

The Easy Step by Step Guide

Stress &

Time

Management

Brian Lomas

 ROWMARK

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Dedicated to my mum, Helen,
- a real inspiration

About the author

Brian Lomas is a business consultant and trainer based on the south coast of England.

It is his second career - his first being in retail management in the UK and the USA. He ultimately held responsibility for over 100 locations, more than 1000 staff and an annual turnover exceeding £400million. Shortly before starting his own business, he headed the UK business development and marketing departments for a major high street retailer.

So why the change in career? Well, in his own words:

"I was earning good money, in a challenging role with a great company - but I wasn't happy. My work had taken over my life and I saw no point in continuing that way. It was time to address the in-balance and use my experience to find an enjoyable job which I actually wanted to do."

He continued: "Two years into my self-employment, one of my ex-colleagues confirmed that I had made the right decision when they told me I had never looked nor sounded better. I didn't realise it before, but the stress in my previous jobs had been taking its toll and, had I continued, I may not have been able to change before the potential negative consequences were too great."

"Those realisations made me look harder at the whole subject of stress and time management.

One of the results is this book, which I trust will help others to see that stress and heavy demands on their time can be dealt with - and the sooner, the better."

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Introduction

Time management courses are perhaps one of the few training programmes which many people seem to attend again and again. They try out different trainers, different training companies and may even collect books on the subject - not to mention a multitude of diaries and personal organisers along the way.

Why do they do this? Why doesn't a single training course or book solve all their problems?

There will be, no doubt, many reasons. But perhaps the main three are:

- Some people leave a training course and try to implement the whole thing on day one - and it falls apart within two weeks. Work colleagues actually encourage it to fail - you can hear the corridor gossip now: "What are they up to with this new system of theirs?" And the reply comes back: "Oh, they have just been on a training course, never mind, steer clear for a while - they'll soon give it up". And so they do
- Time management courses can also fail to deliver a change for the attendees, because although it might all sound very good, it doesn't actually work in practice - especially when the pressure is on
- To manage time and stress you need to give yourself time to sort things out - and having been out of the office for a day or two, you get

back to work and have to try and 'catch-up' - which, of course, you never do. So inevitably, you never 'sort' yourself out.

So why is this guide any different? Because I have started with the basic assumption that all three of these reasons might apply to you. I have to guide you around these very real obstacles to make time and stress management happen for you.

How to use this guide

This guide has been written in as easy a style as possible to help you. Ideally, you will read it cover to cover and then use it as a reference guide to go back to and dip into to refresh your memory. But you may not have time at the moment to do that.

So here are some tips to help you.

- Look at some of the boxed text in each chapter which contain tips to help you get started
- At the end of each chapter is a useful summary of the points covered, so you can pick which chapters would add the most value
- Number the chapters in the best order of reading for you

- Diarise 20 minutes of your time each week to read one chapter then ask yourself to do just one thing differently in the future
- Over time, re-read the chapters - and finally the whole book - you will have the time by then to diarise the couple of hours it should take to read it cover to cover!

What you will learn from this guide

- Lots of tips and hints which you can absorb easily into your existing work (and home) patterns to help your time management and ease your stress level
- How you might be contributing to your own stress level - and what you can do about it
- How you can influence others to take on some of the workload coming your way - and, even better, how you can pass on some of your work to others
- How to recognise and then reduce the amount of time you 'waste'
- How to prioritise - what to do first and last
- How to take stock of your life in general and take control of it
- How looking after yourself can benefit everyone - but especially you.

Chapter one

Time is a valuable asset

Time is valuable - perhaps a fairly obvious thing to say, but if we all know it, why does anyone ever procrastinate? And it's an asset - what is known as a 'wasting' asset because when you've spent it, you can't get it back - there's no such thing as a refund and the only re-runs are the ones you see on television.

Whilst it is an important first step to recognise the value of your time, it is also vital to remember that you should be the one to decide how to spend it.

Some people adopt a philosophy of treating every day as if it was their last and pack as much into their life as they possibly can. *They* don't 'waste' any time but move as fast as they can from one thing to the next. *They* have lots of energy (for a while at least), get lots achieved (but not necessarily very accurately) and their bosses love them because they do lots. Colleagues do *not* love them because they show everyone else up.

Perhaps they are very productive - but if so, why don't we all do this? Answer: because most of us - me included - would find this very stressful. It

would wear us out in no time. Nor would we have enjoyed it along the way.

It is the enjoyment, the satisfaction, from how you spend your time that rewards you with a 'feel-good' factor and will relieve you of much stress. So always give yourself time to enjoy what you do.

Defining what time management means

So can you actually *manage* time? Probably not - and even if you could, it would be unlikely to deliver the benefits you would want.

Time management is about managing people's use of time - it's about managing *people*.

And the people that need managing are those who have expectations of you (and consequently make demands on your time). You may be top of the list of those who need to be managed, if you have unreasonable expectations of yourself.

It is often controlling oneself that people find the most difficult task. Time management is a discipline, a self-discipline, which will fail unless you decide to stick to it.

Stress can be good for you

Stress can motivate us into action; get us to do something, anything. It's akin to the saying 'a life with little risk is a risk of little life' - we need to take risks, we need to be stressed, to ensure that we get something out of life.

For instance: What gets you out of bed in the morning? Perhaps the need to get to work? To get something done? Without some form of stress in our lives, like having to pay the mortgage or rent, you might never bother to get out of bed at all.

If you follow this thought through, you will see that we can all become stressed by different things - what might get me out of bed in the morning, may have no effect on you whatsoever and vice versa.

So stress is a very personal perception - it relates directly to *you*.

We'll look at what might cause you to get stressed a little later in the book.

The good news about stress is that it can produce the most dramatic gains and achievements - few people who have reached the pinnacle of their career or ambition would claim that it was a stress-free journey. For those people who don't aim quite so high, stress (if relatively short term) can help you perform better or quicker - at least for a while.

Stress that isn't so good for you

From now on, we will only discuss the negative aspects of stress in this book. And to do that, we will use the following definition:

**Stress is a reaction to something(s),
causing you to feel negative.**

Why this definition? Well, I'm going to assume that it is only the negative aspects of your stress that you want to manage and that you're quite happy about things that happen in your life that make you feel good.

This definition of stress specifies 'a reaction to something'. When we are stressed, it is as a result of 'something' - even if we are unsure what that something really is. It may not have even happened - it may never happen - but it is the possibility (however remote) or the fear (however

unrealistic) that can cause you to react negatively - i.e. be stressed.

The connection between time management and stress

We have already said that time management is about control and about managing yourself and other people. When you are not in control, when you are fearful of something, when others demand too much of your time or when you can't (for whatever reason) fit everything into the time you have available, you will feel a certain way about it. If you don't like the way you feel you will be negatively stressed as we define it in this book.

So effective time management can alleviate some stress.

But this book doesn't pretend that all stress is caused by poor time management - if that were true, organised and efficient people would never be stressed and that is definitely not true.

In fact, stress can result from having too little to do, being bored or lonely just as much as by having too much to do or being in a crowd.

So some of the causes of stress we will be looking at may not be strictly time management issues.

In summary

- Time is valuable - make sure you enjoy how you spend it
- Time management is about managing people's expectations of you. The most challenging person to manage in this respect is yourself
- Stress can be good for you
- The stress that needs managing is when your reaction to something causes you to feel negative - and that can be highly destructive
- Stress can be caused by something that might happen or a fear that it might happen, however unrealistic that fear is
- The feeling of stress is personal - what stresses you may have no impact on others and vice versa
- Poor time management can cause stress, but stress is not solely caused by poor time management.

Chapter two

What are the symptoms of stress?

Addressing the symptoms of stress will not take away the causes of your stress. As long as a cause remains, so can your stress.

However, sometimes we need to know just how to cope in the short term and that is where this chapter can help - by giving you some 'quick fixes' to alleviate some of the symptoms.

First, a few words of caution.

Many *possible* symptoms of stress are identified, but they may also be symptoms of something else. For example: Toothache has been said to be a symptom of stress - but I wouldn't recommend that you avoid the dentist simply because you think it is stress related.

So please, do not label symptoms as purely stress related - they may be symptoms of something entirely different which will warrant further and serious investigation.

I also caution you that a quick-fix is *not* a solution - it might just give you a temporary breather. Nothing more. If your stress continues because the causes are not addressed, you should seek professional advice. We will come to some of the causes of stress later - and what you might do about them for yourself.

How will I know if I am stressed?

Well, I could talk about all the chemicals in your body that go into hyperdrive when you're stressed. But I won't, because this isn't a medical book.

You could wear a 'stress detector' to monitor what your body is trying to tell you.

Alternatively, you could fill in a questionnaire in a magazine. It will probably say that moving house, changing jobs, divorce etc. are all highly stressful - so if any of these have happened to you recently, you score extra points. The more points, the more stressed you are - or so the results will tell you.

Or you could just listen to others who keep telling you that you are stressed - be they your partner, your doctor, your colleagues or your boss.

And these are just some of the possibilities. All have their place - but not in this book.

Our definition of stress makes it easy to find out if you are stressed - ask yourself whether you have negative feelings about something. If the answer is 'yes', then that's stress - maybe not the debilitating kind, but still something you need to act upon. So read on.

