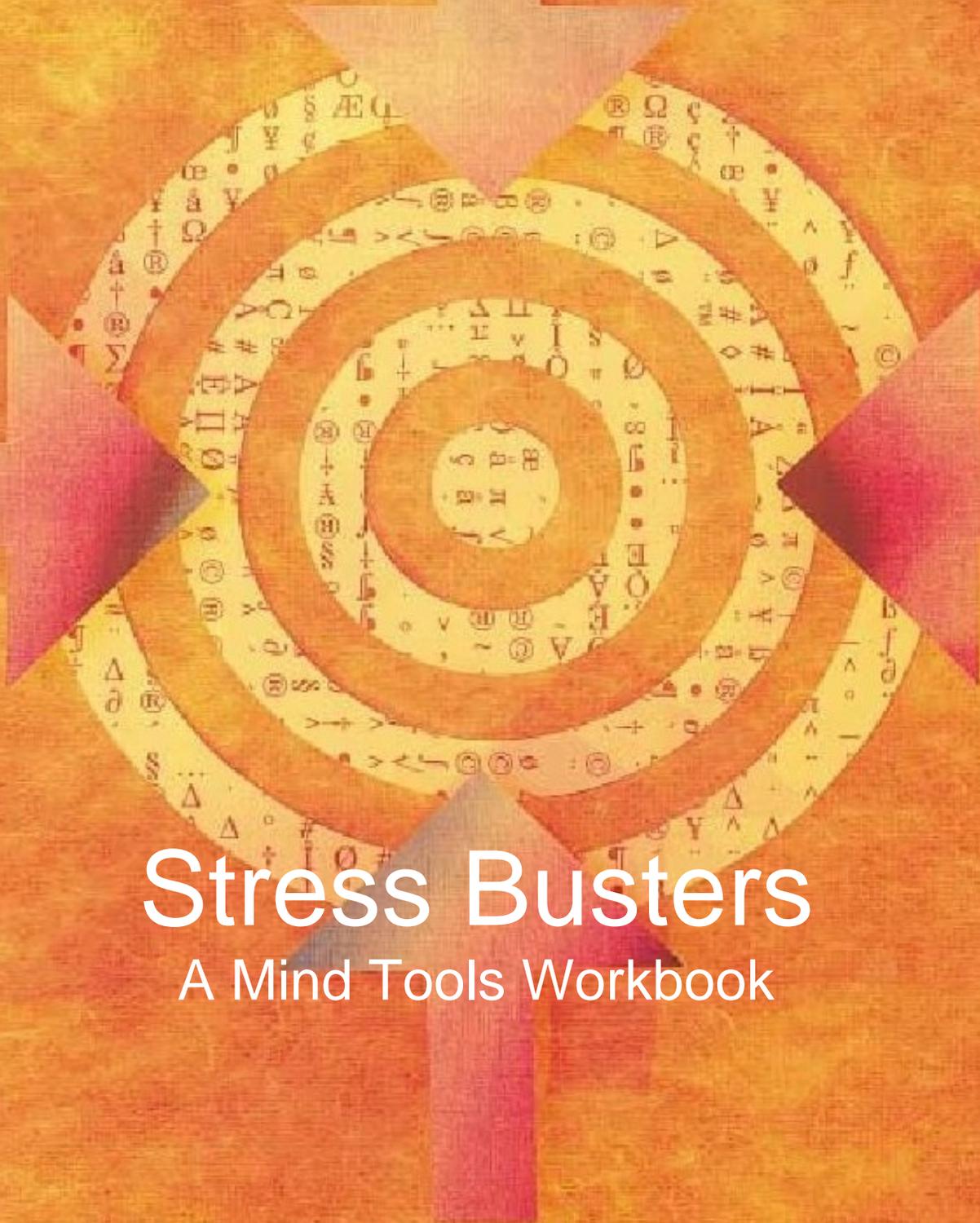




MIND TOOLS

Essential skills for an excellent career



Stress Busters

A Mind Tools Workbook

Essential skills for an excellent career

Stress Busters

This e-booklet is published by:

Mind Tools Limited

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Version 1.0

Stress Busters

What Can You Do When You Feel Out of Control?

