



SUPPORTING THE HEALTH AND  
WELLBEING OF THE ARMED  
FORCES COMMUNITY AND  
CIVILIAN FAMILIES IN  
CORNWALL



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## STRESS & COPING

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### What is Stress

Stress is a word we use, to convey the meaning that we are under pressure physically, emotionally, or cognitively.

Stress can be defined and understood in three different ways:

1. **As a stimulus**

Events occur and humans respond dependent on how much pressure they feel. We may feel stress in response to events in our workplace, at school, and in the current environment, the Covid 19 pandemic.

It is important to note that we don't all feel stressed by the same stimuli and that our responses to stress may differ in type and magnitude.

2. **As a physiological response**

Cannon's (1929) '**Fight or Flight**' response model, explains how animals and people, faced with a threat, either fight it or move away from it. This triggers physiological changes (adrenalin is released, heart rate increases, blood moves from the digestive system to limbs.) This behaviour was essential to the survival of our hunter/gatherer ancestors. This response could also be included under the psychological response section in (3) below.

Hans Selye explains the response to stressors in a 3-stage model called the **General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)**. In this model, the individual, who is experiencing a threat,

1. alarm stage - the body gets ready for action to resist the threat.
2. resistance stage – resources are pooled to fight off the threat, ignoring some of the usual functions.
3. exhaustion stage – at this stage, the resources have all been used up and the individual becomes vulnerable to infection and disease.

This model suggests that the body responds in the same way to all threats, regardless of type and that it is a purely **biological response**. It also suggested an association between stress, the immune system and illness, such as kidney, liver, stomach, lung disease and allergic reactions like asthma and skin conditions. It also differentiates between good stress (eustress) and bad stress (distress) which suggests that some stress is good for us to keep us aware and motivated, whilst others are destructive, breaking us down physically and mentally.

### 3. Psychological response -

**Stress is a transaction between appraisal and coping.**

Lazarus and Folkman suggested that stress is a product of the interaction between our perception and the demands of the stimuli or stress in the environment. Firstly, we assess the threat (its size, power and duration). Next, we assess our resources to manage or defeat it (past experience, skills, capabilities and known social support.) Wherever there is a lack in personal resources to manage a stressor, social support can usefully fill the gap. People are NOT machines; they do breakdown and it is then that they need to be brave enough to ask for support.

**Stress as an inherited vulnerability**

This is the Stress-Diathesis Model – which suggests that given enough stress, any individual will develop a neurosis or psychosis, based on their unique vulnerability. So, due to the same workplace stress, one individual may develop depression, whereas another may develop a general anxiety disorder. As above, the extent of their neurosis or psychosis could be reduced by the amount and type of support they received to manage the stressor.

**Coping with Stress:**

1. Remove the stressor or remove yourself from the stressor – for example, surround yourself with positive people.
2. Redefine the stressor – try using language that takes out the threat, for example, redefine from “I will never get into this team because they are so good” to “These guys are not so good; I just need to get better”. The language we use, defines our boundaries and what we can achieve. Try moving out of your comfort zone and into your challenge zone..... you may surprise yourself.
3. Change the stressor – Do more of what you enjoy and are good at both at work and at home. Use your character strengths. (See paper on Purpose and Goals)

4. Meditate mindfully. Come into a sitting position, and close your eyes, observe your mind and see what thoughts enter it, and what the mind latches onto.... bring your attention back to your breath over and over again. Observe which thoughts come knocking at the door. In this way, you will be able to identify which stimuli may be causing you stress. Meditation can potentially also provide the space in your mind between 'fight or flight', where your mind is given the opportunity to respond instead of just reacting.
5. Blue Health - Try Open Water Swimming, surfing, snorkelling, or any other activity in the sea – the sea provides us with opportunities for our minds to interact with the water and to calm.
6. Make your routine exercise a habit by doing it for more than 21 consecutive days. To do this, arrange a prompt for your exercise, for example, go to sleep in your running kit or leave your running shoes by your bed. Post run remember the reward.... this is essential to sustaining the activity. Doing the exercise is the reward itself but there may be other rewards such as a cup of coffee, a luxurious shower gel or a good breakfast.
7. Ask for support – we all do this at some stage but be mindful that we need to do this at the appropriate time..... this will be different for everyone but it is when you are starting to worry obsessively, losing sleep, irritated, feel like you are on a treadmill, not eating, no time to relax and when you feel your life-balance is out or when you keep thinking about past events.
8. Seek spiritual help – whatever faith you have or don't have..... put your faith in a Higher Power....Spirit and believe.
- 9) Try R.A.I.N:
  - R – Recognise the stressor/feeling
  - A – Acknowledge it
  - I – Investigate it (if it's too traumatic, linger on the outskirts until you are ready or have the support to go deeper
  - N – Nourish yourself (have self-compassion – find those unique aspects about you that you love and cherish them)
- 10) Take a holistic approach to wellbeing by looking at the PERMAH Wellbeing Wheel ([www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org)) and identify two areas on the wheel where you could improve. Start by creating habits (prompt + routine + reward)
- 11) Boost 'Positive Emotion' (1<sup>st</sup> part of PERMAH Wellbeing Wheel) by doing something early in the morning, like running, yoga, meditation, swimming, walking with a friend etc. This has the effect of producing happiness, joy, and self-esteem, which makes more achievements possible during the day. This is called the 'Broaden and Build theory (B. Fredrickson).
- 12) Tell yourself that you have control over a stimulus. This should have the effect of spurring you into action.
- 13) Communicate assertively, as opposed to passively or aggressively as you are more likely to get your needs met. Communicate your needs strongly with the correct tone, on an equal level to the other person, in a non-threatening manner with due

respect for the other person's position. Then, if the person you are communicating with has not responded adequately, repeat your message, in the same way.

14) When faced with a stressor, examine your past and identify what thoughts, feelings, words and actions helped you in a similar situation.

15) Do an action plan to deal with the situation. Once you start problem-solving, you might feel better.

16) Be optimistic about outcomes, it has been proven that people who are optimistic had fewer negative physical symptoms and may recover quicker from health issues.

17) Studies have also shown that a sense of humour can help us cope with stress. Think of all the Covid 19 jokes.

18) Get involved in community – it has been found that greater involvement in community was associated with lower psychiatric symptoms.

19) Explore Biofeedback. This is a process where one can try various relaxation techniques and gain immediate feedback afterwards on physiological response to the relaxation technique.

20) Stress Inoculation – with the help of a coach or a therapist, you can become aware of the interaction between stress and coping. This can be done through processes such as role play, using a true -to- life stressful simulation enabling anyone to develop confidence and self-belief in handling the particular situation.

The above are some constructive ways to manage and cope with stress. Avoid destructive solutions such as alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs. These exacerbate the situation by causing more long-term stress.

Remember that you have the freedom of choice to say yes or no to something. If you are saying no to something, what are you saying yes to, and if you are saying yes to something, what are you saying no to?

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