Some of the symptoms of stress

These can be divided into three categories:

- Behavioural
- State of mind
- Physical

Unless you have been stressed for a long time, you might see a change in only one of the above categories. However, eventually, without some remedial action, all three are likely to be affected. Nor are you likely to be showing all the signs in any one category.

Possible behaviour changes include:

- Showing more aggression - be it in body language (such as clenched fists, grinding teeth, thumping the desk), tone of voice (loudness or even shouting) or the words used (accusatorial, personal attacks, blame etc.)
- Showing signs of withdrawal which again could be in body language (drooped shoulders, standing back, frowning, crying, nail biting and so on), the tone of voice (timid/quiet/hesitant voice) or the words used (apologetic, self-defacing etc.)
- Increased lateness, absenteeism or sickness (see physical changes below)

- Trying to do more than one thing at a time, hyperactivity
- Increased checking of other people's work
- Falling output/achievement
- Increased speed of talking or finishing other people's sentences
- Talking or swearing more
- Talking less
- Increased difficulty in listening to others or taking in of information
- Increase in use of drugs, alcohol, cigarettes
- Increase in infantile behaviour
- Smiling/laughing less.

Some state of mind changes include:

- Increased forgetfulness, rigidity, tension, irritability, moodiness, impatience
- Lack of concentration
- A lack of (usual) creativity
- An increased desire to win-at-all-costs

- An increased feeling of being trapped, isolated or alone
- Less objectivity - more prone to negatively distort situations or information
- Increased feeling of incompetence in self and others
- Falling motivation, more self-pity
- Increase in anxiety levels, fears, likelihood of panic and worry (especially on small matters)
- Inability to relax
- Depression (which will also have physical effects).

And some *possible* physical symptoms include:

- Aches and pains
- Loss of appetite, increased appetite, frequent snacking
- Lack of sexual drive
- Sleeplessness, tiredness, lack of stamina.

Wow! What a list - and it's only an indication of *some* of the symptoms of stress. Yet they could be symptoms of something else - especially those in the physical category, so it is best to seek medical advice if you feel any of the above on a regular or persistent basis.

The quick fixes

If you do nothing whatsoever about stress, it is likely that your negative feelings will increase, rather than remain constant.

These quick fixes are designed to give you a few ideas about what to do at the specific moments of stress. They will help you to try and restore some sort of temporary normality until you get a chance to look at what has actually caused you to be stressed.

One simple method is to take a piece of paper and write down what is stressing you in the first of three columns. In the second column, write when you are going to sort it out and in the third choose one or more of the quick fixes to utilise in the meantime. This should help you put it in perspective and put it to the back of your mind.

Different fixes will be needed according to both the situation and what works for you. Choose the ones that you believe would help you the most.

Here are some really quick fixes:

- Take deep breaths - at least three
- Stretch
- Move
- Walk away
- Laugh, smile
- Thump a cushion
- If you're driving, change your route or slow down
- Count (slowly and silently) to ten
- Ask yourself whether whatever is causing you to be stressed will matter at all next month - or even next week. (Beware - you could feel worse if the cause of your stress has an approaching deadline)
- If you know you can't change it, tell yourself to accept it
- Tell yourself: 'It's not worth worrying about - my well-being is more important'. Get your inner voice right
- Tell your partner or children that you love them

- Think of how great you will feel when it is all sorted out
- Change your schedule to do something next which you have been looking forward to.

And here are some other fixes which may need a little more time (and perhaps a specific location):

- If you normally take work home with you, don't
- Make sure you eat properly and at leisure
- Give yourself a treat, a reward
- Treat your partner
- Spend time with your partner
- Spend time alone
- Take a nap (unless you are suffering from sleeplessness)
- Recite the alphabet backwards
- Meet a friend for a good chat - but not about your stress
- Take a different route to home/work
- Have a long soak in the bath

- Try one of the many relaxation or meditation techniques
- Listen to some favorite music - assuming its uplifting rather than depressing. Sing along with it - out loud
- Make sure that before you go to bed you are winding down - quiet music, soft lights etc.
- Read an interesting book
- Embroil yourself in a hobby
- Take some exercise. However, if you are not used to exercise, don't try to do too much too soon - you may even need medical clearance first
- Think about happier times and memories (which are not related to this stressful event), but remember that if you constantly dwell in the past, you'll never move forward.

If you cannot diffuse your stress level, you are storing up potential problems for yourself in the future. If so, professional help or guidance is advisable. There is no shame in this - on the contrary, you are to be commended for being honest with yourself.

In summary

- Symptoms of stress are merely a reflection of your negative feelings - the easiest way to

identify whether you are stressed is to ask yourself and answer honestly

- There are many possible symptoms of stress - be they behavioural, mental or physical. Not all may be apparent at the same time
- Some symptoms listed as possible signs of stress may be symptoms of something entirely different
- Addressing symptoms with 'quick fixes' should buy you some time, some temporary and relative calm
- Each 'quick fix' should work for some people some of the time. The same 'fix' will not work all of the time
- You need to try and re-establish some form of calm to be able to address the real cause(s) of stress.

Chapter three

What are the causes and consequences of stress?

Rarely will one event alone cause you to be stressed to a point of dysfunction - but it can happen.

Stress can be caused by your negative feelings about a wide range of events, but may only become evident when just one thing triggers all the emotions previously stored up - typically described as the 'straw that breaks the camel's back.' It is this amalgamation of a series of stressful events which has to be avoided - but to do that, you need to deal with each event in turn - the most significant causes first.

Be aware, therefore, that having read this chapter, you may have created quite a list of things that are stressing you - see your list as an opportunity, not a recipe for depression!

Separating the situation from the causes of stress

Remember our definition of stress - 'a reaction to something, causing you to feel negative.' So some of the events mentioned previously like moving house might fall outside of our definition of stress because you may not feel negative about it at all. You might actually feel very good about it.

If it was true to say that moving house is always stressful, then stress management would surely recommend a simple solution - no-one should ever move house! But moving house is fine if it makes you feel good.

Some people, however, do have negative feelings about it even when they have decided to move themselves. What needs to be understood is why they feel like that.

If moving house stresses you, it is more likely to do with:

- Finding a buyer for your old home who is willing to pay your asking price, or...
- Whether you might be surprised by the need for some major repairs after you move in etc..

In other words, it is not the move *per se* that is stressful, it is something about the move that prompts a negative feeling. And it is that 'something' that must be identified and managed.

Therefore, since people fear expensive surprises after buying a house, a surveyor is hired. We manage our stress!

So identifying what stresses you is about finding out how you really feel about specific issues and you will only do that if you stand back, look at yourself and ask yourself the question.

The best time to find out how you feel is at the time you are feeling it - not later when you 'find'

the time. Now this is a vital step in managing stress -

**Ask yourself how you feel *at the time*
that something *specific* happens.
Is it a negative feeling?**

Your state of 'normality'

Knowing how you feel is one thing - but how do you decide whether it is a positive or a negative feeling - or somewhere in between? The truth is that many people spend most of their time not really feeling anything in particular - they feel neither positive nor negative. It is what might be described as a state of 'normality.'

If you know how you feel when you are in a state of normality, you can compare it with how you are feeling at any given time. When you feel different from your own normality, you will either feel better or worse than normal - that is, positive or negative.

There are two other factors to consider in assessing your state of normality:

1. If you consider that your 'normality' has always been negative - what would be the point of finding out that on some days you feel worse than others? Well, you have to start somewhere - find out what causes those days

to be particularly bad and sort those first. You can move on to investigate your more general feelings later - but don't kid yourself that you will end up as 'happy-smiley' all the time.

2. It's possible that you could have been stressed for so long that you can't even remember your normality anymore. If that's the case people around you, people who care about you, should have told you by now that you're stressed. Listen to them - and read the book from your new and enlightened perspective. A medical check up might not be a bad idea either!

Question yourself honestly

So how do you find out what your feelings really are? Ask yourself the questions below and be honest in your answers:

So, something happens, will be happening or you think might happen...

- What specifically is it about this 'something' that might concern you?
- What exactly might you be fearful about?
- Are you likely to behave/react differently from your state of normality? If so, why?
- Are you thinking/feeling irrationally or differently from your normal state? Why do you feel like this?

- Might you be forced to act in a manner you would rather not? What exactly is that manner and why does it concern you?
- Are you happy about it? If not, why not? Be specific
- What is it about this that specifically worries you? Why does it worry you?

You may well see the key words in the above questions - 'exactly', 'specifically', 'what?' and 'why?' These words are great in finding out what causes stress.

Just like when buying our house, to manage your negative feelings about *what specifically* might go wrong, you'll hire a surveyor. In fact, this example is also good time management, because it not only takes away some of the stress, but it also passes on the work to someone else.

One of the most difficult scenarios in tracing the cause(s) of your stress is when you 'displace' the cause. This means that you refuse to face the real cause and so pass the blame onto some other part of your life.

For example:

If you know someone who has been made redundant, they may well have suffered later some form of breakdown in their personal relationships. With hindsight, it is easy to connect the two. Immediately following the

redundancy, however, the stress of not working (and the feeling of rejection which occurs even when it was voluntary) may be 'displaced' to the relationship and be evidenced by increasing arguments, aggression etc. which result in a stressed relationship. But the stress has very little to do with the relationship - it has been 'displaced'.

Only when you truly know what you are dealing with, can you manage it.

