

# Understanding Stress

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Assistance Service

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This guide has been prepared by  
The Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS)

The information contained herein is intended as a guide only





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# Introduction

Stress is a natural phenomenon that may be experienced at the threat of danger and perceived inability to cope in a situation. Stress is neither good nor bad and cannot be completely eliminated from life but we can learn how to recognise it and cope with it more effectively.

Work, social occasions and interpersonal relationships are all part of life. Life events can be pleasurable or stressful depending on interpretation. Positive stress motivates, usually with good outcomes. Negative stress can cause anxiety, worry, and a sense of being overwhelmed and immobilized. Financial problems, lack of self-esteem, lack of competency, physical illness, family/social situations, work/life imbalance etc. can be causes of stress. Stress affects different people in different ways.

***Stress cannot be avoided but it can be managed.***

***Stress is a fact of life - it need not be a way of life!***

## **The aim of this booklet is to:**

- Explain what stress is – Section 1
- Identify the causes of stress – Section 2
- Identify the symptoms/effects of stress – Section 3
- Provide tips and strategies for managing stress – Section 4

***Stress is not an illness but it can lead to illness.***

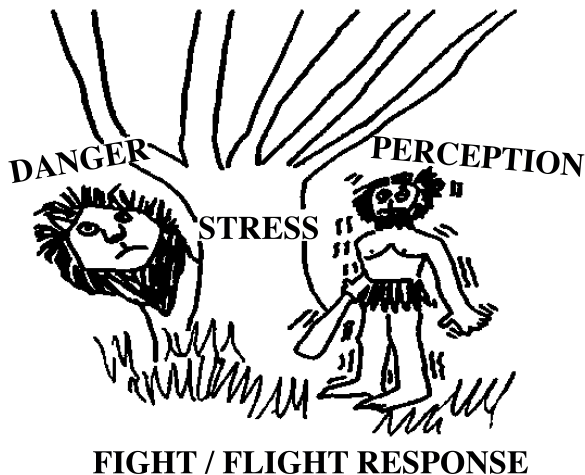


# Section 1: What is Stress?

## Definition:

**Stress:** “The reaction people may have when presented with demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope.” (World Health Organisation)

## Explaining the Stress Response – Fight / Flight Response:



The behavioural blueprint for humankind was laid down hundreds of thousands of years ago when the main threat to human life was from a variety of animal species.

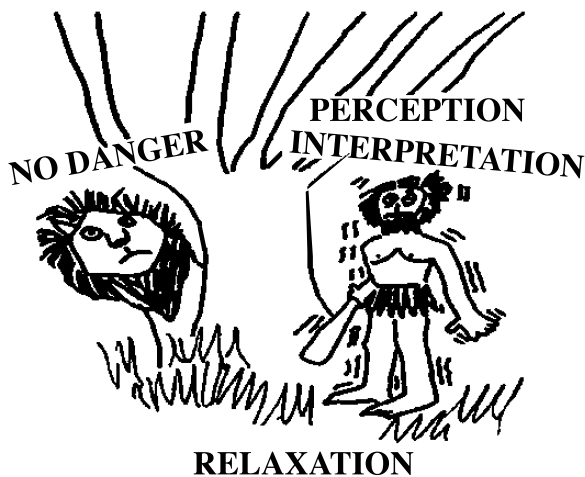
Human beings had to be able to react swiftly when confronted with a threat to life. This is known as the Fight / Flight response.

The stress response is designed to ensure that the body can take appropriate survival measures whenever a Fight / Flight situation might occur. The action is swift and happens entirely at an unconscious level. The response is designed to be short term with adequate time given for the body to recover.

The “fight or flight response” is our body’s primitive, automatic, inborn response that prepares the body to react to perceived threat. Originally discovered by Harvard physiologist Walter Cannon, this response is hard-wired into our brains and represents a genetic wisdom to protect us from danger.

If we experience a threat from an external source or one that is generated by our own internal thoughts, the hypothalamus in the brain initiates a sequence of nerve cell firing and chemical release which prepares the body to respond.

This response is determined by our own subjective interpretations and perceptions of day to day events / situations.

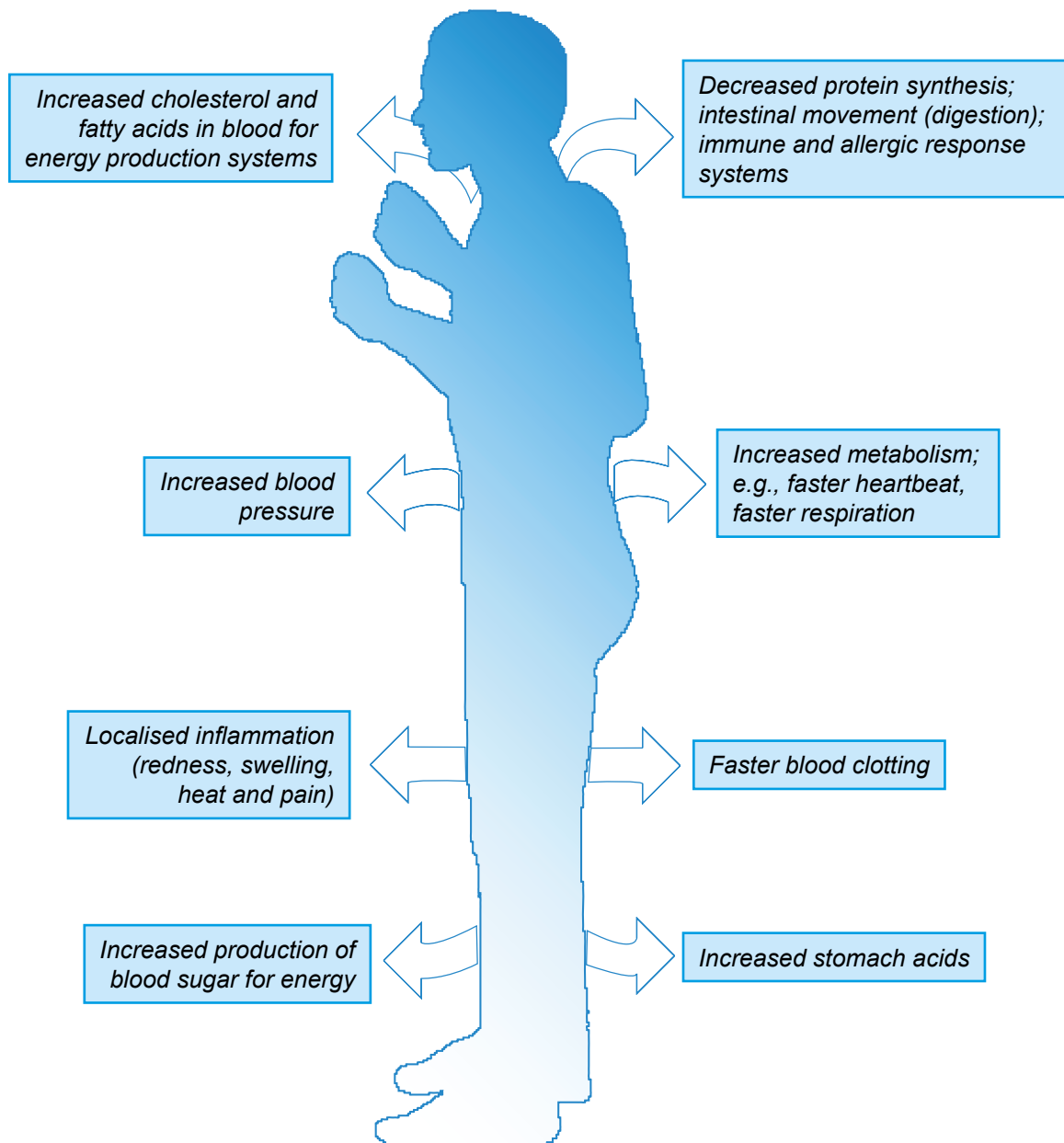


“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another” - William James.

