



# STRESS MANAGEMENT WORKBOOK



## PERSONAL DETAILS

NAME

CONTACT DETAILS

This is a workbook for the Staff Welfare platform “Stress Management”. The aim is to help you understand the impact stress can have.

To visit the platform, please contact Staff Welfare, [sw@iom.int](mailto:sw@iom.int)

Do you know what the effects of stress are?

Have you wondered what makes us stressed?

What are the ways to cope with stress?

Sometimes, when we are in difficult situations, we become stressed for a variety of reasons. This can affect our wellbeing and functioning at work and personal life.

It is therefore useful to review and understand our coping habits and adjust them.

The exercises in this workbook will help you learn about your current approach to stress and difficult situations.

# THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

Stress is an adaptive response that we all experience when we face something we interpret as a stressor, e.g. difficult environment or illness. It affects our minds, bodies and emotions. It is “the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change” (Hans Selye, 1936)

We all need a certain amount of stress in our lives to be able to function. In fact, stress can be positive. However, the effects of too much stress can have a negative impact. Stress leads to the release of hormones that can have a variety of effects.

## Work

The level at which we work and think can be negatively affected. There are four levels at which we can work:

- Level One**     Downloading – you ignore what is different in the new situation and do what you did before.
- Level Two**     You see the difference but still do what you did before
- Level Three**    You see the difference and adapt what you did previously
- Level Four**    You recognise that this is a brand new situation and you carry out new actions to respond to the situation. (source: ottoscharmer.com)

Ideally we should operate at Levels Three and Four. When we are stressed, we often work at Level One or Two which aren't effective except in situations such as brushing your teeth.

## Memory

Stress and worry can negatively affect your memory and take space in your mind. This will leave you with less capacity to think and/or make decisions. If you feel your thinking and/or decision making is affected, then have a break for even a minute, take some deep breaths and return to your work. If your thinking is significantly affected, then ask someone else to take over. We are all human beings and have fallible moments.

## Attention and decision making

When we are stressed or worried, it can affect our ability to pay attention. We can focus on too little or the wrong issue or really consider far too much. We can forget to pay attention to the right information by focusing on too much or too little or the wrong aspect. We can become forgetful and this will lead to poor decision making.

## Past events returning

Experiencing a critical incident or severe stress can bring back memories of similar past events. You could remember a particular part of the event, the sounds or smells associated with that memory.

## Feelings and emotions

Your emotions are likely to be unusual, you could be OK one minute and then very fearful, then happy and then angry and then very sad. You can feel frightened and this can affect your ability to pay attention and focus.

## Impact on your ability to sleep, eat and drink

Eating, drinking and sleeping can be affected by stress and worry. Stress can destabilize our normal patterns.

## Excess behaviours

Overuse of substances, e.g. nicotine, alcohol and excess behaviours, e.g. eating too much do not help you to cope effectively. At best, these behaviours provide very short term relief.

## Breathing

Stress and worry can affect your body including your breathing. Ideally you should be taking 12-18 breaths a minute. When people are stressed they tend to shallow breathe or take less than six breaths a minute. Here's an app that could help: Stop, breathe, think.

## EXERCISE

What are your own stress reactions?

**Body** e.g. tense shoulders, irregular breathing, not sleeping

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**Mind** e.g. problems concentrating, becoming forgetful

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**Emotions** e.g. low motivation, becoming irritable for no special reason

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# WHAT MAKES US STRESSED?

Internal (mood, health issues) and external stressors (temperature, security situation, expectations at work) can lead to stress as a reaction in each of us.

Each person has their own individual set of stressors and will react differently. Your reaction to a stressor can also vary depending on your mood and energy.

## EXERCISE

Please write down your stressors

**Internal stressors** e.g. mood, feeling ill, feeling sad, angry, worries

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**External stressors** e.g. work environment, security situation, family issues

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Which of these stressors can you do something about and which ones do you have to accept?

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# WAYS IN WHICH WE COPE WITH STRESS

It is important that we address stress as it occurs. If we ignore it, then it builds up, and can make life difficult for us later on. For example, not dealing effectively with stress can eventually lead to cumulative stress.