How different things can cause stress

It should be evident by now that unwanted (that is, negative) stress happens on a very personal basis in any given situation. So it follows that it is only you who can really identify what is causing you to feel that way.

But are there any guidelines on what might cause you to be stressed? The easy answer is anything at all could cause stress. For example:

For some, shopping is pure delight - for others it is a dreaded experience. For many, standing patiently in a well-managed queue is an accepted practice (therefore it falls within their 'normality') but for others they could start to be stressed at the very thought of *maybe* having to queue.

It is important not to disregard your stressful feelings about any given situation - however trivial they may appear to be to you or others.

Ever heard someone say the following? “Oh, I’m being silly... ignore me... it doesn’t matter... it’s not important - honestly... forget it....”

It’s a fair assumption to say that the speaker is not being entirely honest here. Think of when you last said, “ignore me” without meaning it. You probably thought that the listener would disregard your thoughts or opinions and if so that would cause you stress.

And yet if we hear “ignore me” we do just that! Our minds seem to say ‘they think it’s not important, so I can forget it’ or - ‘sounds like a bit of a problem there, but I would really rather not get involved. Since they are telling me not to bother, I won’t.’

From the speaker’s perspective, they can make their own situation worse by trying to ignore their true thoughts and feelings. This is because *trying* is unlikely to succeed in the long term. There’s almost certain to be some emotional fallout or backlash in the future when their stress will get out of control.

So never disregard something that causes you stress, least of all when others might think it trivial.

And whilst we are talking about this, when you are about to trivialise someone's feelings, think again. You may be causing them stress.

Where to look for causes of stress

Whilst a list would have to include everything anyone ever does, there are some more obvious places to look. Stress is likely when:

- You are asked to move out of your comfort zone
- You live in multiple comfort zones
- You have a secret comfort zone
- You lack the control you want.

Let's take a look at comfort zones...

Moving out of your comfort zone

What is meant by comfort zone?

Let's start by looking at an extreme example. The word 'institutionalised' applies to people who have spent so long within four walls, that they can't cope effectively outside of them. They are only comfortable when they are literally within those walls.

Everyone has such walls - but they are rarely visible. Your comfort zone is the area you feel mentally (and physically) comfortable and happy in.

People are naturally wary about leaving their comfort zones, because of a fear of the unknown or the possible negative consequences that might arise.

We will, however, step out of our comfort zone if we have an incentive - such as learning from new experiences. How else did we learn as small children when experiencing things for the first time? So stepping outside of our comfort zone can be very rewarding - good for us - but it can also be stressful.

If you step outside of your area of knowledge or experience - your comfort zone - you must concentrate on what you will gain by doing it.

Your comfort zone at work, for instance, may be to work at a specific desk or position in a factory and to produce a set output per day. If you are asked to move location or change your output and you are unhappy about it, stress will follow. To manage your stress, try to anticipate such changes, think about what you would gain by them and focus on these positive aspects.

Comfort zones can take all forms. For example: How comfortable are you with an overdraft? Maybe a £100 is fine for you - but £200 isn't. If that's the case, being more than £100 overdrawn is likely to be causing you stress.

Multiple comfort zones

This section applies to you if you operate in more than one zone.

This happens more often than people might realise. Think about how you behave in your own home and compare it to how you behave when staying with one of your relatives or friends. It's highly probable that you act differently - you will only be accepted in their home if you behave differently. You have moved to a second zone, although it will probably overlap with your usual zone, your own home life.

The more your zones overlap, the more relaxed and less negative you will feel. So, if you have to move zones, think about the overlap between the two rather than the differences. This will make you more comfortable - and less stressed.

The more outside of your usual comfort zone you have to go, the more likely it is that you will suffer stress.

For example:

I became a retail regional manager for a new employer in a segment of retailing that was new to me. If I had dwelt on my total lack of product knowledge, I would have probably suffered from stress. Instead, I thought about my retailing experience and how I could apply it to this new product area. By doing so, I successfully managed the potential for stress.

Secret comfort zones

Stress can be all the more exaggerated if you believe you have to keep one zone totally separate from another - what one might describe as a secret life.

There can be all sorts of secret lives. We might create them because of a fear of rejection, disdain or disapproval by an individual, group of individuals or society as whole.

For example:

Religious or political persecution forces some people to hide their beliefs, which they have freely and positively chosen. They are unlikely to be stressed by their beliefs - they are far more likely to be exhilarated and re-charged by them. However, they may well get stressed if they believe that they *have to* conceal their beliefs from work colleagues or even the authorities.

For some, a secret comfort zone might not be stressful - particularly if they made a conscious and positive decision to act in that way. It is when secret zones are created because of what others might say/do that it can be stressful.

So consider - is it better to handle the consequences of being open with others rather than have the stress of a secret life?

Lacking the control you want

The other key area to look for potential stress is when something is out of your control, but in some way it will - or could - have an impact on you. This is all the more likely (and more damaging) if you are a 'control-freak', but a lack of control can stress most of us at least some of the time. It typically arises when your ability to influence events or others' decisions seems - to you at least - inadequate.

This lack of control isn't necessarily that others will take a decision – this happens all the time - it is that you think your feelings about the decision, or the consequences to you of that decision, may be disregarded.

Your stress can be all the more acute if you never say that you feel negative about the

decisions made by others - even if you are given the option. This leads us to another key point:

Since stress is about your negative feelings, you have to be prepared in managing that stress to talk about how you feel.

So, speak up and explain how you feel it might impact you.

How stress can affect you - the bad news

- If someone causes you to feel stressed, it can grow into a grudge and be stored up for a future explosion
- You could lose your cool
- You might drink/smoke/eat too much - and drinking does not just mean alcohol - too much caffeine (which can be present in coffee **and** tea) is not desirable
- It can damage your relationships with others
- The quality of what you do might suffer. Or you might take longer to complete things - even if they have nothing to do with the cause of your stress

- Being stressed can (and will if prolonged) damage your health.

Highly successful people might appear to thrive on stress, but it can cause real damage to their lives in general. Think about the number of famous people you have heard about whose lives have collapsed through too much pressure and stress. And there are many more people like that, whom you haven't heard about.

Negative feelings about one event can negatively impact all the areas of your life.

Think about it.

Count the number of times that you had a good day at work followed by a great evening at home. Now compare that to the number of times that a bad day was followed by a not-so-good time at home. I think you will find more of the latter times than the former - but I'm delighted if you can prove me wrong.

In summary

- Isolate the specific factors which are causing you to feel stressed
- To manage your time and reduce your stress, you should look at whether there are better qualified people to take on a specific activity for you
- It is best to make yourself aware of stress when you are actually in the middle of it rather than with the benefit of hindsight
- To identify whether something is causing you to be stressed, consider whether you feel more negative than normal
- Start by managing the issues which are causing you the greatest stress
- Be honest with yourself and never disregard what you believe to be stressful - even if others might think it trivial
- Plan new experiences so that you focus on what you will gain and what is familiar rather than what might be new or stressful
- If applicable, consider carefully whether having a 'secret life' is doing you more harm than good

- Be prepared to voice how you feel when others may decide to do things against your interests
- Remember that some stress can be good for you - but too much can be highly damaging.

Chapter four

What others expect of you

If you meet the expectations of others, they should be happy about it. Since you have made someone else feel good about what you have done, by implication you will feel good about it yourself. And feeling good can be regarded as stress-free. So:

Meeting the expectations of others can be a step towards providing a mutually stress free environment.

However, you might feel stressed if *you* believe that their expectation of you is unreasonable. If this is so, you should refuse their request.

This also fits in neatly with time management. If you reduce the amount of effort and time you spend doing unreasonable things, you will have more free time for the better things in life.

Knowing what is expected of you

We do many things to meet others' expectations - we send birthday cards because it's expected and we know that it might disappoint someone if

we don't. Fair enough. But we also do things that we *think* are expected - even when we don't actually know that to be true.

For example:

Think about a Christmas when money was tight - most of us can probably remember such a time. You probably struggled to find the money to buy presents, because present giving was expected and you didn't want to disappoint anyone by giving them nothing - or nothing of value. How many parents have gone into debt at Christmas to give the family a 'good-time?' How many parents have chased around shops for the latest toy craze of the season?

Yet how many of these same parents asked their children (assuming that they were old enough to understand):

"Is it okay if I go into debt this Christmas?" or...

"Is it okay if I get into trouble at work by taking two hours off to find that toy you want?" or put another way...

"Is it okay if I am stressed at Christmas?"

Perhaps for many parents, this example will be far too extreme but consider the message:

Ask what others' expectations of you *really* are and that includes helping them to understand the consequences of you fulfilling those expectations.

Ask others what they expect of you

This sounds straightforward. But it isn't.

"What do you want?" could prompt any number of answers - many of which you might not want - such as:

"For you to stop asking stupid questions"

"For you to leave me alone"

"For you to do your job properly"

"A million pounds."

None of these would be particularly helpful. The question is too broad, too isolated to gain the information that you need to respond and stay stress-free.

Let's try a different question:

"I want to do the job properly and to the right standard. To do that, can you tell me exactly how it might be judged as being successfully completed?"

It's a little wordy perhaps - but it reflects some key thinking:

- It avoids personal comments/accusations by taking the emphasis away from the word 'you' and by the opening statement which declares your willingness to act
- It focuses on the successful outcomes sought.