## What happens when we experience Stress

When we perceive a threat the body undergoes certain physical changes. The chemicals adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released into our blood-stream which bring about a series of dramatic changes including:

- Our respiratory rate increases
- Blood is diverted away from our digestive tract and directed into our muscles and limbs for added strength
- Our awareness intensifies and our sight sharpens
- Our impulses quicken
- Our perception of pain diminishes
- Our immune system is activated to enable us to mobilise and deal effectively with the perceived challenge



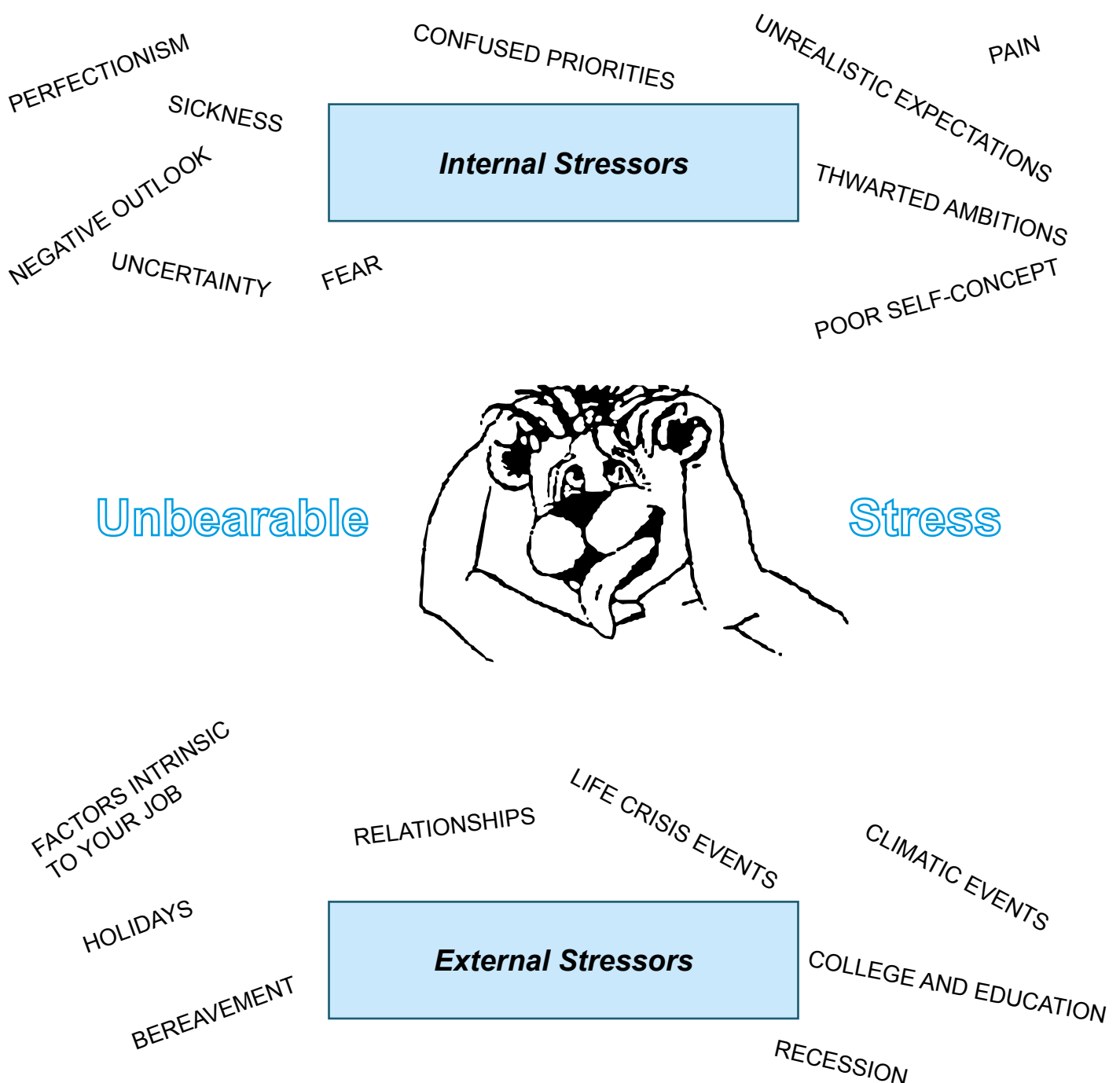
## Section 2: Causes of Stress – Stressors

Many situations e.g. tight deadlines, difficult projects, financial difficulties etc have the propensity to **cause** stress. These situations/events are possible causes of stress but not **stress** itself.

In the modern world we are unlikely to be challenged by wild animals, however there are many things that can trigger a stress response in an individual. We can face situations where we feel that the demands and pressures are not matching with our capabilities resulting in our inability to cope.

Stressors are the triggers which cause an individual to experience stress.

Stressors remain neutral. Our unique response and the stress triggered in us are entirely dependent on our perception of the event. An event (e.g. speaking in public) which is fun and exciting for one, can be dreaded and stressful for another.



## How Personality Type can Influence the Stress Response

A variety of social, biological, psychological and behavioural factors influence how our personality develops. Personality type may have a bearing on how we react in situations, sometimes resulting in stress. It is important to remember that individuals are unlikely to fit into just one personality type.

Indeed, it is comforting to be aware that it is possible to modify or even change aspects of our personalities in ways that might reduce our propensity to be stressed, or at least cope with the stressors more effectively.

The following two pages contain some general classification of personality categories. In addition to these, research conducted in the 1950s by Meyers Friedman and Ray Rosenman identified personality types and behaviours and their susceptibility to illness resulting from stress.

Personality type	Description	Stress Outcome
Type 'A' Behaviour	Hold beliefs, attitudes and expectations that engage them in a constant struggle to gain control	Self-induced Stress
Type 'B' Behaviour	Give themselves time and space to be creative and receptive. Have sense of self as distinct from the job	Avoids Excess Stress
Type 'C' Behaviour	Constantly try to please and win affection (in effort to over-compensate for sense of personal loss and emotional pain)	Prone to Mismanaged Stress

See **Appendix 1** for a more detailed explanation of personality types A, B, C



### **Perfectionist**

Idealistic, principled, orderly and conscientious people. Motivated by their need to be always right. Stressed when they say yes too quickly, don't delegate and when things don't match their unrealistic expectations.

### **Helper**

Caring, generous, warm and attentive people. Motivated by their need to be needed and loved. Stressed by their difficulty in saying "no", and not being able to reveal their own needs and let others know how they are feeling.

### **Leader**

Resourceful, self-confident, energetic and earthy people. Motivated by their need to be in control. Stressed when faced with their own weakness or having to reveal their vulnerability to others.

### **Optimist**

Fun-loving, gregarious, impulsive and charming people. Motivated by their need to be happy. Stressed when tied down to a single project or forced to confront painful issues.

### **Achiever**

Self-confident, adaptable, energetic and outgoing people. Motivated by their need to succeed and be the centre of attention. Stressed at the prospect of failure, loss of status or any threat to their self-image.

### **Artist**

Intuitive, creative, sensitive and expressively warm people. Motivated by their need to be unique. Stressed by misunderstanding, by vulgar insensitivity and by conflict in feelings and relationships.

### **Observer**

Analytical, perceptive, reflective and self-contained people. Motivated by their need to know and understand. Stressed when required to share feelings or get personally involved in projects.

### **Mediator**

Calm, laid-back, unpretentious and reassuring people. Motivated by their need to be calm and at peace. Stressed when they have to face difficult issues, meet deadlines or confront others.

## Section 3: Effects of Stress

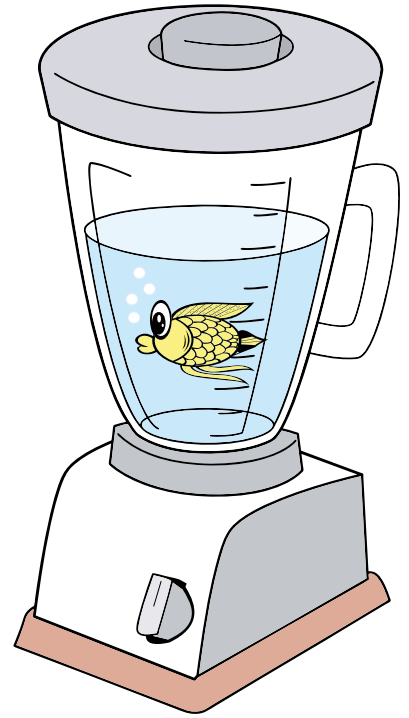
We tend to refer to stress in terms of the *effect that it has on our physical and mental wellbeing*. Stress is our internal response to difficult situations. It is how we mentally react to our problems but it often has physical symptoms. Unmanaged stress can have a major effect on ability, performance, confidence, energy levels and quality of life.

