

Eleven Steps to Stress Reduction

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Step 1

Understand that stress comes from inside you

Over the last 25 years or so the topic of stress has been a pretty hot one, with hundreds if not thousands of books, tapes, lectures, and seminars devoted to the topic. Despite this attention stress continues to be a significant problem for many people. The problem, I think, is that most definitions and descriptions of stress focus entirely too much on what to do after you are already way to stressed out such as having a massage or taking a “5 minute mental vacation”.

Too little attention is being paid to the basic cause of stress. After working with many people over many years, I think that the best way to think of stress is to understand that it is *the uncomfortable internal state generated when reality does not match expectations* and that it comes from inside you. Basically, you can take charge of stress by taking charge of what you expect and how you view the world. Alternatively, you can change reality.

Changing reality is not as difficult as it sounds, and in fact happens every day. Many people find that their job is distressing or not what they want, and they make a change to new employment. Some individuals even change careers, or major life directions. Divorce is another example of individuals changing a reality or a situation, in the hopes that somehow this will reduce unpleasantness or distress.

Changing reality can often can have tremendous positive benefits. On the other hand, many individuals who change their reality are disappointed to find themselves ending up in the same

situation with unhappiness and stress because they did not address their expectations.

The bulk of stress comes from the disappointment or anger that what you expected did not occur. In other words “it’s not the situation that gives stress- it’s your way of looking at the situation”. Face it –no one gets stressed out if they feel like they are doing a fine job of whatever it is they are doing, despite the feedback from other people. I have been unable to think of anyone who was stressed out when everything was going great. In fact, most people’s definition of “great” is when things are meeting or exceeding expectations.

Changes in the health-care industry provide a great example of how failure to meet expectations create stress. You may have heard that revenues and earnings of health care professionals have really taken a hit over the last few years. You can probably see that a physician who expected to earn half a million a year would be stressed out attempting to live on \$250,000 per year.

At the same time, it is easy to understand how many people would be ecstatic to earn \$250,000 per year. The point is that stress or lack of stress is controlled by what you expect.

I ran into a similar situation in 8th grade science class. A fellow student, who will go nameless, had never made less than a “100” on a test during her entire academic life. Yes, it really is true. At any rate, when one test was returned (the teacher was a supportive, non discriminating type who announced each person’s grade and handed them out from highest to lowest- this was obviously before all that “self-esteem” stuff hit academic circles) she made a gasp.....97.5. Forget that the rest of us budding scientists had grades starting at about 42, she lost it. The point is that most of us would have been content with a “D”, much less a 97.5 .

So, the moral of these stories is : *The first step to reducing stress is to understand that your expectations control your stress level.* People who are stressed out almost always have unrealistic expectations about their behavior, life, and the behavior of others. If you can get a grip on what you expect, you can reduce your stress level. Unfortunately, expectations tend to be deeply ingrained and

take some work, though not very difficult work, to change.

Through the next steps we will look at how you can control your thinking to change your expectations and lower your stress. This can be done. You can do it. All you have to do is keep reading, turn the pages, and, when necessary, complete an exercise.

Step 2

Start Talking Sense to Yourself

In the first step you learned that stress occurs when your expectations are violated. I hope you also picked up that changing your expectations (making them realistic) goes a long way toward reducing your stress, because stress comes from inside you, not from the outside.

No one really knows where expectations come from, but we all have them. Even on a most basic level, we tend to expect that things will happen when we do certain things, like dropping a book. You expect it to fall and hit the floor. You probably don't consciously think "well, this thing should be hitting the floor any second now", but you know that you expect it to.

Expectations that produce stress are similar- no one knows where they come from though they may come from the casual comments that parents are always making to children. Typically these expectations involve assumptions about what behavior is "good" or "bad", how you "should be", what you "should accomplish", and how people "should act".

It seems that a lot of psychology is devoted to determining "why" people think a certain way, or how expectations and assumptions have come about. This can be a lengthy and expensive process, but is not necessary. Who cares where the assumptions come from? If they are not working, and making you miserable, it is perfectly ok to change them without a long drawn out process devoted to understanding why you think a certain way.

Stress producing expectations are like book falling expectations in another way, because they occur so rapidly and so automatically that it is hard to tell, and even believe, that you actually thought it. You did, though. Over years of exposure to the same expectations, they become sort of automatic.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about thinking, and I've noticed that most of my thinking seems to be in my own voice (except, of course, when I think of people who have been really mad at me and yelled loudly, which I tend to experience as their voice). This is important, because at least for me, and maybe you too, thinking pretty much amounts to talking to yourself.

Thinking pretty much amounts to talking to yourself. If you change what you say to yourself, the chances are pretty good that you will change your thinking. If you change your thinking, you will change your expectations. If you change your expectations, and drop bad or lousy thoughts, and instead have positive or at least adaptive thoughts, your stress level should drop.

People do actually come to believe what they hear if they hear it enough. Tales from the POW's in the Korean conflict pretty much tend to bear this out. Certainly, advertising agencies bank on this (no pun intended) every day.... repetition is the key to belief.

Ok, so far we know that stress comes from expectations, and that changing your expectations can reduce stress. Expectations crop up automatically. The secret, then, is to change your expectations by breaking the automatic nature of them by consciously repeating more positive expectations to yourself. If you don't repeat positive expectations, though, you will continue to think the old, negative ones.

A popular trick often used to illustrate this point is to ask people not to think about what an elephant looks like. Otherwise, most people find that you can't "not think" of something- that you cannot "blank out" your mind.

Words have tremendous power- if you don't believe this, see how people react when you either praise them or criticize them. Words that have a particular power for setting up expectations or beliefs include:

SHOULD

HAVE TO
OUGHT TO
MUST
NEVER
ALWAYS

It is fine to use these words when describing physical reality and natural laws, but not when describing human behavior. Human behavior is not logical or necessarily predictable, and people typically do what they feel like doing.

To talk sense to yourself, quit describing your behavior, or your expectations, by using these terms. The better, more realistic, and much more positive way to think about things human is to use terms such as:

It would be nice if...

