push back” against unrealistic workload expectations, and manage what people expect from you. This helps you to develop a reputation for reliable delivery while also shielding you from what can be nightmarish deadline stress.

Finally, we look at the basic delegation skills you need to work successfully with other people to better share your workload.

All of these skills work together to help you perform excellently, while simultaneously enabling you to effectively manage the stress of a highly challenging job.

5.3.1. Tool: Job Analysis (1)

– Knowing what to concentrate on to achieve peak performance

Introduction:

To do an excellent job, you need to fully understand what is expected of you. While this may seem obvious, in the hurly-burly of a new, fast-moving, high-pressure role, it is oftentimes something that is overlooked.

By understanding the priorities in your job, and what constitutes success within it, you can focus on these activities and minimize work on other tasks as much as possible. This helps you get the greatest return from the work you do, and keep your workload under control.

Job Analysis is a useful technique for getting a firm grip on what really is important in your job so that you are able to perform excellently. It helps you to cut through clutter and distraction to get to the heart of what you need to do.

Note that this tool takes two forms - the one in this chapter assumes that your organization is already well organized and that its job descriptions, review criteria and incentives are well-aligned and correct. This version of job analysis is therefore a practical, cut-down version of the job analysis tool discussed in the next module.

Using the Tool:

To conduct a job analysis, go through the following steps:

1. Review formal job documentation:

- Look at your job description. Identify the key objectives and priorities within it.
- Look at the forms for the periodic performance reviews. These show precisely the behaviors that will be rewarded and, by implication, show those that will be punished.
- Find out what training is available for the role. Ensure that you attend appropriate training so that you know as much as possible about what you need to know.
- Look at incentive schemes to understand the behaviors that these reward.

2. Understand the organization's strategy and culture:

Your job exists for a reason – this will ultimately be determined by the strategy of the organizational unit you work for. This strategy is often expressed in a mission statement. In some way, what you do should help the organization achieve its mission (if it does not, you have to ask yourself how secure the job is!). Make sure you understand and perform well the tasks that contribute to the strategy.

Similarly, every organization has its own culture – its own, historically developed values, rights and wrongs, and things that it considers to be important. If you are new to an organization, talk through with established, respected members of staff to understand these values.

Make sure that you understand this culture. Make sure that your actions reinforce the company's culture, or at least do not go against it. Looked at through the lens of culture, will the company value what you do?

Check that your priorities are consistent with this mission statement and the company culture.

3. Find out who the top achievers are, and understand why they are successful:

Inside or outside the organization, there may be people in a similar role to you who are seen as highly successful. Find out how they work, and what they do to generate this success. Look at what they do, and learn from them. Understand what skills make them successful, and learn those skills.

4. Check that you have the people and resources to do the job:

The next step is to check that you have the staff support, resources and training needed to do an excellent job. If you do not, start work on obtaining them.

5. Confirm priorities with your boss:

By this stage, you should have a thorough understanding of what your job entails, and what your key objectives are. You should also have a good idea of the resources that you need, and any additional training you may need to do the best you can.

This is the time to talk the job through with your boss, and confirm that you share an understanding of what constitutes good performance in the role.

It is also worth talking through serious inconsistencies, and agreeing how these can be managed.

Summary:

Job analysis is a five-step technique for:

- Understanding and agreeing how to achieve peak performance in your job;
- Ensuring that you and your boss agree on the areas you should concentrate on when time gets tight; and the areas that can be de-emphasized during this time; and
- Making sure that you have the resources, training and staff needed to do a good job.

By using the Job Analysis technique, you should gain a good understanding of how you can excel at your job. You should also understand your job priorities. This is important for the next tool, "Time Management".

5.3.2. Tool: Time Management - Reducing Stress by Managing Your Workload

Time Management is an essential set of skills for high achievers. Time Management skills help you to handle highly demanding workloads, and help you to use your time in the most effective and productive

way possible. By using these skills, you can reduce work stress by being more in control of your time, and by being more productive. This ensures that you have time to relax outside work.

The central shift of attitude within time management is to **concentrate on results, not on activity**.

To this end, it embraces a range of skills that help you to:

- Assess the value of your time, understand how effectively you are using it, and improve your time use habits;
- Focus on your priorities so that you focus on the most important jobs to do, delegate tasks where possible, and drop low value jobs;
- Manage and avoid distractions; and
- Create more time.

Time Management helps you to reduce long-term stress by giving you direction when you have too much work to do. It puts you in control of where you are going, and helps you to increase your productivity substantially. By being efficient in your use of time, you should enjoy your current role more, and should find that you are able to find the time to relax outside work and enjoy life.

The next few tools we look at are some of the most immediately important time management skills.

This course will not, however, go into much more detail than this on these skills, as the skills are diverse and warrant a course in their own right. Visit http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_HTE.htm for more information on time management skills.

5.3.3. Tool: Valuing Your Time

Introduction:

A first step in good time management is to understand the value of your time.

If you are employed by someone else, you need to understand how much your employer is paying for your time, and how much profit he or she expects to make from you. If you are working for yourself, you should have an idea of how much income you want to bring in after tax.

By working these figures back to an hourly rate, this gives you an idea of the value of your time.

By knowing the value of your time, you should be able to tell what tasks are worthwhile to perform, and which tasks give a poor return.

Using the Tool:

Calculating the Value of Your Time:

If you are an employee (and you don't have a charge-out rate), estimate the annual value of your time as:

	Your salary
Add	Your benefits
Add	Employer's payroll tax
Add	A contribution for rent, equipment, heat, light, etc.
Add	A contribution for overheads and supporting services
Add	Profit expected

	Total

These figures can be difficult to get hold of. As all we need is an approximate figure, the following may help:

- Your **salary** and **benefits**: you should know! The value of benefits will often be shown on, for example, end-of-year tax statements.
- **Employer's Payroll Tax**: is dependent on the country you live in. Your Human Resources or Accounting Department may be able to tell you this.
- **Contribution for rent, equipment, heat, light, etc**: it is difficult to get to this figure unless you can read the accounts of your organization. With this in mind, you can use a value of 10% of your salary and benefits as a 'rule of thumb'.
- **Overheads**: again, this information is difficult to get unless you can read your organization's accounts. Use a value of 40% of your salary and benefits as the rule-of-thumb for this.
- **Profit Expected**: in reality, this will depend on the sector you are in. Again, in the absence of reliable figures, use a value of 50% of all other costs as the profit you should bring in. This is a good value for a company that sells people's time. Other businesses may expect greater profit from your activity.

As an example, a software developer may earn a salary of \$55,000 per year, with an additional \$10,000 of benefits. The country she works in has a payroll tax of 12.5%.

The annual value of her time can be estimated at:

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \$55,000 + \$10,000 + (65,000 \times 12\%) + (\$65,000 \times 10\%) + (\$65,000 \times 40\%) \\
 & + (\$55,000 + \$10,000 + (65,000 \times 12\%) + (\$65,000 \times 10\%) \\
 & + (\$65,000 \times 40\%)) \times 50\% = \$157,950
 \end{aligned}$$

Next, calculate the number of working days in a year as:

	Total possible working days (52 x 5 = 260)
Deduct	Holidays
Deduct	Public Holidays
Deduct	An Allowance for Sickness, Training, etc (say, 12 days)

	Total

Again as an example, if the software developer has 25 days holiday each year, and lives in a country that has 12 public holidays, then the number of working days is:

$$260 - 25 - 12 - 6 = 212$$

From these figures, calculate firstly a daily rate:

$$\$146,250 / 212 = \$745 / \text{day}$$

And then calculate an hourly rate:

$$\$690 / 7.5 = \$99 / \text{hour}$$

If you are self-employed, use a similar approach to work out the hourly value of your time; however, make an appropriate allowance for the time that you will be marketing and selling your services and running your business.

Working through this calculation, you may be quite surprised how high the value of your time is!

Using This Figure:

This figure shows you the average value you should aim to deliver with your time if you aim to be a satisfactory performer. If you want to be a high achiever in your organization, you should aim to offer substantially better value than this.

In looking at your workload, think about a rough value of each of the things you do. Where possible, your aim should be to concentrate on tasks with a value greater than the calculated value of your time.

Eliminate tasks that have a lower value than your time whenever possible.

5.3.4. Tool: Activity Logs – Understanding How You Actually Spend Your Time

Introduction:

Once you know the value of your time, the next step is to review your use of time to better understand how you use it.

Activity logs are useful tools for doing this. They help you understand how you use your time, so that you can identify and eliminate time-wasting and unproductive habits. This gives you more time to do your work, increases your efficiency, and makes it more likely that you will be able to leave work on time and have good quality time to yourself to relax.

The first time you use an activity log, you may be shocked to see the amount of time that you waste! Memory is a very poor guide when it comes to this. It is too easy to forget time spent reading junk mail, browsing interesting but unhelpful web pages, talking to colleagues, making coffee, waiting for meetings, traveling, etc.

By keeping an Activity Log for a couple of weeks, you can identify the unproductive time in your daily routine. By cutting this out, or by changing your habits, you can substantially increase your productivity. For example, if you are ruthless in your pruning of irrelevant emails and focused in your daily

newsgathering, you can make substantial time available. If you take a train rather than drive, you can open up good quality, undisturbed working time in your schedule.

Using the Tool:

Keeping an Activity Log

A template for an activity log is shown in figure 5.3.4 below. Alternatively, download the [template](http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/ActivityLog.xls) from <http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/ActivityLog.xls>, and fill information out appropriately on the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Decide how long you want to keep your activity log (one or two weeks is a good length of time).

Without modifying your behavior any further than you have to, make note of the things you do as you do them. Every time you change activities - whether opening mail, working, making coffee or gossiping with colleagues, note down the time of the change.

As well as recording activities, make note of how you feel: alert, flat, tired, energetic, etc. Do this periodically throughout the day. You may decide to integrate your activity log with a stress diary (see [3.2.2](#)).

Analyzing Your Log

After logging your time for a few days, analyse the log. If you understand the value of your time (see [5.3.4](#)), you may be alarmed to see the length of time you spend doing low value jobs!

Work through your activity log, paying close attention to how you spend your time.

Think about whether each use of time is valuable, and if it is not, ask yourself whether you could avoid it, or whether you could do things in a different way to free up time. For example, if you caught a train or flew to a distant destination rather than driving, could you use this travel time to get good work done?

Be careful as you review your log to not be too ruthless. It is important to spend some time gathering information (e.g. by reading industry news) and maintaining social networks (for example, by chatting to people briefly). While these things can be cut out altogether, such eliminating can have harmful effects on your career in the medium- and long-term as you miss important information, and fail to reap the benefits of good social networks.

Also, as you work through your log, think about the value of the tasks. Compare these with the value of your time (see [5.3.3](#)) - if they are lower, then it may be appropriate to eliminate them or delegate them.

Tip:

An important part of time management is to cut out "time wasters". These can be unproductive meetings or calls from people trying to sell you things you do not need, excessive reading, etc. Time wasters are often people who want your time, but have little to offer in return.

Cutting out time wasting involves saying "No" to people.

If you do this rudely, you may get a reputation for arrogance. If you are abrasive to your co-workers or your team, you can damage important working relationships. It usually pays to be as courteous as is practical in cutting time wasting. When in doubt, a little explanation is sure to help!

Summary:

Activity logs are useful tools for auditing the way that you use your time.

To keep an activity log, make of everything you do, and the time you take to do it, on a form like that in figure [5.3.4](#). Analyse it after one to two weeks.

By analyzing your activity log, you will be able to identify and eliminate time-wasting and low-yield jobs. The Activity Log also helps you to review your use of time so that you can find more efficient ways of working.

Next, we look at a technique for ensuring that you concentrate on the most important, highest yield work.

Figure 5.3.4. Activity Log Template

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Date	Time	Activity

5.3.5. Tool: To Do Lists - Focusing on the highest value tasks

Introduction:

Keeping a To Do List is one of the most fundamental and basic working skills that people can have. To Do Lists help people to deliver work reliably, without letting tasks “slip through the cracks.” This obviously helps in reducing the stress of having failed to do something important!

To Do Lists are essential when you need to carry out a number of different tasks or different sorts of task, or where you have made a number of commitments. If you find that you are often caught out because you have forgotten to do something, then you need to keep a To Do List.

While To Do Lists are very simple, they are also extremely powerful, both as a method of organizing yourself, and as a way of reducing stress. Often, problems may seem overwhelming, or you may have a seemingly huge number of demands on your time. This may leave you feeling out of control, and overburdened with work. Keeping a To Do List guides you in your approach to work, puts the work into context, and gives you a starting point for negotiating deadlines.

Just as importantly, by prioritizing your To Do List, you can ensure that you focus on the highest value tasks, helping to ensure that you deliver the greatest possible value.

Using the Tool:

Creating Your To Do List

A 'To Do List' is a simple list of the tasks that you need to carry out, consolidating all the jobs that you have to do into one place.

To create a To Do List, write down the tasks that face you, and if they are large, break them down into their component elements. If these still seem large, break them down again. Do this until you have listed everything that you have to do, with all tasks shown as manageable pieces of work.

Once you have created your list, run through the tasks and allocate priorities from A (very important) to F (unimportant). Where you have several tasks of the same priority, number them in order of priority (for example, “B2” may be the second most important B priority task).

Base your assessment of priorities on two criteria: the urgency of the task and the importance of the task. Some little tasks can be urgent and must be done. For example, paying an electricity bill is a small task, but if you have reached the payment date, it is a task that needs to be completed; otherwise, your power will be cut off! Other tasks will be important and have a high value. Use your own judgment to do your list.

Remember, you should consider the results of your Job Analysis when prioritizing your To Do List. Ensure that you are doing all the important tasks that you should be doing.

If too many tasks have a high priority, run through the list again and demote the less important ones. Once you have done this, rewrite the list in priority order.

Tip 1:

To Do Lists are very personal, and different approaches to them are valid for different people at different times, and in different jobs.

Paper lists, for example, are very portable and easy to change; however, they are laborious to write out and order. You may find that you prefer to keep your list on your PC, perhaps as a document, spreadsheet, or on To Do List software. If this suits the way you work, this will make it easier to keep the list and sort it into order.

If you have too many tasks to do in too short a time, then work through the list and see if there are any tasks that can be delegated to someone who is not as overloaded as you may be, and who can help you.

Alternatively, negotiate with affected people to see if they are prepared to give more time. You should find that being able to show your To Do List helps in these negotiations.

Tip 2:

"Negotiate" is an overloaded word, conjuring up images of sophisticated ploys and subtle gamesmanship. While this can be true in very important negotiations with a great deal at stake, what "negotiate" normally means is "find a mutually acceptable solution". This is easy and is something we do all the time!

Tip 3:

If you know that you are unlikely to be able to deliver something to someone by a deadline, let them know why you cannot do it as early as possible, and give them a date by which you expect to deliver. It is usually much better to do this up front than to let someone down when they are relying on you.

As you consider your use of time and your ability to deliver tasks, remember to leave contingency time for unexpected activities and for appropriate teamwork.

Your To Do List should now be a sensible, small-scale plan that you can use to manage your workload.

Using Your To Do Lists

Different people use To Do Lists in different ways, and in different situations: if you are in a sales-type role, a good way of motivating yourself is to keep your list relatively short, and aim to complete it every day.

In an operational role, or if tasks are large or dependent on too many other people, it may be better to keep one list and "chip away" at it. This may mean be that you carry low priority tasks from one To Do List to the next. You may not be able to complete some very low priority tasks for several months. Only worry about this if you need to. If you are running up against a deadline for them, raise their priority.

If you have not used To Do Lists before, try them: they are one of the keys to being truly productive and efficient.

Summary:

To Do Lists are fundamentally important to efficient work. By using d To Do Lists, you ensure that:

- You remember to carry out all necessary tasks;
- That you tackle the most important jobs first, and do not waste time on less important tasks; and
- You do not get stressed by taking on too many unimportant jobs.

To draw up a To Do List, list all the tasks you must carry out. Mark the importance of the task next to it, with a priority from A (very important) to F (unimportant).

Use your judgment to assess these priorities. They should be based on a combination of task importance, urgency, and contribution to your job objectives.

Redraft the list into priority order.

Now, work your way through the tasks on your list in order. By doing this, you will do the most important jobs first, and will make the best use of your time.

A hidden benefit of using To Do Lists properly is that by the end of the day, hopefully only relatively unimportant and non-urgent jobs should remain, making it much easier to go home on time with a clear conscience!

5.3.6. Tool: Effective Planning - Managing deadline stress on large, complex tasks

To Do Lists are invaluable tools for daily planning. They are, however, not sufficiently powerful for planning large or complex jobs, or major undertakings. This difference is most notable when jobs have high visibility, must be completed to a deadline, or involve coordinating many people to achieve a single goal. For these, some level of planning is appropriate.

Action Plans, which are simple lists of tasks that need to be completed to achieve a goal, are useful techniques to use for smaller tasks, when jobs or particular projects are to be completed mainly by one person, and do not need to be completed by a fixed date. With Action Plans, tasks are written down in the order that they need to be completed. By estimating how long each task will take, you can quickly calculate how long the plan will take to complete.

Formal project management techniques become useful for more complex work that involves coordinating several people, or for work that needs to be completed to challenging deadlines. The techniques for doing this are beyond the scope of this course; however, the Mind Tools project planning section at http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_PPM.htm gives useful information on this.

By planning a project properly, you can work out what resources you need for the project, when you need them, and for how long you need them. From this, you can work out realistic delivery times. This is important for your reputation and for your stress levels, as there is nothing more likely to create excruciating stress for both yourself, and for your co-workers, than trying to meet an unreasonable deadline. Similarly, failing to hit a high visibility deadline may not be good for your career!

Tip:

Project Management is a profession in its own right. If you need to run very large or extremely complex projects, you may benefit from good formal training in project management, or you may want to hire a professional project manager.

5.3.7. Tool: Delegation - Getting other people to help with your workload

Introduction:

There is a limit to the amount of work that you can do on your own. Similarly, there is only so much value that you can deliver to your organization without the help of other people.

If you are successful in your career, the demands on you will at some stage become greater than you are able to cope with on your own. As they do, you must begin to delegate parts of your work to be able to manage your increased workload.

Delegation is the skill that you must acquire to manage this work, and to ensure that it is successfully delivered. It is also a skill you can use to bring additional expertise and enhanced quality to your work.

As your workload increases further, and you delegate more and more, you will soon find that you are managing a team. This needs a whole new range of skills; however, these skills are beyond the scope of this course.

Using the Tool:

Delegation involves passing responsibility for completion of work to other people. This allows you to expand the amount of work that you can handle. It also allows you to bring additional skills to bear on your work, particularly in areas where you do not have the skills or the temperament to do the best possible job. Furthermore, this transfer of responsibility develops your staff, and can increase the enjoyment of their roles.

To delegate work, go through the following stages:

Decide What to Delegate:

A good place to start with this is your Activity Log (see [5.3.4](#)). Look for tasks in your Activity Log that can be quickly taught to someone else, or can be done by someone else who already has the necessary skills.

Also, look for tasks that can be done better by someone with a different set of skills. For example, if you are a self-employed consultant, a trained bookkeeper is more likely to do a better job handling your accounts than you are.

As far as possible, delegate complete jobs. Complete jobs are much more satisfying to work on than unconnected fragments of work. By doing this, you are also more likely to get back well-thought-out, properly integrated deliverables.

Find the Right Person to Delegate to:

Find someone who is capable and willing to do the work, and who has the time to do it properly. Ideally, find someone who is trained to do the job and has been successful in doing it in the past.

Bear in mind that inexperienced people will take time to train, and will initially need close supervision to get the job completed to the correct standard.

Explain the purpose of the job and what you expect:

Explain:

- Why the job needs to be done, and how this will help the client, the company or the team;
- What needs to be done and what needs to be delivered;
- The resources available and the constraints within which work needs to be carried out;
- When the work needs to be completed by;
- The check points during the project at which you will review progress; and
- Your willingness to give information or coaching where needed.

Then let go!

Once you have decided to delegate a task, let the person you have delegated it to get on with it. Review the project on the agreed reporting dates, but do not micromanage the task: Accept that there may be different ways of achieving it.

Be available for queries or to give coaching where appropriate.

Meet at the agreed-upon checkpoint times and review progress. Be aware that you may need to take contingency action if things are not on course. Pragmatically, and particularly when you first delegate work to someone, you can expect that work will not be completed fully to your liking. Leave time for rework if appropriate.

Only accept back good quality work:

When a job is delivered back to you, allow enough time to check it through thoroughly.

Only accept it back when you are satisfied with it. If you accept back partly completed work, then you will have to invest time in completing it, and the person you have delegated to will not have learned to do the work to the required standard. The 80/20 rule holds for many jobs: what seems like 80% of the work takes 20% of the time to complete, while what seems like the remaining 20% of work (which includes tidying up, polishing and proofing) can take 80% of the time to complete. If you accept partially finished jobs, you end up taking back a lot of the work you have delegated.

If appropriate, reward the effort:

If someone has done good work for you, let that person know. Appropriate praise will help to build their self-confidence and efficiency next time they do the job for you.

Tip 1:

When you first start to delegate work, you will often find that people take much longer than you to complete it. This is because you are an expert at doing the work, while the person you are delegating it to is still learning how to do it.

You may even find that you are spending more time supervising work than you would take to do the task yourself.

Be patient and persist!

If you choose a good person to delegate to, and you are delegating correctly, you will find that he or she quickly becomes competent and reliable.

On the other hand, if the person you delegate is not up to the job, then they will slow you down and reduce your ability to manage your workload. Managing this is one of the real chores of management!

Tip 2:

Don't worry too much about asking for help. Most managers have been in the position of having so much work that they need to delegate some of it. This is expected when you are under pressure.

Also, by working with people and delegating work to them, you are training them. This increases the capability of these members of staff, and therefore often benefits the organization.

Summary:

Delegation is an important skill for helping you to manage an over-heavy workload. If you do not delegate, you will quickly reach a stage where you stop progressing in your career because you cannot take on any more responsibility.

Use this process when you delegate work:

1. Decide what to delegate;
2. Find the right person to delegate to;
3. Explain the purpose of the job and what you expect;
4. Let the delegated person get on with the job and review work at appropriate checkpoints;
5. Only accept back good quality work; and
6. If appropriate, reward the effort.

5.4. Applying This to Your Life...

This module has introduced you to the important basic skills needed to manage the pressure and workload that comes with a challenging job.

Now is the time to try them out and put them into practice!

Do the following:

- Spend two hours conducting a Job Analysis of your current job (see [5.3.1](#)).
- Work out the value of your time (see [5.3.3](#)).

- Decide how you will keep your Activity Log, and do the necessary preparation to start using it. Start keeping an Activity Log for 1– 2 weeks (see [5.3.4](#)). After the end of this time, analyse your Activity Log, and spend 30 minutes thinking through how you could improve your use of time.
- Start keeping a daily To Do List (see [5.3.5](#)). Make this part of your everyday working experience.
- Get yourself into the habit of identifying work that might be delegated, and if you are overloaded, arrange to delegate it.



STOP!

Do not go any further until you have done this!

You will not get the full value of your investment in this course unless you actually use these tools!

5.5. Further Information

This is essentially a practical module – the external main reference (for a description of hardiness) is to: Taylor, S.E., 1999, Health Psychology (Fourth Edition), McGraw-Hill, Singapore

Other tools are developed for this course, or are developments based on material at <http://www.mindtools.com>.

Module 6:

Surviving Problem Jobs

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	<p>Module 5 looked at tools for handling overload and deadline stress. These will be experienced in most jobs.</p> <p>This module looks at surviving the more subtle stresses that come from inconsistent and conflicting priorities and demands, lack of obvious career prospects and blocked progression, and jobs that are intrinsically stressful.</p>
Need:	<p>This module helps you to manage stresses caused by situations that threaten your career. It does this by helping you to resolve these situations.</p>
Timing:	<p>The module will take approximately two hours to work through (including reading articles linked to on the Web). Practical exercises will take another four hours to complete.</p>
Range:	<p>The module covers the following techniques:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Job Analysis (2)• Career Planning and Breaking Career Blocks• Surviving Intrinsically Stressful Jobs
Objective:	<p>By the end of this module, you will understand how to take charge of your career so that you can keep it moving forward in roles without clear, well-established career paths.</p> <p>You will also understand where to look for more information on surviving intrinsically stressful jobs.</p>

6. Surviving Problem Jobs

6.1. Why this module is important

Module 5 looked at the basic skills you need to handle work overload, conflicting demands and deadline stress. These are relevant to most jobs.

This module looks at the special skills you will need to survive in jobs that are changing, have not been properly thought-through, or are not supported by the resources and capabilities of industry-leading companies. It also looks at tools that help you take charge of your career and gives pointers to handling truly unpleasant jobs.

Relations with your boss, your co-workers and your team are outside the scope of this module. These are covered in modules 7 and 8.

Jobs can be particularly unstable and inconsistent in fast-changing organizations. This is evidenced even more when organizations are new, have changed their strategy, or are taking on new and more complex work. This will continue to be the lot of many organizations as globalization, and the impact of technology, force change in the business environment. In these cases, job designs can be non-existent, or can be inconsistent and out of date.

Similarly, jobs can be created with little thought given to career paths or anything other than short-term handling of difficult situations.

Objectives can be vague, demands can be irreconcilable, and goals and priorities may conflict. There may also be inconsistencies between what the organization says it wants and what it rewards.

This all sounds quite negative. Yet, in the right organization, a lack of structure and system can be intensely stimulating. Fast-growing organizations can offer tremendous opportunities for quick career advancement. These organizations can face enormous challenges. Working through these can give a tremendous sense of achievement. Lack of structure also means that there is plenty of opportunity to get experience (albeit sometimes quite shallow experience) in a wide variety of roles.

On the other hand, mediocre companies in stable or contracting industries can be dispiriting places to work. Opportunities can be limited, career progression can be difficult, and working conditions can be grim. Particular job types can be intrinsically unpleasant, particularly when you have no control over the pace of your work, or where the work involves exposure to routine unpleasant stresses.

An important point to remember: **When employers create jobs, they have no obligation to make them pleasant or rewarding.** Some employers will care little about anything other than their own reward. It is up to you to find jobs with good employers, and in some cases, you need to recognize that the best option may be to leave bad ones.

6.2. Introducing the Tools...

There are several different groups of tools in this module, addressing the different issues that you can face in these difficult jobs.

The first tool we look at, "Job Analysis (2)," is a longer version of the Job Analysis (1) tool we looked at in the last module. This version does everything that the Job Analysis (1) tool does while simultaneously focusing on flushing out inconsistencies with the job and problems with the job design.

In the many jobs without established career paths, you may be the only person looking after your long-term career. The second tool, "Career Planning", helps you to better plan your career to ensure that you keep moving it forward.

As you become established in your job, career advancement often comes through specialization - you will develop more-and-more skill and expertise in a particular field. In time, however, you can end up in a frustrating position where your expertise is such that you are too valuable to your employer in the role you are doing. Your career progression can be blocked because your employer cannot afford to release you from this role and/or because you have not had the opportunity to develop the skills you need for other roles. While you may be paid well, you will soon become bored and frustrated, feeling like "a bird in a golden cage". The Career Planning tool also helps you to break free of these career dead ends.

The final tools are useful for handling the stress of intrinsically difficult, unpleasant, stressful jobs. Here, stress can come from the nature and environment of work itself, or from conflict with personal goals, ideals and beliefs.

6.2.1. Tool: Job Analysis (2) – Understanding and Agreeing Your Job

Introduction:

In [5.3.1](#), we looked at a simple form of the Job Analysis tool that focused on understanding how to do a well-designed job exceptionally well and assumes that the job was rational and consistent.

This version of the Job Analysis tool looks at jobs that have not been so well designed. These jobs may have been created with little thought, may have evolved in a chaotic manner, or may be incorrectly structured after strategic changes within the organization. Job Analysis (2) gives an expanded framework with which you can challenge the job and identify the inconsistencies that may lie within it.

As we noted in [5.3.1](#), by understanding the priorities in your job, and what constitutes success within it, you can focus on the important activities and minimize effort on other activities as far as possible. This helps you get the greatest return from the work you do, while keeping your workload under control.