Life and work can be stressful. There really is no getting around this basic fact.

That said, some would tell you to just smile and get on with it. Thankfully, there are more effective means of dealing with stress and alleviating the symptoms that it causes.

Stress has been proven to bring on physical illness. From minor headaches and fatigue to heart attacks, high blood pressure and stroke, stress is a real culprit. From an employer's standpoint, stress costs millions of dollars in lost production every year.

These facts offer some pretty compelling reasons to develop strategies and techniques to combat stress when it strikes.

This **workbook** is designed to give you specific tools you can use to combat stress, and get you thinking about your long-term approach to managing the stress in your life.

Here you will learn about three types of approach for dealing with stress, along with specific tools and techniques for each:

- Relaxation techniques for situations where you have no control over the situation causing you stress.
- Time management reminders, which help you take control... eventually.
- Thinking-based interventions, where you can reduce stress by thinking about things differently.

When you have finished, you will have gained some useful tools for managing the stressors in your life. You'll also recognize that stress busting is a lifetime commitment. By learning how to approach stressful situations and adopt a proactive stance with stress, your incidence of unhealthy stress should decrease significantly.

Coping with Stress

First off, let's get clear about what stress really is. There are many definitions and explanations, however one that is commonly accepted is attributed to Richard S Lazarus. He says that, "**stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.**"

We can simplify this by saying that "**Stress is what we experience when we feel that we're not in control.**"

A key issue here is the one of perception. What one person perceives as stressful may or may not be stressful to someone else; and the degree of stressfulness differs as well. And our reactions to situations we perceive as stressful vary too. Some people are predisposed to very negative reactions and others suffer very little. Physical, mental and

social conditioning, personality characteristics, and social support all help to mediate the effects of stress.

Regardless of the degree of suffering, a hierarchical approach is quite effective for everyone when managing your stress. There are three types of overall strategy for dealing with stress:

- **Action-oriented strategies:** with these strategies, you take action that, in time, will help you regain control over your life. They help you improve your capacity to deal with stress as you initiate actions now that will help you resist the negative effects of stress in the future.
- **Acceptance-oriented strategies:** these temporarily relieve stress symptoms when you can't regain control right now. When the stress hits and you need a remedy, these on-the-spot techniques help you get through the experience.
- **Emotionally-oriented strategies:** these types of interventions are psychologically based. They work by helping you break destructive negative thinking, and think more positively about the situation you're experiencing.

Let's start by looking at acceptance-oriented approaches for diffusing the stress you experience "in the moment".

Acceptance-Oriented Strategies

An **acceptance-oriented approach** to stress management recognizes and accepts that stress is a part of life. They help you deal with stress responses that need taming in the here and now.

Often, when you are in a situation of high stress, you simply need to relax and get a break, so that you can regain focus and concentration. This is where you need to use relaxation techniques.

There are a variety of relaxation techniques available and as you develop your repertoire of stress management tools, you can experiment with them to find the ones that work best for you. Popular approaches include:

- Imagery – retreating to a place in your mind that is stress free.
- Meditation – consciously relaxing your body and focusing your thoughts on one thing for a sustained period.
- Self-hypnosis – filling your mind with positive statements and affirmations that build your confidence and ability to manage stress.
- Physical relaxation – using deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises.
- Yoga – improving your body's physical ability to deal with the negative effects of stress.

You can find detailed information on all of these techniques at the Relaxation Techniques page at the MindTools Stress Management site at this address:

<http://www.mindtools.com/stress/RelaxationTechniques/IntroPage.htm>

Meditainment.com is a full of resources for managing stress through meditation. They have a 20 minute free meditation session that you can listen to for stress relief. Click here to access it: <http://www.meditainment.com/free-meditation-download/>

For now, try your hand at Deep Relaxation – a popular relaxation strategy that can be used every day to combat the stress of life.

