

INFORMATION ABOUT *STRESS* FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

This information leaflet is written for health professionals: not just information to convey to your patients or client; but mainly information for yourself. You do a very necessary & worthwhile job. It is a difficult job that you do at the best of times. You almost certainly work under great stress. This leaflet provides some information that may help you to do it better.

Information about Stress:

Stress is one the major problems facing us today: we just simply were not designed to live in cities, work in offices and factories, and live at the pace that we live at. Our bodies are basically not designed to cope with the number, variety and constancy of the stressors found of modern life. We also work longer, commute further, shop more and sleep 20% less than we did 100 years ago. In the UK, at least 40 million working days are lost each year due to stress. Psycho-physiological disorders, those concerning the body-mind, are nearly always caused by stress, or considerably worsened by stress.

Causes of Stress:

The causes of stress are numerous and include: Major life changes and life events; Noise; Crowds; Poor sleep, bad diet & an unhealthy lifestyle; alcohol or drug misuse (also all symptoms); Aggravation & Abuse; Pressure to perform (work, school, sports, etc.); Traffic; Chemicals; Trauma; Poverty; Discrimination; Frustration; Pregnancy; Work Pressures; Negative Emotions; Loneliness; Family Conflicts; Money Worries; Alienation; Uncertainty; Illness; Unemployment; Sexual Problems; Identity Problems; Relationship Difficulties; Going to College; Loss of any kind - theft; relationship break-up; divorce, redundancy; abandonment, death; you name it!

Symptoms:

The physical symptoms of stress are varied. You may experience:

- Feeling tired all the time;
- Your body feeling heavy and listless;
- Poor sleep;
- Either a poor appetite, or cravings for certain foods: chocolate, junk food, coffee, alcohol, etc.;
- Constipation or diarrhoea;
- Feeling that you want to cry a lot;
- Low sex drive;
- Nervous habits like nail biting, hair pulling, skin picking, etc.
- Breathless feelings;
- General malaise and lack of energy;
- Spots, blemishes or skin rash;
- Hard to relax.

The emotional symptoms of stress are also varied. You may experience:

- Feeling so low or sad that you want to cry more than usual;
- Feelings of anger or irritation;
- Depression;
- Feelings of low self-esteem and of nothing good around you (pessimism);
- Feeling inadequate or helpless;
- Loss of interest in friend, activities, social life, etc.;
- Finding it very hard to make decisions;
- Low motivation;
- Loss of all desires;
- Unable to make contact with friends;
- Finding emotional expression very hard.

Health Implications:

Stress has been ascribed as a major factor in: cardiovascular disorders (hypertension and coronary heart disease); asthma and other respiratory disorders; colds and fevers; ulcers and gastritis; several skin disorders; backaches; headaches; the speed in growth of several cancers; chronic infections; infertility and sexual disorders. Stress also negatively affects our intake of cigarettes, alcohol, sugar and carbohydrates, legal and illegal drugs; family, social and work relationships, our capacity for pleasure, our levels of tolerance, and our general sense of self-esteem. It also increases our aggression. In short, it is a killer.

It is one of the main causes of accidents at work and the Health & Safety Executive is now focussing on reducing stress at work. There have been a couple of legal cases that have also demonstrated that it is the employers' responsibility if an employee cannot function properly, or suffers from stress-related illnesses.

There are several main sets of strategies that can considerably help to reduce stress. They work best in synergy with each other, and most practitioners would agree that a combination of these is the only, repeat only, way to reverse long-standing (chronic) conditions of stress. They share one common feature: they all help the body restore its natural functioning.

Your body is supremely designed to heal itself, and it will do so, given half a chance. What not to do is to prevent it from healing by resorting (in order to cope with stress) to cigarettes, alcohol, drugs (including caffeine & sugar) or an inappropriate diet. Other activities like gambling, inappropriate relationships, binge-outs, aggression, or other "remedies" to deal with stress are also self-destructive. However, if some combination of self-healing methods of stress reduction are not being utilised, nothing else you do will make a great deal of difference.

