

## Stress

We all need to feel a healthy degree of stress at times. If you are gearing up for a race, an exam or an interview, you need the stress hormones adrenalin and cortisol to enhance your performance. Likewise, if you are under threat, you need those same hormones to help you deal with it. Professor Steve Peter's book 'The Chimp Paradox' explains it in simple evolutionary terms. He refers to the fairly primitive part of our brain, the amygdala, which controls our fight/flight response, as our Chimp. Like a real chimp, if threatened, we will need to fight or run away and so we need a biochemical boost to do that. Problems start when our Chimp feels chronically stressed ie. always under threat. Then we can start feeling ill. Symptoms can include:

- Sleep problems
- Nausea and stomach/bowel problems
- Headaches, neck and backache
- Racing thoughts
- Rumination (going over and over things)
- Skin problems
- General aches and pains

Many people find that they have a part of their body that particularly plays up when they are stressed – for me, headaches get me first and if the stress increases, then my stomach will start playing up. It can be useful to know your **personal stress signature** because it's a warning to do something to help yourself.

Although mild stress is fine and helps us be effective, long term stress can lead to long-term health issues. It is well established now that 'the body keeps the score.' You may not be consciously aware of stress but your body can 'keep the score' anyway.

### **So what do you do about it?**

#### **1. Address your unhelpful thinking.**

Many young people are under huge pressure to do well – to achieve – whether it is academically or in sport or in some other demanding activity such as music

or drama. It starts with what Prof Peters calls 'the fridge door syndrome.' You come home from nursery with your first painting and your well-meaning parents tell you how brilliant your painting is and how clever you are. Then they stick your painting on the fridge door. You are praised for your achievement. Your parents are trying to encourage you (to 'achieve your potential') but what you pick up is that achievement is what matters to them and that is how to please them. By the time you're taking your public exams, it can feel like your world will end if you don't 'achieve'. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard boys say 'I don't want to let my parents down.' Let's face it, this is a fee-paying school. You can feel like a complete heel if you don't 'repay the investment' in you. Exams can end up feeling less like your means of getting to the course or job that you want and more like the way to prove to your parents that you're grateful and are the person they want you to be. So the stakes become very high. Mega-stressful.

So how do you address all that?

I'm not suggesting that you say, 'Well, stuff that! I'm not staying on this treadmill any longer!' It would be one way out and many famous and successful people have gone down that route – but let's assume that most of you are happy enough at school and at home and don't want to completely kick over the traces. Anyway, it doesn't have to be that drastic. All we're trying to do is reduce the stress.

What you **can** do is challenge the thoughts that you may be having.

Eg.

Not

'If I do badly, I will let my parents down'

But

'If I do badly, it will not be the end of the world. My parents may be disappointed but they will still love me.'

Not

'My parents have given me so much. I must repay them in some way.'

But

'It was my parents' choice to pay fees for my education. I will do my best to make the most of this opportunity but I am not repaying a debt.'

Not

'I must work every hour God sends. That is the only way to do well in this competitive world.'

But

'Humans need sleep and leisure. If they do not get them, they will not do as well. I will work a sensible amount but allow myself time off and sleep as well.'

I'm sure you can do some more 'alternative' thinking yourself!

Having worked out some alternatives to the thinking that is making you stressed (what we call Negative Automatic Thoughts), it's essential that you start applying your alternative thinking. If you are stressed, you will have got very good at your negative thinking! Your neural pathways will be well established for beating yourself up! We get good at what we practise – so it's important to stop practising unhelpful thinking.

The brain is plastic, however. You can build new neural pathways for helpful, alternative thoughts but it does take practise – so don't give up too soon! If you've been thinking thoughts like 'I must do well at all costs' for years and years, it's going to take a while to get into the habit of thinking an alternative such as 'I can do well and if I don't, I'll deal with it when it happens.'

**Remember: Thoughts are not facts. Being stressed is a habit. You can change your thoughts and you can change your habits.**

## **2. Look after yourself!**

If you're stressed, you may be doing all the things that will make you more stressed in an attempt to deal with it! You may well have created a vicious circle.

