



MIND TOOLS

Essential skills for an excellent career



Techniques for Controlling Stress

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Mind Tools - Practical Thinking Skills for an Excellent Life!

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Techniques for Controlling Stress

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8. Techniques for Controlling Stress

This Mind Tools section shows you how to survive intense stress and thrive under pressures that many people would find intolerable. This is essential if you want to enjoy a truly challenging career.

The first part helps you to understand stress and what causes it: this is an important starting point for effective stress management. It introduces you to the three main approaches to stress management, and then shows you how you can identify the key sources of stress in your life.

We then look at range of techniques for managing these stresses. Unlike other approaches to stress management, the Mind Tools approach is, where possible, to tackle stress at source. This means that not only do we show you how to deal with the symptoms of stress, we show you how to deal with the underlying causes as well.

The tools we will discuss are:

- Stress Diaries – *Understanding the short term stress in your life*
- Job Analysis – *The first step in managing job overload*
- Performance Planning – *Managing the stress of an important performance*
- Imagery – *Mental stress management*
- Physical Relaxation techniques
- Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking
- Rest, Relaxation and Sleep
- Burnout Self-Test – *Checking yourself for burnout*

By the end of the section, you should have a much clearer understanding of stress and the importance of managing it. You should be able to analyze the points of pressure in your life, and plan to neutralize them. You will also have access to a good range of different stress reduction techniques.

Introduction - What Stress Is...

Much research has been conducted into stress over the last hundred years. Some of the theories behind it are now settled and accepted; others are still being researched and debated. During this time, there seems to have been something approaching open warfare between competing theories and 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.

Definitions

Hans Selye was one of the founding fathers of stress research. His 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. Stress is viewed as a ‘bad thing’, with a range of harmful biochemical and long-term effects. These effects 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.”**

This is the main definition used by this section of Mind Tools, 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.

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. As well as 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.

Not only life-threatening events trigger this reaction: We experience it almost any time we come across something unexpected or something that frustrates our goals. When the threat is small, our response is small and we often do not notice it among the many other distractions of a stressful situation.

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.

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.

In the short term, we need to keep this fight-or-flight response under control to be effective in our jobs. In the long term we need to keep it under control to avoid problems of poor health and burnout.

Introducing Stress Management

There are very many proven skills that we can use to manage stress. These help us to remain calm and effective in high pressure situations, and help us avoid the problems of long term stress.

These skills fall into three main groups:

- **Action-oriented skills:** In which we seek to confront the problem causing the stress, often changing the environment or the situation;
- **Emotionally-oriented skills:** 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 skills:** Where something has happened over which we have no power and no emotional control, and where our focus must be on surviving the stress.

In the rest of this section of Mind Tools, we look at some important techniques in each of these three groups.

Stress Diaries (8.1)

Function: Understanding the short term stress in your life

Before you can deal effectively with the stress in your life, you need to identify the key sources of stress in it. This helps you to deal with the most important sources of stress first and separate these from the things that are, in reality, minor irritants. Stress Diaries are useful tools for doing this.

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.

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

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.

- 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.

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.

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.
- 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.

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.

As well as 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.

Key points:

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 a regular diary entry with the headings above. 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.

Job Analysis, Short-Form (8.2)

Function: **The first step in managing job overload**

We have all experienced that appalling sense of having too much work to do and too little time to do it in. We can choose to ignore the problem and work unreasonably long hours to stay on top of our workload. The risks here are that we become exhausted, that we have so much to do that we do a poor quality job, and that we neglect other areas of our life. Each of these can lead to intense stress.

The alternative is to work more intelligently, by focusing on the things that are important for job success and reducing the time we spend on low priority tasks. Job Analysis is the first step in doing this.

Introduction: Keeping a stress diary is an effective way of finding out what causes you stress, the level of stress you prefer, and your effectiveness under pressure.

The first of the action-oriented skills that we look at is Job Analysis. Job Analysis is a key technique for managing job overload – an important source of stress.

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 easy to overlook.

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 short-form we discuss here assumes that your organization is already well organized and that its job descriptions, review criteria and incentives are well-aligned and correct. The long-form (discussed within [Managing Stress for Career Success](#)), helps you to deal with jobs where this is not the case – here, inconsistent job design can cause enormous stress.

Using the tool: Keeping a stress diary is an effective way of finding out what causes you stress, the level of stress you prefer, and your effectiveness under pressure.

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.

6. Take Action:

You should now know what you have to do to be successful in your job. You should have a good idea of the most important things that you have to do, and also the least important.

Where you can drop the less-important tasks, do so. Where you can de-prioritize them, do so.

Where you need more resource or training to do your job, negotiate for this.

