

STRESS

WHAT IT IS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

This booklet was produced by the Clinical Psychology Service of Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Trust. It forms part of a series of booklets that are designed to provide people with information that will reassure, advise and encourage them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
HOW TO MANAGE STRESS	3
THE CAUSES OF STRESS	4
THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS	5
<i>Your Stone Age Constitution</i>	5
<i>Your Body's Response to Pressure</i>	5
<i>Diagram of Body's Response to Pressure</i>	6
<i>Emotional, Mental, Behavioural & Physical Effects of Stress</i>	7
HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS	8
<i>Practice Self-Awareness</i>	8
<i>Review Your Lifestyle</i>	8
<i>Explanation of Exercise 1</i>	9
<i>Time Management</i>	10
<i>Learn to Express your Emotions & to be Assertive</i>	11
<i>Distract Yourself with a Hobby or Sport</i>	11
<i>Pursue a Health Lifestyle</i>	12
<i>Stress-reducing Techniques</i>	12
<i>Professional Help & Counselling</i>	13
CONCLUSION	13
EXERCISE SHEETS:	
<i>Exercise 1 : What stresses you, why & what could you do ?</i>	
<i>Exercise 2 : How easy to you find it to look after yourself?</i>	

STRESS

“The hours can be long. I’m often here 12 hours. The work is very stressful because we are spending millions for people in a competitive market. I do things at 100 miles an hour or not at all. I get headaches and I suffer insomnia. I’ve never been to the doctor about it - I just put up with it and accept it as part of life. I like a drink after work because it relaxes me quickly. Sometimes I look at myself and think: I’m 29 now, what will I be like in 10 years time ? Where am I going ? Have I got 30 more years of this before I retire?”

“When the market’s very active I have a migraine the whole time - I get through a bottle of aspirin a week. The worst thing is being so alert all the time. I’m hyperactive. I have no patience in queues or with incompetent people. Most of us in these jobs live on our nerves. By 30, we’ve had enough of it - or made enough money to retire”

“It took a lot of energy to do all those job applications and when I didn’t get anywhere it got me down. I began to look at other aspects of my life and that didn’t help. I sank. I started having palpitations, sleepless nights, nightmares and hot sweats and was generally feeling worn out all the time”.

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS:

Humans are designed to cope with the changes and hardships that life can bring. Stress in moderation provides that vital rush of adrenaline we need to survive deadlines, job interviews and many other challenging situations.

Each individual has her or his level of tolerance, but sometimes our life circumstances really get on top of us and we feel pressured, strained and stressed. Pressures of the wrong type, or excessive pressure can mean discomfort, illness or even early death. Stress eventually leads to physical and emotional exhaustion. We all have a level of pressure which is right for us. When pressure is not at this optimum level we become stressed. ***Too much pressure as well as too little pressure can both result in stress.***

High Pressure	S	TRUGGLING]	
	T	ENSE]	Inappropriate
	R	EADY]	
	E	ENERGIZED]	Optimum
Low Pressure	S	TODGY]	
	S	LEEPY]	Inappropriate

THE CAUSES OF STRESS:

Stress does not begin and end in obviously high pressure jobs. In fact, those who suffer the most work-related stress are people who feel undervalued at work or experience frustration over job prospects and work satisfaction. Redundancy and unemployment have the effect of lowering self-confidence and self-esteem. Frustration, apathy, lethargy and depression quickly lower your stress threshold, leaving you open to pressures which previously you would have coped with easily.

The most important areas of our lives that cause stress are work, finances, personal relations and our children.

Major upheavals e.g. moving house, are often very stressful, although people may not realise the extent of the adjustments they are having to make. Moving house may mean losing contact with friends, children have to start new schools, the new house may need a lot of work and parts of it may be unusable for a while. Bereavement, apart from the pain of losing a loved one, carries with it all sorts of changes which we have to deal with despite not feeling at our best.

Another form of stress which we may be slow to recognise is worry about something that might happen in the future. For example, we may have financial worries, not because we are in difficulty at present, but because things might get worse and we are already stretched to the limit.

It has been found that people who don't express their feelings are least able to manage stress. Also at risk are "destructive copers" - those who moan about lost opportunities and constantly say, "If only I had done things differently". It does not help to blame yourself or anyone else when things go wrong. Those people who cope best with stress are those who think constructively and who find a solution to a problem.