This is significant because too often we try and guess what others want. And a guess will probably mean that you either over or under deliver against their expectations. If you over-deliver you will spend time and effort doing things that are not wanted nor needed. If you under-deliver, you will probably waste time by having to start again when it is rejected and you will have stressed others because you haven't delivered to them.

So you must ask for the specific expectations others have of you as described by the outcome they want to see.

The quoted question on the previous page, however, implies that you will do exactly what is asked whatever their answer is - which may not

be the case. So you may need an alternative question:

“It would help me to understand what you expect from me to determine whether or not I can do it to the standard you need. What exact outcome is needed here?”

This brings out two further points:

- You can find out more information without committing yourself
- By inserting the word ‘exact’ you have obliged the respondent to be specific about their expectations.

However, you may want to think about whether you believe the expectations are reasonable before responding:

“I would like to think about exactly what this involves and come back to you with any questions I might have. To help me with that, can you clarify what specific outcome you need to enable me to come back this afternoon with my thoughts?”

There are further positives which this provides:

- You have made it clear that you will give it serious thought
- You have avoided being put ‘on the spot’ and, if you want, have time to think how to refuse the request!

- You have provided a deadline for your response to avoid being chased by them for an answer.

Which ever of the above formats suits your needs; paraphrase it into your own words.

Never use wording written by others verbatim - not even from this book. It would be like trying to walk ten miles in someone else's shoes - a nightmare!

A reality check - are the expectations reasonable?

It doesn't matter who is making the request of you, it doesn't matter how reasonable it sounds, it doesn't matter whether they have always been reasonable in the past...

Always think before saying 'yes'.

Remember that it is you who decides whether a request is reasonable, because it is only you who knows whether it would cause you stress. But

there are two sides to determining whether a request should be fulfilled:

If you refuse a reasonable request you may cause stress to others - which is unreasonable behaviour on your part.

You need to think about what might make a request or expectations reasonable or unreasonable.

Here are a few true examples to start you thinking - ask the following of each scenario: Who (if anyone) is being unreasonable and potentially causing stress for the other?

- One of my relatives decided that birthday cards were a waste of money, so she stopped sending them - including to her mother. Her mother thought that it was unreasonable and became stressed about it. The daughter thought she was being totally reasonable and wasn't stressed at all about it
- One of my trainees had always insisted that his daughter should not travel home from a nightclub on her own - should that be likely to happen, she should phone him for a lift. He got a surprise call at 3am to pick her up

- A lady was asked by her boss to do an essential but pressured job for which she had no training. She refused but her boss insisted
- A project manager was asked on a Friday afternoon to write a vital report - something she had done many times before. But the boss wanted it Monday morning and weekend working was not 'normal' for the project manager - it was beyond her expectation
- A hotel decided to close for Christmas for the first time in eighteen years. One of the regular Christmas guests had nowhere to stay, so persuaded the hotel to stay open.

If one party is unreasonable, it will cause the other to have negative feelings - that is, stress.

In assessing whether expectations are reasonable, stay objective and consider it from both points of view.

How to say 'no'

If fulfilling someone's expectations would cause you stress, you may need to say 'no'. For many of us, this is not always as straightforward as it sounds.

For instance: Let's say your mother asked you to visit and do a job for her. But you are really busy **and** it's a three hour drive **and** you had an argument the last time you went **and** you can't afford the petrol **and** it's probably only to change a light bulb.

Let's assume that you think that it is an unreasonable request - but how easy would you find it to say 'no'?

You might say:

"No mum - I really don't have the petrol money" - but if she then offered to pay, you'd be getting in the car within minutes.

So how about:

"I can't today mum, I'm really busy" - so you end up going the next day instead.

Let's try another:

"No mum, it's not worth coming all the way over there to change a light bulb". She answers - "So it doesn't matter to you if I fall over in the dark and break my leg?". You're trapped and on your way.

So how do you say 'no'?

Follow this 5-point guide:

1. Check whether it is a reasonable expectation or request. If it is reasonable and you refuse,

you will probably be causing someone stress - is that fair?

2. Never give excuses. Even a genuine reason could be countered (like mum offering to pay for the petrol), but if it is the only reason why you want to refuse, problem solved.

You could, however, make people aware of what will not be done if you fulfill this later request.

For instance: "If I did visit you today Mum, I wouldn't be able to referee the Under-12s game and it would have to be cancelled".

This particular example is close to emotional blackmail - especially if her grandson is a member of the team - but in work situations, it can be very effective if others realise that their insistence will prevent some other task being achieved.

3. Clearly refuse the request, not the person. Saying no to your mum's request doesn't mean you think the less of her and you must make that clear.
4. Look for the hidden message. Maybe mum's just lonely. Maybe you need to help her in that respect.

5. Think of offering alternatives. This doesn't mean volunteering your sister who lives much nearer - it means helping to find ways to overcome the hidden message without dumping the responsibility elsewhere.

So let's try and say no to mum without hurting her feelings:

"Mum, you know I think the world of you, but it really isn't reasonable for me to drive for six hours to change a light bulb. I'm sure that between us, we can think of someone else who can help you with it."

And continue...

"Whilst you're on the phone, perhaps we can sort something out to spend a bit of time together in the next few weeks. What do you think?"

Think about times in the past when you really wanted to say 'no' to a request and still ended up fulfilling it. What could you have done differently by using the five-point guide?

In summary

- Not meeting the expectations of others is likely to stress one or both of the parties involved
- Never assume what is expected of you - if you are unsure in any way, ask for specific information

- You should think about refusing unreasonable demands, but take care not to reject the person who is asking you
- If you are unsure whether or not you should refuse to meet the expectations of others, buy yourself some time to think about it
- Be clear in any refusal and don't give excuses. If people are making unreasonable requests of you, you should explain to them how it makes you feel and what the potential consequences of trying to do it might be
- Consider whether there is a hidden message behind any request and try to respond to that if not the request itself
- If refusing a request, look for alternative ways that it can be fulfilled without volunteering others.

Chapter five

The expectations you have of yourself

In the last chapter, we discussed people's demands on you and your time. These demands took the form of expecting too much from you - and being potential stress areas for you as a result.

Now, we need to look at another set of expectations, which may be unreasonable. These are the expectations you have of yourself.

You, and you alone, may be the major cause of stress in your life - so let's find out in this chapter if that's true.

What do you expect of yourself?

One of my colleagues starts his day with the best of intentions: "Today, I am going to do this, and that, and this other thing". He's keen to achieve his goals. The trouble is that his goals are often unrealistic - he expects just too much of himself. As a result, he is disappointed at the end of the day and puts more pressure on himself for the next day's workload.

In short, his expectations are unreasonable.

People can make extraordinary demands on themselves. Stress arises when they don't know that they are expecting too much.

Further examples of when expectations can be unreasonable are at Christmas, birthdays or even weekends. Most of us would like a 'Happy Christmas' but how many of us look back at a Christmas time and say something like: "Well, it could have been better" or "What ever possessed them to buy me THIS!" Perhaps our idyllic expectations are a little unrealistic.

So it is important to know yourself, find out about yourself and to discover whether any of your expectations are unreasonable or unfair on yourself.

How fair are you with yourself?

Think about specific times in your past when you have said to yourself:

- "I could have done it better" or "I would do it differently if I had to do it again" - even when others are more than satisfied with what you have done. Not only might your thoughts be unreasonable and stressful, but doing it again would probably waste your time

- “I can’t sit still, there is so much to do” - but failing to give your mind and body some ‘recovery’ time from earlier exertions is unreasonable, stressful and potentially dangerous
- “I’m annoyed at myself because things have not gone according to plan” or “I have no time to think, I must get on.” You cannot expect things to succeed if you don’t plan properly and you will probably waste time in the longer term by having to redo work
- “I wish I had managed to do just one more thing today” - but is that always reasonable?

And think of times when others have told you:

- “I didn’t expect you to do it this well or this quickly” – have you pressurised yourself unnecessarily?
- “You are your own worst critic” - indicating that you fail to praise yourself enough and are too hard on yourself.

Such occasions may well have happened after a highly productive time, but you finished up with negative feelings because you were being unreasonable with yourself.

How you can cause yourself to be stressed

If you have now identified occasions when you have been unreasonable in your expectations of yourself, we're on the right track.

Can you identify any common themes amongst them?

If you can, it will help you anticipate future occasions when you are likely to be unreasonable again. Now, you should plan to be a little bit fairer on yourself when that situation occurs.

If you haven't identified any time when you feel in any way negative about what you have done then you are:

- a) Not thinking hard enough
- b) Have a tendency to blame others for your past mistakes
- c) Super-human or...
- d) A very well balanced and adjusted person.

You choose.

Yet again we are faced with the meaning of the word 'reasonable' - and yet again, you are the only person who can really judge it - but remember...

You aren't super-human - so it may be time to start telling yourself that.

How to say 'yes' to yourself

You have to make a conscious effort to reverse the influence on yourself of anything that you think, believe or do that is causing you to feel stressed.

For example: My work colleague who never completes the goals he sets himself has got to start telling himself either:

- That he should plan to do less in a day or...
- It's fine not to complete everything in a day (or whatever time period is used).

Another example - a person who apologises all the time for what they do/haven't done should start asking themselves:

- Do I actually mean that I am sorry? If not, save it for when you really mean it.
- Does the person to whom I am apologising deserve an apology? If not, don't give it.
- Does the person to whom I am apologising want an apology? If not, why bother?

