

Stress & Resilience

Tool Kit



Pressure & Stress

What is Pressure?

Pressure at work is good for us. It gives us the energy, drive and motivation to achieve our full potential.

Pressure enables us to do our best work in an enjoyable and highly productive state.

Pressure at work is a combination of the tasks we are expected to perform and our perceived ability to complete these tasks. If we feel confident in our abilities, we generally view the tasks and demands as achievable, exciting and rewarding.

Pressure is positive when:

- The goals of work are achievable, but not necessarily easy
- We have to work hard, but are not so overloaded that we struggle
- We can work collaboratively and negotiate conflicts
- We can prioritize appropriately, without being overwhelmed by competing demands

An ideal environment is one where colleagues can identify their own pressures and can take responsibility for maintaining a healthy equilibrium between pressure and stress.

What is the difference between Pressure and Stress?

Whilst the right amount of pressure is positive and increases our performance, too much (or too little) pressure is destructive, harmful and has a negative effect on our performance, our mind and our body. This is stress.

Stress is the experience of being under too much (or too little) pressure.



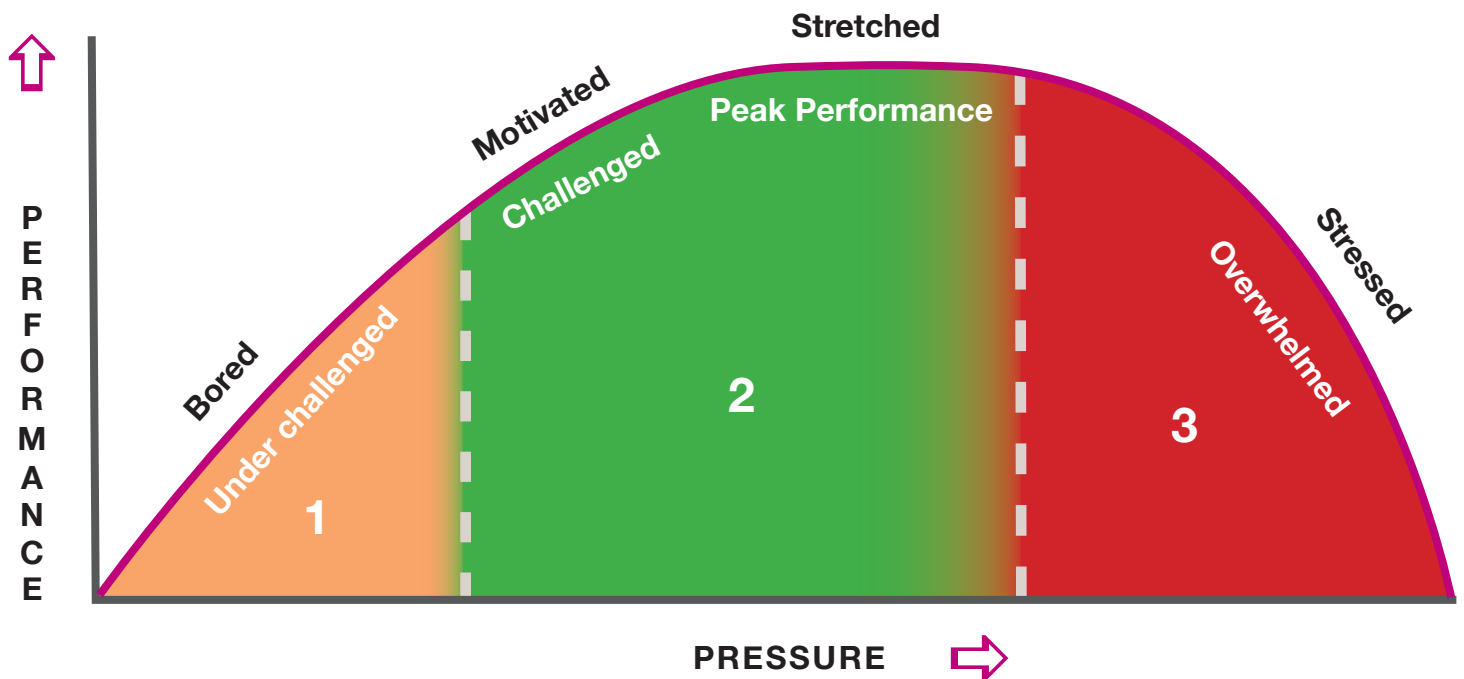
Stress is:

“The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed upon them”

HSE (Health and Safety Executive)

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The following 'pressure curve' may help to explain the difference between pressure and stress.