Most people find it easier to cope with predictable stress. They know a meeting is going to be tough so they ensure that they are psychologically prepared. But a sudden unpredictable stress outside of their control can be totally unnerving. However, it is the prolonged or chronic stresses rather than the sudden stresses that are most likely to lead to serious illness.

This is why it is so important to identify the things in your daily life which you find stressful and, wherever possible, to do something about them. Learning adaptive ways of dealing with stress is vital. It has been suggested that it is not the level of stress which matters so much, but how you cope with it.

There is no single definition or cause of stress. What counts is a person's reaction to a potentially stressful situation, not the situation itself.

The first requirement for dealing with stress is to realise that it is around and that it is getting to you. So we need to start by examining stress.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS:

Your Stone Age Constitution:

Stress has its origins in the need to survive. When primitive people had to hunt to stay alive, they faced the constant threat of being hunted themselves:

Imagine you are back in the Stone Age. You step outside your cave and there charging up the valley towards you is a large prehistoric beast. It is a large and shaggy mammoth, 14 feet high, with long tusks. What do you do? You have two main options. You can jump out of the way and run for safety, or you can stand your ground and fight. But above all, you need to react quickly; there is not much time to think.

This primitive ability to get yourself out of trouble fast is still part of our make-up today. It is known as the *Fight or Flight* response and it is part of your body's programming.

Most of the threats we have to deal with today are directed at our psychological selves rather than at our bodies. If your boss tears a strip off you at work, your body may gear up as if to fight him/her. However, this is not a very appropriate response, and so you are unable to "work off" your body's arousal.

Your body's response to Pressure:

Whenever you are faced with a "mammoth" problem or threat, your body undergoes a complex reaction: [The diagram on the next page illustrates this]. Your brain tells your body of the need for action. When your brain alerts the pituitary gland at the base of the brain, a number of hormones are released.

The adrenal glands release more adrenaline into the bloodstream as well as substances known as corticoids.

The immune and inflammatory responses [ones that fight disease and injury] are slowed down.

The hormones act to increase the level of arousal of your body and prepare it to deal with the threat.

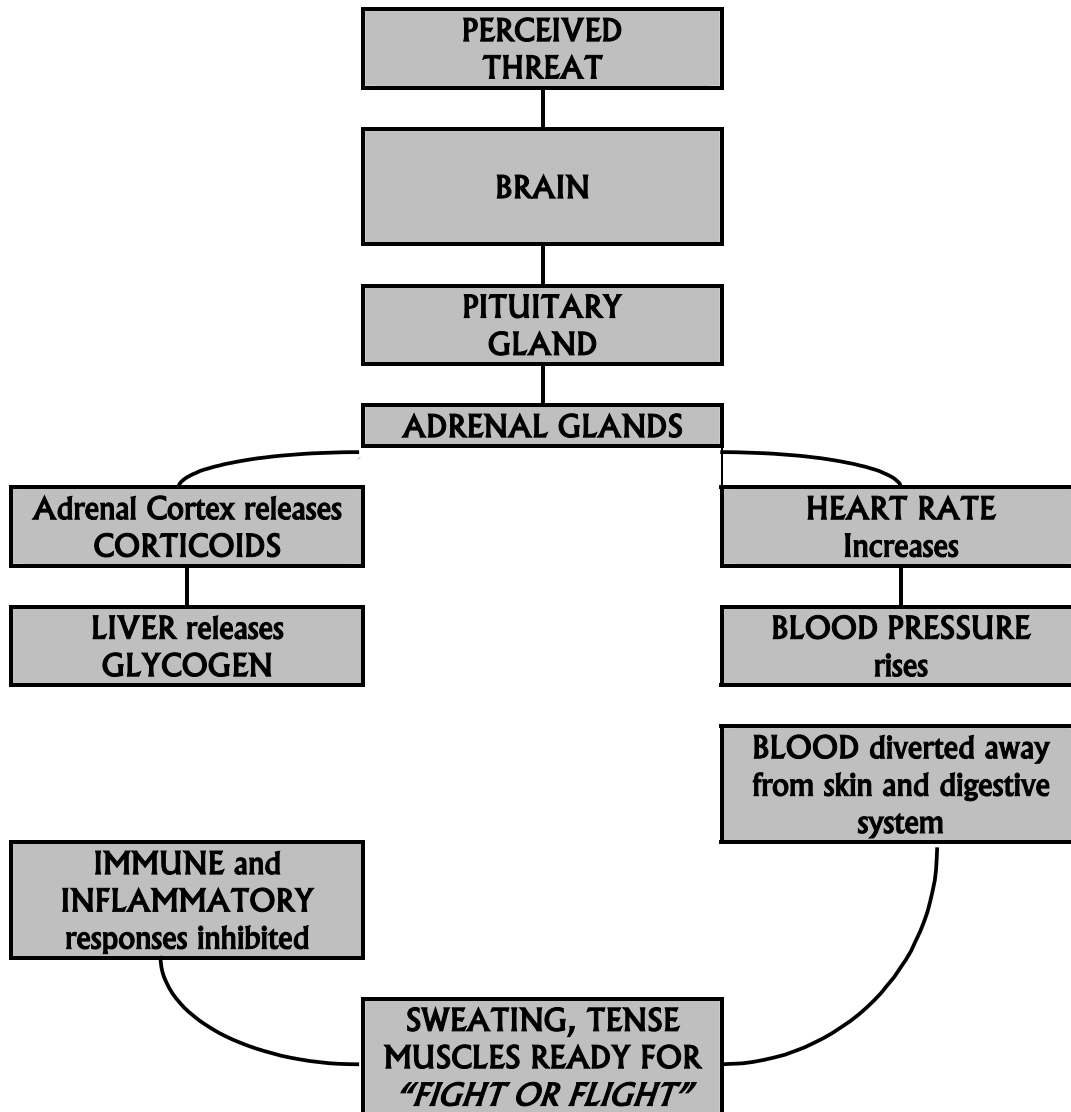
Attention is then turned to the bloodstream. Your muscles need a greater supply of glucose so the heart rate increases and the blood pressure is raised.