Job Analysis is a useful technique for getting to grips with the reality of what is important so that you are able to perform excellently. It helps you to cut through waffle and inaccuracy to get to the heart of the job.

This is particularly important in a job that is not consistently structured. It is extremely frustrating to have worked extremely hard at what you thought was important, only to find that your work is being assessed on different criteria. It can also be intensely stressful to be pulled in different directions by inconsistent or conflicting demands.

Using the Tool:

To conduct a full job analysis, go through the following steps:

Review the formal documentation on the job:

- Look at the most recent job description that exists. Identify the key objectives within the job description and the priorities identified within it.
- Look at the forms for any periodic performance reviews. These should show precisely the behaviors that will be rewarded, as well as those that will be punished.
- Find out what training is available for the role. Ensure that you attend appropriate training so that you know as much as possible about your role, and any expectations of you in this role.
- Look at any incentive schemes to see the factors that these are geared to.
- If any of these are not available, write down what you believe the roles, responsibilities, objectives and performance criteria to be. You should then work through these with your boss.

Understand the Organization's Strategy:

Your job will exist for a reason, and this will be determined by the strategy of the organizational unit you work for. This is often expressed in a mission statement. In some way, what you do should help the organization achieve its mission (if it does not, you have to ask yourself how secure the job is!)

Look at the way in which your objectives contribute towards the mission. These should be major objectives of your job. If they are not, make a note of this.

Understand the Organizational Culture:

Similarly, every organization has its own culture – its own, historically developed values, rights and wrongs, and things that it considers to be important. If you are new to an organization, talk through with established, respected members of staff to understand these values.

Ask yourself which objectives fit with these values. Do they reinforce the company's culture, or do they go against it? Looked at through the lens of culture, will the company value what you do?

Check that your priorities are consistent with the company culture. Make an appropriate note if they are not.

Find out who the top achievers are, and understand why they are successful:

Inside or outside the organization, there may be people in a similar role to you who are seen as highly successful. Find out how they work, and what they do to generate this success. Look at what they do and learn from them. Understand what skills make them successful, and learn those skills.

Understand where your career could go from here:

If you find, as you work through this, that little thought has been put into the design of your job, chances are that career progression from this position has not been considered.

While we look at managing your own career progression in [6.2.2](#), you need to ensure that you are sensibly placed for a next career move. If this is not obvious, then this should be a matter of serious concern. Make a note of this, and ensure that it is clarified.

Check that you have the people and resources to do the job:

The next step is to check that you have the staff support, resources and training that you think are needed to do the job well. If you do not, make a note of this, as well.

Confirm priorities with your boss:

By this stage, you should have a thorough understanding of what your job entails, and what your key objectives are.

You should also have a good idea of any lack of clarity in objectives or lack of resource, or of discrepancies and inconsistencies between what you believe your job to be, and the realities of the situation. These have the potential to undermine you in your role.

This is the time to talk the job through with your boss, and confirm that you share an understanding of what constitutes good performance in the role. Also, talk through the inconsistencies in the job. Make sure that you resolve these in a satisfactory way. If you do not, these inconsistencies may undermine your position in the future.

Summary:

This second form of Job Analysis is a seven-step technique for:

- Understanding your job and how to achieve peak performance in it;
- Ensuring that your job is consistent with corporate strategy and corporate culture;
- Ensuring that you have agreed with your boss the areas you should concentrate on when time gets tight, and the areas that can be de-emphasized; and
- Ensuring that you have the resources, training and staff needed to do a good job.

By using the Job Analysis tool, you should flush out any major issues or hidden problems with your current job. You should also understand exactly how to do your job excellently.

6.2.2. Tool: Career Planning – Reducing Future Stress

Introduction:

In your use of the Job Analysis Tool ([6.2.1](#)), you may or may not have identified a good onward career path from your current position.

Well-established, successful companies often have clear career paths, particularly if they rely on attracting good people and keeping them working hard.

Even in these companies, people can get too valuable in their job to be allowed to move forward in their careers. Employers can let the short-term, tactical problems of replacing key staff get in the way of ongoing career development. This can be intensely frustrating for the person affected.

Similarly, organizations in change often do not have clear career paths. Where an organization is growing quickly, this is not normally a problem. As organizations grow, they need more and more people at all levels. This means that if people work hard and have the right skills, energy and aptitude, they can be promoted quickly as new roles open up.

However, with more mature organizations, a lack of obvious career paths is a serious problem. This is particularly the case if you are early in your career. At this professional stage, you need to be gaining plenty of experience as quickly as possible so that you can keep up with your peers.

Without good career development opportunities, you will probably fail to achieve your long-term potential. Many good, challenging jobs quite legitimately need the right experience, and you will not get these jobs unless you have had the opportunity to accumulate this experience. If you fail to reach your potential, you can obviously expect to feel bored, frustrated and disillusioned, causing you severe stress in the medium-term.

If you have a sufficiently clear career path in front of you, you are happy with it, and you are well positioned to take advantage of it, then just keep on doing the things that you need to do to perform excellently. Keep an eye open for opportunities, and be ready to take them as they come.

If after conducting the Job Analysis discussed in 6.2.1, and after talking it through with your boss, you still do not have an obvious, credible career path open to you, then you need to take charge of your own career planning and progression.

The Career Planning Tool helps you to take stock of where you are now, look at the opportunities open to you, and plan how to take advantage of them.

Using the Tool:

To use this tool, work through the process below:

- 1. Look at Your Current Position:**

It is important to understand where you are now so that you are realistic in identifying the options open to you, and so that you use all of the resources available to you. A good place to start with this is to conduct a Personal Inventory of your knowledge, skills, experience and resources. Visit <http://www.mindtools.com/JobHunting/CareerChoice.htm> for more information on how to conduct a Personal Inventory.

- 2. Think Through What You Want to Achieve In Your Career:**

The [same page](#) introduces you to a goal setting process that you can use to think through what you want to achieve with your life. While this sort of goal setting is time-consuming and involves much soul-searching, it will help to bring focus to your personal goals and aspirations, and will help you to crystallize what you want to achieve.

You may want to stay in the same industry or career that you are already in.

If this is not the case, and you are struggling to identify the sort of careers you would like to move into, then visit <http://www.mindtools.com/JobHunting/CareerTests.htm>. This page links to a

number of useful aptitude and career selection tests that can help you to identify good career options.

3. Research Your Options:

Having identified your career options (even if the option is to stay in the same career), it is important to do some basic research into these. In particular, you need to know whether the career is increasing or declining in importance, and you need to know how well you will be paid in it. The <http://www.mindtools.com/JobHunting/CareerResearch.htm> page shows how to research careers so that you can check trends showing what is happening to the career, understand the entry requirements for it, and see how well rewarded it is. It also points to sites where you can research the top companies in top industries to find out key information about them.

If you want to change your career, you should also try to speak to people in your target career to get their opinions on it and on your suitability for it. They should be able to give good advice on making the transition, and on the good companies to work for within the industry or career.

All of this helps you to check that the career is as desirable as you think it is, and gives you the basic information you need to succeed in the career.

4. Plan Your Approach:

Once you know where you want to go, the next stage is to work out how to get there. If you need new skills to make the change, then you need to begin to acquire them. If you need experience, then you need to work out how to get it.

If you want to make a major change, then it may not be practical to do this in one go. This is particularly the case if you want to change to a radically new career in a new company or industry. Similarly, if you want to move to a senior role, then you will normally have to work through a series of intermediate roles.

Identify the intermediate steps that you will need to make, and the skills and experience that you will need to make those steps. Work out how you will have to position yourself to make those steps and gain those skills and experience.

5. Take Action!

By this stage you may have come to the conclusion that you are well enough positioned in your current job to stay and manage your career within your current organization. If this is the case, then you should have a good idea of the actions that you need to take to progress your career within it.

Alternatively, you may have come to the conclusion that you need to change organization. If this is the case, then the articles at <http://www.mindtools.com/JobHunting/JobHunting.htm> will help you through the process of finding the best possible alternative job.

Tip:

As with other many, many other things, the best careers come about through a mix of careful planning and opportunism. While you are implementing your career plan, make sure that you do not ignore good career opportunities that present themselves.

Summary:

The Career Planning tool helps you to think about how you would like your career to develop. This is particularly useful in jobs where there is no clear, established career path or where you are locked into a job that does not satisfy you.

Planning your career helps you to avoid the boredom, disillusionment, frustration and stress that come with failing to have achieved your potential. This is a real risk if a good, clear, satisfying career path is not open to you.

The tool provides a 5-stage process for thinking through your Career Plan:

- Analyzing your current position;
- Thinking through what you want to achieve in your career;
- Research your options;
- Plan your approach; and
- Take action!

This tool is further supported by an array of informational resources that will help you make an informed decision.

6.2.3. Tool: Surviving Jobs That Are Intrinsically Stressful

Some jobs are intrinsically stressful.

For example, customer service departments in call centers can be extremely stressful, particularly where customers are often unpleasant, rude or angry. Production line workers on continually moving production lines can experience intense pressure from the constant, unrelenting demands on their performance. Managing people can be stressful, particularly where managers face regular interruption from staff at the same time that they are trying to complete work themselves.

Pressures and stress are part of these jobs, and while you may be able to eliminate some of them, others will always remain.

Major contributors to job stress are lack of information, poor environments, lack of control over work and the pace of work, frequent distraction and upset, and frustration of goals. People can also find that the demands of their jobs conflict with their values, beliefs or goals, and this can cause intense stress.

In these jobs, you often do not have the power to change them, and the action-oriented strategies we have discussed in modules 5 and 6 only have so much effect. The best approaches here may be the 'emotionally-oriented' ones we touched on in module 2, or may be acceptance of the situation with use of the 'buffers against stress' we will discuss in [module 12](#).

We look at these different stresses below:

- *Lack of information* can often be stressful, particularly at a time when people may be insecure about their jobs. Often, the best thing to do in these cases is to ask for clarification of the situation. Many people and organizations communicate extremely poorly, and although managers are often perfectly happy to share information they simply may not think to do it. It can also be very difficult for managers

to know that people have misunderstood or misinterpreted their messages. This occurs where team members are scared of their bosses or are be over-respectful to them, and because of such, do not communicate their lack of understanding. Whilst it may be unprofessional for managers to pass on all information, at least by seeking clarification you create the opportunity for open communication.

- [Module 9](#) talks about simple things you can do to reduce the stress that comes you're your environment, and improve your working conditions. Often, things can be improved with very little expenditure and effort. If your environment is causing stress, have a look at [module 9](#) to see what you can do.
- The adrenaline management techniques explained in [module 10](#) can help if you are exposed to frequent upset and interruption. Here, the emphasis is on using practical techniques to relax.
- Similarly, [module 11](#) explains how to quiet the negative thinking that can come with job stress, while simultaneously helping you to identify and challenge the goals, beliefs and interpretations of events that may be a source of intense stress.
- [Module 12](#) is also helpful in dealing with as it shows you how to set up the buffers against stress' that will serve to protect you. This module explains the importance of building and using your social networks, of taking sufficient breaks, and of using relaxation techniques to calm yourself down.

Ultimately, though, we reiterate the comment we made at the start of this module: Employers have no obligation to make jobs pleasant or rewarding. Some jobs are intrinsically unpleasant. If you do not like your current job, then the best thing may be to find a job that brings you the pleasure and the rewards you need.

6.3. Applying This to Your Life...

This module has introduced you to the important basic skills needed to clarify your job and plan your career. It also shows you the actions you can take to manage stress in jobs that are stressful by nature.

You may be completely clear about your job, or may be satisfied with the analysis you carried out at the end of module 5. You may also have a clear idea of the career path open in front of you. If you are, then move on to the next module.

If you are not, then now is the time to use the tools in this module!

Do the following:

- Spend two hours conducting the more formal Job Analysis explained in [6.2.1](#). Identify any inconsistencies in the role and clarify these and other details with your boss.
- Once you have done this, spend two hours thinking through what you want to do with your career as explained in [6.2.2](#). Do the research that you need to do, and take the action that needs to be taken.
- Review your Job Analysis. Based on this, and on your practical knowledge of your job, see if you can spot the stresses that intrinsically belong with the job. Think through whether these are acceptable to you and, if they are, what changes you will need to make to manage these stresses.



STOP!

If you do not understand your job or your career path, do not go any further until you have used these tools.

You will not get the full value of your investment in this course unless you use them!

Module 7:

The Stress of Working with Powerful People

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	This module explains some of the key skills needed to work successfully with powerful people. It shows you how to stand up for yourself assertively so that you can defend your rights in a fair and adult way. It looks at simple techniques for managing unreasonable demands. Finally it introduces important tools that help you to manage your relationships with powerful people so that they support and help your activities rather than undermining them.
Need:	These techniques help you to reduce the stress of working with people who are more powerful than you are, and help you to improve your chances of success in reaching your goals.
Timing:	The module will take approximately one hour to read through and understand. The practical exercises will take an additional two hours to complete.
Range:	<p>The module discusses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assertiveness• Coping with unreasonable or impossible demands, and• Stakeholder management
Objective:	By the end of this module you should be able to manage your relationships with powerful people confidently and competently, and should understand the importance of clear, honest and regular communication in winning support for your projects.

7. The Stress of Working with Powerful People

7.1. Why this module is important

Whatever you do, on whatever scale, there will always be people who have the power to affect you and your goals. These people may be your boss or may be clients, politicians, managers within your company, or external people who have the power to help or hinder your projects.

These people may be able to help you and support you in realizing these goals, or may be able to undermine you and block your achievement. They may have the power to overload you with unpleasant and stressful tasks, or may knowingly or unknowingly be quite unreasonable in the demands they seek to place upon you.

This module helps you to deal with the special stresses of working with people who have power over you.

7.2. Introducing the Tools...

A key area of potential stress lies with your relationship with your boss. Issues here revolve around balancing work and free time, managing workload, and handling apparently excessive demands or unreasonable behavior. The same can be true of working with clients. While your boss has an interest in keeping you as part of his or her team, clients may see things on a much shorter-term basis. Clients may wish to get as much as they possibly can out of you, irrespective of the long-term consequences to you.

The first tool in this module, Assertiveness, shows you how to defend your right to a well-balanced life in a fair, reasonable and positive manner. It helps you to express, and get, what you want in a way that is rational, non-manipulative and adult.

The second tool, Coping with 'Unreasonable' Demands, helps you to handle these in an appropriate and mature manner. People tend to react emotionally to demands that they perceive as unreasonable, often jumping to the conclusion that such demands are being made by a 'bad person'. In reality, most people are fair and rational, and many apparently unreasonable requests arise from misunderstandings and lack of knowledge. It is also possible that demands may be objectively reasonable, but that circumstances make them impossible to meet.

This tool gives you a process to follow when faced with apparently unreasonable demands. It helps you to make sure of your facts and reach a balanced conclusion that you can have confidence in. While you may not always end up with a pleasant conclusion, this tool helps to eliminate the intense stress of uncertainty and over-reaction that comes with an impulsive reaction to unreasonable demands.

The final tool, Stakeholder Analysis, shows you how to manage your communication with powerful people so that you can win support for your projects. This helps you to cut through much of the politics and unpleasantness that can lead to frustration, and get in the way of accomplishing your goals.

Assertiveness is the first of these tools:

7.2.1. Tool: Assertiveness – Getting what you want, in a fair way...

Introduction:

If you are using the time management and planning skills explained in [module 5](#), then you can be confident that you are working efficiently and effectively. If you have fully clarified your job using the Job Analysis tools described in [5.3.1](#) and [6.2.1](#), and are acting appropriately, then you can be confident that you are concentrating your efforts on the right activities.

If you still find you are working longer hours than you think is fair, if you find that your working conditions are unreasonable or unhelpful, or if your workload is still excessive, then you need to communicate this and change the situation.

You can do this well and you can do this badly.

One bad approach is to be passive in the way you handle this, taking an inferior position and emphasizing the power of the person you are approaching. The advantage of this approach is that it seems to minimize any potential conflict arising from the request. By acknowledging the power of the other person, you make the granting of your request a “favor” which can be granted or denied irrespective of reason or right. This weak approach is obviously bad for your self-esteem and will mean that you frequently do not get your way. This will particularly be the case if other people are applying stronger pressure in the opposite direction.

A second bad way of doing this is to be aggressive in your approach. Here, you actively state what you want, and seek to force the other person into giving it to you. While this is sometimes successful in the short-term (particularly where there will be no ongoing relationship), it can damage long-term relationships severely. This is clearly a problem if you are dealing with your boss.

The best approach is to communicate assertively. With an assertive approach, you ask for what you want clearly and openly and explain rationally why you want - all without trying to use inappropriate emotional leverage. By negotiating rationally with the other person, you show respect for your working relationship and ensure that you make a fair contribution to the decision making process.

Assertive communication is “grownup” communication. Without clear and open communication, your boss will not know what you want from your job. He or she will therefore not be able to help you to achieve it.

Using the Tool:

Among its other good sections, [The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook](#) (see references) introduces a useful approach to assertiveness with its LADDER mnemonic, the approach we use in this course.

LADDER describes a six-stage process for handling problems in an assertive way. These are:

- L – **Look** at your rights and what you want, and understand your feelings about the situation
- A – **Arrange** a meeting with the other person to discuss the situation
- D – **Define** the problem specifically
- D – **Describe** your feelings so that the other person fully understands how you feel about the situation
- E – **Express** what you want clearly and concisely
- R – **Reinforce** the other person by explaining the mutual benefits of adopting the course of action you are suggesting.

We look at these in more detail below:

[L – Look at your rights and what you want, and understand your feelings about the situation](#)

The first stage of the process is to look objectively at the problem. Do what you can to cut away the emotion involved with it. Try to understand why you feel that your rights are being violated, or why you feel that something is wrong with the situation. You may find that the Emotional Analysis tool in module 11 helps you with this.

Also helping you to understand your rights, the Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook has a useful table showing traditional incorrect assumptions and how these compare against the legitimate, fair rights that you can reasonably expect to have. This is shown in figure [7.2.1](#). below.

As we grow up, we are exposed to many views of how we should conduct ourselves. These come from many different sources. Some of these are appropriate for us as children, but not as adults. Others reflect old fashioned or autocratic ways of thinking that have more recently been superceded. Others arise from the many inconsistent and conflicting belief systems we are exposed to in daily life. This is particularly the case when you consider the thousands of channels of television and radio available to us, not to mention the millions of Web pages we can access.

Figure 7.2.1 – Your Legitimate Rights

Reprinted with permission from the Stress & Relaxation Workbook by Martha Davis PhD et al, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA.

Mistaken Traditional Assumption	Your Legitimate Rights
1. It is selfish to put your needs before others' needs.	You have a right to put yourself first sometimes.
2. It is shameful to make mistakes. You should have an appropriate response for every occasion.	You have a right to make some mistakes. Mistakes are inevitable, particularly when you are stretching yourself to do something new or original.

Mistaken Traditional Assumption	Your Legitimate Rights
3. If you can't convince others that your feelings are reasonable, then the feelings must be wrong, or maybe you are going crazy.	You have a right to be the final judge of your feelings and accept them as legitimate.
4. You should respect the views of others, especially if they are in a position of authority. Keep your differences of opinion to yourself. Listen and learn.	You have a right to have your own opinions and convictions.
5. You should always try to be logical and consistent.	You have a right to change your mind and decide on a different course of action.
6. You should be flexible and adjust. Others have good reasons for their actions and it is not polite to question them.	You have a right to protest against unfair treatment or criticism.
7. You should never interrupt people. Asking questions reveals your stupidity to others.	You have a right to interrupt in order to ask for clarification.
8. Things could get even worse. Don't rock the boat.	You have a right to negotiate for change.
9. You shouldn't take up other people's valuable time with your problems.	You have a right to ask for help or for emotional support.
10. People don't want to hear that you feel bad, so keep it to yourself.	You have a right to feel and express pain.
11. When someone takes the time to give you advice, you should take it very seriously. They are often right.	You have a right to ignore the advice of others.
12. Knowing that you did something well is its own reward. People don't like show-offs. Successful people are secretly disliked and envied. Be modest when complimented.	You have a right to receive formal recognition for your work and your achievements.
13. You should always try to accommodate others. If you don't, they won't be there when you need them.	You have a right to say "No".
14. Don't be anti-social. People are going to think you don't like them if you say you'd rather be alone instead of with them.	You have a right to be alone, even if others would prefer your company.

Mistaken Traditional Assumption	Your Legitimate Rights
15. You should always have a good reason for everything you feel and do.	You have a right not to justify yourself to others.
16. When someone is in trouble, you should help them.	You have a right not to take responsibility for someone else's problem.
17. You need to be sensitive to the needs and wishes of others, even when they are unable to tell you what they want.	You have a right not to have to anticipate others' needs and wishes.
18. It is always good policy to stay on people's good side.	You have a right not to always worry about the goodwill of others.
19. It is not nice to put people off. If questioned, give an answer.	You have a right to choose not to respond to a situation.

A – Arrange a Meeting with the Other Person to Discuss the Situation

By arranging a formal meeting with the other person, you show the importance of the situation to you. You also ensure that due time is allocated to discussing it. Note that in spontaneous situations it may be appropriate to discuss the problem straight away.

D – Define the Problem Specifically

In defining the problem, keep information objective and uncolored by emotion. Make sure that your comments are correct, and that they are supported by facts where appropriate.

In talking about the facts underlying a situation, you give the other person an opportunity to give you additional information. This may change your perception of how things are.

D – Describe Your Feelings So That the Other Person Fully Understands How You Feel About the Situation

Once you have explained the facts of the situation, explain how you feel about it. This helps the other person to understand how important it is that the situation is resolved in a satisfactory manner.

In doing this, do not attack or blame the other person for the problem. Explain how the situation affects you.

Tip:

If you find that you start to get emotional when you describe your feelings, use imagery (see [module 10](#)) to help you out. For example, if you start to get upset, imagine that you move your feelings into a box on the table beside you. Then describe the contents of the box to the other person. You should find that this helps you to dissociate yourself from your feelings so that you can talk about them objectively.

E – Express What You Want Clearly and Concisely

Say precisely what you want to happen to resolve the situation. Keep your message short, clear, direct and unambiguous. Be polite in your expression of this; however, do not confuse your message.

R – Reinforce Your Message to the Other Person

Explain the benefits of the course of action that you want to the other person. Show him or her how doing what you want will improve the situation.

Be careful in expressing negative consequences of not taking the action, as making threats can damage working relationships. In some cases, however, the negative consequences of not taking action may need to be spelled out.

Summary:

Using an assertive approach to communicating is a fair and adult way of raising, and dealing with, difficulties in your relationships with powerful people. In using an assertive approach, you avoid both the weakness of passivity and the relationship and career damage that comes from excessive aggression.

Assertive approaches avoid the game-play of passive and aggressive communication. They promote clear communication and, because all relevant facts and emotions are considered, are more likely to bring about a successful resolution of the situation.

By being able to communicate clearly, you can bring stress-creating problems and issues to the attention of people who have the power to do something about them. Most managers are rational human beings who want to keep their teams happy recognizing that this actually helps teams to perform well. Often, the main obstacle to this is that people do not communicate problems. You may be surprised by how willing powerful people are to help you out.

The LADDER mnemonic describes a useful process for dealing with problems assertively. LADDER stands for:

- L – **Look** at your rights and what you want, and understand your feelings about the situation.
- A – **Arrange** a meeting with the other person to discuss the situation.
- D – **Define** the problem specifically.
- D – **Describe** your feelings so that the other person fully understands how you feel about the situation.
- E – **Express** what you want clearly and concisely.
- R – **Reinforce** the other person by explaining the mutual benefits of adopting the course of action you are suggesting.

7.2.2. Tool: Coping With “Unreasonable” Demands

Introduction:

Demands that seem unreasonable can be a tremendous source of stress.

All sorts of circumstances can occur when innocent situations come together and reinforce one another to create stressful, extreme, and unfeasible demands on you. For example, if you are in a customer service role, several customers can be clamoring for completion of large jobs at the same time. This is very stressful when you only have the resource to service a few of them. Similarly, enthusiastic middle managers can amplify the importance of simple, low priority requests from senior managers, creating unwarranted pressure on implementation teams. In other situations, requirements can be misunderstood when transmitted from person-to-person, the importance of deadlines can be overstated, and requests can be made in ignorance of key pieces of information.

Obviously, real emergencies can also occur. Resolving these can often require extreme and unpleasant levels of activity from all involved.

In all of these cases, and in many others, reasonable people can make unreasonable demands with or without knowing it. If you add into this the concept of “stretch goals”, the fact that people making requests may not have correctly appreciated the situation, and the fact that that people may be playing normal commercial games, you can see how problems arise.

This tool helps you to work through apparently unreasonable demands to understand what lies behind them, and develop appropriate solutions to them. It helps you to work effectively with the person making the demand to find a satisfactory solution, rather than just assuming that the other person is “difficult and unreasonable”. This helps you to reduce the stress that these situations can cause.

Using the Tool:

Figure [7.2.2](#) below shows you a process for working through apparently unreasonable demands. By using this process, you can ensure that:

- The situation has not arisen as a result of a misunderstanding;
- You have fairly tried to understand the other person’s position;
- You have explored all reasonable ways to meet the demands; and
- You have tried to negotiate a fair compromise.

To use the tool, work through the following steps:

1. Check Your Information and Assumptions:

The first stage of this process is simply to make sure of your information. Check firstly that you have not made any incorrect assumptions. Then check that you fully understand what you are being asked to do. Finally, confirm when it needs to be delivered. If you are set a deadline, understand why that deadline has been set, and what happens if it is not met. You may find that deadlines are actually much more flexible and arbitrary than they initially appear.

2. Look From the Other Person's Perspective:

If things still seem unreasonable, try looking at the situation from the other person's perspective. Make sure you are fully aware of all of the facts. For example, if you are working at full capacity and someone asks you to take on more priority work, they might not know how much work you have on. Explain the situation to them, and try to negotiate an appropriate solution.

Tip:

As we said in module 5, "negotiate" is an overloaded word. It conjures up images of sophisticated ploys and subtle gamesmanship. While this can be true in very important negotiations with a great deal at stake, what "negotiate" normally means is "find a mutually acceptable solution". This is often easy, and is something we do all the time.

It is also quite possible that what seems unreasonable to you, might seem fine to someone else. For example, if you are new to a company, it might have a longer hours culture than you are used to. As another example, a client needing to place a priority order may expect it to be turned around in a reasonable time - the fact that your production process is backlogged may not interest them. Come to a fair view of what is right in the set circumstances with which you have to work, and then manage the situation appropriately.

3. Explore Your Alternatives and the Cost of the Alternatives:

If the demand still seems unreasonable, think through all the ways in which you might try to meet it. A little lateral thinking may help you to find a solution. Evaluate the impact of any possible solution.