- Have I done my best? If so, is an apology appropriate?

And what if you are the person who can't sit still?

Try telling yourself that it's good to take a breather - there's no harm in sitting down and doing nothing for a while. Practice sitting down for 10 minutes without thinking about what you need to do - nor doing it.

Whatever unreasonable demands you have put on yourself, see them as self-imposed rules and set about breaking them every now and again.

In summary

- Ask yourself whether you are expecting too much of yourself and as a result causing yourself to be stressed
- Think about times in the past when you felt stress which could have been attributable to your expectations of yourself - is there a common theme?
- Are you too self-critical? You may well be better than you give yourself credit for

- Learn for the future by looking at times when you have stressed yourself in the past
- If you frequently apologise for yourself, your actions - ask yourself whether such apologies are always desirable
- Tell yourself that it is okay to disobey your own 'rules' every now and again and not try to be super-human.

Chapter six

The stress you might cause others

One message in this book, which should be fairly clear by now, is that if expectations are unreasonable, they can cause stress. People who place unreasonable demands on you can cause you to be stressed and you can cause yourself to be stressed by having too high an expectation of yourself. And you can stress others by demanding too much of them.

This chapter starts by discussing the stress that you might cause others.

If you think that this doesn't really interest you, think again. If you cause stress for others, they are unlikely to perform at their best. As a result, your expectations of their performance will not be met - which in turn can stress you. So don't do it!

The second part of this chapter looks at how you can get others to do what you want *without* stressing them. If you achieve that, you will avoid some stress and be more effective with your time.

Why more effective? Well, if you have to re-explain or re-do anything that has been done 'wrongly' by others, it will take up more of your time. This must be avoided since we are trying by this book to reduce your workload - not increase it.

What do you expect of others?

You should reflect back at this point on the expectations you have of yourself - because it is highly likely that you will seek to impose those expectations on others.

For example:

- If you are the type of person who *has* to do a job immediately even though you may have weeks to complete it, it is very likely that when you give a task to someone, you will expect them to do it at once
- If you are something of a perfectionist - you will expect others to work to the same standard - even if it isn't really necessary
- If you put your personal problems aside when at work, do you expect others to do the same?

You may consider that all of your expectations are reasonable. But will the people you are trying to impose your standards on agree with you?

Setting the right standards for others

You need to be clear about what you do, and do not, expect from others. One of the simplest ways to do this is to set objectives.

Objectives have two parts - the first defines what you want done - known as a statement of intent. The second part identifies how you will know that it has been done successfully - the measures of success.

For example:

Let's say you want your teenage son or daughter to tidy their room and say: "Go and tidy your room." Assuming you get a response, it would probably be something like:

"Later - when I have finished..."

"I mean NOW!" is your response

This is your first measure. It defined what you deem to be a successful tidying of their room - an early start.

We'll assume that works and they go to their room. And because they finish remarkably quickly, you go and check...

"I didn't mean that you should push everything under the bed and in the wardrobe - I meant that you should bring the dirty washing down, hang up your clean clothes and..."

You have started to add some more measures of success, but because you delayed telling them what you expected in the first place, you are now somewhat stressed about it. You may even wish you had never asked, because they have gained an 'attitude' about going back to do it again.

Although it will take a little longer to communicate exactly what you expect, it will save you time (and stress) in the long run by saying something like:

"I would like you to go and tidy your room so I can do the washing and be sure you will have clean clothes for your night out. Can you go upstairs and hang up the clean clothes and bring me your washing. If you do it now, I will have time to get everything ironed before you need to go out."

This example seeks to communicate exactly what is required. It also includes another essential:

**If you want someone to do something,
be clear about what they will get out of
it by completing it successfully.**

And a final check before you ask someone to do something:

Are your expectations of others reasonable?

The art of delegation

Delegation is about giving someone something to do which otherwise you might well end up doing yourself. By relieving yourself of the work, you can escape the stress of having too much to do or of trying to do something for which you may not have all the necessary skills. Plus:

Successful delegation is a major boost to gaining free time in a busy life - wonderful time management. So it is important to get it right.

To delegate effectively, follow the guide below:

1. Set an objective for what needs to be done - as discussed in the section above
2. Decide who would be the 'best' person to delegate to. 'Best' does not necessarily mean the most qualified or the most able -

delegation can be a development opportunity for someone who has lots to learn or a task might be delegated to a person who has lots of free time

3. Think about what the person to whom you are delegating will gain by doing it successfully. You will need to say this to them early in the conversation to get them interested
4. Discuss it with them. The key word here is 'discuss' because you need their commitment to do it and do it right. Telling them may not necessarily secure that commitment. Part of the discussion should include identifying whether they believe that they have the skills and experience to do it. If they haven't - agree how any gap can be filled
5. Let them determine *how* they are going to do it to your satisfaction, but agree when you want to review their progress
6. Stand back. Shut up. Leave them alone to get on with it. To prevent them having to return to you for an authorisation to act, you may have to give them some specific 'powers' to complete the job
7. Review what happens, at the agreed times, but particularly when the task has been completed
8. Give them praise.

So now you know how to delegate, to whom can you pass on your work?

Delegation is not just for managers who have a team of people working for them. You can delegate to anyone.

Delegation is not a question of rank. You can delegate to members of your family, friends, colleagues and your boss - although I wouldn't actually use the word 'delegation', especially to the latter.

Here are a few prompts to start you thinking about the different things you could delegate:

- Any task which is *not* included in your role description
- Any task for which you might be over-paid (assuming that you receive a salary). For example: A shop manager might be an inexpensive manager but relatively expensive shelf filler - so delegate it!
- Any task for which you are not competently skilled or experienced - unless it provides you with a significant 'learning opportunity'
- Any task which can provide a development opportunity for someone else. This can even

include getting other members of your family to cook!

- Things you *like*, but shouldn't do. These will be the most difficult for you to delegate.

Getting others to say 'yes'

Great idea this delegation you may say. But getting people to say 'yes' isn't that easy. So how can we get them to agree to do things for us?

- If you cannot identify what they would gain by doing it, you are unlikely to succeed.
- Anticipate the excuses and reasons they might have for *not* doing it and plan how you are going to deal with them. (Remember the mother who anticipated you not having the petrol money to visit her; she was ready with her cheque book before you even thought of it!)
- Do not allow them to choose between a 'yes' and 'no' answer. Ask them to do 'this' or 'that'. At least you will get one job done!
- Be courteous and positive when asking.

In summary

- If you cause stress to others, it may well rebound back on you

- Be wary of imposing any of your own unreasonable standards on others
- When making a request of others, check that you have also described how you would judge its completion a success
- When trying to get someone to do something, be specific about what they would gain by it. Anticipate the possible excuses and reasons they might raise and plan to deal with them
- Don't interfere when you have delegated a task
- Remember that you can delegate to anyone - even your boss
- The hardest things to delegate are the things you enjoy doing the most.

Chapter seven

Anticipating problems and dealing with them

So far we have concentrated in this book on what might have caused stress in the past and what you might learn from that for the future to create a more stress-free environment for yourself and others. In dealing with that stress, you should become more productive and substantially improve your time management.

The rest of this book now takes a more proactive look at stress and time management.

Panic and fire fighting

Panic and fire fighting don't always go together. You may know someone who is wonderful at fire fighting, thriving in a crisis. They appear positively heroic - yet even they might become stressed if they have to firefight all the time, although they might not always show it.

The main alternative to thriving in a crisis is panic. And when we panic, we are in danger of making irrational decisions, communicating badly and spreading panic to others. It is also likely that if we do anything during this time we will do it badly - causing us more work in the longer term which means more stress and poor time management.

So panic = stress = poor time management.

Therefore, we need to try and anticipate what would make us panic and see if there are ways that we can eliminate or minimise this.

Think about contingencies

The purpose of a contingency action is damage limitation.

For example: If you spill paint, you will try to clean it up before it damages too many things. You can no longer stop the paint from spilling, but you can limit the damage caused.

Contingencies cannot restore normality - they cannot put the situation back as if it never happened - something will have changed.

But contingencies can *reduce* the negative impact when things go wrong.

To reduce stress and manage time better, plan contingent actions.

So for contingent actions to be effective, we have to think about what could go wrong before we start. So, when we decorate, it is possible that some paint might spill. If it does - what will we do about it? Mop it up quick! So we need a cloth or mop to hand just in case.

Had we not thought about this in advance, we may have to run around the house shouting 'anyone got a cloth?' and the spillage could be getting worse for every second it is left to its own devices. Whilst looking for a cloth, we may even accidentally tread paint on non-protected areas causing even more damage. And think of the time and money needed to put all that right - all for the sake of a cloth being to hand - just in case.

Contingencies need a little bit of thought in advance to prevent a major catastrophe - and panic - later.

So before you do anything, consider what could go wrong and what you would need to do if it does. Can you make your life any easier with a little more preparation before you start?

Trying to avoid problems

It would be much better, however, not to have to use contingencies at all. To help achieve that,

we need to think about how to prevent things going wrong *before* they happen.

Ask what could go wrong and what you could do to prevent it - or try to prevent it - happening. Evidently, you must think about this before you start doing *anything*.

Let's consider our decorating once again: Before I start, what might go wrong? Well, the paint could spill. What can I do to try and prevent that happening?