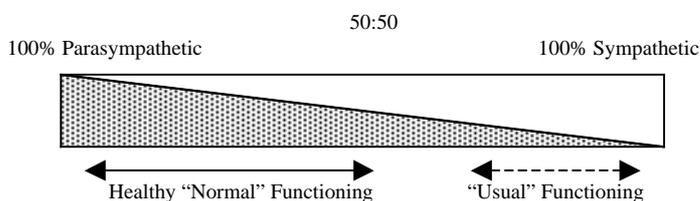
THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (ANS)

About the ANS:

Our bodies work almost exactly the same as the body of every other animal on this planet. Our internal organs, the "viscera" of our body (the heart, stomach and intestines) are regulated by one of the main nervous systems in our body called the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). The ANS regulates most of the internal organs and also the background condition of the muscles that surround and contain the body. Mostly we are unaware of the workings of the ANS because it functions in an involuntary or reflexive manner, below the level of our consciousness.

The ANS performs most importantly in different two situations: (i) In emergencies that require us to "fight" for our lives or to take "flight" and run away; and (ii) in non-emergency situations (which should be most of the time) that allow us to "rest" and "digest" – this system has evolved over many millions of years. Unfortunately in the last few thousand years, we got 'smart' and became 'civilised'. Our bodies have not adapted so quickly, and herein lies the problem.

The ANS is divided into two almost totally separate parts: the sympathetic nervous system (the adrenaline based "survival" part) and the parasympathetic (or "relaxation") part. They tend to work in opposition: when one is working, the other is not.



The Sympathetic Nervous System:

It is a nice, sunny day...you are taking a nice walk in the woods. Suddenly, an angry bear appears in your path. Do you stay and "fight for your life" OR do you turn and run away "like blazes"? These are your basic animal survival "Fight or Flight" responses. In these types of situations, the "sympathetic" part of the ANS switches into action automatically - it uses energy, your blood pressure increases, your heart beats faster, and digestion slows down (you don't want to be digesting your lunch, whilst trying to stop yourself from being someone else's lunch). The sympathetic nervous system is "switched on" by an instantaneous flood of adrenaline. There is a threat, or a perceived threat. It also doesn't just operate with bears: angry bosses, a near miss by a bus, noisy teenagers in the street, being late for a meeting, a sick child, an argument, noise, worry, tension and stress – all produce adrenaline. Instead of working only for the occasional emergency (getting chased once every three weeks), this system is now working "usually" – most of the time.

Physiologically, all of the motoric or skeletal muscles that we use for movement are also "primed" or tensed immediately ready to act for this 'fight or flight' reaction, whenever the sympathetic nervous system operates and adrenaline floods into our system. If we manage to "survive" through the intense physical activity that we are "primed" for, the adrenaline is broken down and our ANS returns to a more relaxed state. The muscles of our body relax. If we don't act physically, the stress hormones (cortico-steroids) stay in our system, and then build up with the next "startle". We stay "tense" and this builds up into chronic stress. Soon we are "climbing walls".

The Parasympathetic Nervous System

It is a nice, sunny day...you are taking a nice walk in the park. This time, however, you decide to relax on a comfortable bench in the sunshine. This calls for the more normal (rest and digest) responses. Now is the time for the parasympathetic nervous system to work to save energy; your blood pressure decreases, your heart beats more slowly, and your digestion starts up working again. This should be our "normal" state, most of the time, but how often does it usually happen? Once an hour: once a day, once a week? We have gone and got these two systems effectively reversed and this is what is affecting our capacity to cope – and our health.

The Autonomic Nervous System

It should be noted that the autonomic nervous system is always working. It is NOT only active during "fight or flight" or "rest and digest" situations. Rather, the autonomic nervous system acts to maintain our normal internal functioning and works in conjunction with the other somatic nervous systems to maintain our homeostasis and general well-being.

