

Chris Welford & Jackie Sykes

Mind Body

BALANCE

in Business

A new approach to resilience at work

sane.works

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who has provided us with the inspiration to write this book. Running our own business, family lives, hobbies and investing in our own health and wellbeing is a constant juggling act and when the creation of a book is added to the mix, life can be somewhat stressful from time to time! However, we are firm believers that one of the keys to resilience is having a strong support network and it's a privilege to have so many fantastic people in our lives. A special mention goes to our colleague Gloria Groves who keeps us sane on a daily basis and also our friends and families for your love, patience and humour.

A lot of individuals have shared their knowledge, skills and experience, and these insights have shaped the content of the pages ahead. In particular, our thanks go to Andrew Bridgewater for his contributions around nutrition, Jonny Brooks and Jamie Kingdon for their advice on exercise, Larissa Klinke for her insights into the mysteries of sleep and Oliver Blackwell for helping us flesh out our thoughts on balance. We are also very appreciative of the ideas that Helen Whitten and Dr David Beales have kicked around with us. Both Helen and David have much to say in this area and it's been a pleasure to refine our thinking with their support. As ever, we appreciate the expertise and guidance provided by Sarah Williams from The Book Consultancy regarding the book production, the team at Global River for producing graphics at the drop of a hat, Helen Weston for her constructively critical reading of the first draft (and removing the worst examples of Chris' sense of humour) and all of the other people who have read, commented on and endorsed our efforts.

Finally, we want to acknowledge each other. It's true that you get more done when you work with people you like! We have complimentary skill sets underpinned by some core values and motivators. It's a testament to a good partnership that projects like this go smoothly. Both of us are passionate about the work we do and we wish our readers and our clients happy and healthy lives, with a good measure of clear mind, healthy body and, above all, balance.

Mind Body Balance in Business
A new approach to resilience at work
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The 'Individual Realities' sections of this book are all drawn from the experiences of real-life clients we have worked with. We have sometimes conflated their stories to illustrate a point, and have always changed their names, and sometimes their gender, to protect their identities.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Chris Welford



Jackie Sykes

You'd think one book was enough, wouldn't you? That was our feeling after we had completed *Staying Sane in Business* in 2015! But somehow there seemed more to say. Partially, this was a response to the increasing amount of work that we have been doing over recent years in the field of wellbeing but also it was about interest – this feels such an important and fascinating topic.

In running our niche consulting company, Sixth Sense Consulting Ltd, it has been a privilege to work with so many interesting and varied companies in the UK and internationally and across such a diverse range of sectors. No day is the same and every client we work with is a source of endless fascination to us. But it's really struck us how many people are struggling with stress; thoroughly bent out of shape by modern life: tired, stressed and ill, they have come to us for help. It posed the question: were we doing enough?

We are both business psychologists, coaches and psychotherapists and it's our view that these disciplines have much to offer and can be even more powerful when they are used in an integrated way. There are lots of psychological approaches available and many of them are effective but we kept finding that adverse responses to pressure weren't all about the way people were thinking: they equally involved the body. As

we dug deeper to help our clients, we realised we hadn't been paying enough attention to nutrition, exercise and sleep. We were falling into that familiar trap of treating the mind and body as separate entities.

Worse still, we were a great example of the cobbler and their shoes, full of ideas about how to lead a more balanced and ultimately productive life, without paying very much attention to our health. A man in his 50s and a woman in her 40s, between us, we had sore backs, weight gain, disturbed sleep and we both too easily felt grumpy and out of sorts. It felt a bit hypocritical, to say the least, to be trying to support other people when we hadn't got our own acts together.

Some years later, people who had known us as colleagues started to comment that they noticed a difference. They saw two people who had genuinely tried to grab the proverbial bull by the horns and do something. Some said we looked healthier, many said we looked happier and one or two even said we looked a bit zen. But what had we done? Was it all about quitting corporate life and setting up our own business? After all, we had hardly dropped out of the world of work!

This is our story of trying something better out, of attempting to deal not only with the way we were thinking but also how we were treating the bodies that we live in. We aren't stating here that we have all the answers. We aren't claiming to have the keys to the next new diet. We haven't become personal trainers, we haven't spent the last five years locked in a sleep lab and we certainly haven't been sitting on a mountainside in Tibet, meditating. What we have done personally, and more importantly what we have put into practice with our clients, are simple and pragmatic approaches to integrated wellbeing. For us, the mind still has centre stage but now it is accompanied by the body. All we want to do is share what we have found to be useful so that you, the reader, can enhance your mind body balance.