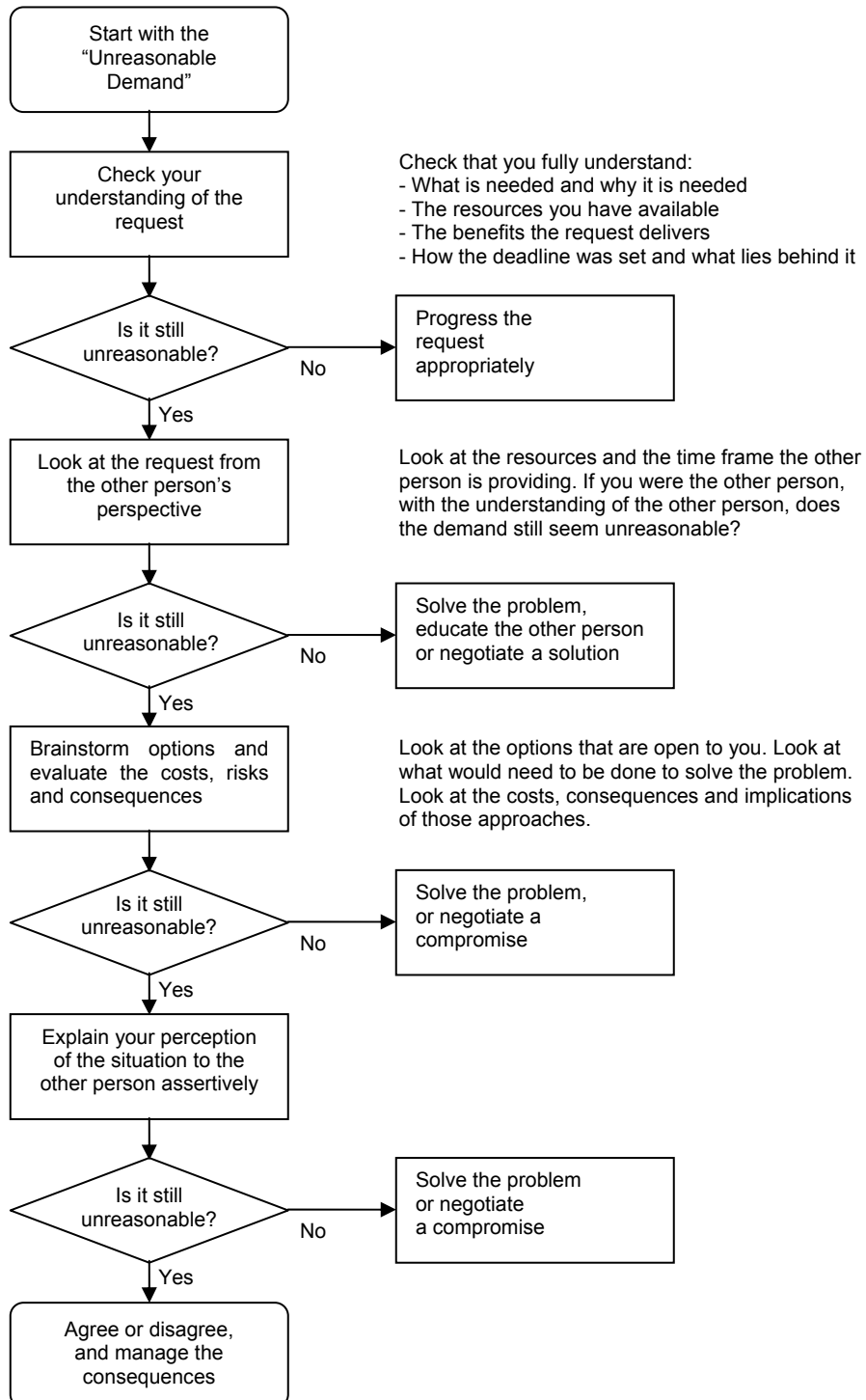
4. Explain Your Perception Assertively:

Using the techniques we described in [7.2.1](#) above, arrange a meeting and explain the situation as you see it in an assertive manner.

5. Agree or Disagree, and Manage the Consequences

By this stage, you will have done everything that you can reasonably be expected to do to meet the unreasonable demand.

It is still quite possible that you may not have agreed on a fair way forward. The other person may be trying to squeeze you to get a better deal than is normal. This is quite often the case in tough commercial negotiations (particularly where the other person does not expect to have to do business with you again).

Figure 7.2.2: Managing “Unreasonable” Demands

Alternatively (this is unpleasant) they may have political “hidden agendas” and may want you to feel or be disadvantaged.

This is where you need to know your “BATNA” – your Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement. This is the course of action or outcome that is open to you if you do not agree to meet the unreasonable demand. You also need to have an idea of what the future value of the relationship might be, as making a sacrifice now may bring strong benefit in the future.

If your BATNA is good, then the other person may have little power to impose the demand on you. Either use your BATNA to negotiate good compensation for coping with the unreasonable demand, or reject it.

If your BATNA is poor, then you may have to agree to the demand. Even if this is the case, try to negotiate some form of fair compensation for any pain you have to accept.

If you choose to turn down the demand, make sure that you manage this with all of the stakeholders who will be affected (see [7.2.3](#)).

Summary:

It is far too easy to immediately jump to the conclusion that someone is a “bad person” when they make an unreasonable demand of you. In reality, people can make unreasonable demands for a whole range of good and bad reasons.

This tool gives you a process for working through seemingly unreasonable demands. This involves the following stages:

- Checking your information and assumptions;
- Looking from the other person’s perspective;
- Exploring the alternatives;
- Explaining your perceptions assertively; and
- Agreeing or disagreeing, and managing the consequences.

If you choose to turn down the demand, make sure that you explain the reasons for this to all appropriate stakeholders. We talk about this next.

7.2.3. Stakeholder Management – Winning support for your goals

Introduction:

Reprinted with thanks to [Rachel Manktelow](#), who has fifteen years experience of helping major organizations and business leaders to more effectively manage change, and move their organizations forward.

She comments that: "Stakeholder management is critical to the success of every project in every organization I have ever worked with. By engaging the right people in the right way in your project, you can make a big difference to its success... and to your career."

As you become more successful in your career, the work you do, actions you take, and the projects you run, will affect more and more people. The more people you affect, the more likely it is that your actions will impact people who have power and influence over your projects. These people could be strong supporters of your work, or they could block it. This could obviously be intensely stressful.

Stakeholder Management is an important discipline that successful people use to win support from others. It helps to ensure them that their projects succeed where others fail, and helps them to manage the intense politics that can be associated with major projects.

Stakeholder Analysis is the technique used to identify the key people who have to be won over. You then use Stakeholder Planning to build the support that helps you succeed.

The benefits of using a stakeholder-based approach are that:

- You can use the opinions of the most powerful stakeholders to shape your projects at an early stage. Not only does this make it more likely that they will support you, their input will usually improve the quality of your project.
- Gaining support from powerful stakeholders can help you to win more resources, making it more likely that your projects will be successful.
- By communicating with stakeholders early and frequently, you can ensure that they fully understand what you are doing, and that they understand the benefits of your project. This means they can support you actively when necessary.
- You can anticipate what people's reaction to your project may be, and build into your plan the actions that will win people's support.

Stakeholder Analysis

The first step in Stakeholder Analysis is to identify who your stakeholders are. The next step is to work out their power, influence and interest, so you know whom to focus on. The final step is to develop a good understanding of the most important stakeholders so that you know how they are likely to respond, and so that you can work out how to win their support. You can record this analysis on a stakeholder map.

After you have used this tool and created a stakeholder map, you can then use the stakeholder planning tool to plan how you will communicate with each stakeholder.

The steps of Stakeholder Analysis are explained below:

1. Identifying Your Stakeholders:

The first step in your stakeholder analysis is to [brainstorm](#) who your stakeholders are. As part of this, think of all the people who are affected by your work, who have influence or power over it, or have an interest in its successful or unsuccessful conclusion.

Figure 7.2.3.1 below shows some of the people who might be stakeholders in your job or in your projects:

Figure 7.2.3.1 – Possible stakeholders in your job or projects

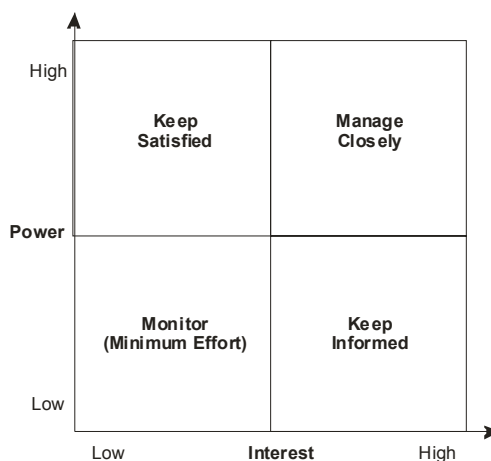
Your boss	Shareholders	Government
Senior executives	Alliance partners	Trades associations
Your co-workers	Suppliers	The press
Your team	Lenders	Interest groups
Customers	Analysts	The public
Prospective customers	Future recruits	The community
Your family		

Remember that while stakeholders may be both organizations and people, ultimately you must communicate with people. Make sure that you identify the correct individual stakeholders within a stakeholder organization.

2. Prioritize Your Stakeholders:

You may now have a long list of people and organizations that are affected by your work. Some of these may have the power either to block your efforts, or help to advance them. Furthermore, some may be interested in what you are doing, while others may not care.

Map out your stakeholders using the Power/Interest Grid shown in figure 1 and classify them by their power over your work and by their interest in your work.

**Figure 1: Basic Power/Interest Grid**

For example, your boss is likely to have high power and influence over your projects, as well as a high level of interest. Your family may have high interest, but are unlikely to have power over it.

Someone's position on the grid shows you the actions you have to take with them:

- **High power, interested people:** These are the people you must fully engage, and make the greatest efforts to satisfy.
- **High power, less interested people:** Put enough work in with these people to keep them satisfied, but not so much that they become bored with your message.
- **Low power, interested people:** Keep these people adequately informed, and talk to them to ensure that no major issues are arising. These people can often be very helpful with the details of your project.
- **Low power, less interested people:** Again, monitor these people, but do not bore them with excessive communication.

3. Understanding your key stakeholders:

You now need to know more about your key stakeholders. You need to know how they are likely to feel about, and react to, your project. You also need to know how best to engage them in your project, and how best to communicate with them.

Key questions that can help you understand your stakeholders are:

- What financial or emotional interest do they have in the outcome of your work? Is it positive or negative?
- What motivates them most of all?
- What information do they want from you?
- How do they want to receive information from you? What is the best way of communicating your message to them?
- What is their current opinion of your work? Is it based on good information?
- Who generally influences their opinions, and who influences their opinion of you? Do some of these influencers therefore become important stakeholders in their own right?
- If they are not likely to be positive, what will win them around to support you?
- If you don't think you will be able to win them around, how will you manage their opposition?
- Who else might be influenced by their opinions? Do these people become stakeholders in their own right?

A very good way of answering these questions is to talk to your stakeholders directly. People are often quite open about their views, and asking people's opinions is often the first step in building a successful relationship with them.

You can summarize the understanding you have gained on the stakeholder map, so that you can easily see which stakeholders are expected to be blockers or critics, and which stakeholders are likely to be advocates and supporters of your project. A good way of doing this is by color-coding: showing advocates and supporters in green, blockers and critics in red, and others who are neutral in orange.

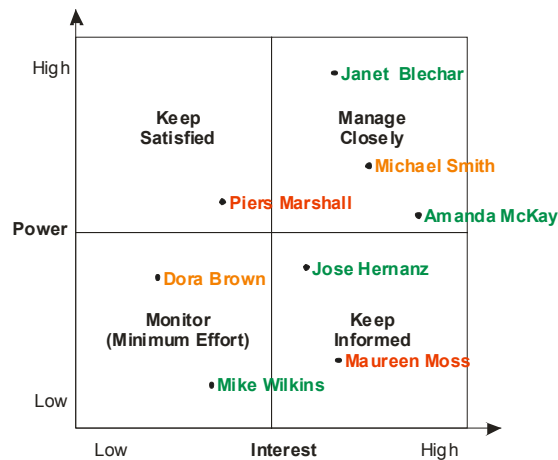


Figure 2: Example Power/Interest Grid With Stakeholders Marked

Figure 2 shows an example of this. In this example, you can see that a lot of effort needs to be put into persuading Piers and Michael of the benefits of the project. Janet and Amanda also need to be managed well as powerful supporters.

Stakeholder Planning

Having conducted a Stakeholder Analysis exercise, you will have a lot of the information you need to plan how to best manage your stakeholders. You will have identified the stakeholders in your job and in your projects, and will have marked out their positions on a stakeholder map (see figure 2).

The next stage is to plan how you can win them around to support you and your efforts. Stakeholder Planning is the process by which you do this.

To carry out a Stakeholder Planning exercise, start with a Stakeholder Planning Sheet. A template for this planning sheet is shown in figure 7.2.3.4 below. Print this off and fill it in appropriately. Alternatively, [download](http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/StakeholderPlanningTemplate.xls) this from <http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/StakeholderPlanningTemplate.xls>, and fill information out appropriately on this Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

Using this template, work through the planning exercise using the steps below:

- 1. Update the Planning Sheet With Information From the Power/Interest Grid:**

Enter the stakeholder name, their influence and interest in your job or project, and your current assessment of where they stand with respect to it. This information comes straight from your Power/Interest Grid.

- 2. Plan Your Approach to Stakeholder Management:**

The amount of time you should allocate to Stakeholder Management depends on the size and difficulty of your projects and goals, the time you have available for communication, and the amount of help you need to achieve the results you want. Think through the help you need, the amount of time that will be taken to manage this, and the time you will need for communication.

Help with the project could include sponsorship of the project, advice and expert input, reviews of material to increase quality, etc.

3. Think Through What You Want From Each Stakeholder:

Next, work through your list of stakeholders thinking through the levels of support you want from them, and the roles you would like them to play (if any). Think through the actions you would like them to perform. Write this information down in the “Desired Support”, “Desired Project Role” and “Actions Desired” columns.

4. Identify the Messages You need to Convey:

Next, identify the messages that you need to convey to your stakeholders to persuade them to support you and engage with your projects or goals. Typical messages will show the benefits of what you are doing to the person or organization, and will focus on key performance drivers like increasing profitability or delivering real improvements.

5. Identify Actions and Communications:

Finally, work out what you need to do to win and manage the support of these stakeholders. With the time and resource you have available, identify how you will manage the communication to, and the input from, your stakeholders.

Focusing on the high-power/high-interest stakeholders first, and the low-interest/low-power stakeholders last, devise a practical plan that communicates with people as effectively as possible, providing the appropriate amount of information in a way that neither under, nor over, communicates.

Think through what you need to do to keep your best supporters engaged and on-board. Work out how to win over, or neutralize, the opposition of your skeptics. Where you need the active support of people who are not currently interested in what you are doing, think about how you can engage them and raise their level of interest.

Also, consider how what you are doing will affect your stakeholders. Where appropriate, let people know as early as possible of any difficult issues that may arise, and discuss with them how you can minimize or manage any impact.

Tip:

It is usually a good idea to manage people’s expectations about likely problems as early as possible. This gives them time to think through how to manage issues, and preserves your reputation for reliability.

Once you have prepared your Stakeholder Plan, all you need to do is to implement it. As with all plans, it will be easier to implement if you break it down into a series of small, achievable steps, and put these into effect one-by-one.

Figure 7.2.3.4. Stakeholder Planning Sheet

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Power Order High to Low	Interest Order High to Low	Stakeholder Name	Key Interests and Issues	Current Status Advocate, supporter, neutral, critic or blocker	Desired Support Order High to Low	Desired Project Role (if any)	Actions Desired (if any)	Messages Needed	Actions & Communications

Summary:

As the work you do, and the projects you run, become more important, you will affect more and more people. Some of these people have the power to undermine your projects and your position. Others may be strong supporters of your work.

Stakeholder Management is the process by which you identify your key stakeholders and win their support. Stakeholder Analysis is the first stage of this, where you identify and start to understand your most important stakeholders.

The first step in this is to identify your stakeholders. The next is to prioritize them by power and interest, and to plot this on a Power/Interest Grid. The final step is to get an understanding of what motivates your stakeholders, and how you need to win them around.

Once you have completed your Stakeholder Analysis, the next stage is Stakeholder Planning. This is the process you use to plan how to manage your stakeholders and gain their support for your projects.

Stakeholder Planning can usefully be conducted by using a planning sheet like the one shown in figure [7.2.3.4](#). To prepare your plan, go through the following steps:

- Update the planning sheet with information from the power/interest grid.
- Think through your approach to stakeholder management.
- Work out what you want from each stakeholder.
- Identify the messages you need to convey.
- Identify actions and communications.

7.3. Applying These Tools to Your Life...

This module has introduced you to three useful tools for managing the stress of working with powerful people. Now is the time to put these skills into practice!

Do the following:

- Spend a few minutes thinking back through the interactions you have had with other people during the past week. Think about your relationship with your boss in particular. Also, look at the stressful events in your stress diary. When you reflect on the way in which you handled things, would you say that you used an assertive approach?
- Look at the table of rights in [7.2.1](#). Again, do you find yourself making any of the outmoded traditional assumptions described in that table? Think through for yourself whether the traditional assumptions or the legitimate rights are correct for you.
- If you come to the conclusion that you need to be more assertive, then learn the LADDER approach. Next time that you feel that your rights are being infringed, use LADDER to push back against this

infringement. You may find it easy to build up a bit of confidence by pushing back against minor infringements before you tackle major ones.

- Print off figure [7.2.2](#) and keep a copy of it with you. Next time someone makes a request of you that seems to be unreasonable, work through the flow chart and use it to manage the request effectively.
- Use the Stakeholder Analysis tool to identify the stakeholders in your job and in the goals you want to achieve.
- Use the Stakeholder Planning tool to think through how you can win the help and support of your stakeholders. Start using these tools on a routine basis to manage your stakeholder relationships.



STOP!

Do not go any further until you have used these tools!

These tools (Assertiveness and Stakeholder Management in particular) are absolutely fundamental to succeeding in life, and to managing the stress of working with powerful people. Make sure that you know how to use them!

Module 8:

Co-Worker and Team Stress

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	<p>Bad relationships with your co-workers can cause tremendous stress, as can working on dysfunctional teams.</p> <p>This module helps you to manage co-worker and team stress, starting by helping you to identify possible structural problems with your team. We then look at ways of resolving interpersonal conflict within the team.</p>
Need:	<p>This module helps you to resolve many of the unpleasant issues that can make team working unpleasant and stressful.</p>
Timing:	<p>The module will take one hour to work through. The practical exercises will take another two hours.</p>
Range:	<p>We discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reviewing team and work structure• Interpersonal skills, including assertiveness and negotiation• Setting of team rules
Objective:	<p>The objective of the module is to help you reduce co-worker and team stress by helping you to deal with the issues that cause it.</p>

8. Co-Worker and Team Stress

8.1. Introduction

Many of us spend a large part of our time working with the same group of people.

When we like these people and enjoy working as part of a team, our work can be very satisfying and we can achieve a great deal. But if we find our co-workers difficult to deal with, and teamwork is plagued with conflict, work quickly becomes stressful and unpleasant. Conflict within our teams can seriously undermine our productivity and ultimately, the success of our work.

This module introduces tools that can help you solve problems with dysfunctional teams and poor working relationships. This helps you to control what may be a serious source of stress in your life.

Understanding Teams:

For us to understand where teamwork can go wrong and become stressful and unpleasant, we must first understand how good teams are designed, and how they manage to work well together.

Team Design

The fundamental “design” of the team has a big impact on its success. By design, we mean the number of team members, their mix of skills and experience, the resources they have available, and the way that they are supported by their organization.

At first sight, it seems natural to think that the more people belong to a team, the more likely it is to achieve its goal. There is obviously some truth in this. However, coordinating teamwork takes time, and the larger the amount of co-ordination, the more time is needed. Think of it this way: If only two people are on a team, each person only needs to co-ordinate activity with one other person. If four people are on a team, each person needs to co-ordinate with three others. If six people are on the team, each person needs to co-ordinate activities with five others. The more people on a team, the more productive time each person loses because of the co-ordination activities needed to produce a coherent team product.

As well as this, as the team grows in size, two other factors come into play: first, it becomes more difficult to keep all team members fully occupied on the team task; and second, it becomes much easier for less-committed team members to shirk their responsibilities and free-ride on their colleagues’ effort without being noticed. Because of this, teams are often at their most efficient at a particular size – while this obviously depends on the circumstances, research has shown that optimum team sizes can be as low as five people. The performance of larger teams can often be improved by breaking them down into smaller sub-teams with responsibility for completing specific tasks.

These problems of inefficiency and “free-riding” mean that teams should not be formed without careful consideration. In a team task, the final output should be more valuable than it would be if all team members worked individually. If this is not the case, then the inefficiencies of working as a team can reduce the productivity of team workers and damage the effectiveness of the organization.

Skills and Experience...

Another important part of team design is to ensure that teams have the right mix of skills and experience. It is obvious that the team needs all the working skills needed to achieve its goal; however, what is less obvious is that it is better to bring together people with different backgrounds and experience than it is to build a team with similar people. While people who are very different from one another may take longer to bond as a team, they have a much richer and more diverse pool of experience to draw upon. By contrast, teams of similar people can be quite uncreative in the way they approach problems, hence reducing overall effectiveness.

Equally obvious is the importance of teams having free access to the resources needed to do the job. Appropriate manpower, funding, time, coaching, information and support must be available when needed. It can be intensely frustrating and stressful to be set challenging goals, but not to have the resources needed to achieve them.

The final part of team design is ensuring that reward systems are correctly aligned. It is unlikely that teams will function well if bonuses are given to people who succeed at the expense of other team members. If good team behavior is important to an organization's success, then rewards must follow this. Badly aligned reward systems can destroy teams.

Team Briefing

Once the team has been properly designed and brought together, it needs to be briefed clearly so that it knows its purpose, understands what it can and can't do, and understands what it has to deliver. In doing this, there are many parallels with the individual delegation skills we discussed in module 5.

This briefing needs to be done carefully if the team is to realize its full potential. While the person setting the objective may have an idea of how the job could be achieved, by the time of delivery a skilled and experienced team should have deeper expertise in the problem and its solution – even more so than the person setting the objective. If the method of delivery or the final product is specified in too much detail, it will prevent the team from using its expertise to deliver a product that is even better than the one expected.

On the other hand, the team product needs to be specified in as much detail as is necessary for the team to understand what its client wants, and how its client wants to monitor the delivery. The team needs to understand that its success or failure will be measured by whether it achieves this delivery.

Set objectives should be clear and easily understood. If possible, the meaning of the work to other people should be explained, so that all team members can understand the value of the work they are doing. Objectives should be sufficiently challenging to fully engage team members and make full use of their skills. Not only does this benefit the client, it also makes work more interesting and satisfying for team members.

Excessive control is intrusive, frustrating and irritating. It causes stress by getting in the way of flow and good performance. However, insufficient control causes intense stress as it means that the team can fail to satisfy its client's real needs. This can be intensely upsetting and can threaten the team's existence.

Understanding its Boundaries

Knowing its objectives, the team needs to know what its boundaries are: It needs to know what it can do and what it cannot do. For example, it needs to know whether it can bring more people onto the team, how far it can adapt standard working methods, and what power it has to change things outside the team. If the team does not know its boundaries, it risks either not achieving its potential, or causing political problems and turf wars.

Finally, the team needs to know the resources it has available to it, so that it knows what tools it can use to do the job.

With good team design and clear briefing, it should be possible for the team to make a good start. Having made this start, the people who set the team up should let the team perform without detailed scrutiny up until the first checkpoint.

Coaching

That is not to say that the team should be abandoned during this time. People outside the team should offer coaching to the team where appropriate.

Coaching may be motivational, where it concentrates on helping the team to commit to its objectives. It may focus on helping the team identify the strategies it will use to achieve its goals. It may be educational, in helping team members to develop the skills and knowledge needed to reach the goal. Alternatively, coaching may focus on the team itself, in helping individuals within the team to work together effectively.

Good coaching from experienced outsiders can help to eliminate many of the difficulties and stresses that the new team will experience as members learn how to work together and perform.

Feedback

The team also needs good feedback on the results of its work. Where problems arise, the team needs to know about these so that it can correct related behavior. The team also needs to know when results are good, as this will serve to improve individual job satisfaction, improve team spirit, and develop the confidence of the team.

8.2. Introducing the Tools

We start the module by looking at what can be the least emotionally charged solution to team problems: Identifying problems with the team's design, briefing and support. In doing this, we can work to make certain these are not at the root of team problems. Then, we move on to look briefly at your own expectations and attitudes so that you can be sure you are not contributing to any stressful situation. Finally, we look at tools you can use to smooth relationships with your co-workers while still defending your own rights.

Team Tools:

By now, you should broadly understand what is needed for setting up, establishing and supporting a good team. The tool we discuss in [8.2.1](#) (Team Diagnostic Checklist) provides a check list that you can work through to identify problems in the design or support of a team that may be causing stresses within it.

This is the first thing to check where you are experiencing co-worker or team stress – you may well find that problems with working relationships are just a symptom of poor team design or of weak team support.

If your team seems to be reasonably well-designed and supported, then the next thing to check is your own behavior to make sure that you are not contributing to the problem:

Checking Your Own Behavior:

Where we experience problems in working with other people, it is possible that we are contributing to these problems and to the stress they cause. Problems with working relationships are rarely and completely clearly defined; often both parties are contributing to the problem to a lesser or greater extent.

If you are serious about sorting problems out (and therefore reducing team stress), then you owe it to yourself to consider whether you are contributing to the problem. If you do not, then you risk being severely embarrassed when you raise the problem with other team members.

Checking your own behavior is not something that fits with the tools-based approach we use elsewhere in this course: Whether behavior is good or bad behavior is subjective and depends on the situation. It can also need a level of insight that can be difficult to achieve, particularly under stress.

However, a first step in this is to look at what you are expecting from other team members, and challenging these expectations to check that they are fair and reasonable. It is reasonable, for example, to expect that people work to the employment contracts and job descriptions that they have agreed. It is fair to expect people to make a reasonable effort to do their job well. But it can often be unreasonable to expect people to act against their own best interest or conform to your own political or religious beliefs.

A second step can be to look at your own attitudes and the way that you deal with and relate to people. These can be major contributors to problems, stress, unhappiness and career failure. The difference between good and bad team behavior often depends on the situation, however the following factors are usually important:

- **Customer and results focus:** A key factor in judging whether behavior is good or bad is looking at whether it contributes to or harms the team's delivery to its customer.
- **Effects on the team:** A second factor to look at whether a behavior promotes or damages the cohesion of the team and helps or hinders it in becoming more effective.
- **Effects on individuals within the team:** Good team behavior should help individual team members to benefit by teamwork – perhaps through enjoying working with other people, by learning more about what they do or by earning an appropriate reward for working as a team. Bad team behavior can harm the interests of other team members.

Once you have dealt with any of your own behaviors that might be contributing to the situation, the next thing to do is to look at how you can improve relationships:

Improving Relations With Co-Workers:

Here, we look at a number of key techniques that you can use to work more smoothly with your co-workers, thereby reducing team stress.

First, we briefly recap some of what we have already learned about assertiveness. This helps you to discuss problems with co-workers in a positive way that is likely to achieve the desired effect. We then look at negotiation skills so that you understand the basics of negotiating a fair compromise.

Finally, we look at negotiating formal “Team Rules.” By learning this approach, you will be better equipped to agree a fair set of behaviors with which all team members agree to comply. Team Rules are useful in that they give the team a fair benchmark against which they can manage the behavior. The process of negotiating Team Rules can be useful for aligning team members’ expectations of one-another.

The Last Step:

It is quite possible that you may have already taken all of the steps we have looked at so far. If so, you may already have a well-founded and supported team. You may be acting in a perfectly reasonable and well adjusted manner, and you and other members of your team may have agreed clear Team Rules. In short, you may have taken all reasonable actions to ensure productive, smooth relationship with co-workers.

Despite this, it may be that one team member is still behaving unacceptably, and that this is either threatening the team’s ability to meet its objective, or causing intense team stress.

In this case, it may be appropriate to exclude this person from the team. This is an unpleasant thing to have to do, but the benefits of doing so may outweigh the unpleasantness. If you have to do this, make sure that you have managed all stakeholders appropriately (see [7.2.3](#)).

8.2.1. Tool: Team Diagnostic Checklist

Introduction:

The Team Diagnostic Checklist is a simple tool for reviewing team design, briefing, coaching and feedback. It helps you to identify some of the key issues that can undermine team performance and therefore contribute to team stress.

While there are many possible causes of team stress (some of which will not be covered by this tool), using this technique will help you to identify some of the key problems that can arise.

This tool is useful as an early action in solving problems that are creating stress within a team. As you will see, the checklist provides a relatively emotion-free framework through which the team can discuss problems without the discussion becoming unpleasant and personal.

Using the Tool:

To use the tool, work through the checklist in figure [8.2.1](#). For each question, think carefully about the answer and, if appropriate, research it appropriately. For example, it might be quite difficult to identify the match or mismatch between the skills the team has and the skills it needs; however, this is an important thing to look at when solving team problems.

As you work through the checklist, you may identify shortcomings in the team's structure. Where you do, take what actions you can to resolve the situation. Where you cannot resolve the situation, think about what the consequences might be, and manage stakeholder expectations appropriately.