The main operating nerve centres of the ANS are located in the spinal cord and the brain stem, well below the level of normal consciousness. The ANS (sympathetic & parasympathetic) affects many parts of the body: the eye muscle; salivary glands; oral/nasal mucosa; the heart; the bronchial muscles of the lung; the stomach; the small & large intestine; the liver; kidneys; the bladder wall and anal sphincter; the enteric nervous system, which is a meshwork of nerve fibres that innervate the viscera (gastrointestinal tract, pancreas, and gall bladder); the medulla; and all the major motoric (movement) muscles as well. However, in stress situations, there are also chemical hormones called neuropeptides that flow throughout the body. Candace Pert describes these as the "Molecules of Emotion" in her book with the same name. Emotions seem to flood chemically throughout our bodies and this obviously has an additional effect.

It is evident, that whilst we are not constantly aware of the activity of the autonomic nervous system as we can be of unusual sensory and motor events, the normal functioning of the ANS, day and night, from heart-beat to heart-beat, plays a largely unconscious but vital role in our general health and livelihood. It is the main system through which we react to stressful situations, and it is also very significant in the 'build-up' and 'storage' of stress. Adrenaline can easily be 'turned on' by any perceived threat, like a "bear in the woods", but also by many other sources of stress, both external and internal. However, it is not so easily "turned off" and there is no real chemical antagonist. Normally the body breaks down and discharges adrenaline and other stress hormones through the intense physical activity that it is designed to stimulate: fighting or running away. Alternately, it takes much longer periods of very gentle relaxed activity to "digest" or absorb these stress hormones. It is therefore usually necessary both to increase physical activity (in order to burn them off) as well as to increase forms of relaxed or pleasurable activity (to digest them) in order to restore a healthier balance within the ANS.

In order to combat chronic stress, you will need to build up your own 'recovery plan', depending upon what the main stressors in your life are. There is no one simple formula, common for all. Often the recovery components are in two different parts: a practical part and an emotional or psychological part. If you are constantly being late, not only must you plan your day better and give yourself more time, but you must also look at some of the self-destructive or (possibly) passive-aggressive tendencies that might lie behind this symptom of constantly being late. If you are continually feeling run down and regularly getting ill, then you should on one hand find ways to boost your general health and immune system, as well as looking at some of the causes behind your stress, ill health or depression. If you are trying to do too much in too little time, then you need to work (with your superiors, perhaps) on your job description, work-load, scheduling and your referral possibilities, as well as considering (more privately) why you might be trying so hard, or not standing up for yourself, or not saying "No. Enough." The physical and the emotional aspects of our selves that form the combined unit of our body-mind are so complexly inter-related that they cannot be functionally separated. We have to attend to both aspects.

STRESS @ WORK¹

Firstly, under modern Health & Safety regulations, management have a legal obligation to take all reasonable and appropriate steps to try to reduce stress at work for their employees. This is a very significant point, often overlooked, sometimes conveniently by management or sometimes out of a sense of over-responsibility by the employees.

How do you know if you, or someone who works for you or with you, is suffering from burnout? Here are some of the early warning signs, especially if usually foreign to that person:

- Chronic fatigue - exhaustion, tiredness, a sense of being physically run down
- Anger at those making demands on one; frustration at set-backs
- Self-criticism for putting up with the demands, for not doing 'well enough'
- Reduced ability to share feelings, thoughts, socialise,
- Inner sense of being besieged, under-pressure, over-loaded, burn-out, run-down, etc.
- Exploding easily at seemingly inconsequential things, or at 'loved ones'; general irritability
- Frequent headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, skin problems, muscular tensions,
- Marked weight loss or gain; flushed or out-of-breath; increased absenteeism
- Sleeplessness and/or anxiety and depression
- Increased alcohol, cigarette, coffee, sugar, medication consumption
- Mood changes: suspiciousness, feelings of helplessness, negativity, despair
- Increased degree of risk taking; having an affair; recreational gambling; extreme sports, etc.

Whilst many pressures can come from outside through inappropriate work schedules, deadlines, filling-in for absent others, bullying, poor management, etc., many pressures are internal, largely self-inflicted, though often supported by the underlying work ethic: often pressures of work are added to by pressures at home.