Whenever you become aware that your heart is racing, it is because your muscles are being fuelled for action. In order to burn the glucose efficiently the supply of oxygen is increased, and your breathing rate becomes more rapid and intense.

While your muscles are being equipped for action, your body cannot cope with the normal processes of digestion and so digestion is slowed down.

Finally, your cooling system is activated and you begin to sweat.

PREPARATION FOR FIGHT OR FLIGHT:



A problem is that these days we often can't escape from a bad situation in the way that our caveman ancestors could. This bodily response to threat is designed not to last very long. If it is kept going because the situation continues, or because you encounter another problem before your body has returned to normal, this can have bad consequences for your health.

When the body is constantly in a state of preparation for fight or flight, the short-term changes designed to get you out of danger can in themselves be harmful.

- The heart rate can be permanently raised resulting in hypertension otherwise known as ***HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE***. This is one of the links in the chain between stress and ***HEART DISEASE***.
- The rapid breathing which increases the supply of oxygen, can lead to ***HYPERVENTILATION***, causing dizziness, tingling in the arms and legs, tightness across the chest, and a feeling of not being able to take a satisfying breath, and other ***BREATHING PROBLEMS*** e.g. asthma.
- Prolonged release of the corticoids by the adrenal glands ***NEGATIVELY AFFECTS THE ABILITY OF YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM [The system that fights disease] TO RESPOND***. This effect on the immune system may be a possible link between stress and cancer.
- Muscle tension over a prolonged period leads to ***PAIN IN THE MUSCLES, PARTICULARLY IN THE NECK SHOULDERS AND BACK***.
- The skin changes in the resistance of the surface of the skin due to sweating make it prone to ***RASHES AND SKIN DISEASE***.
- Other stress related ailments include: Migraine, Hayfever and Allergies, Peptic Ulcers, Constipation, Colitis, Menstrual difficulties, Flatulence and Indigestion, overactive Thyroid Gland, Diabetes and Depression.

You will not usually have problems in all these areas. Many people develop problems in one or two.

When people are under too much pressure they are often in so much of a rush that they fail to notice how stressed they are becoming. The earlier you notice that you are beginning to suffer from stress, the better, so that you can do something about it before it becomes severe.

Although the body's reaction to stress is common to everyone, you will have developed your own patterns of stress response.

You need to look for the "pattern of changes" you experience when you are stressed. The pattern will differ from person to person.

Stress can affect any of the four main areas of functioning:

- **Emotional :** [Feelings]
- **Mental :** [Thoughts]
- **Behavioural :** [Actions]
- **Physiological :** [Physical responses]

Emotional responses: A change in feelings often accompanies changes in pressure level: for example, you could have a general feeling of depression or elation, or a feeling of panic when certain things happen or guilt about particular actions.