I would like.....

It would be wonderful if.....

Use of the phrases above as substitutes for the Newtonian words makes life a lot more manageable. Take the following for examples, and see if you can underline or circle the less stress thought for the situation.

You are late. Which thought produces less stress?

I should be on time. I'm not. I'm a dork.

It would be nice if I were on time. Oh well.

You are out of money. Which thought produces less stress?

With my job and education, I ought to be filthy rich. I'm a failure because I'm not.

I would like to have more money. What can I change to accomplish that?

You have just made a mistake. Which thought produces less stress?

I shouldn't make mistakes. I'm an idiot.

I'd like to make fewer mistakes.

Notice that each of the thoughts above comes after the act, or after the fact. It really does not matter at all what you should or shouldn't do- you've already done it.

The "less stress" approach is to approach situations by essentially saying "I screwed up, its not what I want, but what is the big deal", and refusing to spend the next 8 days hashing it over in your brain.

This leads to our first OFFICIAL exercise, which is sanctioned by the 11 step program. Here it is:

1. Make a mental note when you use the words "should, have to, ought to, must, never, and always".
2. Immediately after using/saying those words, correct yourself by substituting "it would be nice if, I would rather, or I prefer to..."
3. Monitor the difference in your reaction.

Step 3

Understand the Differences Between Needs and Preferences

These days it is pretty easy to be seduced into confusing what you actually need, and what you prefer. Although it is certainly true on a material level, where we are constantly urged to keep up with the Joneses and extend our Visa credit limit, it also applies to what we can and cannot live with relative to people, how they treat us, and what we “need” from them.

This confusion of needs and preferences does lead to stress, because it does affect your expectations. Words that we use, like “need”, is like those Newtonian words we reviewed in the last step, only much more dangerous. We’ll talk about why they are more dangerous in a while, but first let’s identify some things.

In reality, people only have 5 true needs. They are: Food, Water, Air, Shelter from the elements, and Elimination of waste products.

You’re probably wondering where “sleep” is. If you like, you can take a pencil (or pen) and write the word “sleep” on your list, above. For reasons that are much too tedious to go into, I’m just going to leave it off of my list. Note: no other substitutions, like “tacos” or “chocolate” are permitted.

Back to the point- the five (or six) things listed above are absolutely the only things that you need to survive, and actually do pretty well. If you don’t believe it, imagine that you have been stranded on an island by yourself. If you had all of the above things, you would be in pretty good shape. Imagine instead that you were stranded on the moon without air- well, good luck, see you later.

In neither case would you need a nice car, a better job, warm and supportive family members, or even things to keep you occupied. In reality, these things may contribute to pleasantness, niceness, and things of that nature, but are not necessary.

So what's the point? The point is that one form of stressful self talk takes the form of telling yourself that you have "needs" other than the five things above. Remember that stuff about expectations, and lack of meeting them producing stress? Well, if you are constantly telling yourself that you "need" something that you don't have, you are going to be pretty stressed out and miserable.

The reason for this is that our bodies, without the brain, are not too bright. The brain, as you know, is in charge. If the brain keeps telling the body "we need air!!!!" what do you think is going to happen? Right....maximum overdrive to get some O2. If you don't believe it, think about the last time you tried to stay under water too long in a pool, even if it was when you were a kid. Remember that kind of overwhelming, crushing, body screaming reaction to get to the surface? Well, that is exactly what happens when your brain says "we NEED this". Your body is ready to panic.

The problem with confusing needs and preferences is that it runs your body into overdrive, and makes you feel bad inside.

Getting the difference between needs and preferences straight, then, is a way to get your expectations back on track. How to do this? By talking sense to yourself as you started to explore in the last step.

It is not at all that we should avoid having or working toward nice things, or preferences. It is just that they are what we prefer, and no one ever died from not having something they preferred.

Keeping the difference between needs and preferences can have a profound effect on how a person thinks about him or herself. For example, if someone thinks "I need to change my life", we could say "Well, you don't really need to change your life. You might just be happier if you did, though". Although I may put too fine a point on it, you don't really need to reduce your stress level. You can continue to be as stressed and miserable as you like. The only thing is, though, that you would probably like your life better if you had less stress.

In other words, change is always optional. It would only be better for you if you did, and probably

more consistent with your expectations about how your life could be.

Well, time for another exercise. Without a lot of explanation or additional confusing background, do the following if you want to, and want to reduce your stress:

1. Make a point to identify every time you use the word “need”, as in “I need to change my life” or whatever.
2. Immediately provide a substitute- say “I would like to” Or “I would prefer that.....”
3. Ask yourself if the sun will come up tomorrow if you don’t get what you prefer.

It is perfectly ok to prefer just about anything, and please don’t take the above discussion to mean that you should be an isolated jerk- nothing could be further from the truth. The point is, though, that confusion between needs and preferences leads to a lot of stress.

Step 4

Root out and destroy irrational beliefs and expectations

So far, you have learned that words are powerful, and that what and how you say things to yourself can stress you out. This, in reality, has been a warm up just to get into the habit of watching what you say to self, and beginning some preliminary work. The real heavy duty stuff begins now, as does what we popularly refer to in the trade as “integration”. It’s kind of like you knew how to read in 3rd grade, but didn’t really tackle heavy stuff until much later, unless of course you were searching the elementary school library for “Catcher in the Rye” or “Tropic of Cancer”.

For quite a few years some really influential people, namely Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis, both of whom are very smart, have been talking about how most people who have problems with stress think “irrationally”. This is not to say that they think they see ghosts, or that the FBI is after them, but that they have a way of looking at the world and themselves that just doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. They believe, and I do too, that identifying and replacing (remember the “elephant” example?) these irrational thoughts goes a long way toward reducing stress, depression, and other bad things.

Look over the list below, and see if you are inclined to agree with any of these statements about yourself or life:

A person should be loved or approved of by almost everyone to be “good” or “worthwhile”.

You should do everything you do well.

Some people are just bad or ignorant or stupid, and they must be punished even if I have to do it.