Negative stress is the type we tend to dwell on. It can make us feel insecure, inadequate and incapable.

### Vulnerability to Stress

Our vulnerability to stress is governed by a range of factors:

- The degree to which we believe in our own intrinsic worth
- The number and degree of stressors at any one time
- Our personality type and thinking styles
- Our enjoyment of, experience of, and skills for work
- Our belief system or philosophy
- Our present lifestyle balance and state of health
- The support of a caring home background
- The support of a group, or colleagues at work
- The types of strategies used for coping with stress

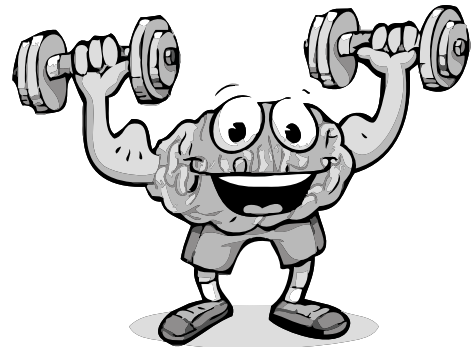


“Life is not a matter of having good cards, but of playing a poor hand well” - Robert Louis Stevenson

## Benefits of the Stress Response

There can be benefits to the body's reaction to stress in the short term. The chemicals released in the brain can cause us to have:

- Sharper focus
- Greater strength
- More speed
- Greater determination
- Faster decision making
- Better short-term judgement

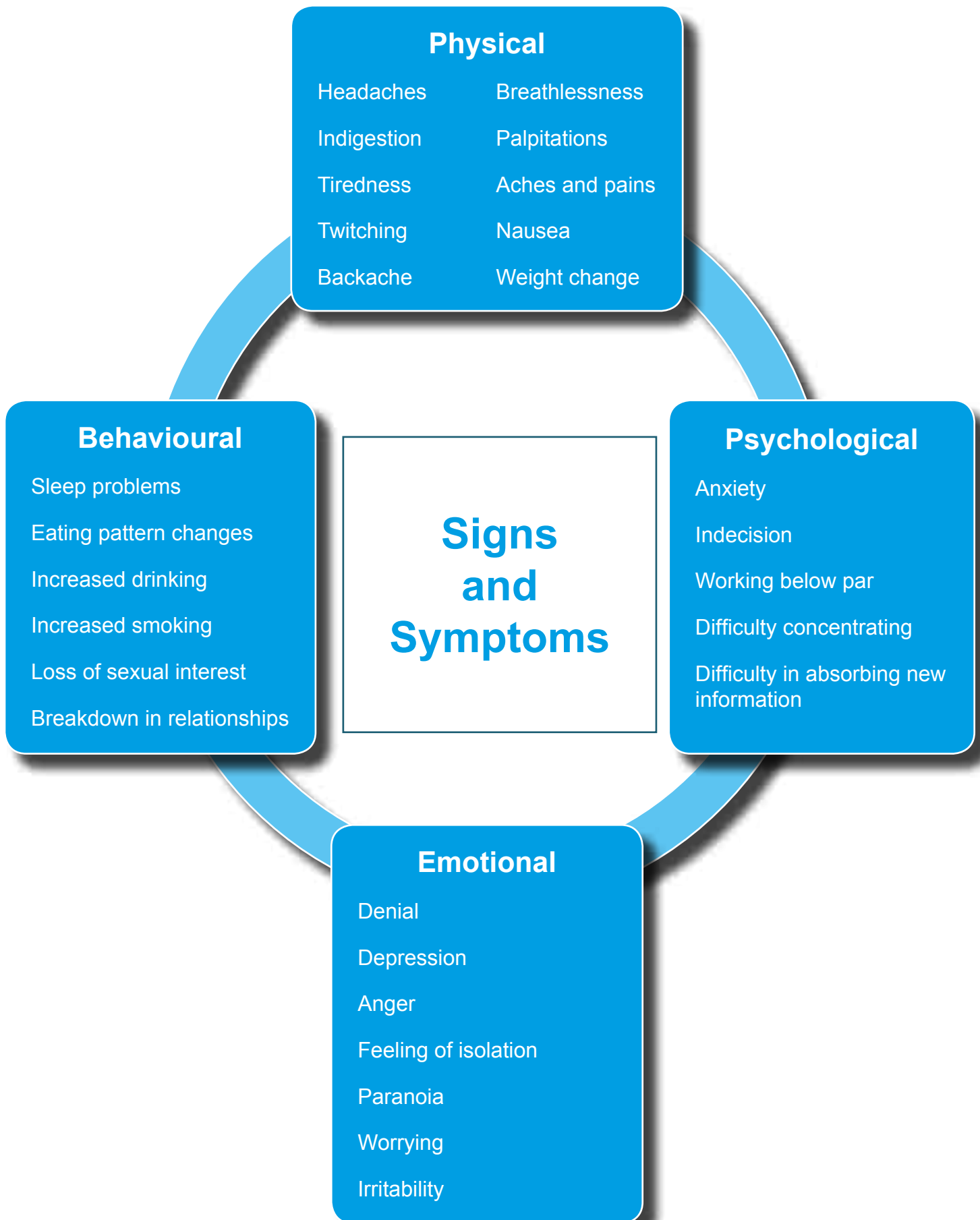


This improves our capacity to improve our performance in challenging situations where we find ourselves under pressure. It is important to remember that the stress response is really only beneficial in the short term. We need to experience a certain amount of pressure to spur ourselves into action and not remain lethargic.

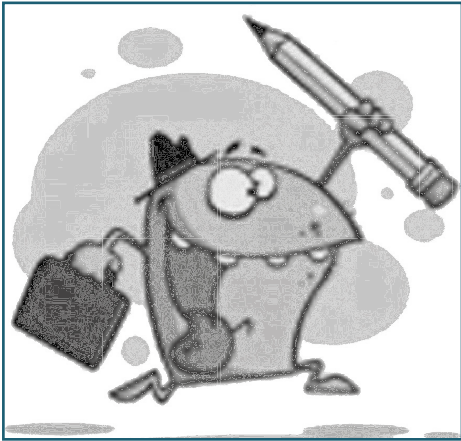
Stress is like a stringed instrument  
“you need enough tension to make  
music but not so much that it  
snaps” - Dr. Donald A Tubesin



## Signs and Symptoms of Negative Stress



## The Stress Continuum



### Pressure:

is when we perceive we are able to cope with a situation successfully, resulting in energy and enthusiasm.

### Stress:

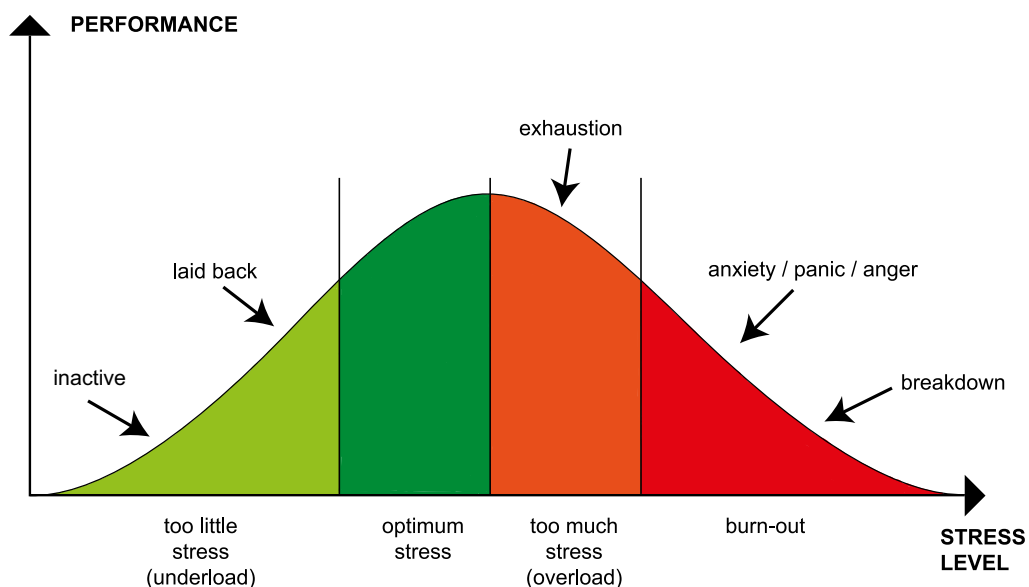
occurs when we perceive we are unable to cope with a situation successfully, resulting in physical, emotional and mental deterioration.