For example:

You feel you haven't enough time so you cut down on sleep.

You're cramming in loads of activities so you skimp on meals or eat take-aways and redi-meals.

You feel you need more energy so you drink caffeinated drinks and start taking stimulants.

You feel so shattered by the end of the week that you relax by getting completely pissed and end up sleeping in too long, waking with a hangover and – OMG! – you now haven't got enough time to do all the work you were planning to do!

Everything feels like too much and you lose your temper with your parents. They start telling you how you're letting them down – which makes you feel awful as that's a big part of what you're stressed about!

So, if you're suffering from stress you need to:

- Establish a healthy sleep routine and stick to it.\* Teenagers need (sorry about this) 8 – 10 hours. Adults can manage on an absolute minimum of 5 but they will tend to feel grim on that amount and if it gets any less, they will work ineffectively and have poor decision making skills. Long term sleep deprivation is thought to be a factor in causing Alzheimer's Disease. Think happy thoughts before you sleep! Memories are 'fixed' during sleep so if you drop off thinking stressful thoughts, they will be remembered! Avoid disturbing films and books just before sleep for the same reason!
- Eat healthily and regularly. If your blood sugar slumps, you will feel low and grumpy and will be tempted to reach for caffeine, chocolate and high sugar snacks! Healthy eating includes your 5 fruit and veg a day or preferably more! Seeds and nuts help boost your serotonin levels and that will help you feel generally better.
- Drink plenty of water. Drink caffeine in moderation or not at all. Avoid fizzy drinks and fruit juices (it's better to eat fresh fruit so the sugar is released more slowly) – they contain loads of sugar which is addictive and associated with increased anxiety in some people.

- Only drink alcohol in moderation. It does interfere with your sleep – you will drop off easily but are likely to wake later. It also affects your mood – you’ll get an initial lift but will feel low later. Definitely avoid binge-drinking.
- Exercise – it’s a great stress-buster and releases endorphins – the happiness hormones. It’s important that you enjoy it so you may want to review what sports you are doing if you’re not. It actually helps your brain to grow!
- Consider your workload. Is it realistic? Are you stressed because really, you are doing far too much? You need down time – just chilling. If you try to make your brain and body work all day, every day, you **will** be stressed. Even if you are doing stuff you love, you need breaks – and, frankly, in a school environment, it’s unlikely that you’ll love every minute!
- Spend time with your friends. Look after your friendships, however busy you are. Time and again, studies show that we manage better mentally and emotionally if we have a strong network of friends.
- If you have a faith, practise it! One of the main reasons people find a faith helpful is that it gives them extra strength and a source of comfort when things are difficult.

\*If you’re having problems sleeping, see my blog/article on sleep.

### **3. Consider taking up meditation.**

You may be getting sick of hearing about Mindfulness Meditation. It seems like the modern cure for everything. But taking time out to meditate has been something people have been doing for aeons. Whatever form of meditation you choose (there are different sorts), having a meditative practise is good for your brain. It can be relaxing, grounding and just give you an opportunity to get things in perspective. It actually helps your brain to grow and it reduces cortisol, the stress hormone. Just ten minutes a day can make a real difference or even just scattering 3 minute ‘breathing spaces’ throughout the day. If you want to learn more about this, get in touch [m.harper@warwickschool.org](mailto:m.harper@warwickschool.org)

#### **4. Use aphorisms to help you.**

An aphorism is a wise saying! They can be really helpful. For example, supposing you're stressed because you think you look terrible. A couple of useful aphorisms might be:

Beauty is only skin deep.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

It's back to addressing your thinking. The fact is that most people don't look fantastic - but that doesn't mean they have no friends or no partner. At the end of the day, it'll be how nice a person you are, not how great your six-pack is, that will influence whether you live happily ever after! And you may think you look dreadful but that doesn't mean everyone else does!

Or supposing your family is driving you mad. Remember this one:

You can't choose your family. Thank God you can choose your friends!