It is absolutely awful when things are not how I want them.

Events and situations control people and their emotional response.

If there is a chance that things could go wrong, you should worry about it constantly.

It is easier to wish that things would go away rather than fix them.

What happened in the past absolutely and totally controls a person's future.

People should get upset, distraught, and angry when others do not do what they want, or when they act stupid.

There is an ideal solution for every problem. If I can't find a good option, I'm a loser.

Life should be fair.

Things should happen the way I want.

If I make a mistake, it means I'm a failure.

If someone does not like me or agree with me, it's awful.

My value as a person depends on what others think of me.

I should put others first at all times.

I should show my parents respect, and honor them, regardless of what they did to me.

My needs come before anyone else's.

Because I have made mistakes, I can never be worthwhile.

I should have the same accomplishments and life style as other people I know, and I have failed if I don't.

I must be treated with respect.

If you have been paying attention so far, you probably noticed the number of times the word "should" appeared in the above statements. This is important- many of the irrational thoughts become much more rational if the word "should" is replaced by the phrase "it would be nice if".

Irrational thoughts produce stress. As a "mini" exercise (aren't you glad no one uses the word "mini" any more? I am eagerly anticipating the day "You go girl" drops out of common use, particularly when used by....oh well, never mind), you can go through the above thoughts and pretend that you actually believed them. Who wouldn't be miserable?

The common element of most of the irrational thoughts above is that they try to convey the idea that human behavior is lawful and rational. Many people say or think "People should act right" and get upset when they don't. Well, who says people "should" act "right", whatever that is?

The reality is that people are pretty much going to act as they please, and you don't have any control over it. If you read the Old Testament, (or even the New one), people don't even do what God tells them to do. If God can't get people to act right, where do you get off thinking you can?

The second element of irrational ideas is the word "should", particularly when applied to you. For many of them, you might as well go ahead and admit thinking that you "should" be perfect, fully in control, always doing the right things, and on and on and on.

Many stressed out people take this irrational thinking, couple it with a few personal shoulds, and go

way to far. For example, if you have indicated that you “should” be acting a certain way (usually perfect and error free, in proper military order, sir!), you probably are the only person in the world who you think should act that way. I’d be willing to bet almost anything that you certainly do not hold your friends, family members, and associates to the same standards of perfection. Get a grip!

The following are much more reasonable reformulations of the irrational ideas above. I think they are great, and I also think that if you could substitute thoughts like the ones below, your stress level will drop.

I am not less of a person because I made mistakes.

People are going to act however they want, and that’s ok.

It would be nice if I were thoroughly competent, but I’ll just do the best I can.

Life isn’t fair to me or anyone else. One thing I can do is treat others fairly.

I’d like to have everything I want, but I don’t think that its going to happen just because I want it.

What makes me worthwhile is who I am, not what others think about me.

I’m comfortable with me. If others aren’t, that’s too bad.

I don’t always have to have the solution.

I can control how I feel if I work at it.

It is not possible for me to be all things to all people.

It would be nice if people treated me well, but they will do whatever they want.

It does not matter what others do to me, only how I respond. If I don't care for the way I am treated, I can leave.

I cannot control anyone, and it would be silly to expect that people will act in ways that are pleasing to me. That's life.

I really don't have to make life work for any one particular person.

You can see that the more rational statements above are much more flexible. In doing the reformulations, I hope that you can see that the key element to more rational thinking is to adopt a more realistic core belief, and pull out all the "shoulds" and "have toos".

The exercise for this section is pretty important. Please do the following:

1. Review the above ideas, and check any that seem to be giving you problems. Don't be hesitant or hold back- honesty here will really pay great dividends (unlike numerous tech stocks).
2. Write in your own particular irrational ideas. Look for words like "should", and phrases that relate to the actions of others.
3. Re formulate these irrational ideas to more realistic ones. Use phrases and words like "it would be nice if" or "I'd like it if".
4. **Write down your reformulations on an index card. Limit yourself to 3 reformulated thoughts. Carry them with you, and review each one at least 20 times three times a day.**

THIS LAST STEP IS CRITICAL, AND FORMS THE BASIS OF MANY FUTURE EXERCISES. Changing maladaptive thinking requires constant repetition of more positive thoughts. It sounds geeky and weird, but it does in fact work. The more you practice more adaptive expectations, the sooner maladaptive or unrealistic thinking patterns will drop out.

When you discard irrational, stress producing thoughts, and generate more adaptive, realistic thoughts, and then systematically repeat them like this, you will succeed. Like I said in the beginning, it is not hard, but it does take some effort.

It is important to work on no more than three maladaptive thoughts at a time. I don't know why it works that way, but it does. Some of the future exercises contain adaptive expectations for particular circumstances. The same corrective procedure is used- write it out, and then repeat it until it becomes automatic instead of the stress producing expectation.

Step 5

Transform the “horrible” to the “merely inconvenient”, or,
The Sun Shall Rise Tomorrow

Wearing shoes that only marginally match the color of a handbag would probably cause Scarlett O’Hara to collapse. She might be tempted to say “Isn’t that just awful!”.

The way we describe events to ourselves has a big impact on how we react to them. Unfortunately, just as stressed out people confuse needs and preferences and use irrational thoughts to let themselves when to know when they should be upset, what you do “after the fact” is just as important.

One of the most common lies people tell themselves is “I can’t stand it when....”. I don’t know about you, but I tend to think that if you can’t stand something, it would render you dead, as in “I can’t stand my heart just stopping” or “I can’t stand it when large boulders fall on my head”.

The pattern of describing something as much worse than it actually is can be called “awfulizing” or “catastrophizing”, words that I think were actually thought up by Albert Ellis. To me, the use of these “awful” statements in describing events actually fools the body in the same way that the improper use of the “need” words confuse the body. Although there is no point to going into all of it, I was able to wrangle the scientific literature dealing with these kind of issues into a passable major paper and dissertation so that I could get a degree and actually get out of school, which was a blessing richly celebrated by my family and me.