### Burnout:

is when our ability to cope with pressure and stress breaks down.

#### Stress Curve

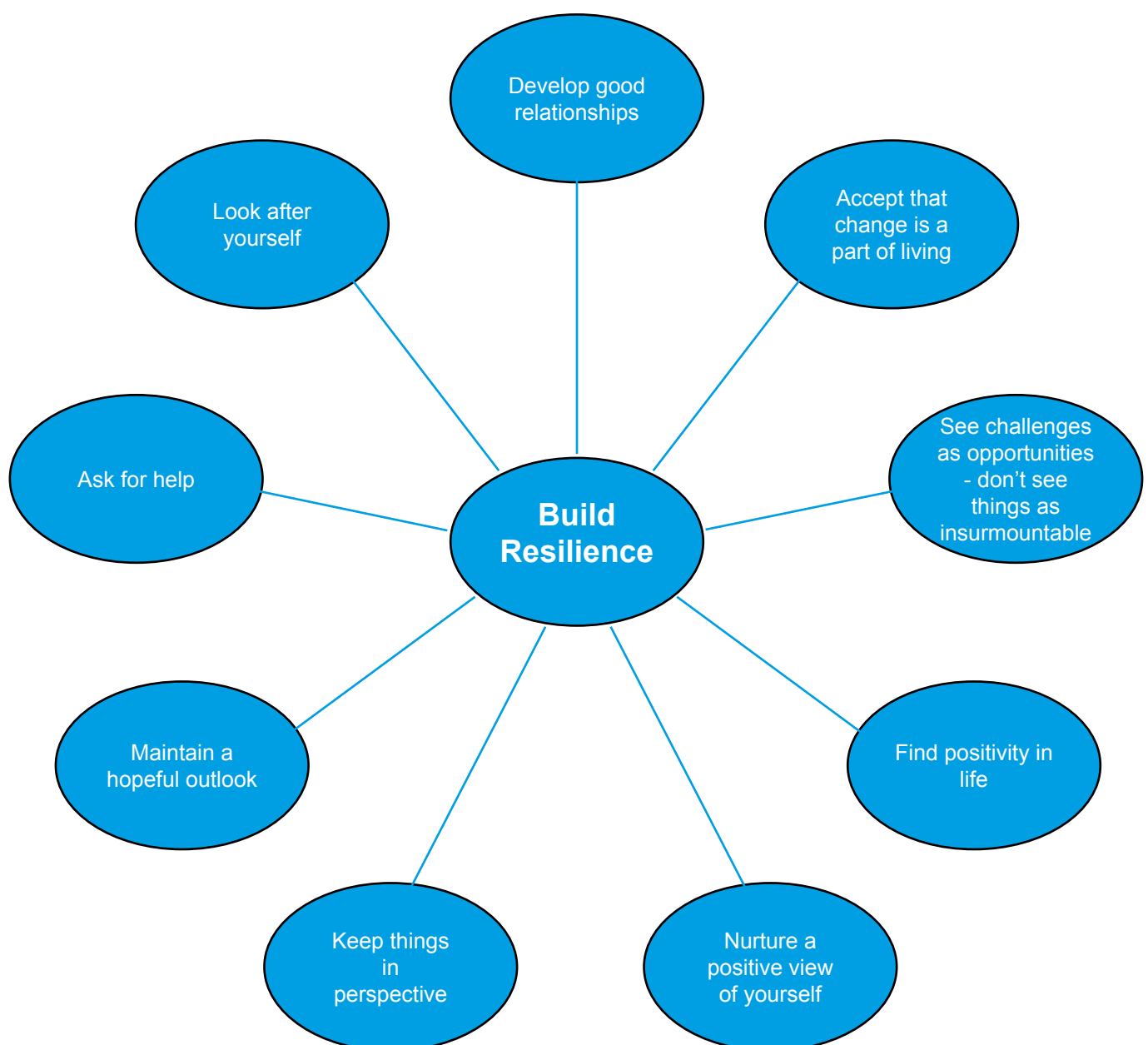


# Section 4: Tips and Strategies for Managing Stress

## Building Resilience to Manage Stress

Building resilience does not prevent difficult or stressful events occurring. It helps us to respond to life events and recover from the impact they can have on us.

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have.



Resilience can be learned and developed by anyone because it involves learning how to behave, think and act differently – for further details see **Appendix 2**.

## Tips to BEAT STRESS

**B**e realistic about what you can achieve. Don't take on too much.

**E**at a balanced, nutritious diet.

**A**ction Plans - write down specific and realistic ways to deal with outstanding problems.

**T**ime management - plan your time - build in breaks. Don't make too many changes at once in your life, if possible.

**S**et priorities - if you could only do one thing, what would it be?

**T**alk things over with a friend/family member, someone you trust

**R**elaxation or leisure time factored into each day can be beneficial.

**E**xercise regularly - at least 30 minutes, three times each week.

**S**ay NO occasionally, when appropriate, if you are currently struggling to keep up with demands.

**S**eek professional help if you find you are not coping adequately with the stress in your life.



# Stress

## Some Strategies to Help Reduce Stress

Stress awareness and relaxation techniques are key elements of stress management but equally important is a positive approach to life in general – both in our mental attitude and physical lifestyle.



In **Appendices 3 – 5** we have outlined a number of strategies/tools which have been proven to reduce stress levels along with suggestions to manage the physical aspects of staying well.

## Personal Action Plan

The CSEAS has published a useful resource leaflet entitled “Personal Action Plan”. It can help you examine and explore your perception of events/situations which you experience as stressful. You may find it helpful to complete this. You may contact your EAO who can assist you in completing the leaflet. See **Appendix 6**.

## Resources

Always remember that at times of stress, you can avail of your personal supports and also the supports/resources listed in **Appendix 7**.

## Conclusion

Our individual experience of stress, even when it is transient, can be unpleasant and sometimes debilitating. Long term exposure to stressful events and situations can have serious implications for our physical health and mental wellbeing.

It is impossible to eliminate stress completely from our lives but we can work at identifying the unique stressors which cause us to react with the “fight/flight” response. Awareness of our “stress triggers” places us in a better position to take steps to avoid or minimise the effects of stress.

The following appendices contain some useful suggestions and tools which have proven to be effective in helping reduce stress. **Remember**, the stressors/triggers always remain neutral. It is our own perception of our coping mechanisms which will determine how we react in situations.

Please remember that physical exercise, sleep and proper nutrition play an important part in making you more resilient to manage your stress.

**And Finally!** – Explore ways to build regular fun, laughter and relaxation into your life!

# Appendix 1: Personality Types

Friedman and Rosenman conducted research in the 1950s into identification of personality types and their susceptibility to illness resulting from stress. This research has been added to and expanded throughout the decades since then. It must be remembered however, that a person can drift from one personality type into another making it difficult to definitively label people in this way. It does however serve as a guide for determining which types are more prone to long term stress and associated illnesses.

## Points to Remember

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Personality type is a major contributor to a person's stress load</li><li>➤ It is rare that a person is exclusively one personality type</li><li>➤ People are more likely to be a mixture of personality types, with a tendency towards one or the other</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Type 'A' individuals are more than twice as likely to get acute heart attacks compared with Type 'B'</li><li>➤ In the main, cancer patients have Type 'C' characteristics</li><li>➤ Personality types are modifiable</li></ul> |
|--|--|

