

Stress – A ‘Five Areas’ Model

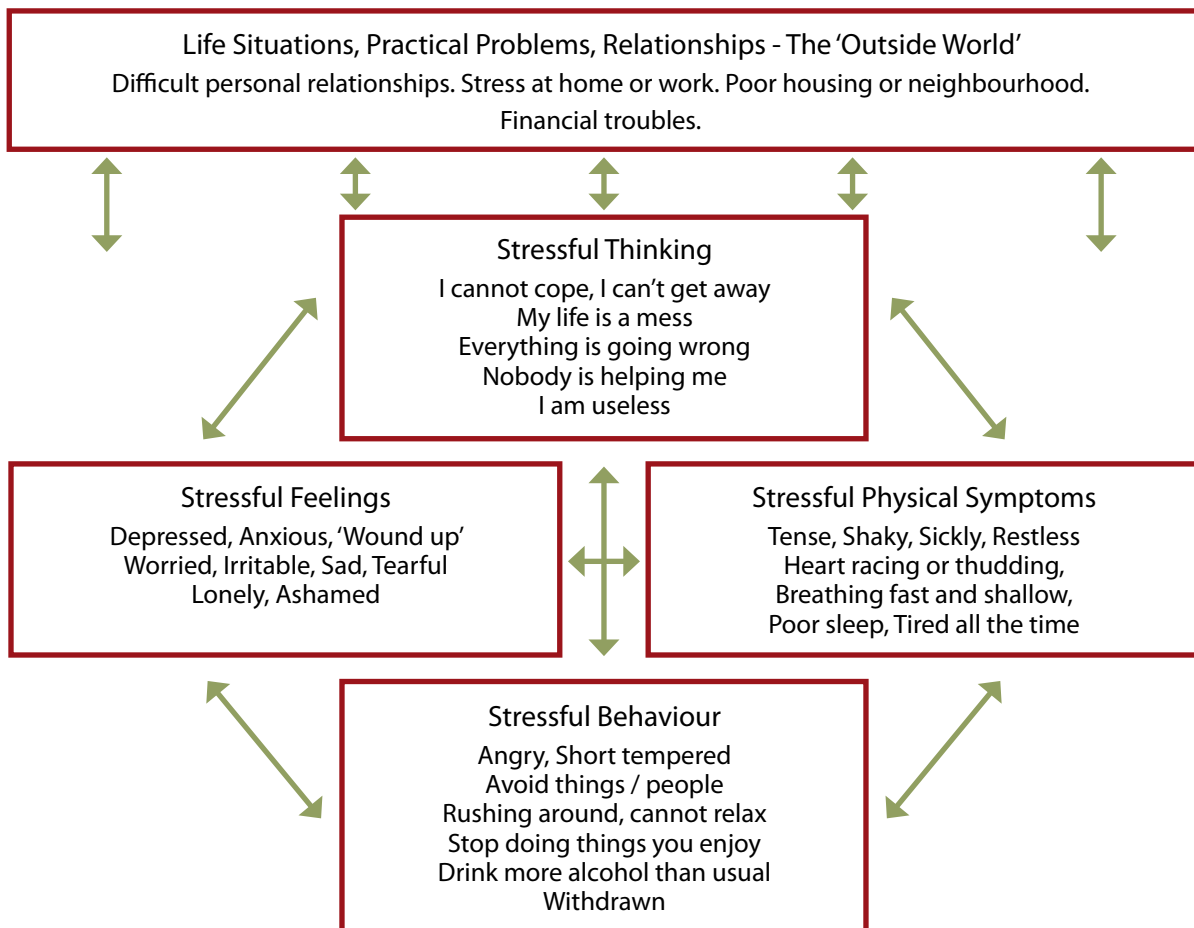
Minutes are ticking by. You are stuck in traffic on the way to that vital meeting or running late getting the kids to school. Your mind goes over the 101 things you have to do by the end of the day but the traffic still isn't moving, the kids start squabbling and you can't concentrate or think clearly. Your heart is pounding, nerves jangling, temper rising. You shout at the kids. By tonight you know you will have a headache or indigestion. Welcome to the stressful world.

Stress has been part of human life since mankind came into being and our body has developed ways of reacting to stress that have become automatic. The 'fight / flight' response (there is a separate leaflet on this if you are interested) is designed to get us out of danger by fighting or running away, and once the danger has gone our body can return to normal. However, many

of the stresses that we face today cannot be got rid of by fighting or running away so, if we don't do something about it, the stress can become excessive and, in the long term, harmful to our physical and mental health.

Below are some of the signs or symptoms you may notice when you are too stressed. These are divided into stressful thinking, stressful feelings, stressful physical symptoms and stressful behaviours. *The Outside World or Environment* often has a major effect on our stress levels, but it is important to realise that stress can be produced by our own thoughts, feelings and behaviours as well, and that reducing our internally produced stress is often a good place to start.

This way of looking at stress is called the FIVE AREAS MODEL



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It is important to realise that stress is not always bad for us – in fact, a certain amount of stress can be a good thing, helping us to perform at our best when we are under pressure such as going for a job interview or a driving test.

Stress can even be enjoyable – the excitement and thrill we get when on a fairground ride is a similar reaction to the ‘fight or flight’ response to threat or danger. Some people say they thrive on stress but we all need to balance the stress in our lives with plenty of time for rest and relaxation to allow our bodies and minds to recover.

Some experts believe feeling stressed is a modern problem, brought on by the ever-increasing pace of life and greater expectations, even for children.

It is true to say that no two people experience stress in exactly the same way – a situation that is very stressful for one person may be just mildly upsetting to another. The trick is to discover your own stress ‘triggers’ and assess the balance of stresses and positives in your life. You should also avoid unhelpful or unhealthy reactions such as self-blame, anger or drinking too much alcohol. Instead develop more helpful and healthy reactions such as relaxation, exercise and being assertive.

The Five Areas model can help you to identify the stresses in your life and how it is affecting you. This will involve the outside world (external stress) and your own thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and physical symptoms (internal stress). Sometimes there is not much we can do to change the stress, whether external, such as working in a stressful environment, or internal, such as coping with a long-term illness or disability. In that case you may have to try and reduce the stress by balancing the stress with more healthy coping strategies.

Effective Stress Management is a series of steps:

1. Work out exactly where your stress is coming from
2. Decide which stress problem to work on first – don’t add to your stress by taking on too much!
3. Make a plan to tackle the problem
4. Put the plan into action
5. Decide if your plan worked – if it did then move on to the next problem, if it didn’t then change your plan and try again. Ask for help if necessary
6. Give yourself plenty of time for rest and relaxation

REMEMBER

- > Stress is a normal part of everyday life, it isn’t an illness that can be ‘cured’
- > Stress that goes on for too long can cause physical and mental ill health
- > There is always something helpful you can do to reduce your stress
- > Achieving a balance of stress and relaxation is very important – think of it as recharging your batteries
- > Avoid developing unhelpful coping strategies such as drinking too much