Deep Relaxation Exercise

- Assume a comfortable position and loosen any tight clothing.
- Adopt a passive attitude, focusing on your physical body and tuning out other thoughts.
- Tense and relax each of your muscle groups for 5-10 seconds in the following order:
 - Forehead – raise your eyebrows as high as they will go and hold.
 - Eyes and nose – close your eyes tightly and wrinkling your nose at the same time.
 - Lips, cheeks, and jaw – grimace widely by bringing the corners of your mouth back as far as they will go.
 - Hands – clench your fists tightly and hold.
 - Forearms – push against an invisible wall.
 - Upper arms – bend at the elbow and tense your biceps.
 - Shoulders – shrug up to your ears.
 - Back – arch your back forward, pushing out your stomach as far as it will go.
 - Stomach – lift your legs off the ground and tense your stomach muscles to hold.
 - Hips and bottom – tighten your hips and buttocks and hold.
 - Thighs – press your legs together as tight as you can.
 - Feet – flex your ankles up toward your shins as far as you can and hold. Then point your toes and hold for another 5-10 seconds.
 - Toes – curl your toes as tight as you can.
- If any muscles still seem tight, repeat as necessary.
- Focus on your breathing and take long and slow breaths in a steady rhythm. Do 45 breaths in a row.
- Feel how heavy your body is. Let it go loose and resist controlling it.
- Think of a simple object and hold it in your mind for about three minutes.
- Get up and return to work as usual. You should feel an inner calm that will stay with you until you need to repeat this or try another relaxation exercise.

Action-Oriented Strategies

Next, we're going to look at action-oriented approaches to stress. These types of strategies deal with specific actions you can take to reduce or eliminate the stressors in your life. By taking action you gain control of stress inducing situations. You develop patterns of behavior that support a less stressful lifestyle.

Managing your workload is one of the most important of these. Here we look at the skills needed to do this.

Workload Management as an Action-Oriented Strategy

A large contributor to stress is lack of time management. A seemingly benign task can turn monumentally stressful when the pressure to complete gets beyond your control, or when you are feeling overwhelmed by your workload. Effective workload management is your first line of defense for action-oriented approaches to stress.

There are some common patterns of behavior that many of us fall victim to and that increase our time stressors. They are:

- "Fail to plan, and you're planning to fail." This is true of time, just as it is with other things. Scheduling your time properly is something you absolutely have to do if you're overloaded:
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_07.htm
- Doing things that are urgent before things that are important – we often say “no” to important requests in order to make time for urgent requests. This perpetuates the feeling of being overwhelmed as the important issues don't just disappear. Refer to the Urgent/Important Matrix for a detailed plan to counteract this tendency:
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_91.htm
- Doing things that are easy before things that are difficult – when you do this, your time will invariably get eaten up by mundane, routine tasks leaving little time to complete the important tasks or resolve problems. Our article on Prioritization provides great tips for combating this pattern:
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_92.htm
- Doing everything ourselves and failing to delegate – read our article full of practical tips:
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_98.htm

For other techniques for managing your workload, refer the index of workload management tools found here:

<http://www.mindtools.com/stress/WorkOverload/IntroPage.htm>

To find out what areas of time management you need to improve, members can use our time management assessment tool. This will help you identify the areas you're weak in and will point you to the right Mind Tools resources you can use to begin making needed changes. Take the assessment here:

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_88.htm

Emotionally-Oriented Strategies

Emotional approaches to dealing with the conflict that is going on inside us can also be highly effective. By strengthening our emotional response to stress we build resiliency and become less vulnerable to the stresses that creep into our daily routines.

One of the most powerful strategies for changing our emotional response to stress is changing our perception of the stressful event. When you can see the positive aspects of a stressful situation and take the negative emotions out of the equation, quite often the stripped down version is less threatening and noxious than you first thought.

A specific technique for doing this is called Thought Awareness.

Thought Awareness Method

We all have times when we get stressed because of what we're telling ourselves. Perhaps we think someone doesn't like us when actually they themselves are just grumpy, perhaps we're scared of a situation we don't understand, or perhaps we're just seeing the negatives and not the positives.

This is where thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking can deliver great dividends!

When you realize that it's your perception of what is going on that causes the stress, you can take control of your thinking and turn your negative thoughts into positive ones. The negative thoughts that run through our heads cause significant damage and they need to be replaced with more rational and positive impressions of what is going on.

By practicing Thought Awareness you consciously record your negative thoughts as they occur and then take deliberate action to replace them with more appropriate patterns of thinking.