<b>Type 'A' Behaviour</b> <b>Self-induced Stress</b> Hold beliefs, attitudes and expectations that engage them in a constant struggle to gain control.	<b>Type 'B' Behaviour</b> <b>Avoids Excess Stress</b> Gives themselves time and space to be creative and receptive. Have sense of self as distinct from the job.	<b>Type 'C' Behaviour</b> <b>Prone to Mismanaged Stress</b> Constantly try to please and win affection (in effort to over-compensate for sense of personal loss and emotional pain).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Achievement orientated achievement at any cost</li> <li>➤ Fast moving, hurried forceful personality</li> <li>➤ Aggressive, hard driven</li> <li>➤ Easily aroused hostility – perceives others as adversaries</li> <li>➤ Fear of losing control – unable to delegate</li> <li>➤ Perfectionist – excessively critical of self and others</li> <li>➤ Multi-activity, excessive competitive drive</li> <li>➤ Time urgency, prone to anger</li> <li>➤ Acts like a policeman to the world</li> <li>➤ Restless, with a sense of urgency, in order to gain control. Hurry sickness</li> <li>➤ Involved/committed to work at the expense of all other areas of life</li> <li>➤ On the edge of the seat behaviour</li> <li>➤ Cholesterol levels raised irrespective of diet</li> <li>➤ Fighting every step of the way</li> <li>➤ Constantly watching the clock – revels in having to meet deadlines</li> <li>➤ Holds rigid and extreme standards</li> <li>➤ Tendency to suppress emotions – ignores body signals</li> <li>➤ Preoccupation with things worth having</li> <li>➤ Inattentive to others, self-engrossed</li> <li>➤ Underestimates time required for tasks. No 'human factor' taken into account</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Adjusts pace to demands of task. More efficient in long term</li> <li>➤ Not hostile. Slow to be aroused to anger</li> <li>➤ Easy going manner. Often humorous</li> <li>➤ Just as much ambition as type 'A', but doesn't seem to panic while achieving goals</li> <li>➤ Good listeners</li> <li>➤ Calm, content, unhurried</li> <li>➤ Hare and the tortoise fable</li> <li>➤ Not needing to demonstrate achievement at any cost</li> <li>➤ Doesn't make unrealistic commitments</li> <li>➤ Not competitive at play and work, no fear of competition</li> <li>➤ Easy methodical pace</li> <li>➤ Enjoys periods of idleness</li> <li>➤ Able to relax without guilt</li> <li>➤ Doesn't need public recognition</li> <li>➤ Not afraid to admit mistakes</li> <li>➤ Flexible – can either lead or follow where appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Over achievers</li> <li>➤ Hyperactive in a quiet, non-obvious way</li> <li>➤ Hard working</li> <li>➤ Stoic</li> <li>➤ Dependable</li> <li>➤ Unassertive</li> <li>➤ Cheerful</li> <li>➤ Thoughtful</li> <li>➤ Sensitive</li> <li>➤ Seems always able to cope</li> <li>➤ Never gives in to illness / fatigue</li> <li>➤ Finds it difficult to say 'No' to excessive demands</li> <li>➤ Perfectionist</li> <li>➤ Driven by fear of failure</li> <li>➤ Very high expectations of self</li> <li>➤ Difficulty in expressing feelings – especially negative ones</li> <li>➤ Difficulty in assessing personal limitations</li> <li>➤ Difficulty in admitting vulnerability</li> </ul>



# Appendix 2: Strategies for Building Resilience

**Personal connections** – Maintain links with family, friends, colleagues etc...

**Social connections** – develop relationships with people. Belonging to a group or a community can give us a sense of identity and purpose.

**Coping with crisis** – you can't change the fact that stressful events happen but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events.

**Accept** that change is part of living and focus on the circumstances that you can alter, not on those you cannot change.

**Set goals** – develop some realistic goals and do little things to help you achieve those goals.

**Nurture** a positive view of yourself – remind yourself of your strengths and accomplishments. Becoming more confident about your own ability to respond and deal with crisis is a solid and practical way to build resilience for the future.

**Maintain a hopeful outlook** – positive thinking does not mean ignoring the problem in order to focus on positive outcomes – it means understanding that setbacks are transient and that you have, or can develop, the skills and abilities to combat the challenges you face.

**Take decisive actions** – start working on the problem immediately, this way you can take steps towards making your situation better and less stressful. Focus on the progress that you have made rather than becoming distracted by the amount of work still needing to be accomplished.

**Develop problem solving skills** – whenever you encounter a new challenge, make a quick list of some of the potential ways you could solve that problem and experiment with different approaches.

**Seek help/support if required** – CSEAS, GP, HSE services, counselling etc...

## Appendix 3: Stress Reduction Strategies – Cognitive Approaches

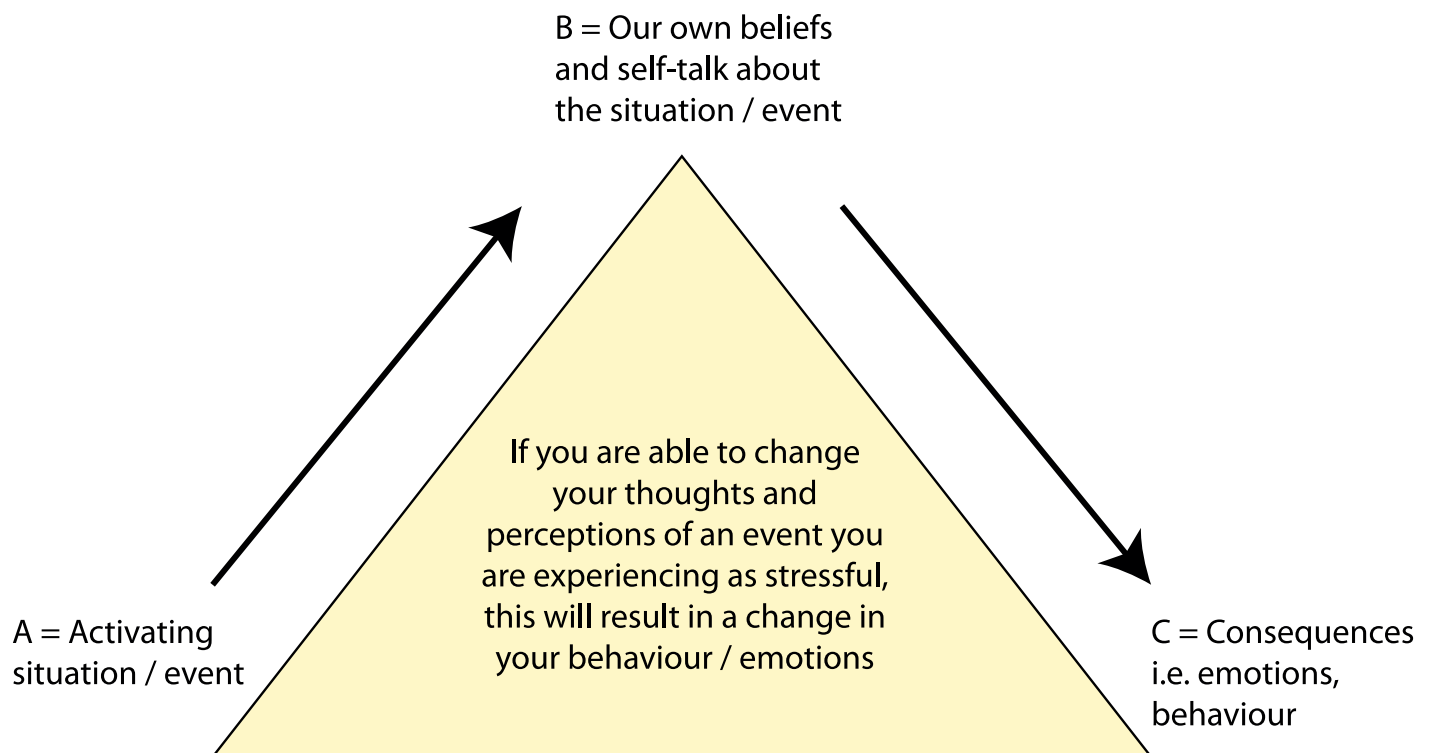
This section provides practical and effective methods of reducing stress to a level where you can perform most effectively. The techniques that you select depend on the cause of the stress and the situation in which the stress occurs.

In choosing methods to combat stress, it is worth asking yourself where the stress comes from. If outside factors such as important events or relationship difficulties are causing stress, then a positive thinking or imagery based technique may be effective. Where stress and fatigue are long term, then lifestyle and work-life balance skills may be appropriate. If the feeling of stress comes from adrenaline in your body, then it may be effective to relax the body and slow the flow of adrenaline.

*“Men are disturbed not by things but by the views which they take of them” – Epictetus, philosopher 1AD*

Some of the contributing factors of stress are – how we **think**, our **attitudes** to people, places and/or situations and our subsequent **behaviour**. There are a number of techniques based on this basic presupposition that can help you balance stress and relaxation (\*See Diagram 1 below). Creating a positive mind-set can take practice.

No one technique is better than another. You should use whatever works best for you.



\* Diagram 1

## Anticipation & Avoidance

By anticipating stress you can prepare for it and work out how to control it when it happens. This can be carried out in a number of ways:

- **Rehearsal**

By role playing a stressful event several times in advance (e.g. interview, speech) you can polish your performance and build confidence.