Stress-Building Work Beliefs

Perfectionism

- Do you feel a constant pressure to achieve?
- Do you criticize yourself when you're not perfect?
- Do you feel you haven't done enough no matter how hard you try?
- Do you give up pleasure in order to be the best in everything you do?

Control

- Do you have to be perfectly in control at all times?
- Do you worry about how you appear to others when you are nervous?
- Do you feel that any lack of control is a sign of weakness or failure?
- Are you uncomfortable delegating projects to others?

People Pleasing

- Does your self-esteem depend on everyone else's opinion of you?
- Do you sometimes avoid assignments because you're afraid of disappointing your boss?
- Are you better at caring for others than caring for yourself?
- Do you keep most negative feelings inside to avoid displeasing others?

Competence

- Do you feel you can never do as good a job as other people?
- Do you feel your judgment is poor?
- Do you feel you lack common sense?
- Do you feel like an impostor when told your work is good?

"Yes" answers indicate potential roadblocks to a stress-free, or less-stressed work life. You will need to challenge some of these belief systems. You may need to discuss these with your colleagues or line manager.

¹ Some of this section was adapted from: Babior and Goldman: *Overcoming Panic, Anxiety and Phobias* (1996) Whole Person Press
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You may also need to experiment a little and try to act in a way that is different to your usual behaviour: then, evaluate the results. For example, if you feel overburdened because of a need to control, delegate a task, and observe the consequences. Notice your feelings throughout the process. Become more aware of how your stress-building beliefs affect your behaviour. Try to replace these thought-forms with more realistic and less stressful thoughts.

Helpful Techniques:

Cognitive

Try to replace any negative ‘stress-building’ statements with more positive ‘stress-busting’ ones. This takes practice, but the results are well worth it.

Examples of Stress Builders and Stress Busters:

Stress Builder #1:	"I'll never get this project done on time."
Stress Buster #1:	"If I stay focused and take it one step at a time, I'll make steady progress."
Stress Builder #2:	"My supervisor didn't say good morning. He's probably displeased with my work, and I'll get a bad evaluation."
Stress Buster #2:	"I'm jumping to conclusions. My supervisor may have been in a bad mood. So far all my evaluations have been positive, so unless I get some negative feedback, I'll assume my supervisor is pleased with my work."
Stress Builder #3:	"I can't get the mistake on page 53 out of my mind. The paper is ruined. I have disappointed everyone."
Stress Buster #3:	"No one is perfect. I did my best. I'm overreacting to one mistake when the overall report is fine."

Try to add or build-in similar “Stress Busters” to your work life: your ability to handle difficult challenges in the workplace will improve and the benefits will transfer over into other areas of your life as well. Please consider adopting concepts like “*Good Enough*” ... or “*I am paid to work from 9 to 5: I have done everything asked of me so far reasonably well: working regularly up to 7pm means they should probably be employing extra staff: So This Is Not My Problem!*” ... or “*I have a family and a social life as well as work. I actually work better when I am rested and enjoying a more rounded life.*”

Tension Breaks

- Take a minimum of a couple of minutes “off” every half-hour: Walk away from your workstation: Breathe differently: Move your shoulders about: Yawn and stretch: Drink some water. You will feel better, more alert, and somewhat refreshed.
- Schedule 5 minutes between clients or patients, not just to write up notes properly and prepare yourself for the next person (who deserves your full attention), but also for yourself.
- Take your mid-morning and mid-afternoon coffee break, even if it is only for 10 to 15 minutes. Get outside and get some fresh air, or open the window and allow in a draught (for a moment or two). Walk along the corridor and chat to someone. Do something different. You need the break. It is often statutory (you have a right to it). People, all too often, work through their breaks and their work will eventually suffer as a result.
- Arrive on time and aim to leave regularly on time. There are occasions when the job demands that little bit extra overtime: make sure these are only ‘occasions’. Otherwise, if you are doing this regularly, you are effectively doing unpaid overtime. However, it may suit you, and your managers, for you to arrive early – but then leave early as well, or get time ‘in lieu’ – but make sure this is clearly understood and properly noted.

