

Overwhelmed with Stress? Try these first steps....

Many of us at some point in our lives, have experienced that awful feeling, where we have so much to do – we simply ... Stop. It feels like being frozen. Simply unable to start anything, or be effective in any way whatsoever. When this occurs – it has an unerring ability to strike at the very point where it feels imperative to ‘get things done’. The situation seems simply unacceptable – and we pile on an extra layer of difficulty by directing frustration and anger at ourselves for having this problem in the first place.

This article suggests ways to begin to ‘unfreeze’ yourself, and indeed stay that way. If this is the first time you’ve experienced stress of this magnitude – then you can look at the solution as a piece of learning. You are merely learning something new, and as we know, when we try new things, it might be a bit ‘hit and miss’ to start with before we get it right.

First - Stop!

You’ve stopped anyway, so continuing to try to function, is just digging you in deeper. Take yourself away from the computer, the pile of papers, the college, or whatever environment is the centre of your stress-hurricane. Your ‘Mind’ is also your brain, highly sophisticated yes - yet fundamentally a bunch of cells which get tired. Working your brain harder when it’s tired, isn’t going to get ‘better’ result merely diminishing returns.

Once you have created some neutral space for yourself away from the ‘problem’, it can feel easier to look ‘inwards’ to start to address what is happening. Very often, we can get so angry and frustrated at ourselves - about ourselves, we make the problem twice the size. So first steps are about asking yourself ‘how do you feel?’. If you find you are angry at yourself for not coping with stress – the most effective first steps you can take are around ‘letting go’ of your angry feelings towards yourself, as this is merely making the problem worse.

Is this ‘Stress’?

I am defining stress here as being that classic situation of having ‘too much to do’ and feeling mentally overwhelmed. This can physically manifest itself as; feeling sick, experiencing palpitations, light-headedness, confusion, sweating or shaking. However, the effects of anxiety can also appear extremely similar, and of course when you are under stress, you will be experiencing anxiety. One way to be able to differentiate whether it is anxiety causing stress (and not the other way round), is to ask yourself, “Am I holding responsibility for something which I have no control over?” Classic situations would be being asked for a report which you don’t have – because it was somebody else’s responsibility to write it. Or you are asked to issue a redundancy, which is not in your control, but for which you have responsibility. Eg. Ask yourself whether you have ultimate control over a situation – or whether there are parts of this outside yourself over which you do not. This distinction is important, as we need to separate what is ‘us’ and what belongs to ‘others’. (Very often of course, our lives can be a mixture of stress and anxiety!)

So. You have taken yourself physically (temporarily) away from the situation. You are gently 'dropping' angry or frustrated thoughts about yourself - ergo 'the problem of having the problem'. And you have ascertained the quantity of 'stress' versus 'anxiety'. Now, before going 'into the problem.', it is important to consider these basic questions.

- a) Have you had enough sleep?
- b) Or enough food?

If the former – there is no way your brain/mind will be able to function unless you rest (will a power nap suffice – or are you suffering from serious sleep deprivation?) Equally, with food, we wouldn't expect a car to run with no petrol – why expect your brain cells to run on empty – or a poor substitute of sugar and caffeine?

This may then give you an idea of how much time you may need 'away' from the 'problem'. Fifteen minutes, 2 hours, or 2 days.

Accepting feeling Stressed

It may feel unacceptable to say to individuals in your office you are going home and won't finish a report (to catch up on sleep), or even going to lunch. Often we can impose strict ideas of 'Perfection' on ourselves, and enter into deeply punitive thoughts if we don't live up to this 'idea'. However, neuroscientific evidence suggests we are most effective when we engage in 'Satisficing'. This is the process of accepting 'good enough', and jobs done to a satisfying level. The kind of "I have done the best I can, given this set of circumstances, therefore I am now stopping."

First steps to Functioning

So, now you have squared how long you need 'away' from the problem, and satisfied your basic needs in order to function (food/sleep), and are doing a good job of fighting perfectionism – how do you start to function again?

Both in Steven Covey's "7 Habits of Highly Effective People" and more recently Daniel Levitin's "The Organised Mind", which builds on Covey's 'organisational' ideas, (with the benefit of recent research into neuroimaging) - there are insights now into how our brains 'categorise'. Eg, how we store – and then access information/memories. Both these books offer fantastic support to us in combating stress, in terms of getting more organised, but for the purposes of this article, which is focusing on merely getting you 'unstuck' and functioning again, I will 'fast-track' through the most helpful tools.

First, divide that 'overwhelming pile' into:-

Important – it needs to be dealt with right away

Important, but can wait (or be delegated)

Significant - information you need at some point perhaps, but not urgent

Not significant – perhaps they can be throw away, not responded to, or delegated

Don't resent the time spent 'sorting this' – it will save you time in the end.

Categorisation is important. Externalising any thoughts you have on and around these things will effectively get it out of your head and down onto paper.

Externalising your thinking onto paper, means freeing up processing power in your

brain, literally giving you space to think. You know then where it is (its in the important file). Or, more eloquently put, David Levitin affirms “Cognitive economy dictates that we categorise things in such a way as not to be overwhelmed by details that, for most purposes, don’t matter.” (Levitin, 2015)

Then,

DNATMT!

That’s Do not attempt to multitask!

There are so many reasons why we think this is working for us, but actually isn’t. When we ‘switch’ from thing to thing, we are not engaging our minds deeply. Literally, brain power - energy is expended in the process of ‘switching’ (via the insula) from task to task. We even get a short-lived snap of dopamine-serotonin ‘hormonal buzz’ when we multitask, but the price is less efficiency, and increased tiredness.

Instead, take the time to work out chunks of time you wish to devote to the important tasks. Again, this is time well spent. It will enable you to feel in charge of your time and prioritise the important tasks. Be firm (but compassionate) with yourself on this. Turn off your email system. Turn off your phone. Resist social media, and avoid interruption. Shut out the imaginary commentary of managers/family/mother, and simply look at one thing.

Then Do One Thing.

Once you have done that one thing (and this is really important), give yourself lots of praise and support. It doesn’t matter if is not masses, the important thing here is you have done it. So often we dismiss what we do ‘do’ – to focus on what we haven’t done or can’t do. Every time you find your thoughts straying to consider how much you have to do – gently drop the thought train, and stay engaged with the one present task. We are blessed with a fantastic ability to throw ourselves forward in time, plan and think strategically – however this mode of thinking will not help when feeling overwhelmed with stress. Therefore, stay as much of the time in the present moment when you start working on something.

For more information on stress management services for your office, go to www.stresscompany.co.uk Or for coaching/counselling sessions check out www.blackheathcounselling.com or email Geraldine Marsh Pg Dip, Reg. MBACP, NCH, at marsh.geraldine@yahoo.co.uk