Remember to be pragmatic in the way you do this. Circumstances will rarely allow for the creation of a perfect team. However, by understanding the issues you may face, you can work around problems in a practical way, without issues becoming personal and unpleasant.

Tip:

Many of the problems of inadequate team briefings can be avoided if the person setting the team up agrees a "Team Charter" with the team members. The Team Charter explicitly documents team aims, powers, resources, performance measures and so on, so that the team is clear on these points from the very start.

Good examples of different team charters are available at:

- <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/itss/projects/files/team-toolkit.doc>,
- <http://www.npd-solutions.com/charter.html>, and
- http://www.ars.usda.gov/afm/tqm/guidelines/wri_cht.htm

Summary:

The Team Diagnostic Checklist is a simple tool for identifying the structural problems that may undermine a team, or cause relationship problems within it. By identifying and managing these problems, you can reduce team stress.

Where you experience significant team stress, making use of this tool is one of the first things that you should do. By using the tool, you avoid taking precipitous actions that deal with symptoms of the problem rather than the underlying causes. This serves to avoid unnecessary damage that may be done to important working relationships.

To use the tool, work through the checklist in figure [8.2.1](#), answering questions appropriately. Where potential problems are highlighted, take action appropriately.

Figure 8.2.1. Team Diagnostic Checklist

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Question	Answer	Observations
Team Design: Is this a team task – i.e. is the product of the team greater than the sum of the product of all individuals?		Some types of work are best done by individuals. This is particularly the case where individual tasks are small. In these cases, coordinated teamwork may reduce efficiency. Consider using a non-team-based approach.
How many people are on the team?		While it varies depending on circumstances, the most efficient team size is usually around 5 people. Much larger teams lose efficiency, and become vulnerable to “free-riding”. For groups of more than 5, you may want to consider splitting into sub-teams.
Do you have the right technical skills to achieve the team’s goals?		This is of grave importance, and should be sorted out immediately if the necessary technical skills are not available.
Are people similar in background, or do they come from a range of different backgrounds, and have a range of different skills?		Teams with a breadth of experience tend to develop more creative and flexible approaches to work than those from a similar background. Often this results in delivery of a better product. Bring different relevant experience into your team where possible and practical.
Do all team members have the social skills needed to work together well?		People work better together when they have good social skills and are used to working in teams. People with poor social skills, or with little team experience, may need coaching to help them become effective team members.

Question	Answer	Observations
Does the team have access to the resources it needs to do its job? For example, does the team have enough skilled members? Is it properly financed? Does it have the time it needs to do the job? Does it have access to the help it needs from elsewhere in the organization?		While people rarely have all the resources they need, serious resource shortfalls can cause extreme stress. If resources are seriously short, the team needs to make all stakeholders aware of this as soon as possible, and either negotiate for the needed resources, or agree to reduce the specification of the product (for example, by gaining more time to deliver the team product).
How are rewards and bonuses allocated to team members? In particular, do they reward individual behavior at the expense of the team?		Poorly aligned rewards can sabotage team performance. If rewards are not well aligned, it may be appropriate to see if you can change the way this is handled so that rewards are given for good teamwork.
Is it in the interests of each team member to act as part of the team?		People tend to want to work on a team when they perceive that the benefits to them exceed the costs. Benefits may be direct (e.g. financial or career-progression-related), or may be emotional (for example, having good learning opportunities or warm relationships with co-workers). Similarly, costs may be direct or emotional. For instance, a bad team atmosphere will reduce the cohesiveness of a team.
Team Briefing: Do you clearly understand what your client wants to have delivered? Do you understand his or her specifications, requirements, volumes and quality? Do you understand the positive meaning of the work?		All teams have clients, whether internal or external. To perform successfully, the team must meet, or exceed, the client's requirements. Make sure that you fully understand these.
Does the specification of work leave the team enough freedom to use your expertise to add real value?		By the end of the project, you should have more expertise in this specific problem than your client. It may be appropriate to explain to your client that you may be able to deliver a better product if some aspects of the specification are relaxed.

Question	Answer	Observations
Do you know what checkpoints the client will be using, and when he or she expects delivery?		Particularly if the work you are doing is important, the client will be anxious that it is completed on time, and of high quality. Involve the client as early and as often as practically possible. This will help to keep the client “on board” with the project and help him or her better manage any problems you experience. However, you may also need to explain that excessive involvement will slow delivery (because it takes people away from the job). The key is to find the right balance.
Do the requirements and the timetable seem realistic?		If these seem unrealistic, then do the detailed work that proves or disproves this. If it is unrealistic, then you need to work out how you can manage this, and communicate potential problems to project stakeholders as early as possible.
Do you understand the resources you have available? Are they available when you need them? Are they sufficient to achieve the team’s goal?		If the resources you need to do the job are not available when you need them, then this will cause problems. Make sure that you book resources early, and escalate resource issues as soon as possible.
Do you understand clearly what you have the power to do, and what you do not have the power to do?		Manage your boundaries carefully and sensitively. It is too easy either to spark a turf war if you exceed your powers, or not to use all of the options you have open to you.
Coaching: Can you call on project sponsors when you need them? Can you ask the advice of people who have successfully done similar things? Do you have access to the education or training you need? Do you have coaching available from people who can help you think through team problems?		Good, accessible, regular coaching can often make the difference between success and failure for a team. Find appropriate mentors who can give you advice and help where you need it.

Question	Answer	Observations
Feedback: Do you have feedback mechanisms in place with your client whereby you can see how successful you are on a regular basis?		If you do not get feedback, you cannot know whether you are doing a good job. You also do not have the ability to correct your approach to work if this is not delivering the results you need. Make sure that appropriate feedback and review mechanisms are in place with your client.

Having checked that the fundamentals are correct, the next thing to check is that you are not contributing to the problem, perhaps with unrealistic expectations or with misaligned attitudes. This course does not provide tools for checking this, because this is such a subjective and situational thing.

Once you are satisfied that this is not the case, the next thing to look at is whether relationship issues are contributing to the problem. Assertiveness is one of the tools that will help with this:

8.2.2. Tool: Assertiveness – Getting what you want, in a fair way...

We looked at assertiveness in detail in the previous module (Working with Powerful People). Assertiveness is no less important in dealing with team members than it is in dealing with your boss. As before, aggression within a team can cause severe problems, while passivity leaves others unaware of your personal needs, and diminishes your input to the team's final result.

If you need to recap on assertiveness, see the appropriate section in [Module 7](#).

Assertiveness is useful where your rights are not being respected. Occasionally, you will come across team situations where what you want directly conflicts with someone else's interests. This is where negotiation skills are useful.

8.2.3. Tool: Team Negotiation Skills – Finding an acceptable compromise

Negotiation skills help you to resolve situations where what you want conflicts with someone else's interests. As we discussed with in the assertiveness skills section, there are wrong ways of handling these situations: With an aggressive approach, you could seek to overpower the other person to give what you want. This is clearly damaging to subsequent teamwork. With a passive approach, you could simply give in to the other person's wishes. This is clearly not good for you.

The aim of negotiation is to explore the situation, and to find a solution that is acceptable to both people.

There are different styles of negotiation, depending on circumstances. Where you do not expect to deal with people ever again, and you do not need their goodwill, it may be appropriate to play hardball. Here you may seek to win a negotiation, while the other person losing out. Many people go through this when they buy or sell a house, demonstrating exactly why house buying can be such a confrontational and unpleasant experience.

Similarly, where there is a great deal at stake in a negotiation (for example, in large sales negotiations), then it may be appropriate to prepare in detail, and use gamesmanship to gain advantage.

Both of these approaches are usually wrong for resolving disputes within a team. If one person plays hardball, then this puts the other person at a disadvantage. Similarly, using tricks and manipulation during a negotiation can severely undermine trust, damaging subsequent teamwork. While a manipulative person may not get caught if negotiation is infrequent, this is not the case when people work together on a day-by-day basis. Honesty and openness are the best policies in team-based negotiation.

Preparing for a successful negotiation...

Depending on the scale of the disagreement, a level of preparation may be appropriate for conducting a successful negotiation. For small disagreements, excessive preparation can be counter-productive because it takes time that is better focused on reaching team goals. It can also be seen as manipulative because just as it strengthens your position, it weakens the other person's.

If a major disagreement needs to be resolved, preparing thoroughly is warranted, and worthwhile. Think through the following points before you start negotiating:

- **Goals:** What do you want to get out of the negotiation? What do you expect the other person to want?
- **Trading:** What do you and the other person have that you can trade? What do you and the other person have that the other might want? What might you each be prepared to give away?
- **Alternatives:** If you don't reach agreement with the other person, what alternatives do you have? Are these good or bad alternatives? How much does it matter if you do not reach agreement? Does failure to reach an agreement cut you out of future opportunities? What alternatives might the other person have?
- **The relationship:** What is the history of the relationship? Could or should this history impact the negotiation? Will there be any hidden issues that may influence the negotiation? How will you handle these?
- **Expected outcomes:** What outcome will people be expecting from this negotiation? What has the outcome been in the past, and what precedents have been set?
- **The consequences:** What are the consequences for you of winning or losing this negotiation? What are the consequences for the other person?
- **Power:** Who has what power in the relationship? Who controls resources? Who stands to lose the most if agreement isn't reached? What power does the other person have to deliver what you hope for?
- **Possible solutions:** Based on all of the considerations, what possible compromises might there be?

Style is critical...

The best approach for negotiation within a team is to adopt a win-win approach, i.e. one in which both parties feel positive about the situation when the negotiation is concluded. This helps to maintain a positive working relationship afterwards. This governs the style of the negotiation. Histrionics and displays of emotion are clearly inappropriate because they undermine the rational basis of the negotiation and because they bring a manipulative aspect to the negotiations.

Despite this, emotion can be an important subject of discussion. For a team to function effectively, the emotional needs of team members must be fairly met. If emotion is not discussed where needed, the agreement reached can be unsatisfactory and temporary. Be as detached as possible when discussing your own emotions. Perhaps it would be best to discuss your emotions as if they belonged to someone else.

Negotiating successfully...

The negotiation itself is a careful exploration of your position and the other person's position, with the goal of finding a mutually acceptable compromise that gives you both as much of what you want as possible. Note that the other person may quite often have very different goals from the ones you expect!

In an ideal situation, you will find that the other person wants what you are prepared to give, and that you are prepared to give what the other person wants.

If this is not the case, and one person must give way, then it is fair for this person to try to negotiate some form of compensation for doing so. The scale of this compensation will often depend on the many of the factors we discussed above. Ultimately, both sides should feel comfortable with the final solution if the agreement is to truly be considered a win-win agreement.

The final technique, the formal setting of team rules, comes into play where both assertiveness and negotiation have failed to build good working relationships:

8.2.4. Tool: Setting Team Rules – Establishing a code of conduct for the team

As teams learn to work together, they often establish an informal set of norms, or codes of conduct, that govern the way they work together. Usually, these are established informally as the team learns what works, and what does not. Once established, the rules are enforced by team disapproval of anyone who breaks them. Most team members are sensitive to this disapproval and do what they can to avoid it.

Occasionally, people may lack the sensitivity or social skills to conform to these informal rules. They may behave in a way that damages the team's delivery to its client, undermines the cohesiveness of the team, or makes other team members unhappy. Alternatively, people may at times resolutely champion new ways of doing things that are uncomfortable for a team that has become set in its ways.

When the conflict involved with this is seriously affecting the team, a useful way of resolving the situation can be for team members to negotiate between themselves the standards to which they wish to conform, and establish these as formally documented "Team Rules". These rules normally relate to the behavior that is causing the problem. For example, team members may agree to be punctual, or to do all they can to honor deadlines, or to always write up minutes on the same day as a meeting.

The process of negotiation is an important part of this. By negotiating the rules, people with over-stringent standards are brought down to earth, while people whose standards are too lax have the reasons for higher standards explained rationally to them by the rest of the team. The process of negotiation also provides a forum within which the team takes the time to look at new strategies, and decides whether or not it wants to adopt them.

Rules should be written down after being agreed on by team members. These rules then act as the benchmark against which behavior can be judged. Democratic (not necessarily unanimous) agreement is needed for the rules to be valid.

The process of negotiating the set of rules means that they are likely to be rationally considered. The formality of the documentation of the rules means that there is no scope for people to misunderstand what is expected of them. The agreement of the majority of team members gives the rules democratic legitimacy.

Ultimately, when an individual consistently ignores or violates these rules, the only way forward may be for the individual to be asked to leave the team. This is tough, but in some cases it is needed.

8.3. Applying These Tools to Your Life...

If you are experiencing problems with co-workers or with your team, work through the following steps:

- Use the Team Diagnostic Checklist in [8.2.1](#) to check that the team is correctly designed, resourced, briefed and coached. This will help you to spot structural issues that may be causing interpersonal problems.
- Before taking up issues with other people, spend a little time reflecting on whether your own behavior may be contributing to the situation. Make sure that the behaviors you are expecting from other people are objectively reasonable. Then, make sure that your own behavior is suitably customer and results-focused; benefits the cohesion of the team; and does not harm the people you are working with.
- Also, apply this last test to the other person's behavior. Does this help you to clarify why this behavior is a problem?
- Next, revisit the assertiveness skills we looked at in [Module 7](#). Consider whether you have been managing your relationships and expressing your views in a suitably assertive manner. If you have not been sufficiently assertive in bringing the problem to the other person's attention, then correct this.
- Alternatively, if the problem is arising from legitimate, but conflicting aims, see if you can negotiate a suitable solution.
- Only consider the more drastic steps of setting team rules, or disciplining a co-worker or team-member, once you have worked through the alternatives and found them unsatisfactory.

8.4. Further Information & References

For more information on how teams work and how to lead them, I strongly recommend [Leading Teams – Setting the Stage for Great Performances](#) by J Richard Hackman. This has been an important source of information for this module.

Other references for the module are:

- How Hardwired is Human Behavior, Nicholson, Nigel, July - August 1998, Harvard Business Review, Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston
- The Discipline of Teams, Katzenbach JR and Smith D, March - April 1993, Harvard Business Review, Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston
- The Manager's Job: Folklore and Fact, Mintzberg H, March - April 1990, Harvard Business Review, Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston

Module 9:

Managing Environmental Stress

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	<p>We experience a variety of small environmental stresses every day. These range from the frustrations of commuting to badly organized workspaces, poor ergonomics and many, many others. While these are small things, they can all add up to make life more stressful.</p> <p>Many of these stresses can be controlled quite easily, and this module shows you how to identify and manage them.</p>
Need:	<p>This module helps you to manage the background environmental stress in your life, so that you can reduce your overall stress levels.</p>
Timing:	<p>The module will take approximately 30 minutes to read through. The practical exercises will take around 30 minutes to complete.</p>
Range:	<p>The module discusses stress from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Commuting• Crowding• Work layout and lack of personal space• Furniture and poor ergonomics• Bad lighting• Noise• Bad air quality, and• Unpleasant environments
Objective:	<p>The objective of the module is to help you spot the environmental stresses in your life so that you can manage them appropriately.</p>

9. Managing Environmental Stress

9.1. Why this module is important

From the moment we wake up in the morning to the time we go to sleep at night, we experience a host of minor irritations and frustrations.

These can be very small, and include things like getting stuck in a traffic jam, suffering a backache from an uncomfortable chair, being distracted by gossiping colleagues, or wasting time finding things in a cluttered, disorganized environment.

Even though these frustrations are small, each one either triggers a small release of stress hormones into our bodies or reduces our overall sense of happiness. This creates a background level of stress in our lives, which is then exacerbated by the serious stressful incidents we deal with elsewhere within this course.

By managing the small stresses in our life, we can reduce the impact of the major stresses when they occur.

This module helps you to be aware of these small stresses and then gives some suggestions as to how you can control them. These suggestions can make your life much more pleasant!

9.2. Managing Environmental Stress

In looking at managing environmental stress, we will look at the stress you experience throughout your working day. We start with the crowding and frustration that can be an every-day part of our commutes to work. We then look at improving our working environments once we have arrived.

Tip:

As you work through this module, make sure that you do not stress yourself with negative thinking as you recognize the imperfections of your environment. Do what you can to manage the environmental stress that you experience, and then try to change the way that you perceive the things you cannot control. Try to see these as necessary costs that you pay to get the benefits you deserve, or try to find something positive about them.

9.2.1. Commuting

However it is done, commuting can be a source of unpleasant stress.

If we commute by car, then we can experience stress from congestion, physical discomfort, air pollution and noise. Of these, congestion is often the most intense source of frustration: While our goal is to get to

our destination as quickly as possible, congestion directly prevents us from achieving this. Plenty of studies have tracked the direct physiological effect of traffic congestion in raising blood pressure and releasing stress hormones into the body.

On the other hand, commuting by public transport has its own set of stresses. These mainly involve the stresses of lack of control over our environment, overcrowding and violation of personal space. Noise, delay and unwelcome interaction with other travelers can add to the frustration of using public transport.

We should not underestimate the significance of overcrowding as a source of stress. As with congestion (a form of crowding), it becomes a problem when it interferes with our ability to achieve our goals. This is often the case when we need to get somewhere quickly. Crowding also forces us into closer contact with strangers than we would often like, triggering all of the social taboos associated with unwanted physical contact and invasion of personal space. Again, many studies have confirmed the direct effect of crowding on the release of stress hormones into our bodies. Fortunately, it is something we get used to with time.

Whatever we do, commuting is likely to remain something of a pain, hence, a source of stress. Despite this, there is a lot we can do to improve the situation. Depending on whether we commute by car or by public transport, we can make things better by:

- Leaving earlier for work so we beat the rush
- Checking on a map to see if there is a better way around regular congestion spots
- Making sure that we adjust the controls of our car so that our driving position is as comfortable as possible
- When using public transport, reading or distracting ourselves in some other way
- Playing calming music when frustrated
- Using the relaxation techniques in Module 10 to manage stress when we experience it, and
- Using the positive thinking skills in Module 11 to think about the commute in a more positive way.

The stresses of public transport are more difficult to manage than car commutes because we have less control over the situation. A long-term solution may be to move further towards the start of a commuting route. Here, crowding is usually less intense. This gives people at the start of a commute the freedom to arrange themselves and their possessions. This is not true of the people who join commutes halfway, as they do not have these freedoms.

9.2.2. Working Environment Layout

The way in which your working environment is arranged can be a major source of stress.

An obvious source of stress is where the people and resources you need are not immediately at hand. Here, physical barriers and distance stand in the way of being able to work efficiently. This obviously obstructs people's achievement of work goals and causes stress accordingly.

A less obvious source of stress comes with the difference between working in an open plan environment and working in individual offices. On one hand, it is much easier to work as a team in an open plan environment because walls and barriers can get in the way of good team performance. On the other hand, open plan offices can be immensely distracting when you are doing a job that needs intense concentration. The noise of telephones and of people talking can significantly undermine performance in these jobs.

Open plan offices also lack privacy. This is important because it forces people constantly to “maintain appearances”, and to be constantly sociable when they may be more efficient focusing on the job in hand. This requirement for constant sociability can be a source of stress, as people really need to be able to control the level of social activity they participate in, and the way in which they interact.

Being pragmatic, the layout of your working environment may or may not be something you can control. If it is, try to arrange things so that people have easy access to the people and resources they need. This normally works best by organizing workspaces around the processes people operate, or the types of work that they do. The idea here is to make it as easy as possible for people to do their jobs.

If the layout of your workspace is not in your control, then consider making a well-thought-out suggestion to the person responsible as to how things could be improved. Emphasize the benefits of making the change.

If you need personal space but none is available, try blocking off areas with furniture, screens or blinds. If noise is an issue, then padded screens and plants can help to muffle it. Make sure that you explain to your co-workers why you are doing this; after all you don't want them to think that you are avoiding their company!

9.2.3. Furniture and Ergonomics

Another source of stress is tension and pain caused by bad furniture, or by bad use of good furniture.

This normally shows itself in a backache caused by badly designed chairs, or by bad seating positions in properly designed chairs, although it can come about in other ways.

Take the time to arrange your working environment so that it is comfortable. For example, when you consider that you may spend a large proportion of each day sitting in a particular seat, it is worth ensuring that it is properly adjusted, and is not causing you pain or damaging your body.

If you spend a large part of each day working at a computer, then make sure that the monitor and keyboard are comfortably placed, and that you are well positioned when using both. Make sure you use a properly designed, properly adjusted chair. Otherwise, you will undoubtedly end up with a backache. If you find that tendons in your hands get sore when you type for sustained periods, it may be worth experimenting with a “natural” or ergonomic keyboard. If you find that your eyes get sore when looking at a monitor, or that you start to get headaches, then try taking breaks periodically.

Wherever your environment causes you pain, look at what you can do to relieve it. It may be worth getting expert advice on this as oftentimes, the ideal solution may not be immediately obvious.

9.2.4. Lighting

Similarly, bad lighting can cause a strain on your eyes and increase fatigue, as can light that is too bright or light that shines directly into your eyes.

What you may not appreciate is that the quality of light may also be important. Most people are happiest in bright daylight. In fact, this may trigger a release of chemicals in the body that bring a sense of emotional wellness. Normal artificial light does not seem to have the same effect on mood.

Try experimenting with working by a window or using full-spectrum bulbs in your desk lamp. You will probably find that this improves the quality of your working environment.

9.2.5. Noise

Noise can cause intense stress.

High levels of background noise can severely impair your ability to concentrate. In an open plan office, the sound of people talking casually, of office machinery, or of meetings going on, can undermine the quality of work done. Ringing telephones disturb not only the person to whom the call is directed, but also other people in the same area.

Reliable research has been carried out showing that excessive, intermittent or unpredictable noise can raise people's blood pressure, and reduce people's performance at complex tasks. It can cause tetchiness, tension and headaches, in addition to a loss of concentration. It can also damage a team's work, as people in a noisy environment tend to become more irritable and less willing to help one-another out.

Solutions to noise at work can involve:

- Installation of partitions to deaden sound;
- Use of meeting rooms separate from the main work area;
- Use of quiet rooms when concentration is needed;
- And, if all else fails, use of earplugs!

In a home environment, unwanted noise can be even more stressful and irritating as it intrudes on private space. Where noise comes from neighbors, or from someone sharing the house, let them know that you have a problem with their behavior in a suitably pleasant, assertive manner. Ask that the music be turned down, or that a different room be used. When noise comes from outside the home, think about what physical barriers you can use to reduce the noise.

9.2.6. Air Quality & Pollution

Poor air quality is more insidious as an issue. While people tend to notice obvious problems with atmospheric pollution, they are often unaware of the negative effect of invisible and odorless pollutants like Carbon Monoxide.

Long-term studies in polluted cities have shown that admissions to hospitals for psychiatric illness increase as Carbon Monoxide and Nitrogen Dioxide levels increase. High levels of atmospheric pollutants can damage people's ability to concentrate. Similarly, inadequate levels of ventilation can deplete oxygen in the air, and can lead to headache, tiredness and reduced concentration.

The following factors can also contribute to the problem of poor air quality:

- Smoking
- Air conditioning
- Heating
- Ionization by electrical equipment
- Overcrowding

- Pollution
- Solvents in e.g. carpets and furniture
- Excess humidity or dryness

You can do a number of things to improve air quality and reduce the stress caused by it:

- Ban smoking
- Open windows
- Use an ionizer. This helps to freshen the air by eliminating positive ions created by, for example, electric motors powering computer fans.
- Use dehumidifiers where humidity is a problem.
- Introduce plants where the air is too dry. Evaporation of water from the plant pots or from the plants themselves will help to raise humidity. Not only do plants raise the amount of oxygen in the air and reduce stuffiness, they also help to absorb pollutants in the air.
- Keep drinking water on hand so that you do not get dehydrated.

9.2.7. Maintenance and Tidiness

If your environment at work or home is dirty, uncomfortable or neglected, then this can cause stress. Similarly, if your living or working area is untidy and chaotic, then this can be distracting and can make it more difficult to achieve your goals.

Not only is a dirty, dingy working environment unpleasant to work in. It is also damaging to the organization that inhabits it. What new member of staff wants to work in an unpleasant environment? Who wants to continue working in one?

In the scale of all business expenses, it does not cost much to maintain premises to a reasonable standard. Nor does it cost much to bring in plants and pictures and to do the small things that make a place more of a pleasure to work in.

Having mentioned tidiness, it is important not to be dogmatic about it. While it can be very difficult to coordinate many tasks successfully in an untidy work area, it is perfectly possible to work on one task very effectively. The early '90s trend of clear desk thinking ignored one of the most important lessons about human beings: Different people doing different jobs work most effectively in different ways.

9.2.8. Summary

If you are suffering a lot of environmental stress, there are probably many things that you can do to improve the quality of your life. These include:

- Adjusting the controls and seat position of your car, the height and position of your chair at your desk, and moving your computer monitor and keyboard so that they are all as comfortable as possible. This helps to avoid the small aches and pains that contribute to stress.
- Doing what you can to avoid the most crowded times during your commute, having calming music available for when you do get stuck, and using relaxation techniques to reduce stress as it begins to build.
- Arranging your working environment so that things are where you need them and so that you can get privacy when you want it.
- Ensuring that your workspace is well lit with indirect light. Where possible, use full-spectrum light bulbs.

- Deadening sound where possible, either with padded screens or by doing work that needs concentration in quiet meeting rooms, and
- Tidying your workplace, personalizing it where appropriate, and introducing plants to improve the environment and air quality.

You can do most of these things at relatively little cost. When done together, they can significantly reduce your stress levels by eliminating many of the unpleasant small irritations that can build up during the day.

9.3. Applying This to Your Life...

This module has introduced you to some of the practical things that you can do to manage the many small, but cumulative, stresses that come from your environment. Now is the time to do something about them!

Do the following:

- Take a notebook and pen wherever you go for one day. Make a note of everything in your environment that irritates you or causes you pain.
- At the end of the day, look at these things and think what you can do about them.
- Where you can, do something to manage each of these.
- Where you have no control over a situation, find something positive about it that you can remind yourself of when the situation occurs.

9.4. References

- Eric Craig, Stress as a Consequence of the Urban Physical Environment, in Goldberger, L, Breznitz, S (Eds), 1993, The Handbook of Stress, Free Press, New York
- [The Book of Stress Survival](#), Alix Kirsta, Guild Publishing, London, 1987.
Despite being published 18 years ago and being slow to get hold of, this is one of the best books we've found on stress management. It is clearly laid out, practical, comprehensive, and a pleasure to read.

Module 10:

Managing Performance Stress

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest: We all know the feeling of sickness in our stomach before an important presentation or performance. We also know how excessive pressure can undermine our ability to perform well in these situations.

This module explains important skills that can help us to enjoy performing at our best when under intense pressure.

Need: By using these techniques, you can ensure that you perform well in stressful situations.

Timing: You will need approximately two hours to read through and understand this module. The practical exercises will take another two hours to complete.

Range: The module covers a number of important techniques for:

- Preparing for peak performance;
- Managing performance stress;
- Recovering from setbacks; and
- Building self-confidence.

Objective: By the end of this module you should understand how to manage performance stress so that you can perform well under pressure.

10. Managing Performance Stress

10.1. Why this module is important

We all know the feeling of sickness in our stomach before an important presentation or performance. We have all experienced the sweaty palms, the raised heart rate, and the sense of agitation that we feel as these events approach.

In section [2.3.1](#), we showed that these are just unpleasant side effects of the important fight-or-flight response that helps us to run faster and fight harder. A raised heart rate brings more oxygen and blood sugar to power important muscles. Sweaty palms are the most noticeable part of an increase in sweating across our bodies - this increases cooling of muscles and helps them stay efficient. Agitation is just a negative word for a level of increased alertness to threat.

In section [2.5.2](#), we looked at the “inverted-U” relationship between pressure and performance. We saw that at low levels of pressure, we can find it difficult to get motivated to give a top class performance. At excessive levels of pressure, we experience stress. Anxieties and negative thinking crowd in on our minds. Concentration suffers, our focus narrows and we find it difficult to think clearly and perform well.

Our ideal state is to manage the pressure we experience so that we can find our own area of peak performance (see [2.5.2](#)). Here we can enter the state of flow described by Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *“being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost.”*

This module introduces you to the important techniques that help you to manage the performance stress that can disrupt this state of flow. Many of these techniques come from sport psychology, as these are the mental techniques that help top athletes deliver exceptional performances under intense pressure.