Hopefully, you will establish good, mature relationships with your family in the end – but just because you share their genes, it doesn't necessarily mean you want to share living space or the stuff you bought with your birthday money with your little brother! It can be really tough living at home during the teenage years – but remember, being a teenager is temporary.

Nothing lasts forever.

Thirty years from now this will all be water under the bridge.

The critical thing is not to do or say anything which a) adds to everyone else's stress levels b) is potentially hard to forgive. 'I wish you'd never had me. I hate you and I wish you were dead!' is easy to shout as you slam the door but hard for your parents to forget – and could add to your stress when you feel bad about it later. 'Ooops, I'd better work even harder to make up for what I said!'

#### **5. Use affirmations and visualisations.**

Your thoughts have enormous power. If you want a practical demonstration of this, get in touch and I'll run through a couple of exercises with you. If you keep on thinking negatively, it will do you no good and considerable harm.

If however, you get into the habit of thinking and saying affirmations, you will be far more effective and more relaxed.

So decide how you want to be and affirm that to yourself. Supposing you decide that you want to be calm and feeling able to cope. Tell yourself this – first thing in the morning, on your journey to school, before doing your music practise, before you run out onto the sports field – several times, every day.

‘I am calm and am able to cope.’

Keep telling yourself. Not that you want to be. That you are. Use the present tense. Your brain will listen to itself and act accordingly. If you keep telling yourself that you are rubbish, your brain will believe you!

You probably already know that sports people use visualisations to prepare for key events. This isn't hocus pocus – it works. You imagine yourself succeeding at a particular challenge, thinking through how you will look and act, what you will hear, see, smell and even taste. It's like practice, only you do it in your imagination. It is helpful for everything from getting a vital goal to not getting wound up by your mum! You will be learning to live proactively, rather than reactively. You will be prepared – and if you are prepared, you are less likely to be stressed because you are less likely to react spontaneously in ways that are not helpful.

## **6. Take time to reflect.**

If it all does go pear-shaped and you completely lose your rag or foul up some vital exam, do not beat yourself up. That only adds to your stress levels. The key is to see every failure as a learning opportunity. Reflect on what went wrong and what you could have done to avoid it and make a plan for next time. Planning is fine – stressing out about it is not!

Here's a reassuring and thought provoking video about the value of losing:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/theschooloflifetv/search?query=winning%20and%20losing>

## **7. Use power posing.**

If you are going into a potentially stressful situation, prepare yourself by power posing. This is spending 2 minutes in one of certain 'power' positions. An easy one is to stand with your legs apart and your hands on your hips, like Superman. There's a reason he's depicted like that – it's because that's a powerful stance! Stand like that and you increase testosterone levels and reduce cortisol – so you will feel stronger but less stressed! Here's a link to a shortened TED talk about it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdU2l0i2Wh0>

You might feel like an idiot doing it, but whose watching if you do it in your bedroom? And the seated power poses are just perfectly normal ways of sitting! Check it out!

## **8. ASMR**

This is one to Google!

If you're someone for whom ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) 'works' it can be very useful as it can be very relaxing. No one seems to know why it has such an effect on some people but not on others but research is ongoing. It's currently thought to have a similar effect to the grooming that primates give each other. Watching a short ASMR video can be very relaxing – just make sure you don't watch for too long! It's easy to lose track of the time and if you planned to do something else, you'll only add to your stress. If it doesn't work for you, don't stress about it. You're just one of those people who aren't going to spend any time watching someone flipping over the pages of a catalogue, squidging goo or pretending to do a facial on you!!!

I've only written generally about stress here. Whatever the cause of your stress, these points will help, but it may be that you are undergoing some specific form of stress with you could do with some ongoing support. Family problems, relationship problems, long term illnesses – none of these are easy to manage and it can just be helpful to talk – to get it off your chest or to do some thinking with someone else about what you might be able to do to improve things. Good friends can be great for remember that the counselling

department is also here to help you with this so do get in touch.

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If you want to handle your stress yourself, then do try all these suggestions but remember the aphorism:

A problem shared is a problem halved! 😊

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