Our coping habits help us deal with the day to day stress we encounter. These habits have developed over the years. Some of them are helpful and others are not. We all have ways in which we cope with stress. We each have four different types of coping habits:

## Physical actions

How much do you do to keep fit every week? Regular exercise is vital to manage stress. Too much or too little is not helpful.

## Healthy living

How healthy is your diet and how well do you sleep? Your body, heart and mind need constant nourishment and appropriate rest and looking after so that you can function effectively.

## Healthy working

How positive are your working habits? How is your concentration? How much time do you spend at work? How productive are you? Healthy work habits lead to better stress management and productivity.

## Social support

Social support is vital as it alleviates stress. You don't have to have 50 friends but you need at least one or two people in whom you can trust and confide. Looking after yourself emotionally is also vital.

## EXERCISE

Please write down your current positive and negative coping strategies and evaluate whether they are effective or not (place a tick beside the ones that are helpful).

**Physical actions** e.g. going to the gym regularly, daily walk

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**Healthy Living** e.g. healthy diet, sleeping well

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**Healthy Working** e.g. following a priority list, healthy work-life balance

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**Social Support** e.g. work environment, security situation, family issues

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# TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

Here are some suggestions that may help you. If you have health issues, remember to check with your doctor before trying any of these suggestions.

## Physical actions

10 minutes of *physical activity* three times a day can improve mood, relieve depression and increase feelings of wellbeing.

*Good posture*, i.e. sitting up straight helps you to take in more oxygen and perform better during stressful activities such as deadlines.

*Acupressure* Take the thumb and index finger of one hand and squeeze the soft spot on the palm (between both fingers) on the other hand. Hold for three counts and switch. Using the same fingers, squeeze each of the fingers all over.

Rub each joint in a circular motion.

Hold each finger at its base and pull gently to stretch it, sliding your grip up the finger and off the tip. For extra benefits, use a dab of lavender oil which can aid relaxation (make sure that you are not allergic to lavender oil).

Hold a small hard ball between both hands and roll it around. Place the ball on the floor and put one foot on top of it and move the ball around the sole and toes of that foot. Repeat with the other foot.

Rub your ear-lobes with your fingers slowly. This will help you relax.

*Repetitive actions* can soothe, i.e. sewing, crafts, etc

*Breathing*. It is important to practice regular deep breathing. This will help you think and act more constructively. You should be taking 12-18 deep breaths per minute. If you are not, then it is likely you are breathing in a shallow way. Here are some exercises:

### *Intentional breathing:*

Sit straight in a comfortable chair. Place your hands on your sides just above your hip bones. Inhale deeply into your abdomen (your hands should move as your

body expands and contracts). Exhale. Repeat this three to four times. Move your hands to the middle of your ribs. Continue breathing and feel your body expand etc. Repeat this three to four times. Move your hands to your collar bones and, again, feel your body moving. Repeat three to four times. You have re-learned how to carry out a full breath.

#### **Foundation Breathing:**

Sit comfortably with your back straight, feet flat on the ground, eyes closed and hands in your lap. Start breathing in and out very slowly. This can be helped by listening to slow music with a beat and regulating your breath with the beat of the music (twelve to eighteen breaths per minute).

## Healthy living

**Food and drink.** Even if you don't feel like eating and drinking healthily, it is important to continue to do so. Try to eat a healthy well balanced diet including alkaline foods that can reduce stress reactions, e.g. lentils, sweet potato, eggplant, garlic, carrot, ginger, beetroot, broccoli, Brussels sprouts and avocados.

Keep some dried fruits and nuts handy. Snack on these instead of sugar to avoid blood sugar highs.

Eat three meals a day. Your last meal should be eaten at least three hours before you go to bed.

Choose ginseng tea instead of coffee –it gives your metabolism a kick start like coffee and soothes anxiety as well.

**Sleep.** If you find it difficult to go to sleep then get out of bed and do something active –music, reading etc. until you feel ready to go to sleep. Another strategy is to lie in bed and rub your stomach gently and focus on slowing your breathing down until you fall asleep.

If you do not feel well, make sure that you seek medical advice before assuming that you can manage by yourself.