Good stress management gives you a competitive edge when times get tough.

10.2. Introducing the Tools

The first part of this module introduces four tools that help you to ensure that you are fully prepared for the stressful event.

The first of these, “Anticipating Stress” helps you to think through the upcoming event, rehearse your performance, and understand and manage the uncertainties that can disrupt it. The next technique, “Thought Awareness, Positive Thinking and Rational Thinking” helps you to prepare mentally to counter any negative thinking that may cause you problems. The next tool, “Performance Planning” gives a good framework for brainstorming the problems and distractions that you may encounter before the event. This helps you to prepare to manage them appropriately. This can be a real boost to self-confidence. The final

tool in this group, use of “Post-Performance Reviews”, helps you to learn lessons from the performance and reward yourself for success. This helps to further build your self-confidence.

The second group of tools gives you some good techniques for directly managing the fight-or-flight response. You will inevitably feel this shortly before an important performance starts. “Imagery” is the first of these. As well as being a powerful mental rehearsal technique, it is extremely useful for relaxing when you are under pressure. Meditation, Self-hypnosis and use of Relaxation techniques are also good ways of relaxing. Finally, “Deep Breathing, Progressive Muscular Relaxation, and the Relaxation Response” are good physical techniques for managing muscular tension.

All of these tools help you to ensure that you are both fully prepared for the event, and are able to manage the nerves of the occasion.

Tip - Biofeedback in Stress Management:

We can see the effectiveness of this second group of tools directly using biofeedback devices. These are electronic sensors that measure your stress levels and feed them back to you.

One of the most common approaches to biofeedback involves measuring the electrical conductance of your skin. We have already seen that the more you are under pressure, the more you sweat. Because sweat is largely composed of water, the more you are under pressure, the higher the electrical conductivity of your skin.

One of the pleasures of using biofeedback devices is that you can actually see the relaxation techniques take effect. You can observe for yourself the real effect of techniques that can otherwise appear to be nebulous and theoretical.

For example, later on in this module we will discuss imagery. With biofeedback devices, you can see the objectively measured reduction in stress that happens when you create a mental image of relaxing in a garden. Similarly, you can measure the increase in stress you feel when you imagine something like being chased by sharks in a swimming pool.

One source of biofeedback devices is the [Tools for Wellness](#) web site. Their CSR2 biofeedback device is available from their “Tools for Meditation and Relaxation” section.

10.2.1. Tool: Anticipating Stress – Managing Stress by Preparing for it

Introduction:

This tool brings together a number of simple techniques that help you to anticipate the stresses that come with important performances, and take early action to manage them. These techniques are rehearsal, reducing uncertainty, and reducing the importance of the event.

Using the Tool:

Reducing Uncertainty:

In preparing for an event, uncertainty about key factors can cause high levels of stress. Uncertainty can also lead you to make mistakes in your preparation that undermine your performance.

Different information is needed for different types of performance. For example, a presentation to the board of your organization will need different information than an athletic or artistic performance. From your circumstances, you should be able to identify the sort of uncertainties that you might face.

Examples of these uncertainties may include:

- The size of your audience and the situation or environment you will be performing in
- What the audience will want to get out of your performance
- Where your performance occurs within the program and what will have happened before it?
- The mood that the audience will be in. Are they likely to be skeptical or hostile, or are they (as in many cases) likely to be well disposed to you?
- Will the audience want to question you? Do you need to prepare for questioning?
- What else will be happen during your performance? What distractions are you likely to experience?
- What technology will support your performance (equipment, lights, sound, data projectors, etc)? What preparations have been made in case the technology fails?

Without clarification of these uncertainties, there is a high risk that you will be wrong-footed if your assumptions are incorrect or if something goes wrong.

Asking the questions that reduce this sort of uncertainty is all part of preparing professionally for the event. If you ask in a positive way, then people are usually quite happy to help.

Rehearsal:

The next technique, Rehearsal, is well known and regularly used in many, many situations, and is included here for completeness.

Rehearsing for a stressful event such as an interview or a speech helps you to polish your performance and build confidence. Each time you rehearse your performance, you make the flow of words or actions smoother and more polished. Also, practice allows you to spot potential problems with the performance and have the ability and time beforehand, to change and eliminate these problems. As you rehearse your performance, you can identify any areas that may cause you difficulty, and can change things appropriately.

Ultimately, the more you repeat what you are going to say and the actions you will take, the more these become automatic. The more they become automatic, the more you are able to repeat them and perform well when under pressure.

The success of this approach in the extreme can be seen with the rehearsal conducted by people like fire fighters and the military: Their constant repetition of key skills ensures they can perform automatically, and optimally, under intense survival stress.

Reducing the Importance of an Event:

When an event is important to you, this can make it very stressful. This is particularly true when you are operating at a high level, or when many people are watching. It can also be true when there is the prospect of a large financial reward, promotion, or personal advancement if you perform well.

The presence of family, friends or important people can add to this pressure.

If stress is a problem under these circumstances, then think carefully about the event, and take every opportunity to reduce its importance in your eyes:

- If the event seems big, put it in its place along the path to your goals. Compare it in your mind with bigger events you might know of, or might have attended.
- If there is a financial reward, remind yourself that there may be other opportunities for reward later, and this may not be the only chance you have. Focus on the quality of your performance. Focusing on the rewards will only damage your concentration and raise stress.
- If members of your family are watching, remind yourself that they love you anyway. If friends are real friends, they will continue to like you whatever happens.
- Switch your focus from your own feelings, and think about what your audience wants to get out of the event. Concentrating your attention on delivering this will distract you from worrying about yourself.

If you focus on the correct performance of your tasks, then the importance of the event will dwindle into the background.

Summary:

By anticipating stressful situations, you can prepare for them. By making sure of your facts, and getting a complete understanding of the situation, you can ensure that you are properly prepared, and that you are not wrong-footed by predictable situations and events.

By rehearsing properly and fully, you can polish your performance and identify and eliminate problems with it. By rehearsing your performance often enough, you can make it almost automatic. This helps you to enter the state of flow we talked about earlier. This turns a stressful event into an enjoyable and pleasurable experience.

Finally, by reducing the importance of the event, you place it in its proper context. This helps you to reduce stress and gain a fair sense of perspective.

Next, we look at managing the negative thinking that can undermine a good performance:

10.2.2. Tool: Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking & Positive Thinking (1)

Introduction:

You may have a whole range of fears, anxieties and negative thoughts associated with the upcoming event. While this is completely normal and is something that everyone experiences, it is important that you deal with these; otherwise, they can undermine your self-confidence.

Negative thinking and negative emotion is something we look at in much more detail in Module 11 (Reducing Stress With Rational Thinking). What we look at briefly here are techniques explicitly focused on managing performance stress.

Firstly we look at “Thought Awareness,” the technique by which you understand your fears and negative thoughts. We then look at rational thinking and positive thinking as ways of countering the negative thoughts that you have identified.

Using the Tool:

Thought Awareness

You are thinking negatively when you fear the future, put yourself down, criticize yourself for errors, doubt your abilities or expect failure. Negative thinking damages confidence, harms performance and paralyses mental skills.

A major problem with negative thinking is that it tends to flit into our consciousness, does its damage and then it flits back out again with its significance having barely been noticed. Since we do not challenge negative thoughts, they can be completely incorrect and wrong. This does not stop them being damaging.

Thought awareness is the process by which you observe your thoughts and become aware of what is going through your head.

To use the technique, observe your “stream of consciousness” as you think about the upcoming event. Do not suppress any thoughts. Instead, just let them run their course while you make note of them. Remember to look out for negative thoughts about the event and your performance.

As you notice negative thoughts, write them down and then let them go.

Examples of common negative thoughts might be:

- Fear about the quality of your performance or of problems that may interfere with it;
- Worry about how the audience or the press may react to you;
- Worries about how you appear to others, important people;
- A preoccupation with the symptoms of stress;
- Dwelling on the negative consequences of a poor performance;
- Self-criticism over less than perfect rehearsal and practice, or
- Feelings of inadequacy.

Thought awareness is the first step in the process of eliminating negative thoughts: You cannot counter thoughts that you do not know you think.

Rational Thinking

The next step in dealing with negative thinking is to challenge the negative thoughts that you wrote down using the Thought Awareness technique.

Look at every thought you wrote down and rationally challenge it. Ask yourself whether the thought is reasonable. Does it stand up to fair scrutiny? What evidence is there for and against the thought? Would your friends or mentors agree with the thought or disagree with it?

Looking at some of the examples above, the following challenges could be made to some of these common negative thoughts:

- **Quality of performance:** Have you trained yourself as well as you reasonably should have? Have you gathered the information you need and prepared properly for the event? Have you conducted a reasonable number of rehearsals? If so, you are likely to give a good performance.
- **Problems of distraction and issues outside your control:** Have you conducted appropriate contingency planning and created a Performance Plan (see [10.2.3](#))? Have you thought about how you will manage all likely contingencies and prepared a solution? If so, you will be well prepared to handle potential problems.
- **Worry about other people's reaction:** If you perform the best you can, then you should be completely satisfied. If you give a good performance, fair people are likely to respond well. If people are not fair, then this is something outside your control, and the best thing to do is to ignore and rise above any unfair comments.
- **Problems during practice:** If some of your practice was less than perfect, then remind yourself that the purpose of practice is to identify problems so that they will not be repeated during the performance. Similarly, ask yourself whether it is reasonable to expect perfect performance at all times. All that is important is that you perform well when you need to.

Tip:

If you find it difficult to look at your negative thoughts objectively, imagine that you are your best friend or a respected coach or mentor. Look at the list of negative thoughts and imagine the negative thoughts were written by someone you were giving objective advice to, and think how you would challenge these thoughts.

These are some examples of how you can challenge negative thinking. You should be able to quickly see whether the thoughts are wrong, or whether they have some substance to them. Where there is substance to the negative thoughts, take appropriate action. In these cases, negative thinking has been an early warning system for you, showing where you need to direct your attention.

Positive Thinking

Where you have used Rational Thinking to identify incorrect negative thinking, it is useful to prepare rational, positive thoughts and affirmations to counter these negative thoughts.

Positive affirmations help you to build self-confidence and change negative behavior patterns into positive ones. By basing your affirmations on the clear, rational assessments of fact that you made using Rational Thinking, you can use them to undo the damage that negative thinking may have done to your self-confidence.

Continuing the example above, positive affirmations could be:

- **Quality of performance:** "I have trained hard for this event. I have prepared well and have rehearsed thoroughly. I am well prepared to give an excellent performance."

- **Problems of distraction and issues outside your control:** “I have thought through everything that might reasonably happen and have planned how I can handle all likely contingencies. I am well placed to react flexibly to unusual events.”
- **Worry about other people’s reaction:** “Fair people will react well to a good performance. I will rise above any unfair criticism in a mature and professional way.”
- **Problems during practice:** “I have experimented with and learned from my practice. This has put me in a position where I can deliver a great performance.”

Tip:

Traditionally, people have advocated positive thinking almost recklessly, as if it is a solution to everything. Positive thinking should be used with common sense: No amount of positive thinking can make everyone who applies it an Olympic champion marathon runner (though an Olympic marathon runner is unlikely to have reached this level without being pretty good at positive thinking!)

First, decide rationally what goals you can realistically attain with hard work, and then use positive thinking to reinforce these.

Summary:

This set of tools helps you to manage and counter the negative thinking that can undermine a good performance.

Thought Awareness helps you to understand the fear and negative thinking that may damage your self-confidence in the time leading up to an event.

Rational Thinking is the technique that helps you to challenge your negative thoughts and either learn from them, or refute them as incorrect.

Positive Thinking is the technique you use to create positive affirmations that you can use to counter negative thoughts, neutralizing them and building your self-confidence.

Note: Here we are focusing on countering performance-related negative thinking. We will expand on this further in the next module.

10.2.3. Tool: Performance Planning – Planning to Manage Distractions

Introduction:

So far, we have looked at a range of tools that help you to prepare for stressful events. We have shown you how to reduce uncertainty and rehearse properly for the event. We have also looked at Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking, so that you can manage the fears, anxieties and negative thoughts that you might have about the event.

For small events, this might be all that is needed to give an excellent performance.

For big events, it is worth preparing a Performance Plan. This is a pre-prepared plan that helps you to deal effectively with any problems or distractions that may occur, and perform in a positive and focused frame of mind.

Using the Tool:

To prepare your Performance Plan, begin by making a list all of the steps that you need to do from getting prepared for a performance through to its conclusion.

Start far enough in advance to sort out any equipment problems. List all of the physical and mental steps that you need to take to:

- Prepare and check your equipment, and repair or replace it where it does not work;
- Make travel arrangements;
- Pack your equipment and luggage;
- Travel to the site of your performance;
- Set up equipment;
- Wait and prepare for your performance; and
- Deliver your performance.

Next, work through each of these steps. Think though:

- Everything that could reasonably go wrong at each step with equipment and arrangements; and
- Any distractions and negative thinking that could undermine your confidence or stop you having a positive, focused frame of mind at the start of and during your performance.

Work through all of the things that could go wrong. Look at the likelihood of the problem occurring. Many of the things you have listed may be extremely unlikely. Where appropriate, strike these out and ignore them from your planning.

Look at each of the remaining contingencies. These will fall into three categories:

1. Things you can eliminate by appropriate preparation, including making back-up arrangements and acquiring appropriate additional or spare equipment;
2. Things you can manage by avoiding unnecessary risk; and
3. Things you can manage with a pre-prepared action or with an appropriate stress management technique

For example, if you are depending on using a data projector for a presentation, you can arrange for a back up projector to be available, purchase a replacement bulb, and/or print off paper copies of the presentation in case all else fails. You can leave earlier than strictly necessary so that you have time for serious travel delays. You can also think through appropriate alternatives if your travel plans are disrupted. If you are forced to wait before your event in an uncomfortable or unsuitably distracting place, prepare the relaxation techniques you can use to keep a calm, positive frame of mind. Research all of the information you will need to take the appropriate actions quickly, and ensure that you have the appropriate resources available.

Also, prepare the positive thinking you will use to counter fears and negative thoughts both before the event and during it. Use the stress anticipation skills in [10.2.1](#) to ensure that you are properly prepared to manage stress. Then use the thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking skills we discussed in [10.2.2](#) to prepare the positive thoughts that you will use to protect and build your confidence.

Write your plan down on paper in a form that is easy to read and easy to refer to. Keep it with you as you prepare for, and deliver, your performance. Refer to it whenever you need it in the time leading up to the event, and during it.

Tip:

In his excellent book "[Fight Your Fear and Win](#)", Don Greene discusses a useful routine for recovering from an error in your performance. This helps you to restore the focus and self-confidence that you need to perform well. To use the routine follow these steps after making an error:

- **Accept the mistake:** Do not criticize yourself for it. The mistake is now in the past, and there is nothing you can do about it.
- **Focus on the present:** Worrying about the past will not help.
- **Relax:** Breathe deeply and use the techniques described later in this module to relax.
- **Focus on normal good performance:** If you try to compensate for the mistake with an excellent performance, you will over-stress yourself, and this will break your flow again...

Build this into your Performance Plan and use it when you need to within your performance.

"Fight Your Fear and Win" is full of similar techniques, and we strongly recommend it for people interested in sport and performance psychology.

Tool reproduced with the permission of Dr Don Greene.

Summary:

Performance Plans help you to prepare for an important performance. They bring together practical contingency planning with mental preparation to ensure that you are fully prepared to handle any situations and eventualities that may realistically occur.

This gives you the confidence that comes from knowing you are as well prepared for an event as is practically possible to be. It helps to ensure that you deliver your performance in a relaxed, positive and focused frame of mind, whatever problems or upsets may have occurred.

10.2.4. Tool: Post-Performance Reviews – Preparing for the next time...

Performances do not typically take place in isolation. If you prepared well and delivered a performance that your audience benefited from, it is likely that you will be asked to perform again and again.

Where this is the case, you can learn from each performance to improve your next one by conducting post-performance reviews. Conducting these reviews helps to improve your performance much more quickly than would otherwise be the case.

You can do a lot of this on your own; however, you are likely to get more acute insights into future improvements if you review your performance with a coach, with the buyer of your services, or with a

respected member of your audience. Not only will external feedback have an objectivity that can be difficult to achieve on one's own, you will also get both the perspective of the audience and the benefit of the other person's wisdom and experience.

The precise format for the review will depend on the type of performance; however, at minimum, it should cover:

- The success of the preparation for the event;
- The handling of any problems which occurred before and during the event;
- Any negative thoughts or distractions that occurred at any stage; and the effectiveness of your handling of these.
- Anything that you noticed could be done to improve your performance and the value you deliver to your audience, including acquisition of additional equipment, improvement of skills, improvement of preparation, etc.

Feed the learning points from this performance back into your Performance Plan for the next performance, and take action on the skills improvements as soon as possible.

The final stage is to review the things that went well, and to congratulate yourself for these things. This is vitally important for building your self-confidence.

Next, we look at a series of tools useful for managing the stress of an important performance:

10.2.5. Tool: Imagery – Mental stress management

Introduction:

Imagery is a potent method of stress reduction, especially when combined with physical relaxation methods such as deep breathing (see [10.2.9](#)).

You will be aware of how particular environments can be very relaxing, while others can be intensely stressful. The principle behind the use of imagery in stress reduction is that you can use your imagination to recreate, and enjoy, a situation that is very relaxing. The more intensely you imagine the situation, the more relaxing the experience will be.

This sounds unlikely. In fact, the effectiveness of imagery can be shown very effectively if you have access to the biofeedback equipment we discussed earlier. By imagining a pleasant scene (which reduces stress) you can see or hear the stress in your body reduce. By imagining an unpleasant and stressful situation, you can see or hear the stress in your body increase. This very real effect can be quite alarming when you see it happen the first time!

Using the Tool:

Imagery in Relaxation

One common use of imagery in relaxation is to imagine a scene, place or event that you remember as safe, peaceful, restful, beautiful and happy. You can bring all your senses into the image with, for example, sounds of running water and birds, the smell of cut grass, the taste of cool white wine, the warmth of the sun, etc. Use the imagined place as a retreat from stress and pressure.

Scenes can involve complex images such as lying on a beach in a deserted cove. You may “see” cliffs, sea and sand around you, “hear” the waves crashing against rocks, “smell” the salt in the air, and “feel” the warmth of the sun and a gentle breeze on your body. Other images might include looking at a mountain view, swimming in a tropical pool, or whatever you want. You will be able to come up with the most effective images for yourself.

Other uses of imagery in relaxation involve creating mental pictures of stress flowing out of your body, or of stress, distractions and everyday concerns being folded away and locked into a padlocked chest.

Imagery in Preparation and Rehearsal

You can also use imagery in rehearsal before a big event, allowing you to run through the event in your mind.

Aside from allowing you to rehearse mentally, imagery also allows you to practice in advance for anything unusual that might occur, so that you are prepared and already practiced in handling it. This is a technique used very commonly by top sports people, who learn good performance habits by repeatedly rehearsing performances in their imagination. When the unusual eventualities they have rehearsed using imagery occur, they have good, pre-prepared, habitual responses to them.

Imagery also allows you to pre-experience achievement of your goals, helping to give you the self-confidence you need to do something well. This is another technique used by successful athletes.

Summary:

With imagery, you substitute actual experience with scenes from your imagination. Your body reacts to these imagined scenes almost as if they were real.

To relax with imagery, imagine a warm, comfortable, safe and pleasant place, and enjoy it in your imagination.

Imagery can be shown to work by using biofeedback devices that measure body stress. By imagining pleasant and unpleasant scenes, you can actually see or hear the changing levels of stress in your body change.

10.2.6. Tool: Meditation - Relaxing with sustained concentration

Introduction:

As with our next tool (self-hypnosis), meditation has a “new age” image that can lead to it being dismissed as a less-than-serious stress management tool. This is a shame. Good research has been conducted into meditation that shows it is a useful and practical technique for managing stress.

As with the next two tools, meditation is a good way of relaxing during, and at the end of, a stressful day. It is something you can learn to do yourself, or may be something you prefer to learn in classes.

Note on research:

Some of the key research on meditation was carried out by Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard University. His book on this, "The Relaxation Response", was published in 1968. In a series of experiments into various popular meditation techniques, Dr. Benson established that these techniques had a very real effect on reducing stress and controlling the fight-or-flight response. Direct effects included slowed heartbeat and breathing, reduced oxygen consumption and increased skin resistance.

Using the Tool:

The idea behind meditation is to consciously relax your body and focus your thoughts on one thing for a sustained period. This occupies your mind, diverting it from the problems that are causing you stress. It gives your body time to relax and recuperate, and to clear away stress hormones that may have built up.

There is nothing mystical about meditation. On the contrary, it is something that you can do quite easily by following these steps:

- Sit quietly and comfortably.
- Close your eyes.
- Start by relaxing the muscles of your feet and work up your body relaxing muscles (a technique like Progressive Muscular Relaxation can be useful for this - see [10.2.9](#) for more information on this).
- Focus your attention on your breathing.
- Breathe in deeply and then let your breath out. Count your breaths, and say the number of the breath as you let it out (this gives you something to do with your mind, helping you to avoid distraction).
- Do this for ten or twenty minutes.

Focusing on breathing and counting breaths is just one way you can occupy your mind during meditation. Other approaches are:

- **Focusing on an object:**

Here, you completely focus attention on examination of an object. Look at it in immense detail for the entire meditation. Examine the shape, color differences, texture, temperature and movement of the object. Objects often used are flowers, candle flames or flowing designs, but you can use other objects equally effectively (for example alarm clocks, desk lamps or even coffee mugs!)

- **Focus on a sound:**

Some people like to focus on sounds they make. The classic example is the Sanskrit word "Om", meaning "perfection". Whether or not this is practical depends on your lifestyle.

- **Using Imagery:**

This can be a very refreshing and pleasant way of meditating. Here, you create a mental image of a pleasant and relaxing place in your mind. See [10.2.5](#) for more information on imagery.

However you do it, it is important to keep your attention focused. If external thoughts or distractions wander into your mind, let them drift out.

Summary:

Meditation is a useful and practical relaxation technique. To use it, sit in a comfortable place, close your eyes, relax your body, and focus your concentration on something for a period of time.

By meditating, you rest your body, allow stress hormones to subside, and occupy your mind so that unpleasant, stressful thoughts do not intrude.

10.2.7. Tool: Self-Hypnosis

Introduction:

Hypnosis, like meditation, has a dubious image. Many people over many years have made their living by overlaying this practical and useful technique with unwarranted mystical and magical rituals. In fact, it is a useful tool for achieving deep relaxation.

Self-hypnosis is when you hypnotize yourself. This is often more practical as a stress management tool than normal hypnosis, as you do not need to have a hypnotist present.

Like meditation, self-hypnosis helps you to relax your body, lets stress hormones subside, and distracts your mind from unpleasant thoughts. The relaxation achieved with self-hypnosis can be intense. Unlike meditation, we often use affirmations as part of self-hypnosis to manage stress and build self-confidence. We describe these in detail in section [11.2.1](#). Affirmations are the positive statements (based on rational thinking) that we make to ourselves to counter stress and unpleasant thoughts.

Along with meditation and imagery, self-hypnosis can be used as a part of a daily stress management routine.

Using the Tool:

First, decide if you want to use affirmations as part of your self-hypnosis session (you will still be able to relax deeply if you do not use them). If you do, then prepare the affirmations you want to use before you start the session, as you will not want to think about them once you have reached a state of deep relaxation!

Next, find somewhere comfortable and quiet, and sit down.

Now, relax your body. A good way of doing this is to close your eyes and imagine waves of relaxation running down your body from your scalp downwards, washing out stress. Let the waves run in time with your breathing, first washing down over your head, then your neck, then your torso, then arms, and finally your legs. Feel the muscles in your body relaxing as the waves of relaxation wash over them.

The next step is to use suggestion to deepen the state of relaxation. This can be as simple as saying something like: "I am feeling relaxed and comfortable to yourself. With every breath I am becoming more relaxed and more comfortable..." Alternatively, use the traditional approach of suggesting sleepiness: "I am tired and sleepy. I can feel the heaviness in my arms and legs. I am more and more tired..."

Once you feel completely relaxed, use the affirmations you have prepared. Mix these in with the relaxation suggestions.

Typical self-hypnosis sessions can last between 15 and 25 minutes; however, use the tool for as long as you like.

Summary:

Self-hypnosis is a practical and effective technique for relaxing deeply. It can be used with or without affirmations, depending on what you want to achieve.

To use the technique, find somewhere comfortable and quiet to sit down. Think about, and prepare, any affirmations that you might want to use. Start by closing your eyes and relaxing your muscles. A good way of doing this is to use imagery. Move on to use suggestion to relax yourself even more. When you feel very relaxed, use any affirmations that you have prepared. Enjoy the state of hypnosis for as long as you like.

10.2.8. Tool: Using Music or Relaxation Tapes

The three tools we have looked at so far in this module are active techniques. You need to concentrate to use them.

An alternative, and equally valid, approach is to listen to calming music, or to pre-prepared relaxation or hypnosis tapes². It takes no effort on your behalf to listen to these, and this may be very welcome at the end of a long, hard day's work!

Quite obviously, you can buy relaxing music in very many places. Similarly, there are many sources of relaxation and self-hypnosis tapes, most of which will be fine. Three sources of tapes are:

- [Centerpointe Research Institute](http://www.centerpointe.com) (<http://www.centerpointe.com>), which uses a proprietary audio technology to achieve deep relaxation;
- [Relaxation CDs and Tapes](http://www.relaxation.clara.net) (<http://www.relaxation.clara.net>), which has clear, well-written reviews of many different relaxation and self-hypnosis tapes with hyperlinks to the stores offering them; and
- [RelaxationTapesMusic.com](http://relaxation-tapes-music.com) (<http://relaxation-tapes-music.com>), a store that has tapes of relaxing music and nature sounds

An alternative approach is to record tapes for yourself. This allows you to develop routines precisely tailored to your own requirements.

10.2.9. Tool: Physical Relaxation Techniques

Introduction:

This tool introduces three useful physical relaxation techniques that can help you reduce muscle tension and manage the effects of the fight-or-flight response on your body. This is particularly important if you need to think clearly and perform precisely when you are under pressure.

The techniques we will look at are Deep Breathing, Progressive Muscular Relaxation and “The Relaxation Response”.

² For 'tape', please also read CD or MP3!

Using These Techniques:

Deep Breathing:

Deep breathing is a simple, but very effective, method of relaxation. It is a core component of everything from the "take ten deep breaths" approach to calming someone down, right through to yoga relaxation and Zen meditation. It works well in conjunction with other relaxation techniques such as Progressive Muscular Relaxation, relaxation imagery and meditation to reduce stress.

To use the technique, take a number of deep breaths and relax your body further with each breath. That's all there is to it!

Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR):

Progressive Muscular Relaxation is useful for relaxing your body when your muscles are tense.

The idea behind PMR is that you tense up a group of muscles so that they are as tightly contracted as possible. Hold them in a state of extreme tension for a few seconds. Then, relax the muscles to their previous state. Finally, consciously relax the muscles even further so that you are as relaxed as possible.

By tensing your muscles first, you will probably find that you are able to relax your muscles more than would be the case if you tried to relax your muscles directly.

Experiment with PMR by forming a fist, and clenching your hand as tight as you can for a few seconds. Then relax your hand to its previous tension, and then consciously relax it again so that it is as loose as possible. You should feel deep relaxation in your hand muscles.

For maximum relaxation you can use PMR in conjunction with breathing techniques and imagery (see [10.2.5](#)).

The "Relaxation Response":

We mentioned "The Relaxation Response" in [10.2.6](#). In a series of experiments into various popular meditation techniques, Dr. Benson established that these techniques had a very real effect on reducing stress and controlling the fight-or-flight response. Direct effects included deep relaxation, slowed heartbeat and breathing, reduced oxygen consumption and increased skin resistance.

This is something that you can do for yourself by following these steps:

- Sit quietly and comfortably.
- Close your eyes.
- Start by relaxing the muscles of your feet and work up your body relaxing muscles.
- Focus your attention on your breathing.
- Breathe in deeply and then let your breath out. Count your breaths, and say the number of the breath as you let it out (this gives you something to do with your mind, helping you to avoid distraction).