ANTI-STRESS PRINCIPLES

For you as individuals, there is quite a lot that you can do for yourself, and the main anti-stress principles are:

1. **Regularly Practiced Relaxation:**

Try to do this for an absolute minimum of 10 minutes twice a day; ideally 15-20 minutes twice a day. Look for ways of breathing deeper, and more regularly at first: then try doing this with an absence of any 'busy' thoughts, and then trying for an inner feeling of relaxation and warmth throughout your body. It does not matter if this sort of method is called "Deep Relaxation", "Heart Coherence", "Autogenic Technique" or is some form of formal meditation, the label or the method is relatively unimportant: the regular practice or experience is essential. Find something that works for you.

2. **Managing Present Conflicts & Stress Better:**

There are many simple ways of doing this, though they are not, by any means, usually easy. There are lots of different techniques, and there are lots of suggestions in many different self-help books: again the method is not important; the principles are:

- Identify what your stressors are. External stressors can be: pollution, hydrogenated fats, smoking & alcohol, excessive sun exposure, heavy workloads, emotional problems, bereavement, divorce or separation, difficulties at home or work, high risk factors, difficult case loads. Internal stressors can be: Food allergies and intolerances, auto-immune diseases, high cholesterol, metabolic waste not being eliminated properly, blood sugar imbalances (& diabetes), hormonal imbalances, nutritional deficiencies, endogenous depression (from chemical imbalance), etc. Try to find ways of reducing these stressors: with the external ones, others are probably in the same situation: discuss these at staff meetings. With the internal ones, discuss these with someone who knows you well and whose opinion you value.
- With conflicts, go to the source of the conflict: check out the time & place; approach the person amicably; talk about (their) difficult behaviour first, and then how you are affected by it; finally say what you need to or would like to happen now. If this does not work, then at least you have tried. You may now need outside help to resolve the conflict if it continues further: managers, supervisors, head of department, union, HR dept., etc should provide this.
- Prepare in advance for any known events: get good information; don't rush things; don't leave things to the last minute; don't skimp. Prioritise the important or immediate tasks. Know what you do well and stick to that. Take one day at a time. Tomorrow will be different.
- Try to develop a more positive attitude to yourself, your work and family, and the world around you. Learn not to be a perfectionist. Do not overspend or get into debt (any further). Try not to escape from the present. Address any problems now!
- If all of this doesn't work, go and talk to someone. Ask for support. Get some professional help: be it from the HR or H&S dept, a staff counsellor, someone in your church, etc. Also listen to those around you; they can often see your situation more clearly than you can. Whatever the cost to your pride, pocket or principles, just do it. Life is complicated enough already without more everyday stress and conflict to deal with.

3. **Dealing with Trauma and Painful Memories:**

If there have been traumatic events and/or events that provoke anger, sadness or other painful memories, these really need to be worked on, talked through, and eventually come to terms with in some way. You will not heal these fully if you are still traumatised, or if these 'old wounds' are still suppurating emotionally. The methods that you use: EMDR, psychotherapy, emotional counselling, etc. are relatively unimportant, but the process of emotional healing is *totally* necessary. Be as honest with yourself as possible about your need to heal.

4. Enriching Your Life and Relationships:

Try to combine work and pleasurable activities. Suggest a relaxed staff meeting occasionally, in a different environment. Talk more to those around you; spend more time with them; listen to them (really listen); and value these people more. Discover more about their background, their thinking (general & specific), their feelings, and their ideas. Do things with them. Ask about what affects them, what troubles them. Talk to them about what troubles you have; open up and share a bit more. Respect their views and how they cope: and how they cope with you. Empathy is a key concept in close relationships. Also learn to say “No” to those who you feel are imposing on you, using you, or abusing the relationship. Become more aware of your own limits and boundaries.

5. Rebalancing Your Diet:

When we are stressed, or in distress, our diet often goes to pieces and we focus on comfort foods; often our alcohol and drug intake increases. We are what we eat and the road back to health usually means adopting a better balanced diet. Again, the techniques are varied, and most people know the main principles: reduce unhealthy (animal) fats; increase healthy (Omega-3) fats; reduce carbohydrates considerably; drink much more water – *at least 2 litres a day*; eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day; eat less processed & more organic and home-cooked, if possible; cut out some of your sugar, caffeine and salt intake.