- **Planning**

Analysing the possible causes of stress in an upcoming situation will allow you to plan a strategy and response. This may require taking some action about the situation and/or identifying stress management techniques you will use. There is little point worrying in a non-disciplined way – it will be counterproductive.

- **Avoidance**

Where a situation is likely to be unpleasant and will not yield any benefit to you, it may be one you can simply avoid. You should be certain in your own mind that this is the case.

## Reducing the Importance of an Event

A number of factors can make an event appear highly significant and cause stress as a result

1. The importance and size of the event
2. The prospect of a large financial reward, of promotion, or of personal advancement
3. The presence of family, friends or important people

If stress is a problem under these circumstances, then think carefully about the event and its significance – take every opportunity to reduce the importance you place on the occasion.

- If the challenge you are facing appears too large or daunting, try putting it in perspective. Compare it in your mind with larger events you might know of or might have attended.
- If there is a reward, remind yourself that there may be other opportunities for reward later. This may not be the only chance you have. Focus on the quality of your performance. Focusing on the rewards will not only damage your concentration but raise stress.
- If members of your family or friends are in attendance, remind yourself that they are supportive of you and that your performance will have no bearing on their opinion of you.

If you focus on the correct performance of your tasks, then the importance of the event itself will dwindle into the background.

## Reducing Uncertainty

**Uncertainty can cause high levels of stress. Causes of uncertainty can be:**

- Not having a clear idea of what the future holds
- Lack of familiarity of your department/office business plan
- Not having a career development plan
- Not knowing what will be required of you in the future
- Not knowing what your manager or colleagues think of your abilities
- Receiving vague or inconsistent instructions

In cases such as these, lack of information or the actions of other people may negatively affect your ability to perform.

The most effective way of countering this is to ask for the information you need. This might include:

- information on your organisation's performance e.g. strategy statement, business plans
- utilise the PMDS to clarify your manager's expectations of you to enable you to set appropriate career development goals.

If you are unsure of how you are doing, request a performance review/meeting with your manager. Where instructions are inconsistent or conflicting, seek clarification.

If you ask in a positive way, people are usually quite happy to help.

## Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking

The following three cognitive related tools are useful in combating negative thinking. Negative thinking causes stress because it impairs confidence in your ability to do the task you face.

Negative thoughts occur when you put yourself down, criticise yourself for errors, doubt your abilities, expect failure, etc. Negative thinking engenders negative self-talk – it damages confidence, harms performance and paralyses mental skills.

### 1. Thought Awareness

Thought awareness is the process by which you observe your thoughts for a time, perhaps when under stress, and become aware of what is going through your head. It is best not to suppress any thoughts – observe them without making any judgements as they run their course.

Watch for negative thoughts while you observe your 'streams of consciousness'. Normally these appear and disappear being barely noticed. Most times you will not know they exist.

Examples of common negative thoughts are:

- Worries about how you appear to other people
- A preoccupation with the symptoms of stress
- Dwelling on consequences of poor performance
- Self-criticism
- Feelings of inadequacy

Make a note of the thought, and then let the stream of consciousness run on.

Thought awareness is the first step in the process of eliminating negative thoughts – you cannot counter thoughts that are not in your awareness.



### 2. Rational Thinking

Once you are aware of your negative thoughts, write them down and review them rationally. See whether the thoughts have any basis in reality. Often you find that when you properly challenge negative thoughts they are obviously wrong. Often they persist only because they escape notice.

### 3. Positive Thinking and Affirmation

You may find it useful to counter negative thoughts with positive affirmations. You can use affirmations to build confidence and change negative behaviour patterns into positive ones. You can base affirmations on clear, rational assessments of fact, and use them to undo the damage that negative thinking may have done to your self-confidence.

#### **Examples of affirmations are:**

- I can do this
- I can achieve my goals
- I am completely myself and people will like me for myself
- I am completely in control of my life
- I learn from my mistakes – they increase the basis of experience on which I can draw
- I am a good and valued person in my own right
- I can seek help

Traditionally people have advocated positive thinking almost recklessly, as if it is a solution to everything. It should be used with common sense. No amount of positive thinking will 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). Firstly, decide rationally what goals you can realistically attain with hard work, and then use positive thinking to reinforce these.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. When you're mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them good or bad. Instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to experience and includes an ability to make time to develop resilience in the face of unexpected events. Practicing mindfulness allows you to let go of anxious and worrisome thoughts to let you focus on the "now".

Mindfulness exercises are ways of paying attention to the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing and yoga. Mindfulness training helps you to become more aware of your thoughts and feelings so that instead of being overwhelmed by them, you are better able to manage them. Some benefits of mindfulness exercises are:

- Enhanced attention and productivity
- More level-headedness and resilience to stress
- Less tension, anger, fatigue, anxiety & depression
- Increased self-awareness / emotion regulation
- Improved insight and innovation
- Better relationships
- More vitality, compassion and '*joie de vivre*'

Becoming more mindful of your own emotional responses and actions can help alter them. Adopting a mindful approach may lead you to intentionally choose more hopeful, optimistic and resilient ways of dealing with workplace stress and resistance to change. Mindfulness is about accepting what is happening now. Mindfulness can be learned through formal and informal practice and training.

***Mindfulness is a powerful technique in stress management. It is based on the concept of living in the moment and attending not to the past or future but only to the here and now***



## Imagery in Stress Reduction

Imagery is a potent method of stress reduction, especially when combined with physical relaxation methods such as deep breathing.

We are all 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 a place or scene that is very relaxing. The more intensely you use your imagination to recreate the place or situation, the stronger and more realistic the experience will be.

### What is imagery?

Remember that your brain is a mass of nerve cells. Your sense organs convert signals from your environment into nerve impulses. These feed into the areas of your brain that interpret that environment. Imagery seeks to create a similar set of nerve impulses that can feed into those areas of the brain that experience the outside world. For example, imagining a pleasant scene can reduce stress whereas imagining an unpleasant scene or situation, can increase stress levels.

### Use of imagery to reduce stress

One common use of imagery in relaxation is to imagine a scene, place or event that you remember as peaceful, restful, beautiful and happy. You can bring all your senses into the image with sounds of running water and birds, the smell of cut grass, the taste of favourite food, the warmth of sun, etc. Use the imagined place as a retreat from stress and pressure. Scenes can involve an image 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, '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 is calming for you – you will be able to come up with the most effective images for yourself.

Other uses of imagery in relaxation involve mental pictures of stress flowing out of your body – distractions and everyday concerns being folded away and locked in a padlocked chest.

Imagery can be used in rehearsal before a big event, allowing you to run through it in your mind. It allows you to practise in advance for anything unusual that might occur, so that you are prepared and already practised in handling it. Imagery also allows you to pre-experience achievement of your goals. This helps to give you the self-confidence you need to do something well.

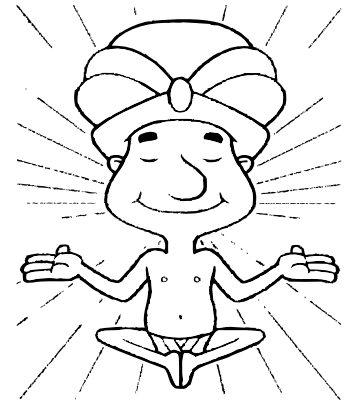


## Meditation

Meditation is a very effective method of relaxation. The idea of meditation is to focus your thoughts on one relaxing thing for a sustained period of time. This rests your mind by diverting it from thinking about the problems that have caused stress. It gives your body time to relax and recuperate and clear away toxins that may have built up through stress and mental or physical activity.

### Meditation is particularly useful where:

- You have experienced long or short term stress
- You have been worried about problems
- You have been physically active for prolonged periods



Lotus Position

### Relaxing using meditation can have the following effects:

- Slows breathing
- Reduces blood pressure
- Helps muscles relax
- Gives the body time to eliminate lactic acid and other waste products
- Reduces anxiety
- Eliminates stressful thoughts
- Helps with clear thinking
- Improves focus and concentration
- Reduces irritability
- Reduces stress headaches

## Meditation Techniques

The essence of meditation is to quieten your thoughts by focusing completely on just one thing. Unlike hypnosis, which is more of a passive experience, meditation is an active process which seeks to exclude outside thoughts by concentrating all mental faculties on the subject of meditation.