Back to the topic at hand, look for the following statements in your conversation to yourself, and to other people, too:

It is awful that.....

I can't stand it that.....

It is terrible that.....

It is horrible that.....

Who would not be anxious or upset if awful, terrible, and horrible things happened to them.

This is an example of something that is awful:

You are kidnaped by a nomadic tribe while touring a foreign land

You are repeatedly beaten by them.

They cut off your eye lids.

They stake you out in the desert over an ant bed.

They pour honey all over you on the off chance that a band of killer bees is nearby.

A similar example would be being detained in a Turkish prison.

Truly awful and horrible things do happen to people- accidents with farm machinery certainly come to mind- but in reality not everything that we say is awful is.

If you want to reduce stress, begin using a series of tests for words and phrases that indicate that things are "horrible" or "awful". Ask the following questions:

Will it hurt me physically?

Will it hurt or place my family in jeopardy?

Will it kill me?

Will it permanently alter me in such a way as to prevent any potential for correction?

Will it prevent the sun from coming up?

Will they take away my birthday for having done it?

Will they put me in prison?

Will it end life on earth?

If your situation passes the test (that means, a “yes” answer to one or more of the questions above, particularly numbers 3, 5, and 8), then it is awful or horrible. For almost any situation, living in one of the typically famine stricken African nations would be much more horrible. It would be truly horrible to see those around you dying from starvation.

Otherwise, there is a more appropriate way to review situations. In truth, many of the things that we face are irritating, not what we want, unpleasant, or even extremely uncomfortable, but not “horrible”.

This brings us to our next life changing exercise.

1. Begin identifying situations that you tell yourself are horrible or catastrophic.
2. Root out horrible words- replace them with the phrases above, such as “It is unpleasant that.....”
3. Listen to what other people tell you. Every time you hear the horrible descriptions, ask yourself (in your own mind, please) if the events they describe are truly horrible, or merely inconvenient.

Warning! If you begin telling others that what they say is horrible is “Merely inconvenient- I’m sure the sun will rise tomorrow and you will live through it” you are liable to be assaulted. This would be inconvenient, but survivable.

Step 6

Understand that all the dinosaurs are dead, and you're just going to have to get used to it .

A general way that people stress themselves out is by combining the problems we have reviewed earlier into one big massive negative experience about their past. You have probably run into this when talking to other people who just go on and on about past injustices, problems, the way things used to be, and similar issues. Complaining, worrying, and obsessing about the past is like being all torn up that all the dinosaurs have died. Ok, well, what are you going to do? Bring them back?

The problem is that, so far as I know, it is not possible to go back and do things over, or change what has happened (if you do know of a way to do this, please call at once- there are a lot of things I would like to take care of!). For almost all stressed out people there is an idea that somehow dwelling on what you did wrong, or what happened to you, will somehow make a difference in the future. It will make a difference- it will make you miserable.

I am sorry to say this, but in fact you have made mistakes. You may have even made dreadful mistakes. You may have even made the worst mistakes that a person could make, and done some very unkind, nasty, and bad things. The reality is, you cannot go back and change them.

Rehashing the past endlessly simply handicaps you for the future. Fortunately, there are several things that you can do to get over this.

First and foremost, if you have made mistakes that have hurt other people, make a strong commitment to yourself that you will do everything in your power to avoid making the same kind of mistake in the future. So far as I know, no major religion expects people to be perfect- only that they strive to avoid making the same mistake over and over and over again.

The second key thing to do is to determine what may have contributed to your mistakes, unless you already know. Perhaps you made a decision without thinking, perhaps you were desperately hoping that things would all come together like they were supposed to (which, by the way, just about never happens. See the later step “Expect the best, plan for the worst”.) Whatever the reason, if you can isolate it, chances are you can avoid it in the future.

If you did things out of spite or meanness, then it would be much better if you quit doing that. If you feel badly because you cheat, hurt, or try to mess people up, things would be a lot better for you if you stopped it.

Finally, you can use the same strategy of changing what you tell yourself to reduce both the amount of time you dwell on the past, and the likelihood that you will make the same mistake in the future.

I actually learned this the hard way. Although the details are not particularly important, other than it involved a two story fall from a roof, I made a simple rule that has prevented me from making similar bonehead mistakes. Briefly, the last thing that happened before the tragedy was my saying to myself “I know I shouldn’t do this, but I don’t think it will matter just this once”. Needless to say, it mattered quite a bit. From that point on, whenever I say to myself “it won’t matter just this once” I immediately stop what I am doing and walk away while I can still walk.

A related way to reduce the stress associated with past miscues is to realistically talk to yourself about what it means. Just because you made a mistake does not make you a total loser, a total failure, or someone with no future. Get a grip. If you want to think that way you can, but you will be miserable.

The exercise for this section is to consider your past, and what you tell yourself about it. If you are haunted by mistakes, and your constant thinking about them is stressing you out, adopt or modify one or two of the following to write on an index card, carry with you, and repeat as often as possible. Again, constant repetition is probably the only thing that will make these thoughts automatic,

regardless of how stupid it seems. Your own individual or unique modification of the wording can also be of benefit- just make every effort to keep your own phrases as short as possible.

I have made mistakes in the past, but I have the rest of my life to do better.

Even though I have done things that I think are pretty bad, the people that love me still do.

It would have been great to know what I know now back then, but at least I know it now.

I will always make mistakes, but I am still working on some things. When I reach perfection, I'll throw a big party.

I refuse to dwell on the past making myself miserable.

Step 7

Understand How Things Work At Work - Overcoming Delusions of Rationality

We've already talked some about how a violation of expectations is what really produces stress, and how you can adopt more realistic expectations by talking constructively to yourself. One of the clearest examples of how things actually work, as opposed to how everybody thinks they should ideally work, is at the work place. I don't know about you, but based on the places where I have worked in the past, I remain astounded that anything actually gets done, or that there is any positive outcome at all.

Looking at work and life does tend to draw many of the irrational ideas we discussed earlier into play, particularly ones regarding how others 'should' act, and what you can do about it.