Chris and Jackie, October 2017

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

Mind Body Balance in Business is an excellent book that provides readers with practical ways they can balance their life and minimise the stress in their working day and beyond. It is well written, easy to read and helps individuals cope with pressures of work, and the interface between work and life more generally.

Professor Sir Cary Cooper, Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester

This book provides an excellent toolkit with which to navigate the stresses and strains of modern life. It offers eminently practical advice on how to manage stress and build resilience by paying more attention to both the mind and the body. It focuses on mindfulness, nutrition, exercise, sleep and work-life balance in a way that inspires the reader to be far more attentive to their own wellbeing.

Carole Spiers, CEO Carole Spiers Group, Chair of the International Stress Management Association [UK]

As a "careful owner" of a mind and a body, I'm astonished by how many modern medical practitioners dismiss the idea that they may be inextricably linked. *Mind Body Balance in Business* is my favourite type of book: it sets out clearly a number of issues with direct relevance to the reader, explains systematically how to tackle them, and weaves in examples and images to bring the subject to life. Next time I feel below-par, I'll be sure to pick up MBB again and check that I'm following its recommendations. Employers and managers will help themselves, their staff and their organisations if they endorse and share the recommendations in this book

Ian Simm, Founder & Chief Executive, Impax Asset Management Group plc

Sometimes it can be tempting to think that you can have it all – a rewarding and stimulating career, happy and fulfilling relationships, and good physical and mental health. The reality is never that straightforward, nor is the wide sense that each of these are either exclusive to each other or that there is no relationship between them. In reality, life doesn't lend itself to being compartmentalised so simply. It is rare to find situations in which all areas are in perfect equilibrium even if it was theoretically possible. This book gives practical help, instead, in recognising where the balance currently lies and where it might become more balanced so that each element can help feed and support the others. I'd highly recommend it.

Stephen Mann, Group Chief Executive, Police Mutual

In *Mind Body Balance in Business*, Chris and Jackie have created an enjoyable and thought-provoking book which I am sure will be helpful to anyone seeking to find balance in their lives. They adopt a realistic approach to achieving balance, with a strong focus on taking action on those aspects of our lives that are within our control and therefore, that we have the ability to change if we want or need to. What I found particularly helpful and reassuring was a certain contentment that my own life (actually, our own lives, because I also deliberately want to include my wife and family in this statement), feel very much in balance; in work, relaxation, rest, exercise, diet, health, relationships....; that we know how and have plans to reshape any areas (that are within our control) that might be making the wheel wonky, and we have methods of dealing with anything that is not within our control. I would strongly endorse the approach that Chris and Jackie take and would encourage anyone to read this book and having done so, critically, take action and do whatever you need to find your own balance.

Simon Coatsworth, CEO, Zenith Chambers

Business leaders who can integrate life and work effectively will be a huge differentiator for companies today and into the future. Increasingly, people want more out of their career, and leaders who can demonstrate how to live a more integrated life and prioritise self-care will prosper.

Angela McKenna, SVP Global Talent Development, Salesforce

Mind Body Balance in Business is a thought-provoking and yet highly practical book. It challenged me to really think about how I deal with the demands of business, home life and the world around me. I'm surprised more organisations don't embrace this more holistic approach. We are more than 'units of production' and this book helps you find the sweet spot!

Graeme Clarke, Owner & CEO, Res Firma Ltd

In today's 24/7 digitally-enabled working environment, I suspect it must be true, that, like me, a high proportion of professional and business people often don't place enough emphasis on how they balance the demands of their busy work and careers, with ensuring that their physical and mental wellbeing is constantly optimised. I found *Mind Body Balance in Business* to be an enjoyable and very simple read which usefully holds up a mirror to identify some of the symptoms caused by modern working life, and provides a series of easy and practical steps to help working people optimise their performance.

Andrew Cowan, Chief Executive Officer, Manchester Airport, Part of MAG Group

Skilfully fusing their personal wisdom and insightful observations with compelling contemporary research, the authors have created a pragmatic guide to the resilience and inherent balance sought by many in a fulfilled working life.