I could decide to:

- Put the paint on a secure base at all times
- Seal the paint tin when not in use
- Clear the room to be decorated of clutter to prevent accidents and so on...

These preventive actions will take the minimum of time to do and they will be unlikely to cause stress (unless I have a very sloppy way of working - in which case maybe I should hire someone to decorate for me). And:

Prevention is better than cure.

Proactive thinking time

Whether you decide to have contingent or preventive actions (and I would recommend you have both), you will need to spend a little more time thinking about what you intend to do, before you do it.

A typical reaction to this need for thinking time is - "I haven't got the time" or "I must get on with it" or perhaps worse of all: "My boss will tell me off if I am sitting here doing 'nothing' at all."

First, let's be clear about it:

Thinking is not doing 'nothing' and if your boss thinks it is, he or she needs telling otherwise.

If you doubt the value of thinking before you act, ask yourself whether you have ever said 'with the benefit of hindsight' or 'I should have thought about that' or 'I didn't think.' If you have, then think again.

Plan your day to include time to think.

Diarise thinking time or write it on your to-do-list. Make sure you think about what you are going to do before you do it.

And decide *where* you can think without distraction. In the bath? In the car before you go into work? In an armchair at home? It doesn't matter where you think providing you don't get interrupted or distracted. Closing your eyes will help (but not whilst driving!) - so might soothing background music.

In summary

- Think before you act
- Minimise panic by thinking what could go wrong and what contingencies you should have ready
- Think about whether you can do something to prevent things going wrong in the first place
- Allocate yourself some pro-active thinking time every day - without interruption.

Chapter eight

'Wasting' time

The opening chapter describes time as a 'wasting' asset, but 'wasting time' - the subject of this chapter - is somewhat different. All time - every moment of it - is a wasting asset, because we cannot get any of those moments back. But when we use the term 'wasting time', we refer to specific periods of time when we felt that we were not as productive as either we or others expected.

We have all used expressions like "I wasted time yesterday" or "...if I hadn't wasted time earlier, I would have finished by now." But such statements are not necessarily true.

For example:

In writing this book, I have to meet a deadline set by my publishers and that date is getting nearer and nearer. So why do I sometimes 'waste' time by playing computer games?

Answer - because I can only cope - I only want to cope - with so much work before giving myself a reward, a break from what I am doing. I need a breather. The first few games (at least) are not a waste of time, because they allow me to re-charge ready to write the next sentence, paragraph or chapter. And allowing myself to re-charge is a good investment of my time rather than a waste.

**So don't feel guilty about time you
'waste' when you are re-charging.**

However, I *may* waste *some* time by spending more time than I need playing computer games. At this point, it becomes a way of deferring a job I don't really want to do - that's not true of writing this book, but it is true of other things such as catching up on my reading. And it is this wasted time that we will be exploring in this chapter.

Eliminate the obvious

The first time and motion people started with the right idea: If it takes twenty seconds to walk each way to a filing cabinet and we have to do it thirty times a day, we will waste 20 minutes every day. That's more than 150 hours per year and that's over 6 days out of our life for every year we work.

The time and motion people would move the filing cabinet nearer to your desk and save your shoe leather and precious hours. Super.

So if this is you, stop wasting time now and get that cabinet moved! But don't forget what I discussed in the last chapter - what might go wrong? If you strain your back moving the cabinet you could be off work for a month. If you

don't lock the drawers, all the files might spill onto the floor which will take weeks to sort out etc..

Better still, before you move the cabinet, ask a few 'dumb' questions about the filing you are doing:

- Why am I doing this?
- Is this task really necessary?
- Who would be impacted if it were not done?
- What is the impact/goal of doing this task?
- Is there a better way to achieve the same goal?

**It's amazing what you might discover
by asking a few 'dumb' questions.**

**Don't just try to streamline a process
to save time - find out first whether or
not the process needs to be done at
all.**

Where to look to eliminate wasted time

Keep a time log for a couple of weeks to record what you have done and how long it has taken.

Break the days on any time log into time periods - I would suggest no longer than 30 minutes per period. Then you can see where you should be spending less (or more) time on any particular issue.

And here are some specific things to do to help you manage your time.

Paperwork

- If you constantly lose papers or information, create an efficient, structured filing system and stick to it
- If you receive memos/letters/e-mails, which you don't want or need, get yourself off the circulation list
- If you have to complete too many progress updates, seek to reduce them
- If you receive (or issue) lengthy reports, insist on a summary on the front so people know its subject matter and importance.

And if you seem to spend too much time on the telephone:

- Write down what you want to achieve before phoning someone then keep it in front of you to keep you focused
- Stand up when on the telephone (it will shorten its duration)
- Limit each call with an egg-timer.

And on communication in general:

- If people come back to you to clarify what your communications/instructions mean, learn for the future how you can be clearer the first time
- If people are constantly bringing you problems, ask them to also bring their recommended solutions
- If you are constantly chasing work that has failed to be returned by your deadline, be vigilant in communicating at the start the reason why your deadline exists.

If you spend a lot of time travelling, ask yourself:

- Would a telephone call, e-mail or a fax suffice?

- Could someone else go in my place?
- Can I merge two journeys to save travelling time and costs?
- Could we meet at a suitable mid-point?
- Should they come to me?
- If I travel, for instance, by train, can I take some work with me to maximise my time?

If you are always getting interrupted:

- Only see some people by appointment.

Add value by what you do

Whatever you do, it should add some sort of 'value'. And the greater the added value the better. Ask yourself:

- Can I be using my time more productively, more effectively, by doing something else?
- Would it be better to employ someone to do this rather than doing it myself?
- How would I use the time I would gain by not doing this particular task?

- Am I doing this - even though I shouldn't - simply because I like doing it?

You have to be quite brutal with yourself - we tend to do things we like doing, even if we shouldn't.

A problem shared and solved

A problem occurs when something has failed to meet expectations and we know that can result in stress.

Problems can also cause poor time management because we have to spend unexpected time resolving them. If we fail to resolve them fully, such problems will re-occur again and again - each time creating more time and stress difficulties. So:

Dealing with problems is a vital element in managing time and stress.

The old maxim that a problem shared is a problem solved carries a lot of truth. If you refuse to share a problem, you are creating a

new secret comfort zone (see Chapter three), and that secrecy alone can stress you. So it follows that if you invite just one person into that zone to share a problem, you can reduce your stress - providing, that is, you pick the right person:

- You need someone who will be objective about it and help you to rationalise the problem
- You need someone who can encourage you to be specific in identifying your concerns - a key requirement in any problem solving technique
- You need someone who won't seek to impose their solution on you
- You need someone who will not make the problem worse or add further problems - for instance, by telling all your colleagues about your problems.

In short...

**Share a problem only with a person
you can trust.**

Now you have shared the problem, you have to solve it. Sounds simple enough - but what tends

to happen is that the consequences of a problem are dealt with rather than the problem itself.

For instance:

Someone is significantly late for work. The manager spends time re-adjusting the workflow to minimise the impact of having an unexpected absentee. Then this person arrives and the manager asks for a reason. Traffic delays? A broken alarm clock? An absent baby-minder? One of the best 'reasons' I heard was that a cow had got onto the railway line and caused train delays - to this day I don't know whether or not it was true!

And the possible solutions? Get up earlier, get a new alarm clock, hire a new minder, get an earlier train etc.. Problem solved? Well yes, maybe - until it happens again.

The manager spends more time on filling in the gap caused by the latecomer (which is dealing with the consequences of the problem) and less time investigating the real problem - the lateness. The excuses are 'accepted' all too quickly, because the only alternative seems to be calling the latecomer a liar.

The trouble here is that this problem may never be solved. And when it happens again - which it probably will - there will be increased stress and more wasted time.

So what should our manager do? The trick will be to get the latecomer to share their problem

with the manager *before* the excuses are proffered. To do this, the manager has to be trusted and seen as someone who can objectively help the latecomer. Together, the problem can be analysed and the real cause identified.

There are lots of problem solving techniques and this is not the book that will describe them - but they all have a common theme:

Problem solving is about being persistent (but friendly) in asking lots of questions until all the facts are revealed.

The impact of poor decisions

If you make the right decision at the right time, it can save a great deal in the long run - even if you have taken some time and effort in making sure it is right.

Consider what the impact of a poor, wrong or late decision might be:

- Poor or wrong decisions are frequently accepted (if not covered up) even though it is known they should be changed. Yet few people feel good about implementing a bad decision. That's a real recipe for stress

- All decisions are followed by some sort of action. If it is a poor decision, any resulting action will waste time. That can be stressful
- Decisions which are not documented are difficult to explain or communicate. As such, they are frequently challenged by others - which can waste everyone's time
- A late decision - or no decision at all - is also likely to cause stress, simply because people may be hanging around, getting bored, whilst they wait for something to do.

So good and timely decisions are vital. There is a range of techniques on decision-making using creative intuition through to logical analysis.

The essential elements of good decision-making are:

- To actually make a decision
- To ensure a 'fitness for purpose' on whatever decision is made
- To document that decision with the details of why alternatives were not accepted
- To explore the risks of any decision that is made. See chapter seven
- To communicate to all interested parties the decision and reasons why it has been made.

Meetings - the great time waster

Ever been to a meeting and thought 'why am I here?' or 'this is boring' or 'can't we get on?' - most of us have.