Do this for ten or twenty minutes.

An even more potent alternative approach is to follow these steps, but to use relaxation imagery (see [10.2.5](#)) instead of counting breaths in step 5.

Again, you can prove to yourself that this works using the biofeedback equipment we discussed in [10.2](#).

Summary:

“Deep Breathing,” “Progressive Muscular Relaxation,” and the steps leading to the “Relaxation Response” are three good techniques that can help you to relax your body and manage the symptoms of the fight-or-flight response.

These are particularly helpful for handling nerves prior to an important performance.

10.3. Applying This to Your Life...

This module has introduced you to the important skills you need to manage the stress of an important performance. If you use the tools in this module, you will experience their very real value the next time you need to perform well under intense stress.

As immediate points, experiment with the relaxation techniques we described earlier in this module. This experimentation will be most effective if you use biofeedback devices so that you can see changes take place³. Do the following:

- See [10.2.5](#) (imagery). Build a mental image of a place where you feel happy, secure and relaxed. Next, create an image of an unpleasant, stressful situation where your life or health is under threat. If you have one, connect yourself to the biofeedback device and learn to control it, imagining the unpleasant image to raise the stress levels in your body and using the pleasant image to reduce them. Experiment with altering and improving the images to intensify the effect. If you do not have a biofeedback device, then try measuring your pulse rate and see if you can affect this.
- Next, use the negative imagery to raise stress levels in your body, and then experiment with using the relaxation techniques in this module to relax. Again, watch the effects on the biofeedback device or your pulse, and find the technique and imagery that suits you best.
- Identify the next time that you need to perform well under pressure. Make an entry in your diary an appropriate number of days in advance of this, reminding you to use the techniques in this module to prepare for it. Use the techniques in [10.2.1](#), [10.2.2](#), [10.2.3](#) and [10.2.4](#) to prepare for and review it, and compare the level of confidence you feel after this preparation with the level of confidence you would normally expect to feel.

10.4. References

- [Coaches Guide to Sport Psychology](#), Rainer Martens PhD, 1987, Human Kinetics, Champaign, Illinois
- [Fight Your Fear and Win](#), Don Greene, 2001, Random House, New York
- [In Pursuit of Excellence](#), Terry Orlick PhD, 1990, Human Kinetics, Champaign, Illinois
- [The Relaxation Response](#), Herbert Benson M.D., 1992 (reissue), Harper Collins, New York

³ If these are not available, try measuring changes in your pulse rate.

- [The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook](#) (Fifth Edition), Martha Davis PhD, 2000, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, California

Module 11:

Reducing Stress With Rational Thinking

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	<p>In many cases, situations do not cause stress themselves. Instead, it is how we react to them, and what we say to ourselves about them that causes stress.</p> <p>Sometimes we are right in what we say to ourselves. Very often, however, we are overly harsh and unjust in a way that we would never be with friends or co-workers. This, along with other negative thinking, can cause intense stress and unhappiness and can severely damage self-confidence.</p> <p>This module provides powerful tools that help you overcome the negative thinking that lies behind so much stress.</p>
Need:	<p>Negative thinking damages your performance by undermining your self-confidence and by occupying attentional capacity at times when we need to focus our entire minds on what we are doing. This module shows you how to counter negative thinking effectively so that you can perform at your best.</p>
Timing:	<p>It will take approximately one hour to read through the module and understand it.</p>
Range:	<p>The module discusses the following tools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking• Emotional Analysis• Cognitive Restructuring
Objective:	<p>By the end of this module you will understand how to use your moods and anxieties as an early warning system highlighting issues you need to face.</p> <p>You will also be able to identify and restructure unhelpful negative thoughts, taking much of the pain and the damage out of them. In many cases, you will be able to turn them around and counter them with helpful, positive thinking.</p>

11. Reducing Stress With Rational Thinking

11.1. Why this module is important

In modules 5 through 10 we looked at a range of action-oriented ways of managing the stresses you can expect to face during your career. These approaches helped you to change the environment or situation, allowing you to actively manage the stress you experience.

The next few modules take a different, emotionally oriented approach. In these modules, we look at situations over which we have less control, where we must begin to adapt ourselves to manage stress successfully.

We have already mentioned that the most common accepted definition of stress is that it occurs when a person perceives that “demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.”

In becoming stressed, people must make two main judgments: First, they must feel threatened by the situation, and second, they must judge whether their capabilities and resources are sufficient to meet the threat. How stressed someone feels depends on how much damage they think the situation can do them, and how closely their resources meet the demands of the situation.

Perception is key to this as situations are not stressful in their own right. Rather it is our interpretation of the situation that drives the level of stress that we feel.

Quite obviously, sometimes we are right in what we say to ourselves. Some situations may actually be dangerous, may threaten us physically, socially or in our career. Here, stress and emotion are part of the early warning system that alerts us to the threat from these situations.

Very often, however, we are overly harsh and unjust to ourselves in a way that we would never be with friends or co-workers. This, along with other negative thinking, can cause intense stress and unhappiness and can severely undermine self-confidence.

How Negative Thinking Undermines Performance

Not only do these inappropriate negative thoughts cause a great deal of unhappiness, they also reduce our performance.

One obvious part of this comes from the mental effort wasted in worrying. As we saw in section [2.5.2](#), this is particularly important when we are focusing on a task in which we need to perform well. Here, negative and anxious thinking compete with task-related thoughts for the attentional capacity of our conscious mind. They also disrupt the state of flow we discussed in [2.5.1](#).

This is shown reliably in study after study, in sector after sector. A particularly good example of this is with students' academic performance:

"Anxiety also sabotages academic performance of all kinds: 126 different studies of more than 36,000 people found that the more prone to worry a person is, the poorer their academic performance, no matter how measured.... In a test, non-worriers were asked to worry for 15 minutes – their ability to do a task reduced measurably. When worriers were relaxed for 15 minutes, their ability to do a task improved radically."

Anxiety and Meta-Performance, Bertha Seipp, "Anxiety and Academic Performance, A Meta-analysis", Anxiety Research 4,1 (1991) (cited in Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman, 1996, Bloomsbury Publishing, London).

Tip:

Worry and anxiety often contain important information on threats that we may face. Eliminating them altogether can mean that we miss important cues from our environment, and fail to make appropriate contingency plans.

However, as we say above, worry interferes with our performance.

A useful way of dealing with worry is to reschedule it: Acknowledge to yourself that you need to think the issue through, and allocate a time to do so. Keep a notebook with you and make enough brief notes in it to capture what is "buzzing around" in your mind. Then think the issue through at the appointed time. In the meantime, put the issue out of your mind.

Negative Thinking and Health

We also saw in section [2.6.1](#) the importance for health outcomes of taking positive attitude towards life.

We saw that people who approach the stresses of life with depression, anxiety and hostility experience significantly worse health.

This is in direct contrast with people who showed stress hardiness. In fact, these people managed to survive intense stress with little illness. Hardiness was characterized by positive attitude to challenges, positive thinking and commitment to goals, among other things.

We can see this in the following quote:

Patients are also taught to examine their mental and emotional responses and to restructure them in a non-stressful way.... Those on the behavior modification group learned how to recognize their exaggerated physiological, mental and behavioral reactions to stressful situations. They were taught how to relax physically and mentally, as an alternative response. Lectures, demonstrations, role-playing and behavioral drills helped them develop new, non-Type A skills."

*"Stress, Behavior, and Heart Disease", Matthew M. Burg Ph.D., Chapter 8, Yale School of Medicine Heart Book
- <http://info.med.yale.edu/library/heartbk/>*

In a study conducted over a four-year period, the group of patients who had modified their behavior had experienced half the number of heart attacks of the group who had not modified their behavior.

This module provides powerful tools that help you to rationally understand the negative thinking that causes so much stress. This helps you to identify either where you need to take action, or where you are being unduly negative.

11.2. Introducing the Tools

The first thing that we do in this module is to take another look at the “Thought Awareness, Positive Thinking and Rational Thinking” tool we looked at in the last module. There, we looked at it specifically as it applied to performance stress. Here we extend it into a more general setting.

The next technique we look at, “Emotional Analysis”, helps us to understand the emotions that we and other people feel, and identify the assumptions that lie beneath them. Once we understand these assumptions, we can decide for ourselves whether they are correct, and either change our interpretation of the situation or take appropriate action.

The final tool in this section, “Cognitive Restructuring” is similar to the first tool, but takes a very formal, intensive approach to understanding what lies behind negative moods. “Cognitive Restructuring” is an extremely powerful tool for looking objectively at negative thinking, helping you to cut away the unfair and unjust negative thinking that damages self-confidence and take a clear, balanced look at the realities behind upsetting events.

11.2.1. Tool: Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking & Positive Thinking (2)

Introduction:

In the last module, we looked at thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking specifically in relationship to performance stress. Here, we extend this important tool to apply to all instances of negative thinking. This tool also acts as the basis of the next two tools, Emotional Analysis and Cognitive Restructuring. Whereas this tool helps with general negative thoughts, Emotional Analysis helps you understand negative emotions, and Cognitive Restructuring helps you to come to terms with deep, pervasive negative moods.

First, we look at “Thought Awareness”. As you will see, this is a technique by which you understand your fears and negative thoughts. We then look at rational thinking and positive thinking as ways of countering the negative thoughts that you have identified.

Using the Tool:

Thought Awareness

You are thinking negatively when you fear the future, put yourself down, criticize yourself for errors, doubt your abilities, or expect failure. Negative thinking damages confidence, harms performance and paralyzes mental skills.

A major problem with this is that negative thoughts tend to flit into our consciousness, do their damage and flit back out again with their significance, having barely been noticed. Since we do not challenge them, they can be completely incorrect and wrong yet, this does not diminish their harmful affect.

Thought Awareness is the process by which you observe your thoughts and become aware of what is going through your head.

In section [10.2.2](#), we used Thought Awareness in thinking about an upcoming event. This is one way of using it. Here you observe your stream of consciousness as you think about a stressful situation. You do not suppress any thoughts. Instead, you just let them run their course while you watch them, and write them down as they occur.

Another more general approach to Thought Awareness comes with logging stress in your Stress Diary (see [3.2.2](#)). One of the benefits of using the Stress Diary is that you log all of the unpleasant things in your life that cause you stress for one or two weeks. This will include negative thoughts and anxieties, and can also include difficult or unpleasant memories and situations that you perceive as negative. All of these can be looked at using the techniques in this module. By logging your negative thoughts for a reasonable period of time, you will quickly see patterns in your negative thinking. When you analyze your diary at the end of the period, you should be able to see the most common and the most damaging thoughts. Tackle these as a priority.

Thought awareness is the first step in the process of managing negative thoughts, as you cannot manage thoughts that you are unaware of.

Rational Thinking

The next step in dealing with negative thinking is to challenge the negative thoughts that you identified using the Thought Awareness technique. Look at every thought you wrote down and rationally challenge it. Ask yourself whether the thought is reasonable: Does it stand up to fair scrutiny?

As an example, by analyzing your Stress Diary you might identify that you have frequently had the following negative thoughts:

- Feelings of inadequacy
- Worries that your performance in your job will not be good enough
- An anxiety that things outside your control will undermine your efforts
- Worries about other people's reactions to your work

Starting with these, you might challenge these negative thoughts in the ways shown:

- **Feelings of inadequacy:** Have you trained and educated yourself as well as you reasonably should to do the job? Do you have the experience and resources you need to do it? Have you planned, prepared and rehearsed appropriately? If you have done all of these, are you setting yourself unattainably high standards for doing the job?
- **Worries about performance:** Do you have the training that a reasonable person would think is needed to do a good job? Have you planned appropriately? Do you have the information and resources you need? Have you cleared the time you need and cued up your support team appropriately? Have you prepared appropriately? If you have not, then you need to do these things quickly. If you have, then you are well positioned to give the best performance that you can.
- **Problems with issues outside your control:** Have you conducted appropriate contingency planning? Have you thought through and managed all likely risks and contingencies appropriately? If so, you will be well prepared to handle potential problems.
- **Worry about other people's reactions:** If you have put in good preparation, and you do the best you can, then that is all that you need to know. If you perform as well as you reasonably can, then fair

people are likely to respond well. If people are not fair, then this is something outside your control. Often, the best thing to do is to rise above unfair comments.

Tip:

If you find it difficult to look at your negative thoughts objectively, imagine that you are your best friend or a respected coach or mentor. Look at the list of negative thoughts and imagine the negative thoughts were written by someone you were giving objective advice to, and think how you would challenge these thoughts.

When you challenge negative thoughts rationally, you should be able to see quickly whether the thoughts are wrong or whether they have some substance to them. Where there is some substance, take appropriate action. In these cases, negative thinking has been an early warning system showing where you need to direct your attention.

Positive Thinking & Opportunity Seeking

Where you have used Rational Thinking to identify incorrect negative thinking, it can often be useful to prepare rational positive thoughts and affirmations to counter them. It can also be useful to look at the situation and see if there are any useful opportunities that are offered by it.

Affirmations help you to build self-confidence. By basing your affirmations on the clear, rational assessments of facts that you made using Rational Thinking, you can use them to undo the damage that negative thinking may have done to your self-confidence.

Tip:

Your affirmations will be strongest if they are specific, are expressed in the present tense and have strong emotional content.

Continuing the examples above, positive affirmations might be:

- **Feelings of inadequacy:** "I am well trained for this? I have the experience, the tools and the resources I need. I have thought through and prepared for all possible issues. I can do a superb job."
- **Worries about performance:** "I have researched and planned well for this, and I thoroughly understand the problem. I have the time, resources and help I need. I am well prepared to do an excellent job."
- **Problems issues outside your control:** "We have thought through everything that might reasonably happen and have planned how we can handle all likely contingencies. Everyone is ready to help where necessary. We are very well placed to react flexibly and effectively to unusual events."
- **Worry about other people's reaction:** "I am well-prepared and am doing the best I can. Fair people will respect this. I will rise above any unfair criticism in a mature and professional way."

If appropriate, write these affirmations down so that you can use them when you need them.

As well as allowing you to structure useful affirmations, part of Positive Thinking is to look at opportunities that the situation might offer to you. In the examples above, successfully overcoming the situations

causing the original negative thinking will open up opportunities. You will acquire new skills, you will be seen as someone who can handle difficult challenges, and you may open up new career opportunities.

Make sure that identifying these opportunities and focusing on them is part of your positive thinking.

Tip:

As we said in the last module, in the past people have advocated positive thinking almost recklessly, as if it is a solution to everything. Positive thinking should be used with common sense. First, decide rationally what goals you can realistically attain with hard work, and then use positive thinking to reinforce these.

Summary:

This set of tools helps you to manage and counter the negative thinking.

Thought Awareness helps you to understand the negative thinking, unpleasant memories and misinterpretation of situations that may interfere with your performance and damage your self-confidence.

Rational Thinking is the technique that helps you to challenge these negative thoughts and either learn from them or refute them as incorrect.

Positive thinking is then used to create positive affirmations that you can use to counter negative thoughts. These affirmations neutralize negative thoughts and build your self-confidence. It is also used to find the opportunities that are almost always present to some degree in a difficult situation.

11.2.2. Tool: Emotional Analysis

– Respecting, Understanding and Challenging Our Emotions

Introduction:

We are educated to believe that emotion is bad. Emotion, we are told, clouds the intellect and interferes with the objective analysis of facts. We understand that excessive emotions like intense anger have tremendous power to damage the complex social relationships on which we rely. So they do. However, this is only part of the story.

In this course, we make a working assumption that negative emotions may be similar to the fight-or-flight reflex we looked at in modules 2 and 10, in that they are an important short cut that prepares us to react to a situation much more quickly than would be the case if we had to carefully think each situation through⁴. As such, emotions may give us the benefit of a speedy, and more-often-than-not effective response to simple situations, at the cost of a sophisticated and reliable analysis of more complex ones.

As such, we can trust negative emotions as a useful early warning signal that something may be wrong. If instant action is required, then we may choose to act. If it is not, these negative emotions can alert us to

⁴ It is difficult to know how this could be tested objectively; however, it seems reasonable to think that our distant ancestors were more likely to survive if they reacted quickly but approximately, rather than slowly but rationally!

something we need to pay attention to. We can then use more sophisticated techniques to understand the situation in appropriate detail.

“Emotional Analysis” is an approach we can use to understand our negative emotions. It helps us quickly and rationally to get to the root of why we are experiencing emotions, and understand the imperfect information that they may be communicating to us.

We can then either rescript the negative emotions that are based on incorrect assumptions or, if assumptions turn out to be correct, can learn from the early warning signals that we have received.

Note:

Emotional Analysis draws on the fascinating “Cognitive – Motivational - Relational Theory” advanced by Prof. Richard S. Lazarus and others. This recognizes the deep, impulsive nature of emotions and proposes a useful model as to how they work.

Emotional Analysis assumes that we experience different negative emotions for different, very rational reasons. It assumes that each emotion has its own underlying set of assumptions, and that we experience the emotion because we are making these assumptions about the situation we are experiencing.

For example, if we were using this tool to understand why we were becoming angry with someone about a situation, we would expect that we were making the following assumptions:

- That someone or something is preventing us from achieving a goal that is important to us;
- That we feel that this is damaging our self-esteem, or that it is hurting people, objects or ideas that we think are important; and
- That the person we are getting angry with is responsible for this situation.

In fact, according to the theory, there are six main automatic assumptions that can lie beneath negative emotions. These are shown in figure [11.2.2.1](#). The emotions we experience in difficult situations depend on which of these assumptions or factors apply. The assumptions behind some common emotions are shown in figure [11.2.2.2](#).

Using the Tool:

Emotional Analysis is useful as a way of understanding our own strong emotions, as well as those of others. It helps us to challenge emotion, allowing us to see where it is alerting us to important information, and where it is incorrectly founded or an over-reaction to the circumstances.

To use the tool, follow these steps:

- **Relax!** If you are able to, use the relaxation techniques we used in the last chapter to calm down so that you can think clearly about why you are upset.
- **Identify the assumptions you are making:** Start by using the list of assumptions in 11.2.2.1. Using this as a checklist, work through it and identify the assumptions that you are making. Once you have done this, identify any other assumptions not on the list that are influencing the emotion.

- **Challenge the assumptions:** Approaching each of the assumptions one-by-one, challenge it rationally to see whether the assumption is correct or not. Figure [11.2.2.2](#) shows examples of some of the emotions that you might experience, the assumptions that lie behind them, and the challenges that you might make to these assumptions.

With each challenge, identify whether the assumptions you have made are correct or incorrect. If it helps with this, imagine as you make each challenge that you are your own best friend – do not be harsh with yourself. Be fair.

Figure 11.2.2.1 – The Automatic Assumptions That Lie Behind Emotion:

This list below shows some of the key automatic assumptions that we make when we experience emotion. Different assumptions are associated with the experience of different emotions. Only some of these will apply at any one time (see figure 11.2.2.2 for examples of this):

- *That the situation is relevant to our goals:* Goals can be formal goals or objectives that we set ourselves, or can be informal, desires not stated like wanting to drink when thirsty or eat when hungry. If the situation is not relevant to our goals or to the goals of people who are important to us, then we feel no emotion. The intensity of the emotion we feel reflects the importance of the goal.
- *That the situation threatens our goals:* We usually experience positive emotions in situations that support our achievement of goals and negative emotion when these are being frustrated.
- *That we expect the situation to turn out badly.*
- *That we feel that something important to us is being threatened:* We will experience different emotions depending on which of the following personal factors we think are threatened (see 11.2.2.2):
 - Our self-esteem, or the value that other people see in us
 - Our ideal of how we want to see ourselves
 - Our moral values
 - Thoughts, ideas, philosophies and understandings of reality that we think are important
 - People that we love or objects that we value
 - Goals and ambitions that are important to us
- *That we are responsible, or that someone else is to blame*
- *That we have some power to affect the situation, or that we are powerless*

- **Take action appropriately:** Where your assumptions are incorrect, the negative emotions should change or disappear as soon as you acknowledge this.

Where assumptions either have some element of truth to them or are fully correct, then you need to recognize this. Think through what you need to do to manage these situations, where this is appropriate. This may draw on the skills we discussed in modules 5 to 9, or may need some other action.

Where you are sure of the foundation of the negative emotion, then you have the option to use it for good effect. For example, in the right circumstances, feeling angry can provide tremendous power and motivation. It also has a shock effect that can help you achieve what you need to achieve, as long as you accept the fact that this may damage relationships.

Summary:

While acting immediately on strong emotion can often leave us looking foolish, emotion should not be discounted altogether. Emotions are highly fallible and they can act as an early warning system alerting us to specific threats from situations we are involved in.

Emotional Analysis helps us to understand the information content of our emotions, helping us to see whether our assumptions are incorrect, or whether they are alerting us to important information that we need to recognize and act on.

To use Emotional Analysis, follow these steps:

- Relax so that you can challenge the assumptions you are making objectively
- Identify these assumptions
- Challenge them rationally and identify valid and invalid assumptions
- Take action appropriately

Emotional Analysis helps us to manage emotions, the strong feelings that move us to action. The next tool (Cognitive Restructuring) is similar to this, but helps us to manage the more passive, longer-term feelings that we call moods.

Figure 11.2.2.2 - The Assumptions Underlying Some Negative Emotions

Emotion	Description ⁵	Underlying Assumptions	Points to Check
Anger	"A demeaning offense against me and mine"	Frustration of important goals (stated or not stated) Damage to our self-esteem, or to people, objects or ideas we value Blamed on another person or group of people	What goals are being challenged? Are they appropriately important? Are they really being frustrated, or is there a way around this? How severe is the damage? Is blame fairly attributed and shared?
Anxiety	"Facing uncertain, existential threat"	Threat to our survival or what we hold to be important Uncertainty about whether the threatened situation will occur or its severity No internal or external blame	Is the threat real? How serious is it? How likely is it to occur? Is there appropriate action we can take to mitigate the risk? What are the realistic consequences of the situation? Are there steps you can take to recover the situation?
Fright	"Facing an immediate, concrete and overwhelming danger"	Threat to our survival or what we hold to be important No internal or external blame	Is the threat real? How serious is it? What are the realistic consequences of the situation? Are there steps you can take to recover the situation?
Guilt	"Having transgressed a moral imperative"	Failure to live up to an important moral standard Blamed on ourselves	Did the event really occur as you describe it? Is this a moral standard that you should respect, or is it one that is inconsistent with your viewpoint or reality? Is there an objective reason that it is as

⁵ Richard S Lazarus' description of the emotion.

Emotion	Description ⁵	Underlying Assumptions	Points to Check
			<p>important as you think it is?</p> <p>How completely did you fail to live up to it? Are you setting yourself unreasonable targets?</p> <p>Are you completely to blame for the situation, or is someone else fully or partly responsible?</p> <p>Are there steps you can take to recover the situation?</p>
Shame	"Failing to live up to an ego ideal"	Failure to live up to an ideal of oneself Blamed on ourselves	<p>Did the event really occur as you describe it?</p> <p>Is this an ideal that is reasonable and achievable?</p> <p>Is there an objective reason that it is as important as you think it is?</p> <p>How completely did you fail to live up to the ideal? Are you setting yourself unreasonable targets?</p> <p>Are you completely to blame for the situation, or is someone else partly or fully responsible?</p> <p>Are there steps you can take to recover the situation?</p>
Sadness	"Having experienced an irrevocable loss"	Damage to ourselves, our self-esteem, or to people, objects or ideas we value No intense internal or external blame No ability to recover the situation	<p>Is the damage real?</p> <p>How serious is it?</p> <p>Is there really no ability to recover the situation, or is there something that can be done about it?</p>

11.2.3. Tool: Cognitive Restructuring – Managing Negative Moods

Introduction:

Cognitive Restructuring is a powerful tool for understanding why we experience negative moods, for challenging them, and for positively rescripting the thinking that lies behind them. Particularly when used with positive thinking, Cognitive Restructuring can help us to turn these moods around so that we can approach situations in a positive frame of mind.

This is obviously important because not only are negative moods unpleasant for us, they also reduce the quality of our performance and undermine our working and social relationships with other people.

The key concept behind this tool, as with the other tools in this module, is that our moods are driven by what we tell ourselves. This is based on our interpretation of our environment. Cognitive Restructuring is a robust and reliable way of evaluating how rational and valid these interpretations are, and, if appropriate, testing them. Where we find that these assumptions and interpretations are incorrect, then this naturally changes the way we think about situations and changes our moods.

Cognitive Restructuring is similar to the “Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking” tool we looked at in [11.2.1](#). This was a quick technique that is useful for dealing with spontaneous or simple negative thinking. By contrast, Cognitive Restructuring is a particularly useful tool where issues are difficult and important, and warrant a careful, considered examination.

Note:

The ‘Cognitive Restructuring’ tool is based on the approach to Cognitive Therapy described elegantly and simply by Drs. Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky in their book [“Mind Over Mood”](#). Mind Over Mood is well worth reading for a deeper understanding of this material.

Cognitive Therapy is now one of the main techniques used to manage anxiety and depression, among others. As with other tools in this module, it focuses on helping its users understand the negative thought processes that can cause problems, and on restructuring these so that they are fair and balanced.

Cognitive Restructuring is a stripped down version of this approach focused on managing “normal” negative thinking. A more intensive approach (such as that in Mind Over Mood) is needed to manage severe mood problems.

Using the Tool:

We use the Cognitive Restructuring tool when we identify that we are in a negative mood. These might be times when we are, for example, sad, angry, anxious, upset or one of many other negative moods.

We may also use it after analyzing our stress diaries (see [3.2.2](#)) whenever we see that we are frequently experiencing bad moods of a particular type or in particular circumstances.

To use the tool, either:

- Use the worksheet shown in Figure [11.2.3](#) to keep a paper-based worksheets (best if you do not have routine access to a computer as you can print off as many pages as you need for your own use), or
- Visit <http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/CognitiveRestructuringWorksheet.xls> to [download](#) and use the template.

To use the worksheet, go through the following steps:

1. Write down the situation that triggered the negative thoughts:

Make a brief note of the situation in the first column of the worksheet.

2. Identify the moods that you felt in the situation:

In the second column, enter the moods that you feel in the situation. Moods here are the deep *feelings* that we have about the situation. They are not *thoughts* about it. “Mind over Mood” is a suggestion for an easy trick to help tell moods from thoughts. It is usually possible to express moods in one word, while thoughts are more complex. Keep in mind, you may well feel several different moods at the same time. These reflect different aspects of the situation.

For example, “he is trashing my suggestion in front of my co-workers,” would be a thought, while the associated moods might be “humiliated”, “frustrated”, “angry” and “insecure”.

3. Write down the Automatic Thoughts that you experienced when you felt the mood:

Next, in the third column, write down the thoughts that came into your mind when you felt the mood. Identify the most distressing of these.

- In the example above, thoughts might be:
- Maybe my analysis skills aren’t good enough...
- Have I failed to consider these things?
- He hasn’t liked me since...
- How rude and arrogant of him!
- Everyone will think badly of me
- But my argument is good and sound...
- This is undermining my future with this company

In this case, the person in this example might consider that the most distressing thoughts (the “Hot Thoughts”) are “maybe my analysis skills aren’t good enough,” and “everyone will think badly of me”.

4. Identify the evidence that supports these Hot Thoughts:

In the fourth column of the worksheet, write down the objective evidence that you can find that supports the Hot Thoughts.

Developing this example, the evidence written down might have been:

- The meeting moved on and decisions were taken with no account being taken of my suggestion
- He did identify a flaw in one of the arguments in my paper on the subject

5. Identify the evidence that does not support the Hot Thoughts:

In the next column, write down the objective evidence that contradicts the Hot Thoughts.

Evidence contradicting the Hot Thought in the example might be:

- The flaw was minor and did not alter the conclusions
- The analysis was objectively sound, and the suggestion was realistic and well founded
- When I trained in the analysis method, I usually came close to the top of my class
- My clients respect my analysis and my opinion

6. Now, identify fair, balanced thoughts about the situation:

By this stage, you will have looked at both sides of the situation as far as you can. This should have clarified the situation. You may now have all the information you need to take a fair, balanced view of the situation.