Mental responses: Some common reactions are: finding it hard to set priorities, having difficulty making up one's mind, putting things off, and confused or illogical thinking.

Behavioural responses: These could include: raised voice, irritability and generally hostile behaviour.

Another common change is increased activity: Moving around more, more speech and faster speech. Do you speak very quickly as though you have to get the words out ?

The opposite can also happen - the person can become withdrawn and less active, quieter. There can also be a decrease in motor coordination leading to clumsiness and perhaps accidents.

Physical response: Bouts of indigestion, headaches and muscular tension and others have been mentioned.

HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS:

1. Practice Self-Awareness:

The importance of getting to know your pattern of responses associated with stress has been mentioned. The earlier that you realise that you are under strain, the sooner you can do something to help yourself.

Ask yourself the question: "Is my lifestyle getting me down ?" Make the connection between feeling under the weather and the pressures and hassles you are faced with. Do not ignore bodily sensations that may be giving you warning of too much stress.

2. Review your Lifestyle:

Ask yourself: Do I have too much to do ? Am I taking on too much responsibility at home or at work ? Are there things I could hand over to other people ? Do all the things I take on need to be done at all ? Could I do things in a more leisurely way ?

Once you have asked yourself these questions, you may be able to see ways of organising your life differently and in less stressful patterns. This may involve re-structuring your views about the importance of things you previously regarded as crucial. [See exercise 1 below].

EXERCISE 1:

You may find this exercise helpful in becoming more aware of what stresses you experience, how much, why and to think about what you could do about it.

Please refer to the 2 exercise sheets at the back of the booklet. One has examples and the other is blank for you to complete.

1. First you need to identify WHAT IT IS THAT STRESSES YOU:

- *Write down the biggest stresses in your life*
- *Write down those aspects of your life where there is too much pressure for you*
- *Think too of pressures that build up slowly over time*

It might be easier to think of:

- a) **SITUATIONS** that stress you
- b) **PEOPLE** that stress you
- c) **TASKS** that stress you

2. The next column asks you to rate HOW STRESSED you are feeling:

- a) *Stressed*
- b) *Very stressed*
- c) *Extremely stressed*

3. The next question to ask is WHY are you pressured ? What is the REASON for your feeling threatened ?

4. The SEE IF THERE IS A DIFFERENT WAY OF LOOKING AT THE SITUATION. QUESTION your reason for feeling threatened. Is your reason for feeling threatened accurate ? See whether there is a different way of looking at the situation which you may find more helpful.

5. See if there is something you can DO about the situation to help or something you can do differently. Ask yourself:

“Could I do this in a more leisurely way ?”

“Could someone else help or do this task for me ?”

“Could I do less ?”

“Do I need to do it at all ?”

“What is the worst that will happen if I don’t do this ?”

“How could I change the way I do this ?”

6. **TAKING ACTION:** *The last part of the exercise involves thinking about exactly HOW you are going to do what you have decided to do about the situation that stresses you. On the separate sheets provided at the back of the booklet, you need to state:*

- a) *What you want to do and*
- b) *The action that you are going to take, thinking about HOW, WHERE, WHEN and WITH WHOM*

Try to be as specific as possible - don’t plan to “take less on” in a vague manner. Decide exactly what you’re going to say “no” to - e.g., “I will leave work by 6.00 pm every day”.

Sometimes writing a message to yourself on a card to remind yourself of what you have decided helps, for example:

TAKE THINGS ONE STEP AT A TIME

RELAX BREATHE

THERE’S MORE TO LIFE THAN WORK

*If you keep this card on you when you know that you could become stressed, you can pull it out and read it **ALoud** to yourself when you feel yourself becoming agitated. This will help to counter any anxious thoughts you may be having.*

3. LEARN TO MANAGE WHAT TIME YOU DO HAVE WELL:

You may be able to reduce the stress in your life by managing your time better. If you feel that you could be making better use of your time, you may find the following guidelines for managing your time effectively, useful:

- a) **Examine your GOALS.** Decide what you want to get out of the day at work, the weekend etc.
- b) **Make a LIST** of things you want to do and things you would like to do. **ESTIMATE** the time it will take you.
- c) **Decide on PRIORITIES.** What must be done today, what can wait, and until when ?