It may not be that the meeting as a whole is a waste - just parts of it. The most frequent exception to this is when meetings are scheduled before any agenda item is set - those dreaded weekly or monthly get-togethers which usually talk about nothing of importance.

Why not cancel all pre-scheduled regular meetings? If they really are so essential, there will be uproar.

The way to better meetings

- Meetings should only be arranged when there are specific items to be discussed
- The agenda should be published in advance of the meeting
- The reason that each agenda item is to be discussed must be clearly identified so only those who are involved or impacted should be invited. They should prepare in advance
- All meetings should have a rigid start time. If one attendee amongst ten is 5 minutes late,

the other nine have wasted a total of 45 minutes

- All meetings should have an agreed finish time

If attendees don't know when a meeting will finish, they can't plan their next activity - and will probably waste time as a result.

- Allow a contingency period after a meeting in case it is agreed to extend its deadline
- All meetings should have a tight schedule

If you give people time to procrastinate, they will.

One way a company cut down on both the number and duration of meetings was to remove all the chairs and tables from their meeting rooms. Meetings suddenly became a lot shorter.

In summary

- Remind yourself that it is okay not to be productive all of the time - we all need to re-charge

- A basic time and motion study of what you do and how long it takes can reduce wasted time
- Create a time log to find out where you have spent your time and deal with anything that takes a disproportionate amount of time in relation to your priorities
- Ask yourself whether you are doing things that are unnecessary or would be better done by someone else
- Ask yourself what value you are adding by doing something - before you do it
- Share a problem with someone who can help you *so*lve it
- Take time to make the right decisions or you will regret it in the long run
- Challenge every meeting you are asked to attend - "What's the purpose and why should I be there?"
- Turn up to meetings on time and check everyone works towards finishing at the agreed time.

Chapter nine

Structuring your day

This chapter draws together the key elements of managing time - and therefore stress - through the efficient planning and structuring of your day.

There are many ways to remind yourself what you need to do - diaries, to-do-lists, wall planners, schedules, small notes stuck to the desk/telephone/fridge or simply creating a pile of everything in front of you.

There is no 'best' method for remembering what has to be done - only the best method for you and you will probably only find that out by trial and error.

Now is the time for you to choose which method you are going to try first.

Diaries, to-do-lists and schedules

**Diaries and personal organisers
should be extensively managed, used
and updated.**

They should include:

- Appointments/meetings etc.
- Matters that you need to re-visit later - including 'bring forward' items
- Any travelling time that needs to be blocked out to avoid clashing with other appointments
- Times when activities should be started to ensure you have enough time to finish them
- Deadlines should be recorded
- Any 'penciled-in' dates when you are awaiting confirmation about something you *might* have to do - plus an earlier date by which it should either be 'inked-in' or erased
- Space to add additional information to avoid a multitude of scribbled notes - some of which you might well lose
- If an issue is entered a long time in advance, it may be necessary to write in more information than usual - for instance, where to find a relevant file
- If required, complete it daily with your expenses.

Some people have a desk diary *and* a personal organiser of some kind (increasingly the computerised version). Bad idea! Using more

than one diary runs the risk of double bookings. If someone else makes diary entries for you (and therefore needs their own written record), block out different times in each version when appointments can be made without referring first to the other. I would still recommend that you do this even if you and the other person have 'live' electronic access to the same diary.

So what about to-do-lists?

Personally, I have found this to be the most effective way to manage my time. Every Monday morning I create a to-do-list for the week. I find the information for that list from my one diary.

You may prefer a daily list rather than weekly list, which is fine. Try and avoid a monthly version since it will probably be too long and therefore it could de-motivate you every time you look at it. It could also be fairly unreadable at the month's end.

Avoid crossing out what has been done, since all you will see when you next look at the list is what remains. It is far more motivating to focus on what you have done - so...

When you have finished a task, use a highlight pen to show it is completed or give it a 'tick'.

To-do-lists should avoid things that have to be done in future weeks, because that is what diaries are for.

When using a to-do-list, add extra things to do during that week to the list and your diary (the latter will keep your records up to date).

If tasks are going to be spread over a number of your to-do-lists, break them down into smaller chunks, so you have specific small tasks to complete on each list. Remember to diarise the other parts of the task for future lists.

If your scheduling is realistic, you should be able to complete your list each time. That will be highly motivating and it should also contribute to managing any stress caused by having too much to do.

I would not recommend the use of small notes to yourself - they get lost, make it difficult to prioritise (see Chapter ten) and generally represent chaos - albeit sometimes a managed chaos. Perhaps the only exception to this is an occasional use for a top priority issue - because it's exceptional, you will treat it as such.

Some people pile their work in front of them to remind themselves it needs to be dealt with. Bad idea!

When writing this book, if I have a pile of other things on my desk, it will only serve to distract me. I'm deciding what to write next and suddenly see a pending problem and I start thinking of that rather than the book. As a result, I disrupt my thinking and probably stress myself over all the other things I haven't yet started.

So to prevent interrupting your thoughts:

Put everything you are not working on out of sight - either behind you or in a specified drawer of your desk but make sure you don't forget about it.

There is one golden rule when choosing how to remind yourself what to do:

Only use one method per specific work period.

Stress free 'corridors of time'

Within any schedule you should leave some space. Unexpected things will happen - and you

may need to devote some time to deal with them. That's the negative viewpoint.

A more positive view is to leave space within a schedule for thinking. Few of us allow ourselves the luxury of thinking time - and you will need thinking time to *solve* problems and make *sound* decisions.

There is another aspect you should plan within any schedule - stress free corridors.

If you have had a stressful day at work and go straight home, how many of you take that stress home with you? You may have wanted to shout, scream or moan at someone all day - but the first person you choose is your partner, since taking it out on people at work could endanger your job. Yet we sometimes forget that taking it out on our partners can endanger our relationships. The result is stress at home, which you will take straight back to work the next morning. So we need to create stress free corridors.

Stress free corridors break the transfer of stress from one situation to another.

To create a corridor, you need to do something that will make you think differently, give you something else to focus on.

For many of us, that opportunity may be the journey home from work. But, it has to make us think to be effective:

- How many of you drive the same route every day and sometimes can't remember whether you stopped at that last set of traffic lights?
- How many commuters always sit in the same seat on the same bus or train and stare blankly out of the window, not knowing whether the bus or train has stopped two or three times?
- How many of you always do the housework in the same sequence and still can't remember what has been dusted?

The problem with the above is that we have not used them as we might - as stress free corridors. Instead, we have 'gone blank' or dwelt on what a stressful day we have had so far.

So when you are moving out of a stressful environment, travel home a different route, sit on the train in a different seat, do things deliberately out of sequence or whatever - as long as it stimulates you to think of something completely different. Now that's a corridor! And you will be on your way to reducing the likelihood of transferring the stress of one event to another - whether the latter is stressful or not.

If you have to undertake a range of stressful activities, going straight from one to the next may

well increase your stress level. Nor will you derive any satisfaction from completing the first.

So when one stressful activity is finished, *schedule* yourself a stress free corridor.

Such a corridor might still involve work, but it could be something you like doing or will require totally different skills and thought processes. It will help prevent your stress spiraling out of control.

Corridors should also be used if you are surrounded by others who are stressed - they can transfer it to you unless you take a break from them.

Finally, in respect of corridors, take the most obvious one - your meal break away from your workstation. Stop the "I'll-eat-my-sandwiches-at-my-desk-syndrome". Your productivity (and stress level) in the afternoon will probably be worse than if you had taken a 'location break.'

Don't start unless you can finish

If you start a task, then break off to do something else, what happens when you re-start the first task? Answer - you have to review where you

are up to and that is wasted time. On the other hand, if you start and finish a task before beginning the next, your flow and efficiency is likely to be at its best.

So you must estimate *all* of the time needed to complete each task in one go.

Estimating how long tasks take

If you know project management principles, you will have studied a range of techniques to help you estimate how long tasks take. In the end they all boil down to one thing - how good at guessing are you?

Probably the best way of estimating is to create a record of how long different tasks take to be completed. Then whenever you have something similar to do, your records will give you a clear idea of how long it took last time. It will help if you break big jobs up into smaller pieces and write down how long each takes.

It is also valuable to find out how good you are at estimating your own use of time. So when a task is completed, compare how long it has taken to your original estimate. Then you can start to identify whether you tend to over or under estimate.

However good you are at estimating, don't crush things into your schedule - it's bound to fail and that can cause stress. If your estimating is poor, allow for your inaccuracy when compiling your schedule.

Managing interruptions

It should go hand in hand with the 'I've started so I'll finish' principle, that you should avoid interruptions. That, however, may be easier said than done. Here are some ways it can be achieved:

- Make yourself available for interruptions at set times of every day
- Shield interruptions, such as telephone calls, from a colleague to give them an afternoon free of interruption. Then swap roles
- When interrupted, explain that you would like to give the issue your undivided attention - could they come back at an agreed time?
- Identify the cause of interruptions and agree a way of avoiding it in the future
- Try not to interrupt others in the middle of their tasks.

But don't ban interruptions outright - there are some emergencies that you would want to be interrupted for.

In summary

- Write down everything that you have to do and use only one record for any time period
- Highlight what you have achieved rather than what remains to be done on your to-do-list
- Clear your work area from distractions
- Create stress free corridors to break one stressful situation from another
- Don't cram your schedule
- Find ways to reduce the number of interruptions you suffer.