1

On the left hand side, the curve demonstrates situations when we are under challenged. Without sufficient pressure our performance is low, we are bored and we underachieve. We don't have the necessary motivation to work to the best of our abilities. We are likely to become irritated, frustrated and possibly withdraw from the workplace.

2

The middle of the curve demonstrates peak performance. As the pressures upon us increase, we become motivated, engaged and our performance increases. We feel challenged and stretched, and encouraged to try new activities. We are enjoying our work and feel engaged, committed, enthusiastic and energized. This is when we are operating at peak performance.

3

If more and more pressure is applied, either in the workplace or with a painful emotional event, our performance begins to decrease. This is the right hand side of the curve. We can no longer maintain the quality and quantity of work that we had done during the peak performance. We feel overwhelmed by the volume, scale and complexity of competing demands. As more demands are applied, pressure turns into stress, which shows itself through how we think, how we feel, what we do and what happens to our body.

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External Factors

Top 10 stressful life events:

1. Death of someone close to you
2. Divorce
3. Personal injury / illness
4. Marriage
5. Losing your job
6. Change in financial status
7. Son or daughter leaving home
8. Moving house
9. Ending of relationship
10. Retirement



“Research has indicated that when events outside work are stressful, employees perceive work as more stressful.”

Internal Factors

- Our perception of what is happening to us is an essential element of the stress response
- Our thoughts, emotions and feelings about ourselves in relation to the causes of stress will influence our response
- If we feel confident, feel we have an impact and able to make a decision about the situation we can apply a thoughtful strategic approach to our stressors
- If we feel anxious about failure, worried about rejection and unable to have influence we are more likely to have an automatic “stress” response

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Signs and Symptoms of Stress

When we experience the right amount of pressure we feel motivated and challenged and are able to reach our full potential. In this state our brain and body are functioning smoothly and are in balance.

When the pressure becomes overwhelming we experience stress. We feel out of control and under threat. Our threat response is a series of physiological changes that prepares us for action. These physiological changes result in the hormones **adrenalin** and **cortisol** being released into the blood system. This is commonly known as the '**flight or fight**' response. Originally named for its ability to enable us to physically fight or run away when faced with a threat, it is now activated in situations when neither response is appropriate (for example it is not appropriate to fight your colleagues or customers or run away from your computer). When the perceived threat is gone, our body is designed to recover. However during times of stress, the threat response remains high, and our bodies are unable to recover. The following signs and symptoms can result from the chronic, continual activation of the threat response.

How we think when we are stressed:

- Inability to concentrate or make simple decisions
- Memory lapses
- Becoming vague
- Easily distracted
- Less intuitive and creative
- Negative thinking
- Prone to accidents



How we feel when we are stressed:

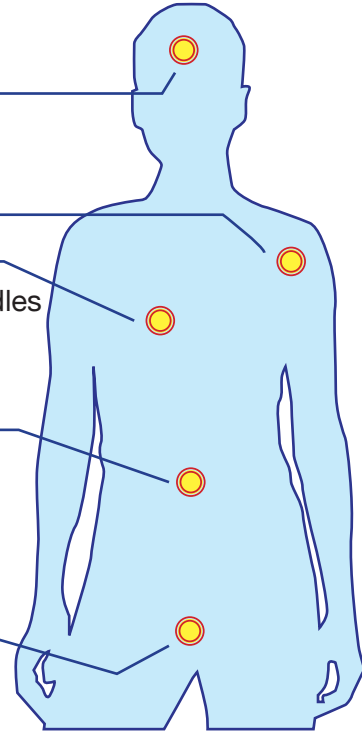
- Upset
- Tearful
- Irritable
- Fearful or worried
- Mood swings
- Extra sensitive to criticism
- Defensive
- Out of control
- Lack of motivation
- Aggressive or angry
- Frustrated
- Isolated
- Hopelessness
- Lost sense of humour
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of self-esteem
- Depressed
- Lethargic



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What happens to our body when we are stressed:

- Frequent colds / infections
- Headaches
- Allergies / rashes / skin irritations
- Weight loss or gain
- Aches / pains and muscle tension / grinding teeth
- Heart problems / high blood pressure
- Hyperventilating / lump in the throat / dry mouth / pins and needles
- Indigestion / heartburn / ulcers
- Sweaty or shivery
- Constipation / diarrhoea / IBS
- Dizziness / palpitations
- Panic attacks / nausea
- Physical tiredness
- Menstrual changes / loss of libido / sexual problems
- Insomnia or waking tired