Alternatively, you may find that there are still substantial points of uncertainty. If this is the case, then you may need to clarify this uncertainty, perhaps by discussing the situation with other people who have a view or by testing the question in some other way. Obviously, the amount of effort you put in does depend on the importance of the situation.

Do what is needed to come to a balanced view and write the balanced thoughts down in the sixth column of the worksheet.

The balanced thoughts in this example might now be:

- I am good at this sort of analysis. Other people respect my abilities.
- My analysis was reasonable, but not perfect
- There was an error, however it did not affect the validity of the conclusions.
- The way he handled the situation was not correct
- People were surprised and a little shocked by the way he handled my suggestion (this comment would have followed an informal poll of other people at the meeting).

7. Finally, observe your mood now and think about what you are going to do:

You should now have a clearer view of the situation.

Firstly, look at your mood now. You will probably find that it has changed and (hopefully!) improved. Write this in the final column.

The next step is to think about what you could do about the situation. You may conclude that no action is appropriate. By looking at the situation in a balanced way, it may cease to be important.

Alternatively, you may choose to do something about the situation. If you do, you may find that the techniques in modules 5 to 10 are useful. The Assertiveness tool (see [7.2.1](#)) is most likely to be particularly useful in dealing with problems with other people!

Make a note of these actions in the final column, but also put them on your To Do List so that you act on them.

Finally, think through positive affirmations (see [11.2.1](#)) that you can use to counter any future automatic negative thoughts, and see if you can spot any opportunities coming out of the situation.

Concluding the example above, we look at these points:

- **Mood:** Compared with the moods felt at the start of the example, the mood experienced by the person completing the worksheet will have changed. Instead of feeling humiliation, frustration, anger and insecurity, this person is most likely to feel only anger.
- **Actions:** A first action will be to use some of the relaxation techniques explained in module 10 to calm the anger. Having done this, this person may take away two actions: First, to check his or her work more thoroughly and second, to arrange a meeting to discuss the situation in an assertive manner.
- **Positive Thoughts:** This person could also create, and use, the following positive thought in a similar situation: "My opinions are sound and are respected by fair-minded colleagues and clients. I will rise above rudeness."

Summary:

Cognitive Restructuring is a useful technique for understanding what lies behind the negative moods that undermine our performance and damage our relationships with other people.

To use Cognitive Restructuring, work your way through this process:

- Write down the situation that triggered the negative thoughts
- Identify the moods that you felt in the situation
- Write down the Automatic Thoughts that you experienced when you felt the mood.
- Identify the evidence that supports these Hot Thoughts.
- Identify the evidence that does not support the Hot Thoughts.
- Now, identify fair, balanced thoughts about the situation.
- Finally, observe your mood now and think about what you are going to do

The worksheets provided can help with this process.

Figure 11.2.3. Cognitive Restructuring Work Sheet

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Based on the "Thought Record" worksheet from *Mind Over Mood* by Dennis Greenberger and Christine A Padesky © 1995 The Guilford Press,
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Situation	Moods	Automatic Thoughts & Images	Evidence That Supports Hot Thought	Evidence That Doesn't Support Hot Thought	Alternative/ Balanced Thoughts	Mood Now, Actions & Positive Thoughts

11.3. Applying This to Your Life...

The tools in this section are powerful techniques for understanding and countering negative moods. They will, however, only do you any good if you use them!

To make these tools part of your life, do the following:

- Get used to watching your stream of consciousness, and identifying negative thoughts as they occur. Routinely challenge these negative thoughts, and if they recur, develop positive affirmations to use against them.
- Print off figure [11.2.2.1](#). If appropriate, when you experience intense negative emotion, use it to check your assumptions before you take precipitate and potentially unwise actions.
- Either print off blank copies of the Cognitive Restructuring worksheet (figure [11.2.3](#)), or download the electronic version to your PC.
- Practice using it now by recalling a situation where you experienced a strong negative mood. Use the Cognitive Restructuring approach to work through and understand this mood, and arrive at balanced thoughts about it. If appropriate, consider actions that you could have taken and design appropriate positive affirmations.
- Keep blank Cognitive Restructuring worksheets with you, and work through them whenever you experience a negative mood.

11.4. References

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Module 12:

Building Defenses Against Stress

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	The way we live our lives can have a huge impact on the way that we experience stress. This module shows how living a healthy lifestyle can help you reduce background stress levels. This makes you more resilient, and means that you can cope with major work stresses more effectively. This is one part of dealing with intense long-term stress. Another part is using support networks to relieve stress and adopting enjoyable pastimes to counterbalance the unpleasantness of routine stress. Again, this is discussed in this module.
Need:	Adopting a healthy lifestyle means that you can concentrate better and are more energetic in what you do. This is particularly important when you are in challenging or stressful situations. It is also important in building stamina, which is the ability to survive intensely stressful situations over the long term, without burning out. Equally important in avoiding burnout is achieving a good work-life balance. By offsetting the unpleasant, stressful events in your life against plenty of good, enjoyable events, you make life more tolerable and reduce the risk of burnout.
Timing:	This module will take two hours to read. The exercises will take another two hours.
Range:	<p>We will discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using and building support networks• Rest, relaxation and sleep• Managing chemical stress• Taking exercise• Environmental Stress• Building relaxation into your lifestyle• Other ways of relaxing
Objective:	The objective of the module is to help you understand how you can continue to perform effectively when under intense long-term stress.

12. Building Defenses Against Stress

12.1. Why this module is important

So far in this course, the tools we have looked at have been specific techniques that you can use to counter particular sources of stress.

In this module, we take a broader look at how you can reduce the long-term accumulation of stress that can come with a high-pressure career. We look at how living a healthy lifestyle and Building Defenses Against Stress can help you to keep on performing effectively when under long-term stress.

We also look at how you can cope with unpleasant sources of stress that you cannot avoid.

12.2. Introducing the Tools

This module introduces three different types of stress buffers.

We start by discussing the importance of getting help from, and taking care of your support network - the friends, co-workers, family and other people who are able to help you handle stressful situations. While this is not so much a tool as something you need to understand, we cover it here because it is so important.

Next, we look at how your lifestyle affects the way you experience stress. We start by looking at the importance of getting enough rest and sleep. We then show how stress levels are affected by exercise and by the chemicals you consume. We then recap on managing the stress from your environment.

Finally, we look at how you can build relaxation and stress management into your lifestyle. We see how building enjoyable and relaxing events into your life can help to counterbalance the routine unpleasantness of stress that you cannot avoid.

The first buffer against stress we look at is your support network:

12.2.1. Managing Support Networks

When under intense stress, it is very natural to withdraw from the world and concentrate exclusively on solving the problem that is causing the stress. Sometimes this is a useful and appropriate reaction.

Often, it is not. This is particularly the case as the projects you take on get bigger and bigger. One person working on his or her own simply cannot achieve tasks beyond a certain size. Similarly, many stressful situations cannot be resolved without the help of other people.

We all have networks of people who can help us solve problems. This network extends professionally and socially, as well as including our family and public services. Within your organization, your professional

networks include relations with your boss, mentors within the organization, colleagues, your team, previous colleagues and organizational support services. Outside your organization, they can include professional contacts, clients, suppliers (who may provide services that specifically address the problem), professional organizations, trades unions, trades associations and many others.

Your social networks obviously include your friends, clubs and social organizations. Your close and extended family is obviously important.

Finally, there is a raft of state and independent organizations whose purpose may be to help you solve the problems you are facing.

These people can give help and support in a wide variety of ways, including:

- *Physical assistance:* This can be financial or direct help, or provision of useful resources.
- *Political assistance:* Other people can use their influence and personal networks on your behalf to help with the situation, for example, by persuading other people to move deadlines, change what they are doing or help directly.
- *Information:* People may have information that helps in the situation or solves the problem, or may have personal experience that can help you. They may have solved the problem before, or may have seen the problem solved elsewhere.
- *Problem solving:* Similarly, they may be able to help you to think through how to solve the problem. Just explaining a problem clearly to someone else can bring a problem into focus so that the solution is obvious. Alternatively, other people may have problem solving skills you do not have, or may just be fresh and unstressed enough to see good alternatives.
- *Reassurance:* People can give emotional support and reassurance when you may be starting to doubt yourself, can help you put problems into context or can help you find solace elsewhere. Others can cheer you up when you are feeling down.

When you are under pressure, make sure that you ask for help when you need it.

Having said this, it is worth being cautious in asking for help from people. People can help, but they can also hinder. They can give the wrong advice or can waste your time leading you down blind alleys. Pragmatically, if someone is going to help you, they need to have the resources you need. These might be experience, connections, or good judgment, as well as the obvious resources of time, money or willingness to help.

People can also tire of giving support if it is asked for too often. This is particularly the case when they have to deal with someone who is negative. It is much more satisfying to help someone who is actively trying to solve problems than it is to try to help someone who seems to have already given up. People can also tire if support is a one-way process. You also need to provide a reasonable level of help and support to your friends, family and colleagues, particularly to the ones who help you the most.

However stressed you are, you need to keep talking to people and building your relationships with them. There are very good, practical reasons for having fun with people you like!

Next, we look at the importance of rest, relaxation and sleep.

12.2.2. Rest, Relaxation and Sleep

In section 2.3.2, we briefly looked at long-term stress. A key facet of this is the way that people can sustain intense levels of stress for a while, but can then burn out.

We will look at burnout in more detail in [module 13](#). It is something that typically affects people who are highly committed to the work they do, probably much like you. When these people are faced by a stressful situation, more-often-than-not they respond with complete commitment, by working intensely hard at resolving it. To do this, they will work all hours, cancel vacations and cut back on sleep, all to make more time to tackle the problem.

If this is short-lived, then negative effects will be minimal and success will often be spectacular. If this hard work is sustained for a long time without relief, these people increasingly risk burnout.

We rest and sleep because we need to.

Rest and Relaxation

Rest is what we do to let stress subside. Rest at the end of a day, and at the end of a week, helps us to calm down.

Doing fun things that we enjoy in our leisure time compensates us for the stress we experience at work, bringing some balance back into life. This is particularly important if we routinely experience unpleasant levels of stress.

A good way of getting rest and reducing long-term stress is to take up an enjoyable, non-rushed sport or hobby. If you spend all your working day competing, then can be very pleasant to be completely non-competitive for some of your free time. Slow physical activities such as sailing or walking are good for this, as are others where there is little or no pressure for performance. Reading novels, watching television or socializing can also be very restful.

Vacations are particularly important, and you really do need to take these. Where possible, take two weeks off rather than just one week. A common observation that people make is that they really do not start to relax properly until the end of their first week of vacation.

Make sure that you take your vacations and that you use them to relax. Also, make sure that you get enough good quality rest during the week to keep on enjoying life to its fullest.

Sleep

The average person needs approximately eight hours sleep a night (although this can vary between three hours and eleven hours, depending on the person and his or her age).

If we are regularly short of sleep, then our concentration and our effectiveness suffer and our energy levels decline. We have all seen and experienced this.

This diminishes our effectiveness in our job, and can therefore increase stress. As our concentration wanders, we start to make mistakes. As our energy declines, we become less proactive in what we do,

reducing our control over events. This means that a situation that is already difficult and stressful can become worse, needing even more sacrifice to bring it back under control.

Make sure that you get enough sleep. If you have become used to being tired all the time, you will be amazed by how sharp and energetic you will feel once you start sleeping normally.

Tip:

When we are stressed and anxious, we can often find it difficult to get to sleep as thoughts keep on whizzing through our heads, stopping us from relaxing enough to fall asleep.

If you find this is the case:

- Make sure that you stop doing mentally demanding work several hours before coming to bed – give your brain time to calm down before you try to sleep
- Try reading a calming, undemanding book for a few minutes, again to relax your body, tire your eyes and help you forget about the things that are worrying you
- Write persistent thoughts and worries down in a notebook and then put them out of your mind. Review the notebook in the morning and take action if appropriate.
- Keep the same bedtime. Let your body and mind get used to a predictable routine.
- Cut back on caffeine and alcohol. Some people find that they sleep badly if they drink coffee or cola after 4pm. Others find that if they drink alcohol to excess, they wake up in the middle of the night and cannot get back to sleep.

If you are having trouble getting to sleep, books like the [Pocket Idiot's Guide to Getting a Good Night's Sleep](#) have plenty of ideas that can help.

12.2.3. Managing Chemical Stress

The chemicals we consume can cause a surprising amount of stress. By eating or drinking certain things, we put our bodies under chemical stress.

Similarly, if we are eating an unbalanced diet, we may be stressing our bodies by depriving them of essential nutrients. Eating too much for a long period causes obesity. This puts your heart and lungs under stress, overloads your organs and reduces your stamina.

You should be aware of the effects of the following:

- **Caffeine:**
Caffeine is a stimulant. One of the reasons we drink it is to raise our levels of arousal, particularly at the start of the day. If you drink many cups of coffee a day, then you may become twitchy, hyperactive and irritable. You may find that you can eliminate a great deal of stress by switching to a good decaffeinated coffee (or an alternative).
- **Alcohol:**
In small amounts, alcohol may help you relax. In larger amounts, it may increase stress as it disrupts sleep, reduces your effectiveness, and possibly harms working relationships. Large amounts of

alcohol over a long period of time will damage your body. Be aware of this, and keep your alcohol consumption under control.

- **Nicotine:**

While in the very short term, nicotine can cause its users to relax, its toxic effects raise your heart rate and stress your body. If you smoke, try taking your pulse before and after a cigarette, and notice the difference. You really will see your pulse rate increase. After the initial period of giving up smoking, most ex-smokers report feeling much more relaxed than they did beforehand.

- **Sugar:**

Sugar-rich foods can raise energy in the short term. The problem with this is that your body copes with high levels of sugar by secreting insulin, which reduces the amount of sugar in your blood stream. Insulin can persist and continue acting after it has controlled blood sugar levels. This can cause an energy dip.

If you eat a good, well-balanced diet, you should be able to minimize this sort of chemical stress. Your body will be receiving all the nutrients it requires to function effectively.

Note that as with exercise, there is a lot of bad advice on diet available. You will normally be able to get reliable information on diet from your doctor or government health education department.

12.2.4. Taking Exercise

Taking frequent effective exercise is one of the best physical stress-reduction techniques available. Exercise not only improves your health and reduces stress caused by unfitness, it also relaxes tense muscles and helps you to sleep.

Exercise has a number of other positive benefits you may not be aware of:

- It improves blood flow to your brain, bringing additional sugars and oxygen that may be needed when you are thinking intensely.
- When you think hard, the neurons of your brain function more intensely. As they do this, they build up toxic waste products that can cause foggy thinking (you may have experienced the feeling that your brain has "turned to cotton wool"). By exercising, you speed the flow of blood through your brain, moving these waste products faster. You also improve this blood flow so that even when you are not exercising, waste is eliminated more efficiently.
- It can cause release of chemicals called endorphins into your blood stream. These give you a feeling of happiness and positively affect your overall well-being.
- There is also good evidence that physically fit people have less extreme physiological responses when under pressure than those who are not. This means that fit people are more able to handle the long-term effects of stress without suffering ill health or burnout.

There are many wrong approaches to exercise. Some traditionally recommended forms of exercise actually damage your body over the medium- or long-term. It is worth finding reputable and up-to-date sources of advice on exercise, possibly from your doctor, and then having a customized exercise plan drawn up for you.

NB: If you are not used to taking exercise regularly, then it may be appropriate to take medical advice before starting an exercise program.

An important thing to remember is that exercise should be fun. It is difficult to keep going with an exercise program that you do not enjoy.

12.2.5. Environmental Stress - A Quick Recap

Our environment is an important part of our lifestyle. We looked at this in detail in Module 9. This section briefly recaps on the key points in that module.

Things that we could do to improve our environment included making sure that:

- We have enough privacy when we need it, and enough social interaction when we want it;
- Our furniture is designed well, is comfortable and properly adjusted;
- Our space is well lit, and that light is not too dim, too bright or too direct;
- Air quality is good and that it is free of hidden pollutants; and that
- Our living and working environments are pleasant and well maintained.

We also looked at commutes between home and work, and how unpleasant these can be.

Part of living a healthy lifestyle is making sure that our environment is good. Another part is making sure that our life works as practically as possible. If your living or working environment is bad, or you have a bad commute, then you can often improve your lifestyle by changing where you work or where you live.

12.2.6. Tool: Building Relaxation Techniques Into Your Lifestyle

In Module 10, we looked at a range of tools that are useful for managing performance stress. These were Imagery ([10.2.5](#)), Meditation ([10.2.6](#)), Self-hypnosis ([10.2.7](#)) and use of relaxation tapes ([10.2.8](#)).

Just as these are useful for managing performance stress, they are also useful for managing long term stress. You may find it useful to spend a few minutes using these techniques during or at the end of your day. The best way of remembering to do this is to make it a regular part of your daily routine.

12.2.7. Tool: Finding Other Ways of Relaxing

There are many other ways of relaxing. What works for one person often does not work for another, and vice versa. Stores like StressLess.com have a wide range of products that can help relieve stress. Health spas typically offer many treatments targeted at relaxation. There is a huge variety of entertainment that you can enjoy.

Similarly, there are many sports and hobbies that you can participate in. Time spent with friends and family can be very satisfying.

When you are stressed, remember to treat yourself. Do the things you enjoy and see the people you like. Where your life is full of unpleasant and stressful events, you can restore some balance to it by doing these things. Spend as much time as you need to find the things that help you relax, and ensure that you make enough time available to do these things. This is not self-indulgent. It is an important part of keeping yourself functioning effectively and avoiding the problems of burnout, anxiety and depression that come with intense, sustained stress.

12.3. Applying This to Your Life...

- Are you getting enough sleep? If you are not, make sure that you do - you will feel much more alive, you will improve your concentration and you will be more effective at work.
- Think about when you last went on vacation. If this was a long time ago, you may be feeling run down or over-stretched. Book a relaxing vacation somewhere nice. Ensure that you have prepared properly for it so that you do not have to take your mobile phone or laptop. Relax.
- Take vacations regularly. Keep fresh and alert by using all of your vacation time each year.
- Make sure that you make time for rest during the week. Find something that you enjoy doing that helps you to relax.
- Think about the chemicals you consume. Do you need to improve your diet, cut down on caffeine or alcohol, or give up smoking? If so, do it.
- If you are not exercising regularly, then get a medical check up and start. Join a gym, sports club or something similar. Find a sport or fitness regime that you enjoy, and get into the habit of exercising regularly.
- Make sure that your living and working environments are pleasant, and that your life is well organized. If your working environment or commute is unpleasant, consider moving job or home.
- List the stresses that you are currently experiencing. If there are stresses that seem particularly overwhelming, ask yourself if there are people within your network who could help. If appropriate, ask for their help.
- Make sure that you make time to socialize with your friends and co-workers. Make appropriate time to help people within your network if they need your help.
- Set aside some time to try meditation, self-hypnosis and imagery as ways to relax. Choose the technique or the mixture of techniques that you find most useful.
- If you are currently experiencing a lot of stress, make time to use your chosen technique on a daily basis.
- Buy or make a relaxation tape. Try it, and judge its effectiveness for yourself.
- Make time in your schedule for things you enjoy - these should go some way to balancing the unpleasantness of any stress you are experiencing.

12.4. References

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- Social Support: Resources and Context, Steven E Hobfoll and Alan Vaux, Handbook of Stress (Eds: Leo Goldberger and Shlomo Breznitz), 1993, The Free Press, Toronto, Canada
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- Articles from www.mindtools.com

Module 13:

How to Avoid Burnout

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	Burnout is a very real threat to people in challenging and stressful jobs, as it can often cause the end of otherwise promising careers. Because of this, it is something that is deeply feared by many successful people.
Need:	The information in this module helps you avoid burnout. It can also help you to recover from burnout where it has already occurred.
Timing:	It will take one hour to read this module. The exercises will take another hour to complete.
Range:	<p>The module will cover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What burnout is• Symptoms of burnout• Understanding your own risk factors• Checking yourself for burnout• Avoiding burnout• Recovering from burnout
Objective:	By the end of the module, you should understand what causes burnout and how you can avoid it.

13. How to Avoid Burnout

13.1. Why this module is important

Burnout occurs when people who have previously been highly committed to a job lose all interest and motivation. This can often spell the end of a successful career.

It mainly strikes highly-committed, passionate, hard working and successful people – burnout therefore holds a special fear for those who care passionately about their careers and about the work they do.

This module explains what burnout is. It then helps you to recognize the warning signs in yourself, shows you how to avoid it, and helps you to know what to do if you have already burned out.

13.2. Understanding Burnout

Two important definitions of burnout are:

- *“A state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in emotionally demanding situations.”* - Ayala Pines & Elliott Aronson
- *“A state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward.”* – Herbert J Freudenberger

Between them, these definitions embrace the essence of burnout, with the first stressing the part that exhaustion plays in it, and the second stressing the sense of disillusionment that is at its core.

Anyone can become exhausted. What is so poignant about burnout is that it only strikes people who are highly committed to their work. You can only burn out if you have been alight in the first place. While exhaustion can be overcome with rest, a core part of burnout is a deep sense of disillusionment, and is not experienced by people who can take a more cynical view of their work.

Exhaustion – an important factor

In section [2.3.2](#), we looked at the way that Hans Selye, one of the founding fathers of stress research, looked at burnout. Over many hundreds of experiments, Selye observed the way that organisms handled long-term stress. What he saw was that after an initial period of adaptation, they survived very well for quite a long period of time until, then all of a sudden, their resistance collapsed without any obvious direct cause.

Selye illustrated this with the example of with bomber pilots in the Second World War, who would fly effectively for many missions, but who would then show “neurotic manifestations” as pilot fatigue set in.

We have probably all seen similar patterns in the past, where people become exhausted and their performance suffers. We may all have worked so hard at something, for so long, that the easy things

become difficult and life loses its flavor. These are times when rest (often in the form of a good holiday) helps us to approach the situation with a new vigor.

Exhaustion and long-term stress contribute to burnout, but they are not the most destructive parts of it.

Disillusionment – the underlying cause

The real damage of burnout comes from the sense of deep disillusionment that lies at its heart.

Many of us get our sense of identity and meaning from our work. We may have started our careers with high ideals or high ambitions and may have followed these with passion.

This is easy to see in doctors and teachers, who may have a strong desire to help other people to be the best that they can be. Good lawyers may have a passion for justice. Others may be ambitious for promotion or may want to “make a difference” to people or organizations in some other way. In all of these cases, these ideals can drive a highly motivated, passionate approach to work.

It is incredible what we can achieve when we truly believe in what we are doing: We are hard working, effective, full of initiative, energetic and selfless. We can find ourselves doing much more than we are contracted to do, working much longer hours. Even more, we enjoy doing this. We find it easy to enter the hugely satisfying state of flow that we discussed in 2.5.1. Particularly when we are appreciated for what we do, and when we are able to see good results from our work, this satisfaction can help us to overcome enormous difficulties.

It is not surprising that people showing this level of resilience and commitment to their work are often spectacularly successful.

The problem comes when things become too much. Perhaps exhaustion sets in because people have been working too hard for too long. Perhaps performance begins to slip because of this. Perhaps the problem being solved is too great, and the resources available are too meager. Perhaps supportive mentors move on and are replaced by people who do not appreciate the heroic job that is being done, or do not subscribe to the ideals that drive performance. Perhaps co-workers or team members make just too many emotional demands, or people being served prove to be ungrateful and difficult.

Being proactive, energetic, committed people, it is likely that we respond to obstacles like these by increasing our commitment and hard work. However, in these circumstances it is possible that these efforts may have little or no impact on the situation.

This can be where burnout begins to set in. As we get less satisfaction from our jobs, the downsides of these jobs become more troublesome. As we get more tired, we have less energy to give. If our organizations fail to support us, we can get increasingly disenchanted with them. We become increasingly disillusioned.

In extreme cases, we can lose faith completely in what we are doing, and what our organizations are doing, becoming cynical and embittered, and feeling that our ideals and meanings in life count for nothing.

This is full-scale burnout.

Symptoms of Burnout

Given what burnout is, the symptoms of burnout are much as you would expect them to be. Physical symptoms can include physical fatigue, frequent illness and sleep problems.

Emotional symptoms include disillusionment with the job; the loss of a sense of meaning and cynicism towards our organizations or clients; feelings of helplessness; frustration of efforts and a lack of power to change events; strong feelings of anger against the people we hold responsible for the situation; and feelings of depression and isolation.

Behavioral symptoms can include increasing detachment from co-workers, increased absenteeism, an increased harshness in dealing with our teams, marked reduction in our commitment to our work, and increased alcohol consumption. These symptoms reflect exhaustion and a loss of satisfaction with work.

13.3. Introducing the Tools

The first two tools that we look at help you to understand where you stand with respect to burnout.

The first tool, “Identifying Burnout Pressure Points”, helps you to think about what you want out of your job and rationally assess where your particular areas of risk lie. The second tool then helps you to assess whether you are currently at risk of burnout.

Where you have identified that this is a danger, the third tool (“How to Avoid Burnout”) gives pointers on how you can avoid it. The final tool, “Coping With Burnout”, helps you to think through your options if you have already burned out.

13.3.1. Tool: Identifying Burnout Pressure Points

Introduction:

As we have already discussed, part of the cause of burnout comes from your situation. The other part comes from within yourself: From your ideals, your ambitions and your goals.

This simple tool gives you the opportunity to identify what you want to get out of your job, and then to compare this with the reality of your situation. This allows you to identify possible areas of mismatch, as these mismatches are possible pressure points that may develop into burnout. Knowing these pressure points helps you to manage the situation to avoid burnout.

Using the Tool:

To start using this tool, list the things that give real meaning to what you do.

Write down what attracted you to your current job or profession in the first place. List the things about it that you find fulfilling now. Write down the value of the profession to humanity and what excites you about it. Think about what you want to achieve within it, and what you think is important to doing the job well.

This will give you a long list of things that are good about what you do. From this list, identify the five⁶ things that give the greatest meaning to what you do. These should be the things about the job that most inspire you. Write these down in order with the most important item at the top of the list. This list shows you the important things that you should protect as far as possible.

The second step is to write down the things that frustrate you most about your work. This may involve things like inadequacy of resource, lack of recognition or bureaucracy. As well as this, list the factors that are causing you difficulty and which are likely to cause stress in the future.

Finally, work through the list of things that give you meaning item-by-item. For each item, look at the list of frustrations and see if any of these threaten the item. While many of the frustrations on your list may be significant, these ones are particularly important as potential burnout pressure points.

Think these through carefully, and plan in advance how you will handle build-ups of stress in these areas. Section [13.3.3](#) can help you to do this.

Summary:

You are most vulnerable to burnout when the stresses you experience impact negatively on the things that you find fulfilling in your job. Not only do you experience the unpleasantness of stress, you lose the job satisfaction that counter-balances this.

This simple tool helps you to identify the things that give meaning to the work you do. It then helps you to understand where the stresses that you experience impact on these. These are the stresses that are most likely to cause you burnout.

As well as this, by understanding what gives meaning to your work, you know how to steer the development of your job to give yourself the greatest job satisfaction.

13.3.2. Tool: Checking Yourself for Burnout

Introduction:

This next tool is a useful self-check for burnout. By using it on a regular basis, you can keep a check on yourself to see whether you are at risk of burnout, and therefore whether you need to take action to avoid it.

Using the Tool:

The tool is a simple self-test that you can run through to check whether you are at risk of burnout.

There are two easy ways of using the test. Either:

- Work through Figure [13.3.2](#) (on the next page) on paper and calculate values manually, or
- Download the [template](#) from <http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/BurnoutSelfTest.xls>, and fill in values appropriately on the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This will automatically calculate scores for you and interpret these scores, showing the score and interpretation in row 30.

⁶ We cut down to five as a way of separating the most important points from the others; however, if you want four or six, then this is fine.