What do I want to get done today ?

Can I delegate anything ? If I can, to whom ?

What will happen if I can't do X ? If nothing, consider leaving X.

- d) Try to **ORDER** the tasks to be done. Find an order that works well for you. Some people find they enjoy the day more if they start with a task they must do and follow it up with a task they enjoy. Then they have something to look forward to and the unpleasant task doesn't play on their mind all day.
- e) Try to do **ONE TASK AT A TIME**. Try to **FINISH WHAT YOU START**. Otherwise each task takes longer as you waste time getting repeatedly started on the same task and uncompleted tasks remain on your mind, interfering with the present task.
- f) Don't rush immediately from one task to another. Instead, plan short **BREAKS** and time to relax; tea breaks, lunch breaks, times for yourself.
- g) **REVIEW/ASSESS** your priorities and progress half-way through the day.
- h) **DON'T PROCRASTINATE/PUT THINGS OFF**. Are you putting it off because you're setting yourself too high a standard ? Are you being unrealistic about what you could do ? Could you do it now and get it out of the way ?
- i) At the end of the day, **REMEMBER** what you have achieved and **GIVE YOURSELF A PAT ON THE BACK !**

4. LEARN TO EXPRESS YOUR EMOTIONS AND TO BE ASSERTIVE:

Research has shown that those most vulnerable to stress are those who bottle up their emotions. Don't keep your problems to yourself. Share them with friends. You may be able to do something creative e.g. dancing, singing, painting, that will help you express your emotions and release energy. Find a creative outlet for expressing your inner self.

Sometimes it is hard to find a balance between satisfying our own needs and wishes and satisfying other people's expectations of us. Being assertive means standing up for yourself, while taking the interests and feelings of others into account. You have the right to live your life as you choose as long as you don't interfere with the rights of others. That includes the right to say no and the right to have your opinion heard.

Saying "So and so can't do without me" is of little use if you are forced to take time off later due to ill health. Striking a balance between responsibility to others and responsibility to yourself may be necessary in reducing your stress.

Take time to be nice to yourself. Treat yourself to a little self-indulgence - take a long, luxuriating bath, eat a delicious meal, see a show etc.

5. DISTRACT YOURSELF WITH A HOBBY OR A SPORT:

Leisure activities - sports, hobbies, evening classes, fitness sessions, dancing, yoga etc., distract you from your worries and provide you with a breathing space. Sports have the added advantage of dissipating pent up physical energy. Because leisure activities focus your energy positively and distract you from your problems, they are particularly important if you are faced with long-term, or insoluble problems.

6. PURSUE A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE:

Smoking may seem to reduce tension, but only at a price. The damage that it does to the body, particularly the arteries, puts you more at risk for the physical consequences of stress.

Drinking too much alcohol can often make problems worse and should be avoided. It creates an extra physical demand for your body, changes your behaviour, damages your health and disrupts your ability to cope effectively.

The effects of **caffeine** are very similar to the effects of stress and can be mistaken for them. It acts as a stimulant, increasing your heart rate and can cause feelings of irritability. So it is a good idea to cut down on tea or coffee if you feel very stressed. You may be surprised by the results, although if you have been drinking a great deal of coffee you may have withdrawal headaches for a while. [Caffeine is addictive].

A regular routine of exercise increases our ability to cope with life's demands, both physically and mentally. However little we may feel like it at the time, exercising after a hard day seems to burn off the effects of stress.

7. STRESS REDUCING TECHNIQUES:

Relaxation training provides instruction on posture, control of muscular tension and breathing. There are specific techniques for relaxing which you could learn.

Training starts with teaching you to recognise the early signs of your stress. You will then be taken through a series of training exercises in which you are taught to relax in less and less time. Ultimately you can learn to relax not just sitting in a chair at home, but in any situation and to do this within 20-30 seconds. Achieving this level of relaxation obviously takes practice. Learning to relax is a skill, and like any skill it needs to be practiced. The little time you put aside each day to practice relaxing will be a good investment of your time.

Yoga and meditation also helps you to relax and are known to reduce heart rate and blood pressure.

Massage is also a good way of attaining relaxation, but perhaps has the disadvantage that it is something done to you and so does not actually teach you how to relax on your own.

