

Managing Stress

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Humans thrive on stress, it is key to our survival. We need it to get up in the morning, it motivates us to achieve bigger and better things, to win new clients, it pushes us forward. But too much stress can be detrimental, weakening the immune system causing symptoms like high blood pressure, fatigue, anxiety and depression, it can cause internal inflammation leading to heart disease, diabetes, not to mention any number of other physical and mental signs developing.



Moving from auto-pilot...

In our modern world we tend to operate on Auto-pilot - we get caught in a 'Driven-Doing' mode in which you might find yourself:

- Running on automatic without much awareness of what you're doing (routines, doing what we've always done, head down and get on)
- Rushing through activities without being really attentive to them (eating, being with loved ones)
- Having a tendency not to notice physical tension or discomfort until it really grabs your attention (tension in shoulders, painful joints)
- Preoccupied with the future or the past (dwelling on past actions, thinking ahead to the next job)

- Listening to someone with one ear, whilst thinking about something else at the same time (very common with children - and partners!)

(from the Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale - Brown & Ryan, 2003)

But it's not your fault...

Life is really busy and really fast. Changes in the way we live have crept in, technology has ramped everything up - we no longer shut the office door and leave work at the end of the day, we take it home with us, carried on our mobile phones or accessed from our tablets and laptops.

And our home lives are busy too, with more entertainment at the tips of our fingers than our grandparents had in their lifetime, more opportunities to expand our knowledge, to look after our health and socialise.

We have a Primitive Brain in a modern world...

Looking back at how we evolved, over millions of years our primitive ancestors lived in a world full of danger - whether it was a predator, a marauding tribe or the landscape they lived in, every time they popped their head outside their cave they faced life-or-death situations.

Compare that with the worse situations we face now, things like bad traffic, running late, trains being delayed, the bank statement arriving, arguments at work or home, deadlines, dealing with tricky clients or truculent children, spilling our coffee... They present barriers to us getting our needs met throughout the day, they might be tiny annoyances but they are cumulative and they are taken on board by the primitive part of our brain as threats to life. They activate the same stress response system as if they are life-or-death situations - which isn't very helpful.

And it all relies on past patterns of behaviour: if what got you through today worked and you survived, then you'll be encouraged to do it again, and that's how habits are formed whether they're good or bad ones.

For example, say you've had a stressful day at work. When you get home, you head straight to the fridge, get out a bottle of wine and pour yourself a glass. It goes down nicely, you can feel yourself unwind, the stress eases and you feel ready to get on with your evening.

The next time you feel stressed, your primitive brain pushes forward that action (drinking a glass of wine) as a great antidote to the stress so as soon as you get home you head to the fridge, you're not even thinking consciously about it, you just do it - and it works again.

This is how habits are formed - action without thought - and sometimes we create habits that are not helpful, that are not consciously developed, they just happen. Before you know it, you're having that glass of wine more frequently and the problem is, one glass doesn't keep hitting the spot because your system quickly becomes accustomed to the effects of that one glass of alcohol, it starts to need more to feel the same effects so one glass becomes two, then three, then it's a whole bottle and a regular trip to the bottle bank...

At no point did your primitive brain understand that the mere act of getting home and doing a simple action, any action that moves your thoughts on from a stressful day at work to more pleasant ones associated with being at home (taking the dog for a walk, cuddling the cat, giving your partner or child a hug, phoning a friend, making dinner), is the real point of reducing stress. The fact that this particular one involved alcohol is irrelevant, but it becomes the hook that you find yourself caught on.

How to build resilience

Remember the 'Doing-Driven' mode? The stressed position that we often fall into, where you are on auto-pilot, keeping your head down and getting on with it but not really being aware, not really enjoying life? You can assess whether you want to continue in that mode or if you want to make a change, to emerge from the fog of busy-ness to being more aware, more present in your life - and less stressed.

Changing to a more 'Thoughtful-Being' mode where you are:

- Sensing, have awareness of yourself and your environment, your interactions with others
- Accepting and being in the present moment
- Approaching experiences with curiosity, rather than fear – this physically alters your hormonal balance
- Seeing thoughts and feelings as transitory mental or physical events, they're not solid or 'true', they are your interpretation of events
- You have conscious choice in our actions, based on a proper assessment of the situation
- Proactive as opposed to reactive, no longer falling back on emotional reactions that are not controlled by you but are a throw-back to our primitive ancestors' need to survive in a hostile world

Changing the way we think changes the way we act – because it changes the chemical balances we operate under.

This isn't about making sweeping changes in your life, upping sticks and moving to a deserted island, rather it's about changing your thinking and mindset about your life as it is, finding a new perspective so that you can make choices that work for you - instead of carrying on doing what you do just because you've always done it.

Quest Hypnotherapy Ltd offers a range of hypnotherapy and psychotherapy services including personal stress management, specialist programmes such as phobia removal, sports and performance motivation. Under the banner of 'Mind Your Business' we also consult with organisations to help develop employee-centric corporate cultures, specialising in stress prevention and wellbeing training.

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