If you choose to use the manual method, then calculate the total of the scores as described in the instructions (*note that this uses a slightly different scoring method from the spreadsheet*). Apply the score to the table below to get the interpretation:

Score	Interpretation
15 – 18	No sign of burnout here
19 – 32	Little sign of burnout here, unless some factors are particularly severe
33 – 49	Be careful - you may be at risk of burnout, particularly if several scores are high
50 – 59	You are at severe risk of burnout - do something about this urgently
60 - 75	You are at very severe risk of burnout - do something about this urgently

See [13.3.3](#) for information on how to avoid burnout if you are at risk of it. See [13.3.4](#) to see how to manage it if it has already occurred.

Use this test regularly (for example, each calendar quarter) so that you can spot burnout before it develops, and take early action to counter it.

Figure 13.3.2 – Checking Yourself for Burnout

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Instructions: For each question, put a tick in the column that most applies. Put one tick only in each row. Score 1 for every tick in the “Not At All” column, 2 for every tick in the “Rarely” column, and so on up to 5 for every tick in the “Very Often” column. Add up your total and check your result using the table in figure 13.3.2.1.

	Question	Not At All	Rarely	Some	Often	Very Often
1	Do you feel run down and drained of physical or emotional energy?					
2	Do you find that you are prone to negative thinking about your job?					
3	Do you find that you are harder and less sympathetic with people than perhaps they deserve?					
4	Do you find yourself getting easily irritated by small problems, or by your co-workers and team?					
5	Do you feel misunderstood or unappreciated by your co-workers?					
6	Do you feel that you have no one to talk to?					
7	Do you feel that you are achieving less than you should?					
8	Do you feel under an unpleasant level of pressure to succeed?					
9	Do you feel that you are not getting what you want out of your job?					
10	Do you feel that you are in the wrong organization or the wrong profession?					
11	Are you becoming frustrated with parts of your job?					
12	Do you feel that organizational politics or bureaucracy frustrate your ability to do a good job?					

	Question	Not At All	Rarely	Some	Often	Very Often
13	Do you feel that there is more work to do than you practically have the ability to do?					
14	Do you feel that you do not have time to do many of the things that are important to doing a good quality job?					
15	Do you find that you do not have time to plan as much as you would like to?					
Total of weighted scores (see instructions):						

Note:

This tool uses an informal approach to assessing burnout. While it is obviously valid on an intuitive basis, it has not been validated through controlled scientific tests. Interpret the results with common sense. For example, if you are on a boundary between two categories, take both categories into account. Also, make allowances for any recent events that may have a disproportionate influence on your mood at the time you take the test!

If you prefer rigorously validated tests, then the Maslach Burnout Inventory may be useful. This was developed by Christina Maslach, one of the leading researchers in the field of burnout. Copies can be purchased from the following sites:

- <http://www.cpp-db.com/detail/detailprod.asp?pc=35>
- http://www.career-lifeskills.com/products_services/atpr/orgdev/cpp-34500.htm

Summary:

This tool helps you to assess your likelihood of burnout. Use it as a burnout “health check” on a routine basis (perhaps every quarter). This helps to ensure you take early preventative action.

To use the tool, fill in the table in figure [13.3.2](#) and score appropriately, or download the [template](#) from <http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/BurnoutSelfTest.xls> and fill this in.

If the tool shows that you are at risk of burnout (or if your common sense indicates that you could be at risk of burnout), then see the next two tools (“How to Avoid Burnout” and “Coping With Burnout”) to see how to manage the situation.

13.3.3. How to Avoid Burnout

So far, we have looked at identifying your personal burnout pressure points and have shown how you can check yourself for burnout.

This section shows you the practical steps that you can take if you are at risk of burning out. We have already looked at many of these in detail in previous modules. This section acts as a reminder of these important skills.

Understanding Where Pressure Comes From

Before you can take action to counter burnout, you need to understand why you are at danger of it. The tools in 13.3.1 and 13.3.2 should help you in this.

If you need more help in identifying the most important sources of stress in your life, then use the Schedule of Recent Experience (see [3.2.1](#)) to get a view of the long term stress you are experiencing, and keep a Stress Diary (see [3.2.2](#)) to see what is causing stress in your day-to-day life.

Too much to do, too little time...

Where excessive workload is the problem, then three major groups of tools may help: First, look at the tools in modules 5 and 6. Use the Job Analysis tool to see if you can cut away low yield work. Review your management of time to use this to its full, and delegate tasks to other people where you can.

Second, consider whether you are being too accommodating. Should you let people know that you have too much work to do? Should you be politely turning down new work that people pass you? If this is the case, then the assertiveness skills explained in section 7.2.1 may help you to do this in a positive way. Remember that you will have to say “no” at some stage, otherwise your commitments will get bigger and bigger. You must learn to say “no” to commitments that you should not take on, otherwise you will be in severe danger of becoming intensely stressed and exhausted.

An obvious point is to check that you are using all of the resources available to you. Included within this, make sure that you are using your support network as fully as you can (see [12.2.1](#)) and that you are getting the help you need when you need it.

Finally, be aware that it is just not possible to do some jobs. Sometimes organizations commit themselves to projects that they do not have the capabilities, resources or skills to complete. These quickly become “projects from Hell”. Beware of these projects. They can be traps from which it is difficult to escape, even if you are at severe risk of burning out.

Political and people problems

Where politics seems to be a problem, you need to check that you are allocating enough time to managing your stakeholders (see [7.2.3](#)) and that you are correctly managing your support network (see [12.2.1](#)). It is very easy when under stress to stop communicating with people, and this can lead to political problems that compound with other issues to create a toxic cocktail of stress.

Alternatively, a major cause of burnout can happen when too many people lean too heavily upon you. While it is important to provide support to the people around you, some people will suck up as much support as you can give and demand still more. This can be both tiresome and intensely disappointing, as you never seem to be able to meet their needs.

While distancing yourself from people is a symptom of burnout, it is also a defense against it. You need to find the fine balance between being reasonably open and available to the people you live and work with,

while at the same time distancing yourself from people who drain you of emotional energy. A way of doing this may be to involve other people in providing support.

Another area where you need to find a balance is with the different (and often conflicting) demands of different groups of people and organizations. An obvious conflict is between work and family: Both really want as much of your time and energy as possible. You need to find a way of reconciling both, while still leaving time for yourself. However, this is also true of almost all of the people or organizations you deal with. All have their own goals and values, and all have their own ideas of how you should behave. In many cases, these goals will conflict with those of other organizations and in many cases they will conflict with yours.

As the only person who is an expert in your own life, you need to find what seems like a reasonable balance and then defend this assertively.

Avoiding Exhaustion

In [13.2](#), we saw how exhaustion was such a major factor in burnout. We looked at the importance of sleep and rest in detail in section [12.2.2](#).

Going on a good, long vacation is one of the best ways of avoiding burnout. Choose a vacation that does not expose you to the stresses you experience at home or which distracts you from them. Leave your laptop and mobile phone behind. Forget about work completely until your return. Rest, and enjoy life.

Similarly, make sure you get enough sleep and rest, and that you frequently use the techniques we looked at in module 12 to calm down and relax.

Protecting the Meaning of Your Job

The other major cause of burnout is disillusionment with your job, particularly when you get a great deal of the meaning in your life from the work you do.

The emphasis here is on protecting the parts of your job that give you meaning and satisfaction. We identified these in [13.3.1](#). If you have trouble in justifying this to yourself, then think about the people you serve: if you burn out, then they will not get the benefit of the energy and enthusiasm you can provide, and you owe it to them to enjoy your job!

It is possible also that the job itself is badly designed and that contradictions inherent within it are causing much of the stress you are experiencing. Use the Job Analysis tool in [6.2.1](#) to check it out. Alternatively, if frustration with lack of career development is the problem, use the Career Planning tool in [6.2.2](#).

Summary:

There is a lot that you can do if you are at risk of burnout. Perhaps the most important thing is to recognize that you are at risk, and take this seriously.

This article briefly shows you the sort of things you can do to avoid burnout. These mainly focus on managing workload, dealing with people problems, avoiding exhaustion and protecting the meaning of your work. If you can do these things, then you should be able to avoid burnout and continue to get satisfaction from the work you do.

Next we look at what to do if things have gone too far, and we look at ways of recovering from burnout.

13.3.4. Coping with Burnout

It may be too late to talk about avoiding burnout, as you may have already reached a stage where you are thoroughly disillusioned with your job and where you no longer get anything of emotional value from it. You may feel let down or betrayed by your organization, and may just be going through the motions of doing your job just for the money it brings in.

While you can deal with exhaustion by taking a good break, rest may not cure this sense of disillusionment. The passion and commitment that you previously brought to your job may now have completely burned out. Without this, it is unlikely that your career will progress much further.

People deal with this situation in a number of different ways. Some are effective, while others are not so good:

- **Doing Nothing:** One of the worst ways of reacting to burnout is to accept it and do nothing about it. By remaining in place, you risk becoming bitter and angry as opportunities pass you by. Your organization may come to regard you as “dead wood” and if things do not change, you may be doomed to a gradual or sudden decline. You need to change the situation in some way.
- **Changing Career:** If you have lost all interest in the values that led you into your profession in the first place, then career change may be the only option open to you. The first downside of this, however, is that you lose the benefit of the precious experience that you have gained within the profession. In entering a new profession, you will undoubtedly be competing equally with people much younger than you. These people may be willing to accept much lower salaries. A second downside is that you risk a strong sense of failure in the way you handled your first profession, whereas burnout will only have been a temporary setback if you succeed in turning the situation around.
- **Changing Jobs:** Job change within the same profession is less of an issue than full-scale career change, in that many of your skills and much of your experience will be transportable. It provides you with the opportunity to rededicate yourself to your original goals. It also provides a fresh start in a new environment, without the constant reminders that come with staying in the same job. Changing jobs is an appropriate response where you are disillusioned with your organization more than you are with your career. What you risk, however, is ending up in the same situation again: In changing your job, you must make sure that you understand the causes of your burnout and ensure that history does not repeat itself. Looking at this positively, you should now know the signs of impending burnout and should now know how to avoid it!
- **Using Burnout as a Trigger for Personal Growth:** This is probably one the most positive ways that people manage burnout: By using it as a wakeup call to re-evaluate the way they want to live their lives and what they want to achieve with them. We look at this in more detail below.

Using Burnout as a Trigger for Personal Growth:

Understanding Why You Burned Out

An important first step in managing burnout is to deal with the sense of failure that you may experience following it. The way to do this is to take a long, rational, dispassionate look at the circumstances leading up to it.

A good way of doing this is by talking to someone who you trust and who is experienced in similar situations in similar organizations. Avoid people within your own organization, as these people will be tainted with its assumptions and thinking habits. These may contribute to the problem. Take the time to talk the situation through in detail, looking at the circumstances before your involvement, your workload, your actions and the actions of other people, and the situations that evolved.

If you are the sort of person who has been committed enough to your work to burn out, it is more than likely that you will have already done everything in your power to resolve the situation. In reflecting, you will probably find that you made some mistakes, but you will most likely see that these are excusable under the circumstances. You will almost certainly see that a great deal of blame should be attributed externally to the situation, to people around you, or to the people who set up the situation in the first place.

Lessons that people typically learn through this process are that they are not superhuman, that hard work does not cure all ills, and that major achievements need the commitment and support of other people. In many circumstances, the intense commitment of only one person simply is not enough. They also learn to look at situations with skepticism as they go into them, and to trust their own judgment in spotting and communicating problems early on.

Learn the lessons of your mistakes so that you do not repeat them.

Moving On... Finding New Direction

Having come to terms with the situation, the next step is to re-evaluate your goals and think about what you want to achieve with your life. We touched on this briefly in 13.3.1; however in recovering from burnout, it is worth doing this in detail.

The Mind Tools articles at <http://www.mindtools.com/page6.html> guide you through the processes of thinking about what you want to achieve with your life and of setting life goals.

Inform these processes with the increased wisdom and self-understanding you will have gained by understanding why you burned out. Ensure that you give due weight to the relaxation, quality of life issues and social activities that will help to protect you against burnout in the future. Make sure that your goals are set in a balanced manner so that they do not conflict with one-another, and that they are not so challenging that they become a source of excessive stress in their own right.

Next, use [SWOT Analysis](#) to more fully understand your current position with respect to these goals. Use it to identify where you need to develop new skills and capabilities, and to understand where you need the help of other people.

Make an [Action Plan](#) for achieving these goals and start work on it. While part of this Action Plan may include changing job⁷ or career, you will be doing this as part of an active plan for the future, not as an escape from one job into another one that is equally bad.

As well as taking these active steps to put burnout behind you, make sure that you adopt the steps towards a healthy lifestyle we looked at in module 13, and use the buffers against stress we discussed in module 12. These will help you to avoid exhaustion and long-term stress in the future.

Summary

People often respond to burnout by changing job or career, or merely by doing nothing and becoming bitter and angry. By changing career, you lose the value of the experience you have built up. By changing job you risk repeating the same mistakes a second time. By staying in the same place, you lose the opportunity to make a success of your career. A better approach is to use burnout as a trigger for new growth.

First, talk to a respected outsider for long enough to get a balanced and fair understanding of what happened during the burnout process. As well as helping you to learn lessons from what happened, this will probably help you to understand that there was little more that you could have done to influence the situation.

Second, use the approach described to rethink what you want to do with your life and set a new direction. Understand where you are now and what you need to do to achieve your new goals. Create an action plan and start work on it.

13.4. Applying This to Your Life...

- Identify your burnout pressure points as described in [13.3.1](#). List the things that give meaning to your work, and then identify the threats to these things. Take action appropriately to protect the meaningfulness of your work.
- Use the burnout self-test in [13.3.2](#) to assess your current risk of burnout. If you are at risk, take appropriate action to avoid it. [13.3.3](#) gives useful suggestions on avoiding burnout, while [13.3.4](#) shows you how you can cope with it if it has already happened.
- Make a recurring entry in your diary each quarter to use the self-test as a check up. This helps you to stay alert to the possibility of burnout and take preventative action where appropriate.



STOP!

Do not go any further until you have done these things!

Burnout can severely damage your career and therefore your enjoyment of life – make sure that you take it seriously!

⁷ If it does, visit Mind Tools [Job Hunting](#) section for information on how to do this successfully.

13.5. References

- Burnout, Ayala M Pines, Handbook of Stress (Eds: Leo Goldberger and Shlomo Breznitz), 1993, The Free Press, Toronto, Canada
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- Sport Psychology – A Self Help Guide, Stephen J Bull, 1991, Crowood Press, Marlborough, UK

Module 14:

Maintaining Change

Managing Stress for Career Success

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	This module helps you to keep on top of stress so that you can maintain your quality of life throughout your career.
Need:	It is far too easy to forget the lessons learned in any course, and to fail to remember information that could help us in the future. This module shows you how you can easily make good stress management an ongoing part of your life.
Timing:	This module will take 15 minutes to complete.
Range:	It shows you how to schedule and conduct stress management reviews on a routine basis.
Objective:	The objective of the module is to help you to keep good stress management a central part of your life on an ongoing basis.

Maintaining Change

In working through this course so far, you have invested a lot of your time in learning to manage stress. Through this investment, you will have learned many different techniques that you can use to manage the many and varied sources of stress that you will experience during a successful working career.

However, what often happens with courses is that people forget what they have learned. While they use the course information to solve immediate problems, over time the lessons are forgotten and the learning investment is gradually lost...

Maintaining your stress management program is incredibly easy, but is so important that it deserves a module in its own right. This is a very short module!

How to Maintain Change...

Keeping your stress management program working effectively on an ongoing basis is as simple as making a regular entry in your diary reminding you to conduct a stress review.

Scheduling Stress Reviews

How often you conduct a review depends on how often your circumstances change. If, for example, your job changes constantly, then it may be worth conducting a review as often as every couple of months. If it changes infrequently, then a review every six months may be perfectly adequate.

If you have an electronic diary, then make a recurring entry that reminds you to conduct a review as often as you think is appropriate. This will automatically carry on (effectively) forever, reminding you regularly when to conduct a review. It may be useful to attach this course (in eBook format) to the recurring diary entry so that you have immediate access to it when you need it.

If you have a paper diary, put entries in appropriately, but also put in an entry for the last working day of the year reminding you to schedule your reviews for the next year in your new diary. When you do this, remember to make another entry for the last working day of the next year!

Conducting Stress Reviews

To conduct a stress review, use the tools in Module 3 to review your position. Firstly use the Schedule of Recent Experience (see [3.2.1](#)) to check whether the overall stress in your life has increased substantially, and then reflect on whether you feel stressed at work on a regular basis. If you do not and you feel comfortable with your current levels of stress, then do no more!

If you do feel regularly stressed, then use the tools in Modules 3 and 4 to identify where the stress is coming from, and create a Stress Management Plan to manage it.



STOP!

Do not go any further until you have done scheduled your Stress Reviews!

If you do, over time you risk losing the benefit of the time you have invested in this course.

Go on... it won't take long...

Module 15:

Course Summary

Managing Stress for Career Success

The Mind Tools Stress Management Master Class

Interest:	This final module summarizes the key learning points we have covered in this course. It recaps on the theory behind stress management, and reminds you how you can get a detailed insight into how stress affects you and summarizes the many different stress management techniques that we have looked at in this course.
Need:	Reviewing what we have covered helps you to organize information in your mind and helps you to remember it for longer.
Timing:	This module will take thirty minutes to complete.
Range:	<p>It recaps on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What stress is;• Understanding the stress in your life;• Action-oriented approaches to stress management;• Emotionally-oriented and acceptance-oriented approaches; and• Managing long-term stress and burnout.
Objective:	The objective of the module is to remind you of everything that you have learned and show you how all points fit together.

Course Summary

This module summarizes the key learning points we covered during this course: We go through these one last time to refresh the most important points in your mind and help you remember them for the medium term.

The course is organized into five major sections:

- First, we looked at the theory behind stress management, partly so that you could see how extensively it has been researched, and partly so that you understood the key concepts. An understanding of these concepts helps you to modify tools and develop new ones where these are needed.
- Next, we looked at some simple techniques for understanding the sources of stress that are most significant for you, and saw how you could create a stress management plan that would help you target these as quickly as possible.
- The next section looked at action-oriented approaches to stress management. These approaches are useful where you have some power to change the situation. We looked at how you could manage work overload, conflicting demands, problems with your boss, co-workers and team, and stressors in your environment. In the last module in this section, we looked at what you could do to control performance stress.
- We then looked at emotionally oriented and acceptance-oriented approaches to stress management. These are most appropriate where negative thinking lies at the root of stress or where we have little power to change the situation.
- Finally, we looked at avoiding burnout and managing long-term stress.

What Stress Is...

In Module 2, we saw that stress is something that has been a subject of intense research for nearly 100 years. Many ideas have come and gone during that time as knowledge has advanced.

Now, the most commonly accepted definition of stress is that stress is experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources that the individual is able to mobilize. This is the main definition used by this course, although we also recognize that there are intertwined instinctive stress responses to unexpected events.

Within the module, we looked at these instinctive responses in more detail, by first looking at the fight-or-flight response that helps us to respond explosively to immediate threat. We then looked at the General Adaptation Syndrome and burnout. We saw that even normal day-to-day stressors of overload, frustration, conflict and deadlines can trigger these instinctive responses.

Next, we looked at the negative effects of long-term stress, first from a behavioral perspective and second, by looking at its contribution to disease. We saw that stress has a well-established link with heart disease, but that relationships with many other diseases are still not fully established.

We also looked at the “Inverted-U” relationship between pressure and performance. We saw that when pressure is low, performance is normally low as other activities compete for attention. When pressure is high, stress, anxiety and interruptions can overload our thinking, reducing our ability to concentrate on a task and thereby reducing our performance. However, we saw that there is a level of pressure at which

we concentrate most effectively. At this level of pressure we can enter a state of intense concentration or flow, in which we do our best work.

Having looked at the theory behind stress management, we then moved on to look at how it affects you.

Understanding the Stress in Your Life

In Module 3, we used three tools to look at your personal experience of stress.

First, we used the Schedule of Recent Experience to look at the major life events that may have strongly influenced the background levels of stress in your life. We saw that if you have recently experienced a lot of significant change in your life, you are likely to suffer more from the negative effects of stress than would otherwise be the case.

We then used a Stress Diary to understand the sources of stress that you experience on a day-to-day basis. Finally, we looked at Stress SWOT Analysis. We saw how this can help you to understand your unique strengths and weaknesses with respect to stress, as well as helping you to recognize the stress management resources available to you.

This gave us the information we needed to create a Stress Management Plan. We saw how to create this in Module 4. As part of this, we used a Stress Management Key to target the tools that can help you manage specific sources of stress. More information on these tools was given in the following modules. The first group of these focused on action-oriented approaches.

Action-Oriented Approaches to Stress Management

This first group of tools looked at the active steps that you can take to manage the stress in your life. We looked at how you can manage situations that could otherwise cause severe stress.

In Module 5, we looked at ways that you could use to manage work overload. We started by using a simple version of the Job Analysis tool to identify the tasks that are vitally important to doing your job well. This allowed us to separate them from the less important tasks that can soak up so much time. We then briefly looked at a number of useful time-management skills that help you get the most out of the time available. These skills boost your ability to handle the heavy workloads that come with challenging jobs. Finally, in this module, we briefly introduced the project planning techniques that can help you manage otherwise overwhelmingly complex and difficult tasks, and looked at the basic delegation skills that you need if other people are to share your workload. These skills help you perform excellently in stressful and challenging jobs.

Module 6 showed you how to manage the stress of jobs that have not been carefully designed. We started by using the full version of the Job Analysis tool to flush out the inconsistencies and contradictions that can make these jobs so difficult and unpleasant. We moved on to look at career planning. This helps you to move your career forward towards a role that you will find intrinsically satisfying, and helps you to avoid the stress and frustration that comes with being locked into an unsatisfying job. The final tool in this section directed you to other modules that can help with jobs that are intrinsically stressful.

Modules 7 and 8 dealt with the stress that can arise in our working relationships with other people. In Module 7, we looked at the stresses that can come from working with people who have power over us, for

example, your boss, other senior people in your organization, clients, or powerful people outside your organization. Issues here revolve around balancing work and free time, managing your workload and handling apparently excessive demands or unreasonable behavior. The first tool in this module, Assertiveness, showed you how to defend your right to a well-balanced life in a fair, reasonable and positive manner. The next tool, “Coping with Unreasonable Demands”, gave you a checklist to work through so that you can react to these in a mature and balanced way. Finally, we looked at techniques of Stakeholder Management that can help you to manage work-related politics. Good stakeholder management helps you to win resources, ease deadlines and avoid stressful interference.

In Module 8, we looked at managing the stresses that can arise in relationships with your co-workers and your team. We started by using the Team Diagnostic Checklist to identify fundamental problems with the design of your team. By doing this, you can identify, understand and confront the sources of stress that are designed into your working relationships. Next, we recapped on assertiveness and looked at team negotiation skills. These important interpersonal skills help us to confront problems and negotiate solutions in an open and honest manner. Finally, we looked at setting team rules as a way of agreeing standards of behavior that the team will enforce. This helps us manage bad behavior that is undermining the team.

Module 9 showed you how to reduce the stress that comes from your environment. This involves eliminating the aches and pains that come from an uncomfortable working environment, reducing distractions that disrupt our concentration and improving the organization of space to eliminate blockages that frustrate the efficient execution of our jobs. By changing your environment, you can reduce the background levels of stress that you experience, improving your quality of life.

The final action-oriented approach focused on the stress we experience prior to and during important performances. This was covered in Module 10. The “Anticipating Stress” tool helps you to think through the upcoming event, emphasizes the need to rehearse your performance, and helps you understand how to manage the uncertainties that could disrupt it. The next techniques, “Thought Awareness, Positive Thinking and Rational Thinking” help you to prepare mentally to counter any negative thinking that may cause you problems. This feeds into the “Performance Planning” tool, which helps you to develop a sound plan for managing the practical problems and mental challenges of the important event. We then looked at ways of directly managing the fight-or-flight response that you will inevitably feel shortly before an important performance. We looked at “Imagery”, “Meditation”, “Self-Hypnosis”, and “Deep Breathing, Progressive Muscular Relaxation, and the Relaxation Response” as useful techniques for managing the pressure that comes with this sort of occasion.

Emotionally-Oriented and Acceptance-Oriented Approaches

Action-oriented approaches to stress management are useful where we have some control over a stressful situation. We use emotionally oriented approaches where stress comes from the way we perceive a situation, and acceptance-oriented approaches where we have no control over a stressful situation at all.

We looked at emotionally oriented approaches in Module 11. Firstly we revisited the “Thought Awareness, Positive Thinking and Rational Thinking” tool. While in Module 10 we looked at it specifically as it applied to performance stress, here we extended it into a more general setting. We then looked at the “Emotional Analysis” tool. This helps us to understand the emotions that we and other people feel so that we can identify the assumptions that lie beneath them. This allows us to challenge these

assumptions and either change our interpretation of the situation or take action appropriately. Finally, we looked at the “Cognitive Restructuring” tool. This is a hugely powerful tool for looking objectively at negative thinking, helping you to overcome many of the unjustified negative thoughts that can damage self-confidence so much. This tool helps you to take a clear, balanced look at the realities behind upsetting events.

Acceptance-oriented approaches mainly revolve around Building Defenses Against Stress. Module 12 discussed several of these. Here, we started by looking at the importance of getting help from and taking care of your support network. Next, we looked at important changes that we can make to our lifestyles to minimize stress: Getting enough rest and sleep; managing stress from the chemicals we consume; and getting enough exercise. Finally, we looked at ways of adding enjoyable events to your life to counterbalance the unpleasantness stresses that you cannot avoid.

Managing Long Term Stress and Burnout

In Modules 5 to 12, we looked at specific techniques for managing specific sources of stress. Module 13 took a different approach, looking at the long-term build up of stress that can lead to burnout. We saw that while exhaustion contributes to burnout, the real damage of burnout comes from disillusionment.

We saw that many of us get our sense of identity and meaning from our work. We may have started our careers with high ideals or high ambitions and may have followed these with passion. Burnout sets in as we enter a vicious spiral of stress and excessive hard work. This can undermine our enjoyment of our job and blocks the realization of these ideals and ambitions. As we get less satisfaction from our jobs, the downsides of the job become more irksome. As we get more tired, we have less energy to give. If our organizations fail to support us, we can get increasingly disenchanted with them. We become increasingly disillusioned and in extreme cases, we can lose faith completely in what we, or our organizations, are doing.

The first tool that we looked at, “Identifying Burnout Pressure Points”, helps you to identify where your particular points of risk are. The second tool, “Checking Yourself for Burnout”, helps you to assess whether you are currently at risk of burnout. We then looked at tools for “How to Avoid Burnout” and “Coping With Burnout” to help you manage these situations.

Conclusion

Having worked through this course, you now have access to a range of tools that can help you manage the stresses that come with a successful and challenging career. You should also have a good theoretical understanding of stress. This will help you to develop your own ways of meeting some of the more unique circumstances that we have not discussed.

Stress management should now be a routine part of your life.

As you go through your life, remember the importance of these skills: Just as severe stress can severely undermine the quality of your life, good stress management can significantly improve your happiness. This course has given you useful tools that will help you thrive in your job, maintain harmonious and productive relationships with those around you and successfully perform under intense pressure. It has shown you how to manage many of the negative thoughts that can undermine your happiness so that you

can live a healthy, fulfilling lifestyle. It has also shown you how to avoid burnout by protecting the ideals and ambitions that are most important to you.

If you have followed this course as laid out, you are now an expert in managing stress for career success.

Congratulations! Have an excellent career!

James Manktelow

Mind Tools
Essential skills for an excellent career

Moving On...

We have put a great deal of effort into developing and testing this course to make it as effective and useful as possible. If you have any suggestions on how we can improve it for the future, then please let us know at mindtools@hotmail.com or through the Mind Tools web site at www.mindtools.com. Alternatively, if you have enjoyed the course and found it useful, please [let us know!](#)

The Mind Tools web site at www.mindtools.com also offers articles on a wide range of important career development and personal effectiveness techniques, as well as a range of related products and services. Click [here](#) to visit [Mind Tools](#).

Alternatively, visit <http://www.mindtools.com/subscribe.htm> to [subscribe to the Mind Tools newsletter](#) so that we can update you on new mind tools as we launch them.

Best wishes, and enjoy using Mind Tools!



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