Pursuing a healthy lifestyle is important in building up your resistance to stress. Prevention is better than cure. This boils down to valuing yourself enough to want to look after yourself much as you might want to look after a dear friend. It is not always easy to devote effort to looking after ourselves because we are conditioned to put others before ourselves. Sometimes we may feel that we are being selfish if we take time out for ourselves. Striking a balance between responsibility to others and responsibility to yourself may be necessary in reducing your stress.

In Exercise 2 [at the back of the booklet] you can get an idea of how easy you find it to look after yourself.

8. PROFESSIONAL HELP AND COUNSELLING:

If you feel unable to deal with the levels of stress in your life on your own, don't be afraid to seek professional help. Many people are reluctant to do this and feel that it is an admission of failure. This is not helpful because feeling that you have to hang on regardless is hardly likely to reduce your stress levels.

Many people first go to their doctor when they get physical symptoms they can't explain. Your GP should be able to tell if you are suffering from an anxiety state or a depressive disorder. Some form of drug therapy may be prescribed if the symptoms are bad, but this will not deal with the **CAUSE** of a stress problem.

This is where counselling can be helpful - the idea is for the person concerned to use their conscious intelligence to see what is producing stress for them, to see what their vulnerabilities and strengths are, and to learn how to cope.

IN CONCLUSION:

We have established that the consequences of prolonged stress have serious consequences for our physical and emotional health. But the road from stress to disease is not remorselessly straight. There are plenty of places to change direction and ways to do this. We can all set new and healthier priorities. The choice is ours.

EXERCISE 2: HOW GOOD ARE YOU AT LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF?

Here is a list of some activities that could be associated with caring for yourself and relaxing. You may well think of others. If so, add them to the list. The idea is to have a look at your lifestyle and to see whether, in your opinion, you are caring for yourself well enough. How much rest and recreation you get and feel you need, is of course up to you, but you could say that if you seldom do these activities, you may be able to reduce your stress by making time for some of them. Admittedly, some of these activities cost pounds. If you are hard up, of course the possibilities are reduced. But there may be “free” options available if you think hard enough. Do try.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU:	NEVER	SELDOM	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
REST: 1. Take a holiday 2. Go away for a weekend 3. Sit and relax and think about nothing in particular 4. Allow yourself time to read an enjoyable book 5. Set aside a day for “lazing” when you aren’t concerned with achieving, but rather with just “being” 6. Sleep-in at weekends, e.g. have a leisurely, lazy Sunday morning, or after a hard week, an afternoon nap 7. Have an early night when feeling tired and run down 8. Sit/lie and listen to music LIST OTHERS:				
RELATIONSHIPS: 9. Spend an evening [or other time] out and about with a loved one or friend[s] 10. Invite a friend to your home 11. Just chat about anything under the sun with a family member/friend, without looking at the clock 12. Share feelings and thoughts with others LIST OTHERS:				

	NEVER	SELDOM	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
<p>RECREATION:</p> <p>13. <i>Take regular exercise whether it's a short, brisk walk or a daily run, playing sport or a solitary bicycle ride</i></p> <p>14. <i>Express yourself through creativity</i></p> <p>15. <i>Get out into nature - whether it's going for a peaceful walk along the river bank, sitting still under a tree, or abseiling down a cliff face, etc.</i></p> <p>LIST OTHERS:</p>				
<p>SELF-INDULGENCE:</p> <p>16. <i>Spend time on your physical appearance e.g. buy some new clothes, get into shape, try a new hairstyle</i></p> <p>17. <i>When shopping, treat yourself to something you want rather than need</i></p> <p>18. <i>Have a good soak in the tub</i></p> <p>19. <i>Cook or buy yourself an extra-specially delicious meal</i></p> <p>20. <i>Make some time to think about where your life is going, how you can make your life happier, better organised, and more fulfilling</i></p> <p>LIST OTHERS</p>				

EXERCISE 1:

WHAT: Stresses Situations People Tasks	HOW MUCH [1 - 3]	WHY are you stressed ?	Can you use the situation DIFFERENTLY ?	What can you DO about the situation ?

EXERCISE 1 /Continued TAKING ACTION:

STRESS/PROBLEM AND WHAT YOU WANT TO DO:	ACTION: Think about HOW, WHEN, WHERE, WITH WHOM

There are psychological causes for many physical symptoms that may be associated with stress

However, if you have ANY concern at all that your symptoms may have a PHYSICAL cause, please see your DOCTOR