My particular set of blinders was the fiction that in a business, things would be "business like", by which I mean people would basically respect each other, that there would be priorities that were clear to everyone, that everyone would be on some sort of "team" with common goals, and the rest of that garbage. Man, was I surprised. What's more surprising is that the business that showed none of these characteristics actually stayed in business, and actually made money. Oh well, I guess I saw too many Spenser Tracey movies as an impressionable youth, and unfortunately came to believe (in error) that things would work out to be fair, equitable, and reasonable.

In reality, the work place is a great example of how things actually are. The reason why people are stressed out by work is that they do not understand how it works, and they keep comparing what they think should happen with what actually happens. If you expect things to be rational, you are deluded. Human behavior is not rational- everyone else is driven by irrational ideas just like you used to be.

There are really only two rules at any work place. These are, despite what you will hear, “set in stone”. They are:

1. If it makes sense, don't do it.
2. Ambiguity must be preserved at all cost.

If you understand these rules, then a lot of things that happen at work make sense. Many companies seem to have an additional rule that sounds like “given a chance to build up and develop, we'd rather tear down and look for scapegoats.

The truly bizarre thing is that despite these rules, things seem to generally work out for businesses. I remain amazed that a company that I used to work for actually seems to have survived my departure, despite the fact that a typical 3 Stooges short shows greater planning, organization, and insight than that company ever did, along with more native intelligence. Oh well, as Pink Floyd said, sometimes you are just another brick in the wall.

Irrational ideas also creep in to generate stress producing expectations, such as:

1. People should be treated fairly.
2. People should do what they say they are going to do.

It would be nice if people, including you and me, were treated fairly in life, but in all probability they will not be. It would be nice if people did what they said they were going to do, but again, we are dealing with people here.

There are several ways to deal with work place stress, one of the most effective being leaving and starting your own company. If this is not a possibility, then you may want to try the following:

1. Define what is important to you. Are you living to work, or working to live? If your job

is the main thing that makes you feel good about yourself, you may be setting yourself up for major stress in the future. If you are relaxed about work, are you too relaxed? Are you taking it seriously enough? If not, your stress is likely to be of a different type. Try to achieve a balance somewhere between obsession and indifference, and adopt a reasonable expectation of what you can get out of work.

2. Control what you can control, and let go of what you cannot. Make a realistic appraisal of areas in which you can have an impact, and focus your efforts there. It may very well be that some management decisions will be catastrophic- Do you remember New Coke? Recognize that other people will likely be making decisions that are out of your control.

3. Avoid hostility, pessimism, and bitterness. Remember that it is not your job to punish people for being inept or non responsive. Although many in the organization may spend hours giving vent to problems, lengthy and ongoing discussions may actually make your situation worse by making it the focus of each day. Make serious attempts to focus on what you can do, and make a decision to be positive (or at least neutral) as much as possible.

4. Shift your way of looking at the situation. Instead of saying “It is horrible that....”, try thinking “It would be nice if....” Examples include “It would be nice if my efforts were recognized” and “It would be nice if I were treated with consideration”. This may free your thinking enough to complete the last step below:

5. Consider your options. If you are miserable, and believe that even if you get your expectations and what you tell yourself about work in line you will continue to be miserable, leave. The real kicker is to remember that when you leave, you usually go along, too, and that getting expectations in line will be critical anywhere.

A similar set of problem expectations applies to life in general. To go ahead and get it out of the way, several people have accused me of being biased, warped, or cynical, and to have a “negative”

view of human behavior. I don't agree with this, but you will have to draw your own conclusions.

The particular expectation that I think works for life, and the one that makes people most upset, is that talk and good wishes are actually easy to produce, while actual performance often lags far far behind. In other words, a good expectation for dealing with others is to expect the best, but prepare for the worst. Human nature seems to be to talk a good game, but to be a little short on follow up.

A second observation that can be incorporated into a realistic expectation of life concerns the amount of time other people will place your needs ahead of theirs, or think about you more than they think about themselves. In reality, the true amount of time that either of these will happen is "not much". I once reviewed a study (but lost the reference) that purported to show that when not actively engaged in a task, people spent 98% of their time thinking about themselves.

Lack of follow through, losing things, getting the wrong information, and thinking that they understood what you said when they did not are pretty typical human happenings. You do it, too.

The exercise for this section consists of adding more adaptive expectations regarding the behavior of others to your daily drill of repeating adaptive thoughts. Try incorporating the following into your list of personal expectations, that is, writing them out for reference and repeating them until they become automatic:

It is easier for most people to make a commitment than follow through on it. That is ok- I'll plan for that possibility.

It is natural for people to be more concerned with themselves than with me. That doesn't give me the right to blow up.

I don't really expect to be disappointed when someone does not follow through, but if they don't it won't crush me.

Things get messed up all of the time- it is not the end of the world.

Not everyone has to like me- but I'll spend most of my time with those that do.

Some people behave in ways that I find objectionable, but I can handle it.

Step 8

Limit your psychic liability- take responsibility for yourself (and let others do the same)

A very common source of stress looks like simple over extension, but in fact is a confusion about what any single person can do. Was that confusing enough? Let me explain by asking you to think about something that may have happened to you in the past.

Have you ever been in the situation where a friend, associate, or family member came to you and exclaimed, in exasperation, that they simply had too much to do? If you are like most generally helpful people, you may have meekly suggested that a possible solution was for your friend/lover/other to not do some of the things on their list. I'd be willing to bet that what you heard in return was something like "I couldn't possibly cut this or that. I have to do these things, and so and so is counting on me so much, and I can't disappoint this person and that person" and on forever. Happens all the time.

Before we talk about the stress part, let me give you a hint- when most people complain about how much they have to do, all they want is for someone to say "Oh, I don't see how you do it" (with some enthusiasm) or "you poor dear!" (with appropriate clucking and admiration for the individual who is so selflessly martyring themselves).

As a wise observer of how using words like can't, should, have to, and the like, you already know that no one will die if most of the things people think they have to do aren't done. That is part of the problem. The second part of the problem is the topic of this step.