Use the worksheet on page 15 to do this exercise.

Step One: Start a Thought Awareness worksheet.

Action: Record your negative thoughts.

1. Think about a situation that is currently causing you stress.
 - Why are you feeling stressed?
 - What is it about the situation is causing you anxiety?
 - What do you believe about your ability to deal with the situation?
2. Let your mind open up and become aware of the thoughts that stream in.

Some examples of negative thinking are:

- I'm stupid.
- I'm in over my head.
- Everyone expects me to fail.

Step Two: Replace negative thoughts with rational ones.

Once you are aware of the negative messages you are sending yourself regarding the situation you feel is stressful, you then have to replace those thoughts with positive ones.

The first step in this process is to think about the situation from a rational perspective. You have to challenge your perceptions and determine whether they are reasonable and accurate.

Action: Turn your negative thoughts into rational ones.

1. Look at each thought on your Thought Awareness Worksheet and ask yourself if this thought is, in fact, reasonable. Be very objective in your assessment.
2. Adopt another person's perspective and again, determine how rational the thought is. Would your colleagues, boss, or friends agree with the thought in question?
3. When the thought is not rational, as is usually the case, rewrite the thought to express the truth of the situation.

Examples from above turned into rational thoughts:

- I'm stupid >> I have the skills and knowledge I need to perform the task.
- I'm in over my head >> My boss is confident I can complete this assignment well.
- Everyone expects me to fail >> My co-workers are dependent on my success and have a vested interest in helping me succeed.

If you encounter a negative thought that is indeed representative of reality, this is your opportunity to take the steps necessary to remedy the underlying concerns. Maybe you don't have all the skills you need. If that is the case, work with your boss to create a development plan to bring your ability in line with his or her expectations.

Rational thinking, regardless of the truth in the original negative thought, relieves you of much of your stress because it gives you something real to hold onto.

Step Three: Affirm your reality with positive thinking.

Now that you know the reality of the situation, you still need a bit of a boost to help you work through the stressful situation. By taking your thoughts to the next level and thinking positively about yourself, you can build your confidence and self esteem.

Knowing you have the skills to perform a job is reassuring; telling yourself that you will complete the task superbly is inspiring. The positive message you send yourself helps you heal the wounds caused by repeated negative thoughts about yourself and your abilities.

When creating your affirmation statements try to make them as specific as possible and state them in the present tense. If you can make an emotional connection with them, that also improves your brain's ability to believe what you are telling it.

Action: Turn your rational thoughts into positive affirmations.

- Look at each rational thought and create a positive statement that you can tell yourself to build your confidence.
- Determine whether the rational thought opens up opportunities you never thought existed under your old negative pattern of thinking.
- Record your affirmations and any opportunities you see on the Thought Awareness Worksheet.

Examples of positive affirmations:

- My skills will allow me to complete this project superbly.
- I can complete this assignment expertly.
- I deserve respect and support from my co-workers.

For more information about Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Affirmations, see the MindTools article here:

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_06.htm

To learn more about other emotionally-oriented approaches to stress management including Cognitive Restructuring and Emotional Analysis, refer to the index of thinking strategies for stress management here:

<http://www.mindtools.com/stress/rt/IntroPage.htm>

Practicing thought awareness and thinking positively help you develop emotional toughness. Another very useful approach involves bolstering your resilience and developing a healthy lifestyle. It's called Building Defenses.

Building Defenses Method

There are a variety of techniques you can use to build your defenses against stress. All of them are designed to help you live a life that insulates you from the effects of stress.

We've talked already about relaxation. This is a great approach for dealing with stress "in the moment." Practiced on a regular basis, and supplemented with adequate rest and sleep, it can protect you from future stresses.

Exercise is another form of defense building. People who exercise regularly have a healthier body and can fight the physical symptoms of stress efficiently. Exercise builds your physiological resiliency especially when you focus on cardiovascular conditioning and dietary control. To read more about managing stress with exercise, click here: <http://www.mindtools.com/stress/Defenses/Exercise.htm>

Building your network of support is also a very powerful defense against stress. Social relationships have a positive influence on the harmful effects of stress. If you have a strong network of friends, family and coworkers who can support you, studies have found you are less likely to experience stress and better able to cope with it when it does surface.