Matthew Reed, Chief Executive, The Children's Society

As I have got older, I have realised just how important it is to not only focus on getting things done but also to engage in personal preventative maintenance. If my car deserves this, I'm sure that I do! Being at the top of your game and staying there takes some planning and deliberate action. It doesn't happen by accident. Chris has been my personal coach for many years and he has always encouraged me to reflect not only on what's good for the business I work in but also on what's good for me. The two should never be mutually exclusive. This book is simply an extension of the practical advice that he and Jackie have always provided.

Adrian Fieldhouse, MD Government Sector, Sopra Steria

Jackie and Chris have delivered a substantial amount of coaching, team building and leadership development work at Impax with outstanding results. In *Mind Body Balance in Business* they have blended their own substantial experience as coaches, psychotherapists and psychologists to provide a refreshing new view of wellbeing in the workplace. This book covers resilience, sleep, exercise, nutrition and work-life balance in a way that is pragmatic and realistic for people striving to juggle the different demands and opportunities of the 21st Century. It could be read by experienced leaders, those just setting out in the world of work, and everyone interested in how to make their contributions at work mindful.

Roz Reid, Head of Human Resources - Executive Director, Impax Asset Management Group plc

We have really valued the judgement and support of Chris and Jackie over the years. They are excellent business psychologists and coaches. This book is simply a testament to their style and attitude: clear, insightful and genuinely helpful. They take complex subject matter, identify what is practical and useful and create something that is digestible.

Lin Kendrick, Group Talent Director, Serco Group plc

I have worked with Chris for over 10 years in corporate life and more recently, he has been my executive coach. He said to me one day, why do you work with me? I said, because you are practical, you keep it real and I can put into practice what we talk about. *Mind Body Balance in Business* reflects my experience of working with both Chris and Jackie. It is simple and straightforward to under-

stand, yet really tackles the subject of stress head on; something that in many organisations is still taboo. Ultimately this book is guide and it gives you options that work in the real and very busy world of work. You can stop and take control, but in a way that suits you and how you want to live your life. Having read the book it is clear: you have a choice! You have options. Go try and see if you feel better. There is another way!

Paul Gaskin, HRD UK & Europe, Serco Group

Too many people suffer in complete silence with their mental health because of the stigma that surrounds admitting you have problems with your emotional wellbeing. Since I founded *Breaking the Silence* I have become increasingly aware of the importance of looking after your mind and your body if you want to feel great about yourself and your wellbeing. This book beautifully explains the link between the two and how you will only operate with maximum energy, control and engagement if you have a strategy that tunes into both your mind and your body to give you balance. Inspirational people are prepared to share their vulnerability and I found this book an inspirational read.

David Beeney, Founder, Breaking the Silence

Working closely with people in a challenging industry has meant that the impact of stress is sadly a feature of the workplace but often we are dealing with it at the point where it is already a problem. This latest book is excellent at looking at this subject in a holistic, practical and supportive way. For me it is the balance between the detailed research with real-life examples and practical help that makes it a compelling and helpful book. I approached reading this book in my professional capacity, hoping that it would give me resources to help the team of people I support. It has done this but it has also made me reflect on my own wellbeing and the recognition of just how easy it is to ignore symptoms. Finally ... loved the images and song titles!

Julia Warren, Group HR Director, Trinity Mirror

This is an important book for anyone riding the waves of the 21st century. Full of tips and thought-provoking philosophical points about living life well in a digital era, Chris and Jackie bring together key techniques to enable the reader to 'jam the spanner in the works of their autopilot' behaviours. Insightful and easily accessible models and audits enable readers to review their lives and develop resilience to gain control of their daily habits of thought, nutrition, exercise and work-life balance. A must for anyone wanting to enhance their work performance, health and wellbeing.

Helen Whitten, author of Cognitive Behavioural Coaching Techniques for Dummies (Wiley)

This excellent book enables the reader to understand their own stress reactions. If you find yourself living beyond your limit of tolerance and anxiety about your present work life balance this book is essential reading for you. Filled with easy to apply self-assessment tools, resources, recovery strategies, relevant client stories, and practical advice you will find sensible and achievable steps to support your return to greater resilience.

Dr David Beales, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians with a special interest in Mind-Body Medicine

I have had the privilege of working with and supporting Jackie on her own journey to improve her health and fitness goals for over six years, long before she even started writing her first book. It is high time that we started taking ownership of our own physical health and understand what a huge impact it has on our mental state and our ability to function in a positive, productive, and empowering fashion. *Mind Body Balance in Business* is an excellent practical guide into understanding mentally how we are programmed and setting up a foundational guide to create practical changes in our lives. It is all about managing stress and creating resilience through tangible and practical steps. It is certainly my sort of book!