A lot of over extension stress comes from a few core irrational ideas which basically have to do with how much responsibility one person can take for another. Other problem expectations include

confusion of what is possible with what is reasonable, and how much one can realistically hope to accomplish.

The core irrational ideas regarding responsibility are as follows:

It is possible for me to make, get, or otherwise ensure that people act in certain ways.

It is possible for me to make another person happy (or sad, or whatever).

I must selflessly give of myself for others, even if it means that it will kill me, and I should love it, because after all there is no greater service than to do this.

It is not ok for me to say “no”, or “I can’t do that”, because that might disappoint someone, and disappointing someone is the worst thing that could happen, and it’s awful.

I possess within me the ability to impart the critical information, special touch, or whatever that will save the day, and I am obligated to do it.

Most people do not understand that they have five basic rights, and that it is all right for you to use them without apology or a lot of explanation. Simply because you are human, you have the right to:

Decide what to do with your body

Decide how to spend your time

Determine what happens with your possessions

Express your opinion

Expect respect

The fact that these are basic rights doesn’t mean that you will have to assert them all the time, or that

a violation of your rights gives you the right to punish someone.

The biggest stress producer that people run into is the idea that it is somehow unfair of you to set limits on any of the rights above, but in particular, time.

It is important to get real. There is no one in the world that has more than 24 hours a day, or 7 days per week. It is a finite quantity, and after a certain point, obligating your time to one activity, pursuit, or task requires that time allotted to other activities, pursuits, or tasks has to be cut. Some people try the strategy of cutting out sleep, but this usually does not work too well over too long a period.

A somewhat different twist on over extension and psychic liability is that we often develop the very bad habit of thinking that we can be responsible for another persons actions, or usually their inaction. The most obvious example of this is a parent who goes to huge (and often very expensive) lengths to ensure that their child does not experience the consequences of their behavior. Let me give you an example.

A guy I know was once complaining to me about a variety of problems in his life. At one point he said “Can you believe that my son has totaled 5 brand new Trans Ams in the last 6 months?” For those of you in another part of the country, around here we use the word “totaled” to indicate that a car has been damaged beyond the point of repair.

The unfortunate thing about that situation was that my friend would not adopt me and start paying some of my bills. Well, no , the unfortunate part of that situation was that my friend was taking responsibility for his son, and not allowing his son to experiences the consequences of his behavior. Most often, the only way we learn things is by making mistakes and suffering, and then we don’t do it again (When was the last time you touched a stoves glowing red burner? Only took once for me, at about age 3.)

When a person attempts to relieve another from the consequences of his or her actions, or tries to

make sure that they don't run into problems, that is taking responsibility for them. Let's run through another example.

This guy I know (me) has always been pretty concerned that the kids turn out to be responsible adults. Oldest daughter buys a new car. I really started to become worried about whether she would be able to/ remember/ care to/ think to/ understand how much her payment was and make it. I started talking to her about it, got the polite but none the less eye rolling stare, and then it hit me! IT WAS NOT MY PROBLEM! IT WAS NOT MY CAR! IT WOULD NOT AFFECT ME ONE WAY OR THE OTHER!! I WAS FREE!!!!

This was one of the most liberating moments of my adult life. Although obviously it is good for adults to take responsibility for children in some ways, it is best that this is gradually cut off as they age.

These expectations, that you can actually take responsibility for someone else, seem to reflect additional irrational expectations:

I have the ability to ensure that people act the way they should, and for their own benefit, and I must keep them on the right track.

I know I should take care of myself, but I will do that later after I have taken care of this other person's problems.

It is horrible for people to make mistakes.

If you love someone, you must spare them the consequences of their action, even if it takes a terrible toll on you.

It is wrong to think that other people's problems are not yours.

Finally, one of the most common stress producing irrational ideas is that we have unlimited future time, and that if we put off what would make us better or happier today, we will have time for it in the future. Unfortunately, that usually never happens. You've probably heard that today, or perhaps tomorrow, is the first day of the rest of your life....but I've got news for you. The first day of the rest of your life was 3 years ago, and it would be appropriate for you to take steps to get yourself in order.

The exercise for this section consists of thinking and saying more realistic things to take back control of your time. Consider adding the adaptive thought "It is all right for me to spend my time the way I want" to the list you are practicing. You may also want to consider using the following phrases when you are pressured to make a commitment, or to spend time where you don't want to:

I'd rather not.

I'll need some time to think about that before giving you a decision.

I won't be able to do that. (Note: No explanation required)

I just can't help you with that.

I'm not able to take on anything else now.

If taking responsibility for others is a problem, consider adding the following adaptive thoughts:

I cannot make people act a certain way.

It is not my job to save people from the consequences of their behavior.

It is ok that I am not willing to give up my life to make someone else's easier.

Step 9

Overcome procrastination- the first day of the rest of your life was actually three years ago.

Putting things off until the last minute produces considerable stress and distress, as does getting things done late. There are many potential reasons for this, but I'd like to focus on those that deal with another set of irrational ideas which follow:

If I avoid or delay something long enough, it will go away.

It takes long blocks of time and a dozen freshly sharpened pencils to accomplish anything of merit.

I have to do everything in absolutely the best, most positive way that I am capable of.

It is awful if I make a mistake, and people will think I am an incompetent jerk if I do.

There is one perfect solution to each problem I face, and I must keep searching until I find it.

Several things tend to conspire to produce procrastination. First, people usually procrastinate on things that they find unpleasant, rather than things they enjoy. This is simple avoidance, and is a normal human characteristic- we all tend to avoid things that are unpleasant, such as having painful surgery or beating our fingers with a hammer. The only problem is that some unpleasant things, such as paying taxes, are not going to go away and will have major consequences for how you spend the rest of your life, and how much freedom you have.

A second factor contributing to procrastination is the "large block of time" myth.. This irrational belief consists of ideas that the only meaningful output or work comes from the expenditure of large,

unbroken blocks of time. My own bias is that this comes from how most people studied when they were in school- through “all nighters” and various other forms of cramming. I know I certainly spent sleepless nights 2 days before a paper I had known about for 3 months was due.