With a well-developed system of support, you can get the assistance you need, when you need it. You always have someone you can turn to and with whom you can talk, vent, bring your thoughts back to reality, or brainstorm solutions.

Your network can include a variety of people including:

- Friends
- Family
- Co-workers
- Managers
- Team members
- Mentors

While it might seem easiest to build your network with friends and family, you do need to form meaningful relationships with people at work as well. These people will be able to provide more specific assistance when your stress is work-related.

There are a number of ways to develop supportive relationships at work:

- Mentoring – having a good mentor provides an excellent opportunity to learn new skills and reinforce your self worth. You have to work really hard at making sure the relationship is not just one way. Be prepared to provide information to your mentor and participate actively in the problem solving process.
- Teamwork – working closely with other people on a dedicated task or project provides a great opportunity to develop close, supportive relationships. Although the relationship starts out as absolutely necessary to get the work done, when managed properly you can grow it into one of mutual support and assistance.

The dynamics of working closely to solve problems builds trust. This can be expanded to facilitate purposeful discussions about what is causing you stress, as well as generating ideas for improving the conditions that are causing stress.

Action: Build your support network

1. Take some time right now to think about who you consider part of your support network. Use the table below to record the names of four people you can turn to for assistance when you are feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Also note the basis of your relationship with them: are they friends/family, your boss, or colleagues? Ideally, you will have a spread of people to whom you can turn.
2. Now, think about why you consider these people part of your support network.
 - Have they provided support in the past?
 - Do you provide mutual support to one another?
 - Record the history of support for each of these people.
3. Look for evidence of one-way relationships. Record what you will do immediately to improve your contribution to the support. Make a plan and follow through with it.

Current Support Network			
Name	Relationship	Support Provided	One-Way or Reciprocal?
		By them: By you:	

Now think of a person you can develop a mentoring relationship with. This person may be well known in your industry, a professor, a senior manager, or someone who has been in the company, or profession, longer than you.

1. Create a goal statement that describes what you want to achieve in terms of this relationship within the next six months.

2. List some specific actions you will take to accomplish this goal.
3. Finally, think about what you can do to ensure this is a reciprocal arrangement. This will help you formulate your initial request as well as help you to maintain a positive relationship once it is started.
4. Be a bit humble. People might not be as transactional as you might expect, so respect the fact that you may not be able to guess their motives for good, positive reasons.

Developing a Mentoring Relationship
Name of potential mentor
Goal Statement:
Action Plan:

Reciprocal Activities:

For more ideas on building your stress defenses, refer to the Building Defenses index at Mindtools.com: <http://www.mindtools.com/stress/Defenses/IntroPage.htm>

Key Learning Points

You've learned about tools that allow you to implement three specific stress busting approaches in this Bite-Sized Training:

- Relaxation
- Time Management
- Positive Thinking-Based Interventions

As everyone's reaction to stress is different, the tools and techniques you might prefer to use may be different from those used by others. So awareness of a variety of available tools is key to your ability to manage the stress you experience effectively, and to eliminate or minimize the incidence of stress in the long term.

Answer the questions in the table below to help you plan what to include in your personal Stress Busting Kit. Then keep this "kit" with you and apply the stress busters as needed. And don't forget to keep developing your stress management skills to their full potential.

Question	Stress Buster
1. What specific relaxation techniques will you use to combat stress that you experience "in the moment"?	
2. How will you incorporate relaxation into your daily routine and use it as a proactive strategy for stress busting?	
3. What are your top three struggles related to time management? What tools will you use to reduce the stress brought on by time pressures?	

Question	Stress Buster
4. What thinking strategies will you use to counter the effects of stress? How will this strategy improve your emotional resistance to stress?	
5. What steps will you take today to build your defenses against stress? How will these steps increase your physiological resilience to stress factors?	

Next Steps

Explore for more!

For more information on this and other key career skills areas, visit MindTools.com, and explore the many other free resources available to you!

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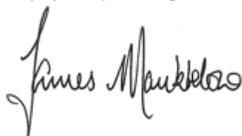
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