Simple: but not easy!

6. Exercise More:

The important features are not what you do, but how much and how often. Regularity is essential; and so is getting sweaty. Twenty minutes three times a week is the absolute ideal rock-bottom minimum. This sort of exercise burns off those stress hormones. Try to vary the pace and vary the type of exercise. Exercise that is enjoyable is also probably much better for you: a forty-minute stiff walk to the nearest hilltop is sometimes better than pounding away on a running machine for the same period. Playing ping-pong in the basement, or football in the park with the kids is usually more fun (even if you lose) than bench-pressing weights with macho body-builders in the gym. Remember that these are all principles of de-stressing: so don't stress yourself doing exercise.

7. Regular Sleep and Waking Gently:

Getting back into a regular sleep pattern is one of the most essential ways of achieving a more relaxed lifestyle.

Firstly always try to go to bed at the same time, and to wake up at the same time. Try to avoid stressors like coffee, sugar and alcohol right before sleep. A gentle walk after dinner can be a good relaxant; so can a nice warm bath or massage.

Then try to adjust the amount of sleep you get to the right amount for you: different people need different amounts: anywhere between six to eight hours is the most common.

Then try 'dawn simulators' or a light (on a timer) going on gently a few minutes before the alarm clock wakens you. Try to spend a few minutes peacefully in bed, once awake, before getting up. Don't rush into the day already stressed.

8. Focus on Your Health:

Your health is important and it is not a constant. It needs to be worked at actively in order for you to stay healthy. Take more care of yourself, on all different levels. You need to look after yourself, in order to continue to look after others. You need lots of pleasurable relaxation.

Explore some of the other activities & possibilities that are around you. Try doing something different for a change, as you may have got yourself into a rut. Take a little time out, a long week-end break, if possible as this can really refresh you. Listen to your favourite music.

Consider also some of the more holistic approaches, some of the alternative health concepts, or complementary medicine perspectives. Massage, tai chi, jacuzzis, acupuncture, tea-tree oil, or lavender oil baths can often help: so treat yourself a little.

9. Seeking a Larger Connection:

We all need to feel a part of something larger than ourselves; whether it be a community group, a church, sports, an interest group or political party, or helping out with a charity or a fund-raising event. Again the method is unimportant, but the wider contact is pretty essential. Maybe there are nice people to meet in the community centre or at the sports club social. Maybe greater and deeper self-awareness will help. Maybe there are new belief systems, philosophies or spiritual practices that you would like to explore. Contact with nature is very therapeutic: via the garden, the hills, the sea, wilderness holidays, or the woods and fields. You might even want to consider some form of pilgrimage at a significant point in your life.

10. Breathe!

Breathe! Breathe! Breathe! Be much more aware of your breathing, regularly. Stop and breathe in for a count of 5, through your nose, and then exhale for a count of 6, out through the mouth. Do this a few times in between patients or clients. You can visualize breathing in various different qualities: calmness, peace, strength, whatever you need; and then breathing out all the stress and anxiety: let it all leave your body. When you breathe in, fill up your chest area, up to the shoulders. When you breathe out, let your shoulders fall, breathe out to the bottom of your belly. A hand on the belly, when you breathe deeply, can serve as a reminder. It only takes a few moments to get back into a more relaxed state of being.

11. Try Some Humour:

There is an archetypal story of a man who cured himself of cancer by locking himself in a hotel bedroom for 3 weeks with nothing but a collection of silent movies by Charlie Chaplin & Buster Keaton: he is supposed to have laughed his way back to health. Humour is very important for stress release. Hopefully you can have a good laugh with friends or colleagues at least once a day. Try to see the funny side; there usually is one. Work can and should also be fun. Healthy humour is always appropriate: laughing at others or jokes are often not.