Years ago there was an interesting study that demonstrated that students who spent something like 10 minutes a day on certain material for 6 days actually learned and retained much more than people who studied continuously one time for 60 minutes. Although this may not exactly apply, I think it does have meaning for approaching tasks. Aside from surgery, there does not seem to be many compelling reasons to do something all at once rather than over shorter periods of time.

Finally, a substantial amount of delay comes from the irrational belief that everything must always be done perfectly. Although you may have an exceptionally demanding and exacting position, finding the exactly right phrase or introductory line may not be worth the huge amount of time spent on it. When I was in graduate school, a student friend of mine was meeting with a professor to review her master’s thesis. The meeting started at 9:00 am. They went out for lunch. They finally broke after 6:00 pm. We slackers were surprised to find that they had spent the entire time they spent together on the wording of the first line of the paper, and had not reviewed anything beyond that.

Extreme? You bet. But the same dynamic applies to many of us in many situations. In reality, it is often all you can do just to do whatever it is you have to, much less do it perfectly. I have actually completed and or “turned in” many less than perfect projects, and really have not gotten into a lot of trouble.

Another thing to consider in this whole process of reducing stress by adopting more reasonable expectations is that not every day is a winner, and some days are better than others. A good example of this is athletes in sports where statistics are kept to enable comparison. Professional golfers tend to have variability in their performance, as do pitchers, football players, and those in every other human activity.....unless of course they are “playing above their ability”, as so often noted by

announcers (does that make any sense by the way?).

At any rate, normal variability is part of being human, and it is simply not possible to always consistently be “at your best”.

This also applies to irrational ideas that people have about decision making. If life were fair, I guess that we would always have a choice between one option that is shining brightly and very pretty, and one that looks like it was run over by a truck. It would even be nice if we could choose between something bad, and something that was clearly worse. Unfortunately, most decisions that are hard to make involve options that both appear very bad, and we are left to sort of guess which one might not be as painful as the other.

An additional irrational idea about decision making is that “once I’m on a course of action, I’m committed”. This works great for torpedo runs if you are a submarine commander, and might even be true. For most circumstances, though, it is possible to change or modify decisions unless you are dead.. One of the classic models of problem solving not only suggests adoption of a strategy, but ongoing feedback and awareness so that modifications can occur in mid stream. There are in fact very few decisions which are permanent. In others, changing your mind may exact a price, but it is usually worth paying it if you made a bad decision.

Exercises to reduce stress:

1. Consider modifying the following thoughts as needed, and practicing daily.

It would be great if I were 100% all the time, but that is not likely.

It would be great if everything I did was wonderful, but sometimes I just have to get it done.

I would rather not make mistakes, but some are inevitable. It is not the end of the world.

Not every day is going to be wonderful.

2. When faced with some sort of “block” or delay, get started by attempting to do only a bad or even a fair job of it. At least that way some activity occurs, and you can usually correct or brush things up later.
3. Do things that you think will take hours only 10 minutes at a time. Again, at least you get started.
4. Do things that you think you will hate, or are very unpleasant, first. It is better to do that and take your lumps than worry about it all day or all week.

Step 10

At least find a direction

In all my years of working with stressed out people, I have never had the opportunity to treat a lazy bum for stress. I guess that they just don't care about much of anything, and so don't have many expectations that are stress producing. It could also be that they don't have health care coverage, but that's a whole n'other deal as we say at home.

At any rate, this probably means that most people who are stressed out want to be somewhere else, have something else, or are in some way "achievement oriented". I don't know if this phrase is used any more, but it describes people who would like to accomplish something, and are reasonably consistent in this regard.

I hope that you have read the opening two paragraphs and are "invested" in this page, because I didn't want to put the real topic right out front. Too scary. Been there, done that (another phrase I hope bites the dust soon, along with "don't go there"). Well, ahem, the topic of this section is..ah.. Well, goal setting. Arrrgh. We have all been there before, haven't we? Whether it's the management/ motivational expert we have encountered at work (the guy in the suit with the big smile, happy voice, and secrets to success who caught the 4:30 flight) or our parents saying to us, in moments of obvious despair "What are you going to do with your life?" we have all visited goal setting hell.

Maybe it is just me, and if it is, please skip to step 11, but I always thought that goal setting was something that everybody else could probably do, but I was lousy at. Never met the goals. Came close, lots of times, but never quite hit it. Oh, another place where people run into negative goal setting experiences is during the annual "performance review". When asked by his supervisor what his goal was for the year, one of my friends in effect said "to reduce the number of times I tell co workers that you are an idiot". Needless to say, he did not get that big raise. Strangely enough, the

supervisor was promoted (see the irrational belief “Life should be fair”, above).

Back to the point. The difficulty in not setting goals is drifting. If you don’t know where you’re going, then its very hard to get there. Imagine driving off- someone says “where you going?” and you say “I don’t know”. Drifting can produce stress because there is no yardstick, and no way to determine if you are making progress except to compare yourself to other people, which is usually not a good idea (see “Get real in how you define success”, Step 11). This is usually called being “lost”.

I was visiting a friend and got to stay in the basement, which he had laboriously converted and furnished. It was very nice, and very comfortable, especially since it was tornado season. His at home office was down there, and while using the phone in it I looked up, and was astounded to see his list of goals for the quarter, year, and next five years, etc. Most of them had to do with work of course, but it was seeing something that I had heard about for years actually used. By the way, he has been successful in business, as defined by a large income.

I was so stunned. I talked to him about it later, and asked him how many he met, and he said “Not many”, which blew my mind. Goals that you don’t reach? He said that he used them as general indicators to keep him consistent in where he was going, and that he didn’t have to meet them, but he would like to. He explained that just having them in front of him at all times, and looking over them once a week or so had a very subtle effect, which was to shape his decision making and choices in small things during the day and week.

