

Stress Management for those working in high stress environments



“I was a week into my placement when the Accounts Officer quit, the Country Director was on leave, my Programme Manager was swamped with taking on the CD’s tasks, and I was asked to complete a household nutritional survey with over 100 respondents by the end of the week, with only 3 volunteers who didn’t know what they were doing”. Sound familiar?

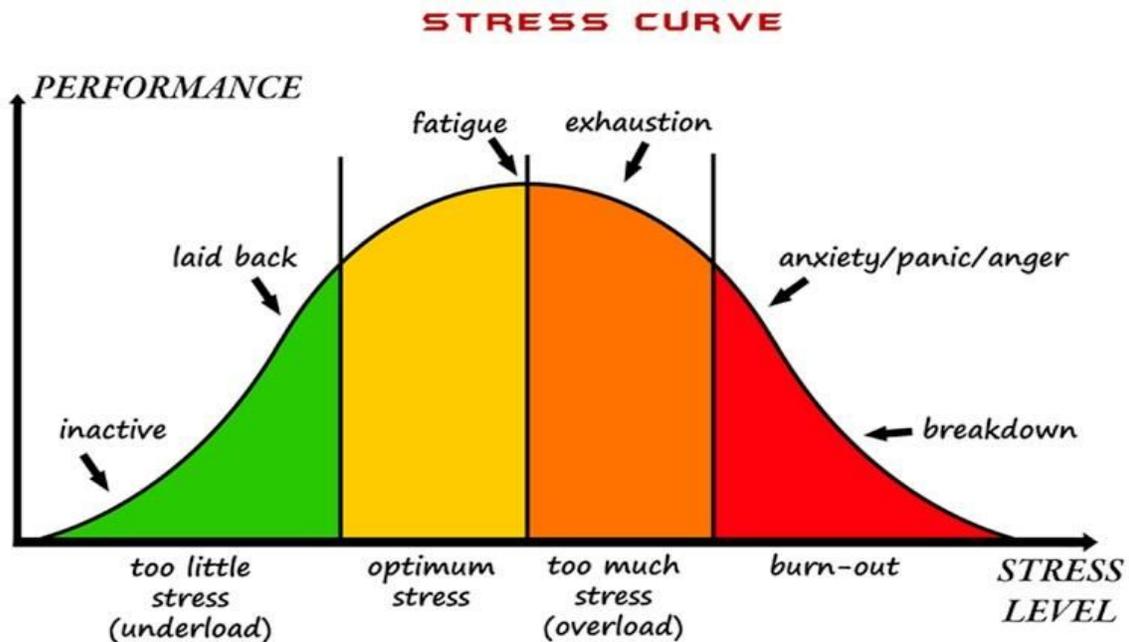
Are you dealing with an aggressive co-worker, working longer hours, staying awake at night, working under untenable deadlines? Are you feeling tired, irritable, and not yourself?

The extent of your wellbeing and effectiveness will largely depend on how well you manage stress. And in high-stress, fast paced emergency work, self-care usually feels counter-intuitive.

The first thing to do is to take stock, become aware of current stressors and your response to them. When was the last time you really tuned into how you’re doing? **Try Asking yourself:** How do you know when stress is taking a toll? What is your thought-life like? Are you acting different—what changes would an old friend notice? How are your energy levels?

Have you noticed any of these common signs of stress?

<p>Changes in your body</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headache • Muscle tension or pain • Chest pain • Change in sex drive • Upset stomach • Sleep problems • High blood pressure and heart disease • Weakened immune system 	<p>Changes in your behavior</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angry outbursts • Drug or alcohol abuse • Tobacco use • Social withdrawal • Less exercise • No pleasure in previously pleasurable activities • Over-eating or under-eating
<p>Changes in your mood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worrisome • Restlessness • Lack of motivation or focus • Feeling overwhelmed • Irritability or anger • Sadness or depression 	<p>Changes in your thinking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self doubt and low self esteem • Negative thinking or cynicism • Poor concentration or focus • Hopelessness



As you look at this chart answer the following:

1. Where are you on this chart now? Where do you anticipate being in 6 months time?
2. How do you know you are at peak performance? What does it feel like?
3. What are the stressors that have a good impact? What are those that drain your energy?
4. Have you ever been to the overload or burnout phase? How did you recover?
5. Think about your boss - are they supportive and consulting with you? Do you have regular times to meet face to face or by phone, Skype or other means?

Stress Management Ideas

From the laundry-lists of what to do when you're experiencing extreme stress, my top 2 picks are:

1. **Connect with people;** even if you don't feel like it. Social connectedness repeatedly shows up as the most significant protective factor from stress. Keep in touch with important people from home and try to do routine, non work things with those close by.
2. **Exercise and drink enough water.** Physical fitness has wide-ranging benefits. It increases: cardiovascular health; physical stamina; personal confidence; elevated mood; balanced/rational thinking; and decreases levels of: anxiety; depression; and fatigue.

Creating personal boundaries can be particularly difficult on short term or emergency missions where the office and communal house are on the same compound. But establishing healthy professional and personal boundaries is a non-negotiable if you want to thrive on assignment. Each context will have different personalities, so your strategies should adapt to the situation.

Pace yourself—even in an emergency. Sometimes slower is faster. **Take breaks** Research shows that to get the rejuvenating effects of rest, it must be done regularly. Finding short and regular times each day (lunch breaks, cut-off time at the end of the day), as well as one day-long break each week, will help your mind and body recharge. It can take several days for your mind and body to relax and recharge if you've been binge working without breaks.

Recall **what strategies have helped you in the past** and recognise that your wellbeing preferences may change over time. Strive to find new ways of remaining healthy and well.

Give yourself space and permission to adjust and “gear-up”. Often in emergency response we go from sitting and waiting to 14-hour days, seven days a week. Take that day off, and be easy on yourself if you're not meeting your expectations. Don't compare yourself to others.

Some research suggests that stress can be managed by **changing your thinking style** or perception of stress. See talks by Mike Evans and Kelly McGonigal below.

If you are feeling frazzled or disoriented, find opportunities to be **mindful of what you're doing**, whether it's the way your feet feel on the ground walking to the office, brushing your teeth, writing in a registry, sitting in a chair, breathing, almost anything. Connecting with the present moment takes us out of autopilot (wandering, stressed-out thinking) and helps to centre the mind and body.

Distract yourself with interesting podcasts (preferably not work-related). Even better...listen while exercising!

Talk to someone about how you're feeling. This could be a trusted colleague, friend or family member. If you would like to talk with someone external, [Thrive Worldwide](#) has a team of counselors and psychologists with 'field' experience who can support you during tough times.

Time to leave? Some workplace environments are too toxic to manage and leaving may be the best option. Alternatively, find a trusted and reliable person in the organisation to share your concerns with. Explore possibilities for adjustment or if reporting an issue is appropriate.

Resources for individuals

- [Headington's "How stressed are you" worksheet](#)
- Mike Evans talk on stress "[Thing single most important thing you can do for your stress](#)"
- TED talk with Kelly McGonigal "[Make Stress Your Friend](#)"
- Mindfulness Apps for example: [Head Space](#)
- [7-minute workout app](#)

Resources for organisations

- Antares Foundation (2012): [Managing Stress of Humanitarian Aid Workers](#)
- KonTerra Group (2017): [Essential Principles in Staff Care](#)

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