What do we do when we are stressed:

- Not making time for relaxation or pleasurable activities
- Increased reliance on alcohol, smoking, caffeine, recreational or illegal drugs
- Becoming a workaholic
- Poor time management and / or poor standards of work
- Absenteeism
- Self-neglect / change in appearance
- Social withdrawal
- Relationship problems
- Recklessness
- Aggressive / anger outbursts
- Nervousness
- Uncharacteristically lying
- Comfort eating
- Struggling to laugh at anything
- Starting tasks but not finishing them



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How Stress May Show Itself in the Workplace

At work employees may have difficulty with:

- Punctuality (being consistently late or early)
- Compromising
- Concentration
- Performance
- Learning new tasks
- Relaxing with others
- Taking responsibility
- Prioritising tasks
- Managing conflicts and arguments
- Making decisions
- Humour

Distressed employees may:

- Withdraw from the team
- Make negative or cynical comments
- Be irritable and moody
- Be accident prone
- Work too many hours
- Be absent

When employees are stressed it often shows itself through ill-health. For example:

- Excessive tiredness
- Inability to sleep
- Nightmares
- Overuse of alcohol or drug
- Severe worry
- Migraine
- Asthma
- Eczema
- Eating disorders
- Overeating or not eating enough
- Stomach ulcers
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Hyperactivity
- Acute perspiration
- Muscle aches
- Lots of infections
- Hair loss
- Shingles
- Heart disease
- Stroke

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Chronic Stress

“The elevations in adrenalin and cortisol provoked by a fight or flight reaction are not in themselves stressful. They become stressful for the body only if they are unnecessarily sustained”

Debilitating effects of Cortisol:

- Perpetual hunger
- Desire for sweet food
- Quick fix” compulsion
- Susceptible to illness
- Inhibition of dopamine (a “feel good” hormone and neurotransmitter)
- Depression
- Depletion of brain cells
- Sexual dysfunctions
- Skin ailments
- Inhibition of serotonin (a neurotransmitter, linked to feelings of well-being)

The “stressed” body will use up:

Vitamin B

Supports nervous system

Proteins

Assists growth and tissue repair

Vitamin A

Essential for vision

Vitamin C

Protection of immune system and lowers cortisol

Magnesium

Muscle relaxation, heartbeat regulation, making new cells

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Tips for Managing Stress

Spotting the Signs

The sooner you spot the signs of stress, the easier it is to deal with it. If you have experienced excessive pressure over a period of time it is likely that you will have some unpleasant reactions to that pressure. Everyone reacts slightly differently to stress, so it is important that you identify your own stress reactions. Here are some of the common signs of stress:

- **Physical signs** – Headaches, muscle tension, nausea, digestive problems, crying, recurring illness and infections.
- **Behavioural signs** – Taking risks, being irritable with family, withdrawing from friends and colleagues, increased alcohol/smoking, changes in eating patterns.
- **Psychological signs** – Feeling fearful, angry, anxious, overwhelmed and out of control. Having difficulty concentrating and making decisions. Feelings of failure and helplessness.

If stress is making it difficult for you to enjoy life or function effectively it is time to take action.

Tackling the Causes

When you are experiencing stress, it can be very beneficial to take a step back and review what is happening in your life, what changes have taken place for you over the last few months and who is putting pressure on you. It is also important to check out how you are feeling about yourself, and how much pressure you are putting yourself under to achieve and complete everything. Can you?:

- Identify the causes of your stress. What has been happening within work and outside the workplace? Have there been any significant changes in your life, either expected or unexpected? What has been the impact of those changes?
- Discuss the causes of your stress with a helpful person. Maybe your manager, friends, family or colleagues. If you would like a confidential discussion, call the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) where one of Validium's counsellors will listen, guide and support you with your stress.
- Identify if you are contributing to your own stress. Do you have high expectations of yourself? Are you agreeing to do things that can be done by others?

There are times when we can't control what is happening to us and stress is an inevitable consequence. At these times you need to introduce some healthy habits to manage yourself through the situation.