Remember to be a little sensitive in the way you do this: Good teamwork often means helping other people out with jobs that do not benefit you. However, do not let people

take advantage of you: Be assertive in explaining that you have your own work to do. If you cannot drop tasks, delegate them or negotiate longer time scales.

Key points:

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 helps you to manage the stress of job overload by helping to decide which jobs you should drop.

Performance Planning (8.3)

Function: **Planning to manage the stress of an important performance**

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. This is even worse when we have experienced problems in the run up to the event. This article helps you deal with this by helping you to prepare well for future performances.

How to use tool: The Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking technique that we look at later may be enough to help you manage the fears, anxieties and negative thoughts that may arise in a small performance.

For larger 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:

- Things you can eliminate by appropriate preparation, including making back-up arrangements and acquiring appropriate additional or spare equipment;
- Things you can manage by avoiding unnecessary risk; and
- 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 stress anticipation skills to ensure that you are properly prepared to manage stress. Then use thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking skills 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.

Key points:

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 also helps you to avoid the unpleasant stresses that come from poor preparation, meaning that you can deliver your performance in a relaxed, positive and focused frame of mind, whatever problems or upsets may have occurred.

Imagery (8.4)

Function: **Mental stress management**

Sometimes we are not able to change our environment to manage stress – this may be the case where we do not have the power to change a situation, or where we are about to give an important performance. Imagery is a useful skill for relaxing in these situations.

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

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 biofeedback equipment. By imagining a pleasant and relaxing scene (which reduces stress) you can objectively see the measured stress in your body reduce. By imagining an unpleasant and stressful situation, you can see 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: 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.

Key points: With imagery, you substitute actual experience with scenes from your imagination. Your body reacts to these imagined scenes almost as if they were real, calming you down and letting adrenaline disperse.

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 diminish.

Physical Relaxation Techniques (8.5)

Physical relaxation techniques are as effective as mental techniques in reducing stress. In fact, the best relaxation is achieved by using physical and mental techniques together.

How to use tool: 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".

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

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 normally. Then, consciously relax the muscles even further so that you are as relaxed as possible.

By tensing your muscles first, you will 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. 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.

The Relaxation Response

'The Relaxation Response' is the name of a book published by Dr Herbert Benson of Harvard University 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 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 instead of counting breaths in step 5. Again, you can prove to yourself that this works using the biofeedback equipment.

Key points:

“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 both handling nerves prior to an important performance, and reducing stress generally.

Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking (8.6)

Quite often, our experience of stress comes from our perception of the situation. Sometimes that perception is right, but quite often it is not. Often we are unreasonably harsh with ourselves or instinctively jump to wrong conclusions about people's motives. This can send us into a downward spiral of negative thinking that can be hard to break.

Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking is the most basic of a number of tools that can be used to change this negative thinking.

Introduction: 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 to use tool: 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.

One approach to it is to observe your stream of consciousness as you think about a stressful situation. 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. 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:

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.

Key points: This set of tools helps you to manage and counter the stress of 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.

Rest, Relaxation and Sleep (8.7)

Function: **The first step in managing job overload**

Up to now we have looked at ways of managing specific, short-term stresses.

Within Managing Stress for Career Success, we also look at long-term stress. A key facet of this is the way that people can sustain intense levels of stress for a while, but then burn out.

How to use tool: We will look at burnout in more detail in the next article. 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 unpleasant 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 noncompetitive 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 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.

Burnout Self-Test - Checking Yourself for Burnout

Function: **Checking yourself for burnout**

Burnout occurs when passionate, committed people become disillusioned with a job or career from which they have previously derived much of their identity and meaning. It comes as the things that inspire passion and enthusiasm lose their meaning, and tedious or unpleasant things crowd in.

*This tool helps you to check yourself for burnout. It is an excerpt from *Managing Stress for Career Success*, the Mind Tools stress management masterclass.*

How to use tool: 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.

There are two easy ways of using the test. Either:

- Work through Figure 2 (below) on paper and calculate values manually, or
- Download the [template](http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/BurnoutSelfTest.xls) 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.

To use this technique, either work through the template or print off and work through the table below.

Checking Yourself for Burnout

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For each question, put a tick in the column that most applies. Put one tick only in each row.

	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?					

	Question	Not At All	Rarely	Some	Often	Very Often
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?					
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):						

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 below.

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

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.

Key points: 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 above and score appropriately, or download the [template](http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/BurnoutSelfTest.xls) from <http://www.mindtools.com/courses/SMMC/BurnoutSelfTest.xls> and fill this in.

Moving On...

We have put a great deal of effort into developing and testing this e-book to make it as 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 this e-book and found it useful, please [let us know!](#)

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Best wishes, and enjoy using Mind Tools!



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