In all cases it helps if your body is relaxed. It should be in a position that you can comfortably sustain for a period of time (20 – 30 minutes is ideal). If you choose, and you are sufficiently supple, then the lotus position may be appropriate. Otherwise, sitting in a comfortable chair or lying on a bed may be equally effective.

A number of different techniques may be used. Which one you choose is a matter of personal taste. Some of these are detailed below:

- **Breathing**

Focus your attention on your breathing. Breathe in through your nose, noticing your stomach rising as you do so. Hold the breath for as long as is comfortable, usually a few seconds and exhale slowly through your mouth. Concentrate on the breaths as you draw the air in and out. You could visualise health and relaxation flowing into your body when you inhale, and stress or pain flowing out when you exhale.

- **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, colour differences, texture, temperature and movement of the object. Objects often used are flowers, candle flames or flowing designs.

- **Focus on a sound**

Some people like to focus on sounds such as ocean waves, natural environment, music or any sound/s that you find particularly pleasing.

- **Imagery**

As mentioned in the previous section 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. Involve all your senses in the imagery: see the place, hear the sounds, smell the aromas, feel the temperature and the movement of the wind. Enjoy the location in your mind.

In all cases it is important to keep your attention focused. If external thoughts or distractions wander in, let them drift away. If necessary, visualise attaching the thoughts to objects and then move the objects out of your attention.

You may find that your attention keeps breaking as you worry that time runs out. In this case it may be easiest to set an alarm to go off to conclude your meditating.

You will find that as you practise meditation your attention will improve.

# Appendix 4: Stress Reduction Strategies – Physical Relaxation Techniques

These are useful where stress is caused by physical processes in the body, perhaps where muscles are tense, or where you are experiencing the effects of adrenaline.

## Taking Exercise

Taking frequent effective exercise is probably one of the best physical stress-reduction techniques available. Exercise not only improves health and reduces stress caused by lack of fitness, it also relaxes tense muscles and improves quality of sleep.



Exercise has a number of other positive benefits. It improves blood flow to the brain, bringing additional sugars and oxygen which may be needed when thinking intensely.

When you concentrate, the neurones of the brain function more intensely. As this happens, toxic waste products accumulate which may cause unclear thinking in the short term and may even damage the brain in the long term. By exercising you speed the flow of blood through the brain, moving these waste products faster. Blood flow is improved so that even when you are not exercising, waste is eliminated more efficiently.

Exercise causes release of chemicals called endorphins into the blood stream resulting in a feeling of happiness and well-being.

There are a lot of wrong approaches to exercise. Many traditionally recommended forms of exercise can actually damage the body in the medium or long term. It is worth finding reputable and up-to-date sources of advice on exercise, possibly from your doctor or fitness clubs, in order to have a customised exercise plan drawn up for you.

An important thing to remember is that exercise should be fun – if you do not enjoy it, then you will probably not keep doing it.

Most studies recommend exercising for at least thirty minutes daily in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle.



## Progressive Muscular Relaxation

Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR) is a purely physical technique for relaxing your body when 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 you consciously relax them again as much as you can.

You can apply PMR to any or all of the muscle groups in your body depending on whether you want to relax just a single area or your whole body.

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 the muscles.

Although you might well be able to relax muscles as far without the initial tension, tensing the muscle helps to provide a starting point for the exercise. It helps in gauging the initial level of tension in the muscle.

For maximum relaxation you can use PMR in conjunction with breathing techniques and imagery (e.g. of stress flowing out of the body).

It can also be effective to link the exercise of PMR to a keyword that you can say to yourself. Associating the feeling of relaxation with the keyword means that in a moment of tension you can bring the feeling of relaxation purely by repeating that word.

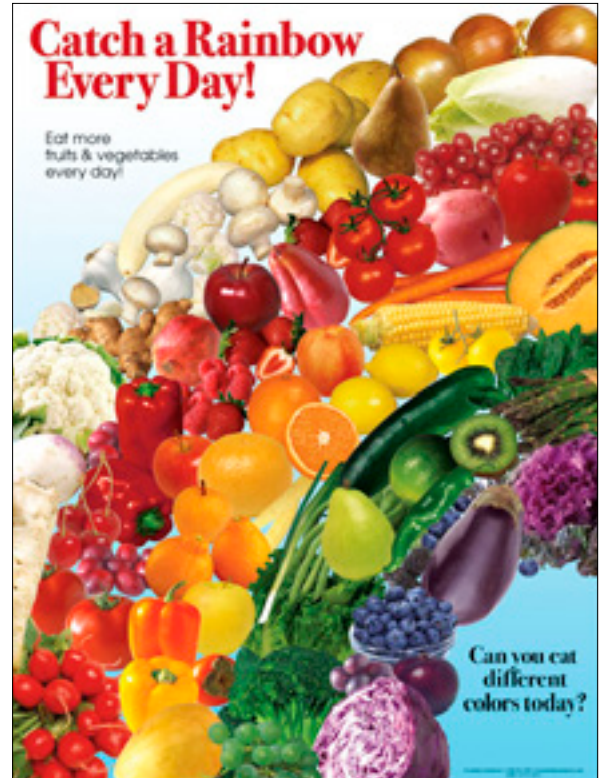
# Appendix 5: Health & Wellbeing

## Diet

Diet is important. Part of the stress we experience on a daily basis may be caused by chemicals we consume through diet and stimulants. Eating breakfast every day, plenty of fruit and vegetables and including protein in food intake every 3 to 4 hours will all help to maintain good health.

Our fluid levels are also important. The European Food Safety Authority recommends that women should drink approximately 1.6 litres of fluid and men should drink approximately 2.0 litres of fluid per day. That is about eight glasses of 200ml each for a woman, and 10 glasses of 200ml each for a man. Drinking water is an excellent form of hydration.

Similarly, if we are eating an unbalanced diet we may be depriving our bodies of essential nutrients. Eating too much of the wrong foods over a long period of time causes obesity which in turn puts the heart and lungs under stress, overloads the organs and reduces stamina. It is good to note the effects of the following:



- **Caffeine**

Caffeine is a stimulant. Consumption of too much caffeine can have side effects and cause problems such as increase of heart rate, muscle tremors, restlessness, digestive problems and insomnia.

- **Sugar**

Sugar-rich foods can raise energy in the short term. However, our bodies cope with high levels of sugar by secreting insulin to help cells absorb glucose from the bloodstream to lower blood sugar levels. Insulin can persist and continue acting after it has normalised levels of blood sugar. This can cause an energy dip. Excessive consumption of sugar and sugar related products can lead to health problems such as obesity and type 2 diabetes.

## Alcohol


The consumption of alcohol outside of the recommended safe limits can have a detrimental impact on a person's health. In large amounts, over a long period of time, alcohol will increase the risk of physical, psychological, social and occupational problems.

### What is a standard drink? <sup>1</sup>

In Ireland, a standard drink has about 10 grams of pure alcohol in it. In the UK a standard drink, also called a unit of alcohol, has about 8 grams of pure alcohol.

Here are some examples of a standard drink.

- A pub measure of spirits (35.5ml)
- A small glass of wine (12.5% volume)
- A half pint of normal beer
- An alcopop (275ml bottle)



*Binge drinking is always dangerous.  
Never drink and drive.*

A bottle of wine at 12.5% alcohol contains about seven standard drinks.

### What are the weekly alcohol limits for adults?

- up to 11 standard drinks in a week for women
- up to 17 standard drinks in a week for men

Drinks should be spaced out over the week, not consumed in one sitting. Remember to have some alcohol free days in each week, preferably on consecutive days. Drinking more than the safe levels may cause harm.

Remember, drinks measures are not always the same. Pub measures and what you pour for yourself may be very different.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hse.ie/go/alcohol/>

## Narcotics

Use of narcotics should be avoided at all times.

## Smoking Tobacco <sup>2</sup>

- 1 in every 2 smokers will die of a tobacco related disease.
- Most smokers (83%) regret that they ever started smoking and would not smoke if they had the choice again.
- Smoking takes 10 to 15 years quality years off your life.
- Every 6.5 seconds someone in the world dies from tobacco use = 1.5 million people dying needlessly each year.
- Every cigarette a person smokes reduces his/her life by five and a half minutes.
- In Ireland, smoking is the leading cause of avoidable death. Nearly 5,500 people die in Ireland each year from the effects of smoking and thousands of others are ill because of smoking-related diseases.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.quit.ie/>

# Appendix 6: Personal Action Plan

**Please contact the CSEAS if you would like to make an appointment for help in completing this Personal Action Plan.**

When we are experiencing difficult and painful levels of stress, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy suggests that we can help ourselves and improve the situation if we focus on 5 areas:

- our thinking
- our behaviour
- our environment
- our emotions
- our physical body

Small improvements in any or all of these areas can lead to noticeable reductions in our stress levels.