Chapter ten

Prioritisation

The previous chapter sought to encourage you to collate all the different things you have to do into a cohesive format. That's great so far - now we need to look at how to decide which of all the things we could do, we will do first. Prioritisation.

You should only ever handle things twice - the first time to assess its priority, the second to action and complete it.

Prioritising techniques

There are many different prioritisation techniques. You can decide to choose a specific technique - or formulate your own along the following guidelines:

Importance

How important is this particular task in the overall 'scheme of things'. By that, I mean your goals to which everything you do can be related. At work, this would be your departmental or corporate strategy. At home, it might be 'to

have a happy, healthy lifestyle' or 'create an attractive comfortable home to live in until I reach a ripe old age'. When you know what you want to achieve, everything can be compared to how well it contributes to your goals

Time-scale

This can fall into two types:

- Is there a deadline, and, if so, how near is it?
- Will the task get more difficult or time-consuming the longer it remains undone? You can assess these two aspects separately, but as long as you review both, that's fine.

For both the importance and the time-scale, 'score' each task - the higher the score, the greater the priority it will be given - perhaps marks out of ten, or marks out of three. You choose. When you multiply the two numbers together, the highest score becomes the highest priority.

A refinement of this approach is to split your tasks into different types of activity such as:

- re-active
- pro-active

- mundane (my word for routine activities) and...
- 'allowable selfishness' - we all need to do some things for ourselves.

Give each type of activity a minimum percentage of your time in each week to ensure that none are neglected then do the top priorities in each.

An alternative split could be between your partner, your work and your home. Then each task is assessed for importance and against the time-scale. Each area of your life will then receive some of your time and effort.

Whatever prioritisation method you use, keep it simple.

It should now be obvious which tasks to do first. However:

Most people have one part of the day when they are more alert, better able to concentrate, more productive. Are you a morning person? If so, then schedule difficult tasks for the morning when you will be at your best.

Further:

- Beware - things that you need to do in respect of communication, team/relationship building and other people related issues rarely have a time-scale and may therefore fall to the bottom of your priority list. Yet these can be the most vital ingredient to your on-going success
- Sometimes logic may require that low priority tasks have to be done before other higher priorities
- It can be more motivating (and less stressful) for you to follow the completion of a difficult task with a more enjoyable one - even though it isn't next on your list of priorities
- Since I advocate (in the last chapter) that you shouldn't start a task unless you can also finish it, when you have 'spare' time, don't waste it because you haven't time to complete the next priority. Use the time to complete one with a shorter timescale
- You should always try to do something for yourself every day. It can also give you a substantial feel-good factor to freely do something for someone else every day.

Merge the results of your prioritisation with your schedule, so when you look at what needs to be done, you can also see what to do first.

Clearing the decks

You may identify certain tasks that you are never going to get round to doing because there will always be greater priorities, which will take up all of your available time.

It is time to get rid of these tasks completely.

- Ask whether the task is necessary at all - use the 'dumb' questions in Chapter eight to help
- Assuming that the task must be done, can you pass it on to someone else? See Chapter four on how to say 'no' and Chapter six on how to get others to say 'yes'.

And whilst we are talking about clearing the decks, tidy your work area before you leave it for the day - it can be very demoralising to walk back into a room which is a complete mess.

You should now have developed a schedule, which is fully achievable within the given time period and established the priority in which you should tackle each task. Now *that* is good time and stress management - if you stick to it!

When priorities change

And they will change.

Every time a new task is added to the list, or a new overall goal is set, all your tasks need to be re-prioritised.

If you find that you have to re-prioritise your schedule frequently, you should reduce the time period covered by it. In a fast moving environment, the shorter the advance planning is, the better and less stressful you will find it.

In summary

- Choose a simple, easy to remember, technique for prioritising
- Don't neglect yourself nor your commitments outside of work
- Beware of using a prioritisation technique which discriminates against the people issues
- Any prioritisation method should take account of the importance and time-scale for completion of tasks

- Don't stick so rigidly to your priorities that you end up starting tasks without having time to finish them
- Get rid of the tasks that you will never have time to complete
- Be prepared to re-prioritise in the light of any change
- If in a fast moving environment, only plan/prioritise for the nearest of futures.

Chapter eleven

A complete way of thinking

Initially in this book, I said that time management is a discipline that only you could instill. I also said that you probably picked up this book because you felt your time and/or your life were not in your control and therefore stressful.

So to date, this book has sought to give you as many tips and techniques as possible within the available space to enable you to take that control. I started by taking a re-active approach to events and then, from Chapter seven onwards, I urged you to take a pro-active stance by suggesting that it was time to take control of your future.

And I don't take a single word, tip or technique back - it will work if given the chance and impetus. But there is another approach.

Now, I am going to ask you to take a step further - to look at your life from what might well be a totally different perspective. I'm going to ask you to take control of your life.

Rather than pick off stress or poor time management issues one by one as we have done so far in this book, we are now going to look at your life, your stress potential, as one.

And to do this, you will need to adopt a complete way of thinking - what is called by Jack Black of

Mindstore 'The Ultimate Mental Fitness Programme' upon which much of this chapter is based.

A balance in life

Jack Black advocates that we should start any self-improvement initiative by creating what he calls 'The Wheel of Life'.

It's simple enough. Draw a wheel on an A4 piece of paper with an outer rim, a hub and eight spokes. Outside of the rim, label each spoke in the following sequence - you can start on any spoke you want:

- Family life
- Social life
- Personal development
- Health
- Attitude
- Career
- Finance
- Spiritual life

Now, on each spoke space out the numbers 1-10 - '10' being at the rim and '1' at the hub.

For each of the eight headings, give yourself a score of between one and ten - if everything is absolutely perfect in a given area, score yourself ten - if absolutely dreadful, score one. Score each of the eight areas on yourself and mark your score on the relevant spoke. Then join your eight marks together.

Do it now.

How round is your Wheel of Life? How easily would it turn? The first time I completed one, I had a very wonky wheel - it would have lurched and stalled whenever my wheel tried to turn. It made me realise that I needed to change a few things.

If your wheel is anything like mine was, you will have just pinpointed the areas of your life where you need to start work to become less stressed and more successful. 'Successful' in this context means successful in your own eyes.

Achieving success in your life

The key characteristics of success are:

- Be determined
- Learn to manage your stress
- Look after your energy levels
- Develop a positive attitude

- Set goals without being restricted by any limiting beliefs you may have
- Be creative
- Be imaginative in what you want to achieve without worrying how you might achieve them
- Believe in yourself
- Go for it!

There are many things that prevent us from being successful but perhaps the greatest of these is ourselves.

The bottom line here is that:

**You can achieve success for yourself
by living all of the characteristics all of
the time.**

You can change just about anything you want to about your life if you make up your mind to do so. It may not be easy but the mind is powerful so tell yourself that you can do it and you will.

Write 'now I can do it' in big letters. Place it, and the characteristics, where you can see them every day.

Looking after yourself

An essential part of mental well-being is that you look after yourself physically.

There is a wide range of things that one might consider doing here - challenging your smoking or drinking habits, eating better food at regular times, taking exercise etc.. Think about whether you are looking after yourself physically - and what you could do about it. You might need advice or help in effecting any change - for instance, if you have lead a somewhat sedentary life, too much exercise can be dangerous and should only be undertaken if expert advice concurs.

Rewarding yourself

In order to feel good and to take away stressful feelings you should praise and reward yourself. We don't do it enough and some people hardly do it at all.

To turn around any negative feelings or beliefs it is vital to feel good about yourself, to have a high self-esteem. And you can influence your self-esteem by telling yourself how good you are. Congratulate yourself out loud (even if it is in private!) a couple of times a day to start with - and mean it!

It's amazing how you can persuade your mind to believe what you say - and how much more positive you can become as a result. Try it for a couple of weeks and see if those around you start to see any changes in your attitude. You may be surprised at the results.

Relax and be happy!

An important part of stress and time management is to give yourself time to relax - and to be happy about it. This 'quality time' allows you to recharge, recover and reenergize yourself.

There is no point in sitting in the garden for a quiet afternoon 'relaxing' if all you are going to do is feel guilty about it. Tell yourself you **are** going to enjoy it.

One of the benefits of 'being happy' is that you attract positive, happy attitudes from others. It becomes self-perpetuating. We all achieve much more when we are happy and since negative feelings have no home in a happy

person, our definition of stress can become obsolete:

**The happier you become, the more
dust this book will gather. And I
would be happy about that.**

In summary

- Assess your own life as it is today - is it in balance? Address the in-balance to relieve potential areas of stress
- Decide for yourself that you are going to be a success
- Be determined in achieving your goals - and make those goals ambitious. Don't worry about how you will achieve them - just believe that you will achieve
- Be creative and imaginative when seeking to move your life towards the success you deserve
- Look after yourself - both mentally and physically - give yourself quality time to recover and gear yourself up for both the immediate and longer term future
- Praise and reward yourself on an increasingly frequent basis

- Learn to relax and enjoy it
- Be happy - it's infectious
- Determine to move to the point where this book can gather dust on your shelf!

Finally - you have the power, use it

If there is one lesson I labour in this book, it is that the potential to manage stress, time and the people around us is within each of us. No-one else can do it for us. It is up to us to take control.

All you have to do is:

Decide to change

Do it

Stick with it

Reap the rewards

and

Enjoy it.

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