Cee Fee Dunn, Personal Trainer and Nutrition Coach

The book has a very readable style, with a flexibility for dipping in and out, user-friendly language, and a logical structure. I love the take home nature of the 'Introduction to...' sections, (and will be keeping them in my back pocket!) as well as the chapter summaries. There are many useful and uncomplicated tools to help readers, such as the 'signs to watch out for' for managers. Finally there is the 'getting started' section, which gives a comprehensive list of suggestions for first steps in this vitally important area of modern life.

Dr Graeme Collinson, Director of Environment, Health and Safety, Siemens plc

This fantastic book is one which you can dip in and out of as it suits, but you are likely to find yourself drawn to make more time to read it! Both common-sensical and compelling, the ideas and practices outlined in *Mind, Body, Balance in Business* embody Chris and Jackie's extensive and hard-won experience. Importantly, they are supported by a growing body of studies in both medicine and neuroscience, making it stand head and shoulders above many others in this field. If you want to change your life for the better, gain a feeling of living with greater ease, and in a more intentional way, I wholeheartedly recommend *Mind Body Balance in Business*.

Chris Downes, Director, Hands on Health UK / Boost Wellbeing

A truly enlightening read. Jackie and Chris have captured and created a wonderful synthesis of psychology, nutrition and fitness concepts, research and tools that allow the reader move between sound practical ideas and deeper psychological reflection. "Challenging autopilot responses" is a core principle of the book and this, for me, was a metaphorical pause button that everyone can benefit from. Particularly in today's world, as we become more and more passively institutionalised through work and comparative ways of living. I could not agree more with the statement "skip the psychology and the goal will fail". Commonly missed; even overlooked in culture and change management strategy. As a change management consultant and psychotherapist, I would highly recommend this book to clients and businesses alike and will certainly look to use its principles in relevant parts of my work and personal development programmes. I'll also be using it for myself - practice what you preach! Thank you, Jackie and Chris.

Joanna Williams, Change Management Consultant & Psychotherapist

I found the *Mind Body Balance in Business* new approach to resilience at work extremely insightful. The combination of expert knowledge and approaches gives me concrete tools that I can apply personally and with my team. I would highly recommend this book for any business leader is who committed to their team's wellbeing.

Otema Yirenyi, Head of Channel Enablement, Vodafone Group Enterprise

FOREWORD - A FEW WORDS FROM A CEO

None of us is immune from the impact of modern life. My own journey with stress and burnout began about 15 years into my career. I was achieving a lot but I was putting a great deal of pressure on myself at the same time. Although feeling exhausted from work, my personal life did not provide many opportunities for recovery either as I was fully committed to a lifestyle of 'working hard and playing hard'.

Yet, niggled by self-doubt, I started to question whether I was really performing to my own high standards and to the satisfaction of everybody else. To make things worse, my boss was not the overly listening or compassionate type and it was then that I started to feel stressed like I had never felt stressed before.

I have come to realise now that when stress happens it is not just one thing. It is a combination of several factors that all hit your body at the same time. The problem is that there are only so many blows our bodies can take – something I had to learn the hard way.

After enduring a prolonged period of stress and pressure, I started to feel emotionally down and completely lacking in energy.

I now know that my experiences were the symptoms of adrenal burn-out. Normally, when we experience stress our adrenal glands release the hormones adrenalin and cortisol which trigger our stress response. Historically, this is an important survival mechanism that mobilises our physical resources. Once the stress passes, our hormone levels normalise again. Yet, if one is experiencing constant stress, the adrenal glands keep producing adrenalin and cortisol and so levels remain consistently elevated, until a point is reached where there is simply no more adrenalin to produce.

What made my situation worse was the feeling that I had to keep up a façade at work. I feared that my boss would see me as weak and unable to cope with the stresses of modern life, and therefore would have prevented me from progressing in my career.

Luckily, this was the time I decided to seek help. I sought a counsellor (and actually tried several types of counselling) and found people who were able to understand and help me.

Looking back at my journey, whilst I would not want to re-live it, I believe that these experiences have made me stronger and have enabled me to cope with more stress than I have ever been able to do before. Not only do I now know my limits and recognise the signs of stress that I did not pay attention to before, but I have also learned which resources to navigate to when I am in need of support. Now, when stress happens, I can react to it mindfully and cope with it actively by taking time out, exercising and living healthily. This way, I can ultimately manage greater levels of stress than I could before my burnout.