12. Anti-Stress Foods:

Certain nutrients (antioxidants) have been shown to help with stress. The “Fighting Five” are the vitamins A, C & E and the minerals Zinc & Selenium. These disarm the stress hormones (free radicals) produced when under stress. Foods containing these antioxidants include plums, tomatoes, kiwi fruits, dark green vegetables (cabbage, kale, broccoli, spinach), seafood, sesame seeds and pumpkin seeds. Try working some of these into your diet.

With continued on-going stress, it might also be worth getting a nutritionist to check your levels of DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone) and cortisol. Stress decreases the former and increases the latter. A nutritionist can help you rebalance these. Vitamin C supports the adrenal glands and can be most easily found in black & red berries, kiwi and citrus fruits. The adrenal glands also need magnesium, found in grains, green leafy vegetables, soya beans, almonds, wheatgerm, cod & mackerel. Cutting down on sugar (and alcohol) helps the liver detoxify the body. Stimulant drinks (coffee & caffeine drinks) encourage adrenaline production and should be cut down or left out. Remember to drink lots of water – at least 2 litres a day.

Try Talking to Someone:

Finally if all else fails, talk to someone else. It is not easy at first, as it sometimes feels admitting that you cannot cope. This is false logic: you have been coping – AND you are still under stress. However many people are also capable of listening, and they can sometimes help you come at things differently. Often just the act of you talking things out can mean that you provide yourself with the answers you need. They might also have some ideas.

YOU CAN ALSO TRY SOME OF THESE:

Different Roles:

Often we get locked into a particular role or pattern of behaviour. If one can step out of this role, things can suddenly seem different, or more possible. One way of doing this is to ask others close to you what their problems are, or what is giving them stress. Stress can put enormous strain on the strongest of relationships. It can be very upsetting, exhausting, and draining (for them) to be close to someone in stress (you): they may be feeling that they are the one contributing to the situation; you may also be feeling guilty. Get talking along different lines.

Another way of taking on a different role is consciously to try to “walk a mile in someone else’s shoes.” Try to feel what it must be like to work with you.

You can also try going back to an earlier way of working together or being together, doing things together, as you did when things were better. Try to step out of your present pattern of behaviour, your present ‘role’: because it is not working for you at present.

Sometimes it can be arranged for you to work in a different department for a while, to see how things are there; or “job swap” for a while; or even take a working sabbatical.

Imagery & Voice:

The next time you are describing to someone how you are feeling, try using a little imagery: if you feel like (say) you are going down a large black plughole, so then you add in a little sound effect: “*Schlooop.*” or “*Gurgle.*” Or if your imagery is that you are seemingly carrying the world, like Atlas: then groan and grimace a bit as you describe this. You may get a light laugh, and you may feel just a little bit lighter yourself, because you can laugh with yourself, or at yourself, a little. It may also bring home a little bit more that that really is the way that you really are feeling, which might not be a bad thing, if you are going to do something about it soon.

Acting Together:

In some situations, you may well not be the only person being affected by stress. In a family, the other members are almost certainly affected; at work, there may be structural or management problems that also affect others, or it may just be a very stressful job. So it may be helpful to talk to others in similar situations to see if they feel the same.

For example: you and your work colleagues together could talk to your management, or to your union, to bring to their attention the pressing (and stressing) difficulties you are all suffering from (remember they have a legal obligation to try to reduce stress at work). A family conference, with everyone sitting round the table, can also help to resolve things: get an uncle or a grandparent to be there as well, their wisdom is often helpful. Residents acting together can help resolve difficulties with landlords; tenants and residents acting together can help to resolve situations in the street or on the estate.

Information & Advice Agencies:

There are a number of advice agencies and help-lines that may be useful. They give information and advice; they can sometimes refer you to a specialist; they are usually professional and confidential. These include: Citizens Advice Bureau; Credit Unions (for help with financial difficulties); trades unions and professional associations for work-related difficulties; and various help-lines for specific problems (consult the local telephone directory or look in the library).

There are also Self-Help groups, usually with people who have had similar experiences. It often helps not to feel that you are alone with these problems, and the ways that others have coped may be helpful to you. Self-help groups can also sometimes help train people to help others.

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