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Healthy Habits to Cope with Stress

There are some actions and activities that you can do on a regular basis to balance the unpleasant consequences of stress. It is important that you identify healthy habits that work for you and your lifestyle. You might, for example:

- Take regular breaks, on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis
- Eat healthily, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables
- Keep hydrated, without overusing caffeine or alcohol
- Explore relaxation techniques that work for you (e.g. deep breathing, muscle relaxation, visualisation exercises, relaxation CDs, yoga or meditation)
- Check that you have sufficient sleep for the amount of activity you have
- Reward and treat yourself
- Exercise regularly, doing something that you enjoy to encourage maximum release of feel good hormones

Talking and Off-loading

One of the worst things to do when you are feeling stressed is to bottle it up. It may be hard to imagine how it can be helpful to talk to anyone, as you feel so out of control that once you start to talk you might not be able to stop. However, talking in a trusting, confidential relationship is helpful. Off-loading destructive, circular thoughts and feelings will help you feel calmer and more in control. It may be hard at first to pick up the phone or start the conversation, but this challenge to make the first move, to describe what is happening in your inner world and to put your thoughts and feelings into words will help you apply logic, context and rationale to your stress. Once you can talk and off-load, you can begin to think about self-help and solutions. Talking about your stress can help in other ways too, it can:

- Build confidence in dealing with the problem
- Identify recurring patterns of behaviour in yourself and others
- Release the urgency and panic associated with the situation
- Articulate thoughts you've been avoiding
- Develop a plan of action for managing the situation

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HSE Legal Requirements

All employers have legal responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees. This includes minimising the risk of stress-related illness or injury to employees.

Line Manager's Role

Line managers are crucial to the successful prevention and management of work related stress within their teams. They tend to be the first port of call when there is a problem and they are in an ideal position to be able to identify and manage stress. But the way they behave can also be part of the problem; if a manager has the appropriate skills they are better able to deal with stress within the team. Line managers' roles and responsibilities include:



- To understand what work related stress is, what causes it and how it can be prevented and managed
- To engage and communicate with staff about stress
- To be aware of the organisation's stress prevention policies and procedures
- To support and get involved in organisational initiatives to tackle stress, for example, encouraging staff to complete questionnaires, attend focus groups and suggest solutions
- To understand their role in preventing and managing work related stress, and that they can sometimes cause or exacerbate it
- To be aware of their competencies in managing and preventing stress and taking action to improve these
- To identify potential causes of stress before they become a problem
- To identify work related stress in team members early and work with the individuals, and human resources, in resolving the problem
- To support staff to prevent work related stress and to help them manage once it occurs, including providing access to relevant support services
- To identify and implement solutions that will prevent work related stress in their teams
- To help staff return successfully to work after work related stress

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Employee's Role

Employees have a responsibility to raise concerns and tell their manager about possible problems and sources of stress. Employees' roles and responsibilities include:

- To understand what work related stress is, what causes it and how it can be prevented and managed
- To be aware of the organisation's stress management policies and procedures
- To identify potential causes of stress for themselves or their colleagues before they become a problem and to raise them with their line manager or other suitable individuals. This may include, where appropriate, sources of stress outside of work
- To identify early when they or their colleagues are beginning to experience excessive pressure at work and raise this with their line manager so they can provide support in resolving the problem
- To work with their manager in tackling the issue, for example, identifying solutions they think may help
- To be supportive of colleagues experiencing work related stress
- If they are absent from work, to liaise with their line manager to identify solutions to help them return to work effectively and quickly

What is Resilience?

Resilience is a concept concerned with maintaining healthy, adaptive functioning in spite of experienced risk and stress. It refers to the capacity of people, groups or organisations to withstand considerable hardship and to bounce back in the face of adversity. Resilient people are robust, having the "capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back" (Vaillant, 1993, p. 248).

10 Ways to Build Resilience:

1. Make connections. Good relationships with close family members, friends or others are important. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you, strengthens resilience.
2. Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances may be a little better.
3. Accept that change is a part of living. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on the circumstances that can.

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- 4. Move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself:

“What is one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?”

- 5. Take decisive actions. Act on adverse situations as much as you can, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses, and wishing they would go away.
- 6. Look for opportunities for self-discovery. People often learn something about themselves and find they have grown in some respect as a result of a struggle.
- 7. Nurture a positive view of yourself. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts help build resilience.
- 8. Keep things in perspective. Avoid blowing a stressful event out of proportion. Look at it in a broader context.
- 9. Maintain a hopeful outlook. Being optimistic enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualising what you want and not worrying about what you fear.
- 10. Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. That will help keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.



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