I have learnt that paying close attention to my physical and mental health is an integral part of my resilience and that working on my well-being contributes as much to high performance at work as do my hours in the office. Being on top of one's game involves the mind as well as the body.

However, it is undeniable that, unfortunately, a lot of work still has to be done to raise awareness of this link, which is why I believe that books like *Mind Body Balance in Business* are invaluable. Not everyone should have to go through the experiences I have been through to realise how important it is to tune into our bodies and feelings.

Mind Body Balance in Business is a great resource for anyone having to cope with stress or pressure, no matter at what level or stage in their career. It recognises that we do not leave our personal life, health and wellbeing at the doorstep when coming into work, and how important it therefore is to consider all these factors if we want to perform at our best in our careers – or much more importantly, in our lives in general.

Having worked with Chris and Jackie and commissioned their support for the stress management and resilience training that we do across Siemens UK, I am convinced that their approach to management will be ground-breaking for many. As trained psychotherapists and directors of their own consultancy, they combine their deep understanding of psychology with a profound knowledge of business. In this way, their re-

freshing stance on management challenges the taboo regarding mental health and promotes a type of leadership that is both self-compassionate and high-performing.

There is lots of help out there and you just need to find a path towards it. If you need a starting point, you are holding it in your hands now.



Prof. Juergen Maier
CEO
Siemens UK

WHO ARE WE AND WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

This book is a practical guide to stress management and resilience for working people. As specialists in our fields, we offer a blend from the disciplines of psychology, coaching, psychotherapy, nutrition and physical education.

As in our earlier book, *Staying Sane in Business*, our aim has been to assemble what we have found to work into one easy-to access volume. We hope that we have, once again, created something practically useful and that holds the attention of busy people in a time-starved world.

Central to our approach is our Mind Body Balance model and the beauty of this is that you can start wherever feels best for you – wherever makes sense. It also doesn't matter whether you have picked this book up to help yourself or whether your primary motive is to help others: the same principles apply.

Whilst our stance is based on solid science and proven practice, you shouldn't just take our word for it.

Try out what we say and make sense of it for yourself. See which bits fit best with the person you are.

Since some of our recommendations involve your body as well as your mind, consider checking in with your doctor, dietician, physiotherapist or personal trainer before you get started. As we shall say later, balanced and resilient people are good at accessing the support they need. Be one of these people and don't be an island!

Our approach is integrative. We are suspicious of professionals who believe that their way is the only way. There's wisdom from all walks of life: you just need an open mind and to know where to look.

Here's what's on the menu: we start off by looking at stress at the level of body and behaviour. We then move to an overview of resilience: the ability we all have to resist the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or to at least recover from adversity. Then it's time to look at the role of the mind before turning to the body. The mind and the body are interlocked

systems but it's easier if we separate out the topics of exercise, nutrition and sleep. Balance is a tricky issue, so we look at this last!

We started the process of collecting useful material: book reviews, YouTube clips, web links and more, when we created the **sane.works** website (www.sane.works), so where we've come across something in our research, we've added it to the site too.

Happy reading. We hope this book goes some way to helping you achieve your goals.

CHAPTER 1 - STRESS

"The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another."

William James

Introducing stress

There's a whole stack of research that shows the most important component of mental self-care is self-compassion. You might have thought that it was simply all about being determined, tough and positive and that self-compassion sounds like something that is soft and self-indulgent. But think again.

Anything that raises self-esteem is usually thought to be good. But self-esteem has some serious drawbacks.

Too often, efforts to boost self-esteem lead to a one-up position: a comparison with people where you are encouraged to think of yourself as better than others; better than the average person. Of course, we can't all be better than average! Secondly, too many self-esteem programmes seem to exist in a world of limitless positive thinking, where accepting vulnerability and personal flaws have no place. They implore us to adopt an 'anything's possible' mindset and tell us that we are all wonderful, gifted and special. Small wonder then that the fastest growing personality disorder in the West is narcissism!