The reason to develop goals is not so much to meet them (I know that this is heresy, and Management by Objective types will be after me) but to provide a consistent direction to behavior. Face it, it is easier to change small things than big things. Suppose every day (ok, every two days) you changed one small thing because you had an idea of where you wanted to end up. Wouldn’t that make a difference? Well, at least that’s my point.

The problem with meeting goals is that things come up, and at times goals are not met. Therefore, that is failure, which is hard for achievement oriented types to stomach, unless they understand that everyone is human, and makes mistakes.

As an 11 Stepper, you have already started setting some goals if you have been doing the exercises. The general goal you are working on is “I’d like to get better control of my emotions”.

Rather than make this longer than it has to be (don’t say “too late!”), goal setting ideas are contained in the Exercise below.

1. Take a few minutes and make a few notes to answer the following questions:
What would you like to be doing (in terms of your emotional, social, interpersonal, and work life) in 1 year?
What would you like to be doing in 5 years?
What would you like to be doing in 15 years?
2. Take the list of your answers, above, and answer the questions “What changes would be necessary to make to reach the above?” or “What do I need to learn or change to get there?”

The results of 1 & 2, above, can be combined to give you a general direction, and what you can change to accomplish this. If you like, you could even devise steps that you can work on right now to work toward the 1 year goal.

Put the results of 1 & 2 somewhere where you will see them frequently, and review them often. When faced with a decision, ask yourself, if you can, “what action will take me closer to where I want to go?”.

3. If you are very literary, and your goals involve primarily emotional or personality type issues, you may want to consider something that was invented a long time ago called “fixed role therapy”. The general procedure consists of writing a one or two page biography or

description of your “ideal self”. It is all right to use someone as an example of how your ideal self would handle various situations, emotions , etc. Once done, review it daily.

Step 11

Ask yourself- How important is this going to be in 25 years?

Years ago I worked with a hospital that was in the process of remodeling. Because several storage rooms were in my “designated departmental area”, I got the job of reviewing documents that consisted mainly of minutes of meetings to determine if they needed to be saved. Please keep in mind that the hospital had changed from a regular hospital to a rehabilitation center approximately 5 years before the remodel, and had entirely new staff, etc. I got to look through notes that were as much as 25 years old.

What really amazed me was that the minutes that I was reviewing from 25 years ago, with an entirely different type of hospital, could have just had the dates and names changed and served as the minutes from meetings I had been to in the last month. Same issues. Same committees. Same everything. I don’t know why I thought so, but I had the thought that if any of the things that were raised were really important in the grand scheme of things, they would have been solved or at least been determined unsolvable in 25 years.

When you look over your life, can you remember what was creating tremendous stress for you (assuming there was some) on this date five years ago? How about 10?

To flip it around, does it really matter that the house gets painted today, or next week, or even the week after that? Is it horrible that everything is not “just so” in your yard on any given date? Will anyone really remember that the napkins did not match the place mats in 20 years? Well, some people might, but how important is their opinion, anyway?

The ability to develop a sense of perspective is probably one of the best ways to minimize exaggerated or trivial expectations. In combination with even a rudimentary map (see Step 10), a considerable amount of stress vanishes.

The exercise in this section is simple. When confronted with a “big deal” issue, simply ask yourself-
“Is this really going to make a difference in 25 years?”

Step 11.5

Get over this road rage thing and lower traffic stress

One of the neatest way to apply what you have read about is to apply it to traffic, especially if you have a long commute, or live where NASCAR is big. My residence falls into the latter category. The other day I was flipping through the channels, and saw one of the big races. All the cars were going around the track at about 200 mph about 6 inches behind the car in front. This reminded me of some of the roads that I drive on, so what I used to consider “dangerous, obnoxious, tailgating” I guess is “drafting”.

The other thing that is irritating in our traffic area is the individual who changes lanes about every 4.5 feet. I think that this is the same person who “drafts” you while courteously flashing their headlights when you are only going 10 miles an hour above the posted limit passing slower traffic.

I have come to the conclusion that people who do this are “number 1” as indicated by the salutes given to them by other motorists (you know, raising their finger in support as if to say “you’re number one, you’re number one”). Most of these people are quite gracious, as they usually return the salute with their own assertion that the saluting motorist is “number 1”.

Unfortunately, expressing any support can be dangerous, as witness by the frequent shootings that occur on our roadways. A bad situation like that almost got me once, by the way. Dumb me. Some times the quest to express your displeasure can be fatal when you come across a real hothead.

Since this is the bonus, or half step, there is no time for a discussion of courteous driving. At least most of us are not in Boston.

If road rage or stress during traffic is a problem for you, consider cutting out or copying the following positive expectations and posting them on your dashboard.

It would be great if everybody followed the rules, but some people just won't. That's ok- I don't have to get worked up about it.

It'd be nice if everyone were as courteous as me.

I could get worked up about that jerk, but it wouldn't change anything except I'd be all upset for nothing.

It'd be great if people didn't tailgate, but I don't think they've got anything personal against me. More likely they're just careless.

It won't kill me to be a little late- I'll just plan better in the future.

Regardless of what happens, I'll probably get where I'm going just the same. It's not a big deal.

Until somebody makes me the god of Traffic, I guess I'll just take it easy and get on with my life.

The End

I hope that you have found the content of this useful, and that you will be able to reduce the amount of stress that you experience.

I certainly would welcome and appreciate any comments you have regarding content or format, particularly if they are real positive and very nice.

Several other stress reduction services and resources are “in the making”, and should be available 8-1-2000 under the auspices of Personal Assessment Services whose web address is:

www.drpatterson.net

In addition to the direct download of this manual, the site will offer the opportunity to purchase an audiotaped relaxation procedure which I originally used in stress and anxiety related research and have been using ever since. An online assessment of unique factors contributing to stress and anxiety, from which you can obtain your own “stress profile”, is also in the works, as well as an online assessment of functional memory performance. If you absolutely cannot wait until 8-1-2000, drop me an email and I will see what we can do in the mean time.

Thanks, and take care.

Arthur S. Patterson