THE FOLLOWING IS YOUR SIMPLE PLAN TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT TIMES

INTERNAL STRESSORS

EXTERNAL STRESSORS

INTERNAL RESPONSE

EXTERNAL RESPONSE

IS THAT HELPING?

YES \_\_\_\_  
NO \_\_\_\_

WHAT WOULD YOU TELL A FRIEND?

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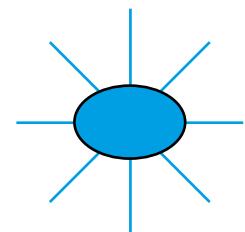
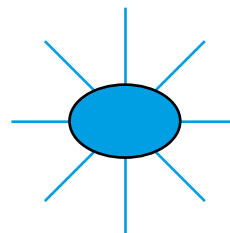
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***If you're feeling all at sea, you need to drop anchor***



ANCHORS - WHAT'S RIGHT?



WEIGHTS - WHAT'S WRONG?

**External Stress:**

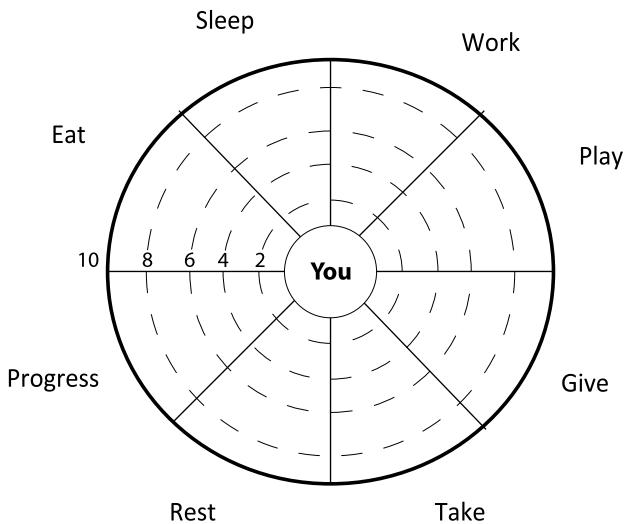
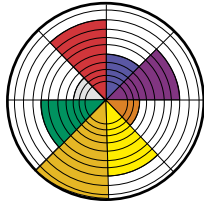
- Remove It
- Adjust to it
- Manage it



## WORK-LIFE BALANCE

### SAMPLE WHEEL OF LIFE

WHERE **2** IS TOO LITTLE  
AND **10** IS ENOUGH



### WHAT WORKED BEFORE?

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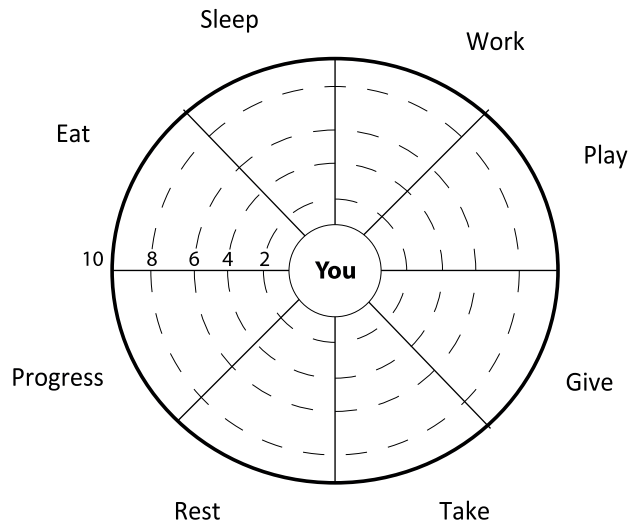


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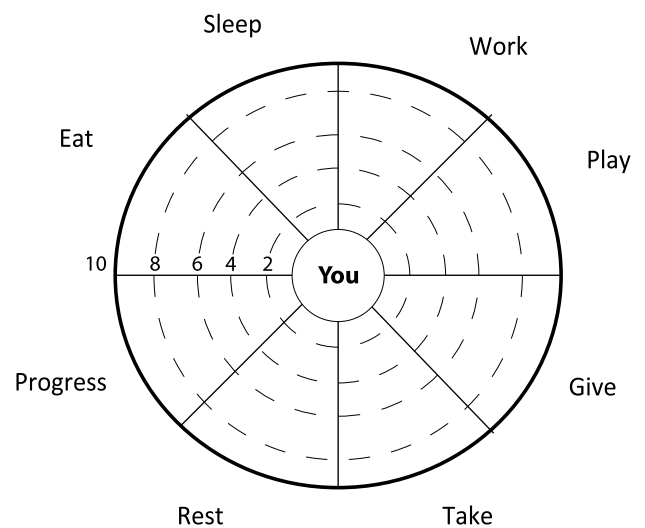
***If things were better, how  
would you know?***

## PROGRESS

Consider regular self-assessment.



**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_



**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

### TIPS TO COPE / WHAT'S NEXT?

***I will take responsibility for the changes or find the help I need.***

## Appendix 7: Supports/Resources List

Name of Organisation	Services Available	Contact Details
<b>Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS)</b>	Offers confidential* support and guidance to civil service employees who may be experiencing personal and/ or work related difficulties.  <b>* Exceptions apply – see website</b>	Tel: 0761 00 00 30 Email: <a href="mailto:cseas@per.gov.ie">cseas@per.gov.ie</a> Web: <a href="http://www.cseas.per.gov.ie">www.cseas.per.gov.ie</a>
<b>Aware – Defeat Depression</b>	AWARE provide emotional support and information to those who experience depression, and their families.	Address: 72 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin 2 Tel: 01 661 7211 Helpline: 1890 303 302 (7 days, 10am – 10 pm) Web: <a href="http://www.aware.ie">www.aware.ie</a> <a href="mailto:info@aware.ie">info@aware.ie</a>
<b>Bodywhys</b>	Bodywhys is the national voluntary organisation supporting people affected by eating disorders.	Tel: 01 2834963 Web: <a href="http://www.bodywhys.ie">www.bodywhys.ie</a> <a href="mailto:info@bodywhys.ie">info@bodywhys.ie</a>
<b>GROW</b>	GROW is a mental health organisation which helps people who have suffered, or are suffering from mental health problems.	Web: <a href="http://www.grow.ie">www.grow.ie</a> <a href="mailto:info@grow.ie">info@grow.ie</a>
<b>Mental Health Ireland</b>	Mental Health Ireland aims to promote positive mental health and to actively support persons with a mental illness, their families and carers by identifying their needs and advocating their rights.	Address: Marine Terrace, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. Tel: 01 2841166 Web: <a href="http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie">www.mentalhealthireland.ie</a> <a href="mailto:info@mentalhealthireland.ie">info@mentalhealthireland.ie</a>
<b>Samaritans</b>	Samaritans Ireland provides 24-hour emotional support to anyone struggling to cope.	Tel: 116 123 (freephone) 24 hours a day – 365 days a year Web: <a href="http://www.samaritans.org">www.samaritans.org</a> <a href="mailto:jo@samaritans.org">jo@samaritans.org</a>

Name of Organisation	Services Available	Contact Details
<b>See Change - The National Mental Health Stigma Reduction Partnership</b>	See Change is an alliance of organisations working together through the National Stigma Reduction Partnership to bring about positive change in public attitudes and behaviour towards people with mental health problems.	Address: c/o 38 Blessington Street, Dublin 7 Tel: 01 8601620 Web: <a href="http://www.seechange.ie">www.seechange.ie</a> <a href="mailto:info@seechange.ie">info@seechange.ie</a>
<b>Shine – supporting people affected by mental ill-health</b>	Shine supports people with mental ill health and their families and friends.	Address: 38 Blessington Street, Dublin 7 Tel: 01 8601620 Web: <a href="http://www.shineonline.ie">www.shineonline.ie</a> <a href="mailto:info@shineonline.ie">info@shineonline.ie</a>
<b>Health Service Executive (HSE)</b>	The HSE provides public health and social services in hospitals, health facilities and communities across the country. Some services are nationwide while others differ according to location.	HSE Info line: 1850 24 1850 Web: <a href="http://www.hse.ie">www.hse.ie</a>