## Work

If you find that you are forgetful and/or find it difficult to concentrate, **make sure that you are breathing properly first.** Then perhaps take a short break during which you carry out a small physical activity to relax. It may be helpful to pair up with a colleague and think about how you can support each other and double-check your work. Remember to be patient with yourself especially if you are in a very stressful situation.

If the situation is very stressful, then **think about the stressors** that are present and make a list. Separate them into ones that you can do something about and those that you have to accept. Whose problem is it? How will you talk to them to solve the problem or is it one that you need to address within yourself?

Make sure that you **pay attention to IOM and UNDSS security advice** and follow it, both at work and home. If you don't understand the advice, ask a security colleague. Be careful about what information you pay attention to. Only listen to news from reliable sources.

**Take regular breaks** at work – ten minutes every hour.

**Plan your week.** Look at and analyse what you did last week. How much of your week was productive? How did you spend your time? What changes do you need to make?

**Work culture** is the character and personality of your organization (HR Insights). Do you feel positive about going to work? Is the culture supportive? If it is negative, what can you do to address it? What should you talk to leaders about?

**Is someone is harassing or bullying you?** What impact does it have on your life? What have you done about it? It could be helpful to speak to the Ethics Office or the Ombudsperson.

## Social support and emotions

*Talk* to partners, friends and family. Social support has been proven to lower stress. Remember to be supportive of each other and plan for how you will cope as an individual and family rather than thinking about the difficulties themselves.

*Plan for the worst case scenario* and rehearse it and then you will know what to do. Make sure you seek advice from IOM Security as needed.

*Be careful in how you explain any difficult situation to children.* It is best to be truthful but only tell them a few things at a time. Double-check that they have understood you correctly. Using stories about how fictitious children have coped can help. Remember that young children (and some teenagers/young adults) will not be able to speak about their emotions but they are likely to act them out. Be patient with them.

Try to *follow a normal routine* as much as possible. Think about how you can do this, including talking about everyday things, dreams you or your family or friends have, maintaining leisure and social activities.

There may be times when you cannot *show your emotions* but it is important to acknowledge them when you can. It is important to share your emotions and concerns with, at least, one person. Keeping feelings and worries to yourself does not really help.

Especially *after an emotional experience*, it is important to process it at both the feeling level as well as cognitively, i.e. acknowledge the feeling and think about what the experience has taught you.

*Feeling frightened* can affect your ability to pay attention and focus. Think about what you are fearful of and then work out what you can do to address the issues. If there is little that can be done, what could you do to accept and address your fear?

*Practicing your religion* or faith can be helpful.

## Excess behaviours

Overuse of cigarettes and other substances and excess behaviours, e.g. eating too much does not help you to cope effectively. It is best to speak to a counsellor who will help you develop alternative strategies to manage worry and stress.

## Past events returning

Experiencing *a critical incident or severe stress* can bring back memories of similar past events. If this happens, you can try one or more of the following:

Write down what happened. What you did well and what could have been done differently. Praise yourself for what you did. Forgive yourself if needed.

Think of a positive memory of another event or time. When the memory of the incident comes back, think of the positive memory instead.

*Wear a bracelet or item that reminds you of good times* and then touch the bracelet or item whenever the negative memory returns.

## Other activities

*Listening to music* has been proven to reduce stress responses such as high blood pressure and elevated heart rate.

People *working near plants* reacted 12 percent faster and were less stressed based on blood pressure readings taken before and after a typing assignment.

Visualization reduces stress. Sit comfortably and focus on your breathing with your eyes closed. Keep concentrating on your breathing for five minutes and then focus on a picture or music that reminds you of 'Peace'.

## EXERCISE: My Plan

Take another look at your coping strategies and write down changes you want to make. Make sure these are manageable and doable in your current situation. What will you do to ensure that you focus on positive habits? Who will support you to achieve your goals? When will you review them?

### Physical actions

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### Healthy Living

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### Healthy Working

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### Social Support

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If you have any questions or need a confidential discussion, please contact Staff Welfare, [sw@iom.int](mailto:sw@iom.int)



**STAFF HEALTH  
AND WELFARE**  
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