So what's self-compassion? Think of how you treat the people you really love and care for. Now think of a really bad day at work; one where you

have screwed up and there have been consequences. How did you treat yourself when this happened? Probably, not as well as you might treat anyone else! Researchers in the field of self-compassion like Kristin Neff see self-compassion as having three components:

- **Firstly, talking to yourself gently and with respect.** You face up to your errors but you do this with openness and acceptance of your imperfections. You might liken this to self-parenting in which your internal working model of a parent is nurturing and supportive rather than harsh and critical. If you are kind to yourself you don't activate your body's defences, you don't flood your system with adrenalin and cortisol and in the long term you are much less likely to become stressed and depressed.
- **Secondly, not looking for the difference between you and others but in accepting the commonalities of the human condition.** We all make mistakes. It's human. In no way does this imply that you couldn't do better or that someone else shouldn't be your role model by the way.
- **Thirdly, mindfulness.** Thoughts are just thoughts and just like feelings, they come and go. To be mindful, in the words of mindfulness expert Ed Halliwell, is to practice ABC – Awareness of your feelings; Being prepared to sit with them and the capacity to effect Choice over what you elect to do. If you are mindful, you don't run your life on autopilot!

Next time things go wrong in your life, instead of subjecting yourself to a tirade of abuse, try some genuine self-compassion. Just as you would ask a friend, who is distressed and suffering what you can do to help them; ask the same question of yourself. You might be surprised at the results.

Stress is everywhere - it's an occupational hazard of being at work! No matter how wonderful your organisation is, it's very likely that there's going to come a point where the demands of a situation potentially exceed your capacity to cope. Ignoring the issue isn't a wise decision. Either you are going to suffer, or the people around you are!

Soldiering on, possibly under sufferance, is a common tactic. But that's not really coping with the issue. If you do this, you are either avoiding talking about stress or you are putting up with circumstances that are going to hurt you. The result could then be drowned sorrows in the pub, loss of temper, damaged relationships and a big impact on your health.

Fail to face up to stress and the damage that it can do and you run the real risk of a derailed career and a very short retirement. Fail to manage stress and pressure and you fail as a manager, if that's part of your job. It's as simple as that!

Imagine if you were a professional athlete: you'd have a training plan that acknowledges the strain that you are placing on your body. Sure, you would be pushing yourself but you'd not be pretending that you were a machine. Your programme would probably include something about sleep, nutrition, strength and endurance and, these days, if you were in the top flight, there would be a psychological component too. You would expect nothing less.

So, trying to manage the complexity of the modern world whilst claiming that stress and pressure either aren't real, don't have an impact on you or are simply signs of weakness is about as wise as pretending that preparing to run a marathon can be accomplished by a couple of training runs around the block on a Sunday morning.

Stress - the term that was first introduced in the 19th century by French physiologist Claude Bernard to describe an 'internal imbalance' - is now dominating news headlines and virtually no day passes without it being denounced by the media as the reason for illness, lost productivity and depression. But whilst the existence of stress may no longer be news, there's no evidence that we are facing up to the challenge of what to do about it.

This chapter looks at how common stress is, exactly what defines it, and how your brain and body recognise and react to it. Elsewhere in this book, we explore what we can do to bounce back from stress and what we can do to resist it in the first place: that's what we mean by resilience.

If you are feeling sceptical, that's fine. Look at our views with a critical eye and make up your own mind. Our assertion is that dealing effectively with stress and pressure are critical competencies for the 21st-century worker and that you are no exception, so please read on.

How common is stress?

Many of us feel pressured from time to time but how much serious stress is there around and is it on the increase? Are we just recognising something that has always been present, have we become somehow softer in our capacity to cope with the demands of life, or is something else at play?

Firstly, there's a lot of solid evidence that stress is a problem. In the UK, the best source is probably the Labour Force Survey (LFS) from the Health and Safety Executive.¹

- The total number of reported cases of work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2015/16 was 488,000.
- The number of new cases was 224,000.
- The prevalence of stress has remained constant in the last decade, despite much greater awareness of it. It appears that it's not increased by much but it's certainly not decreased either.
- The total known time lost due to this condition in 2015/16 was 11.7 million working days. This equated to nearly 24 days lost per case.
- In 2015/16 stress accounted for 37% of all work-related ill health cases and 45% of all working days lost due to ill health.

The main work factors cited in the survey as causing work-related stress, depression or anxiety were workload pressures, including tight deadlines, too much responsibility and a lack of managerial support.

It's not just the HSE that collects data of course. The mental health charity MIND noted back in 2010 that stress had caused one in five workers to call in sick, with the clear majority not telling employers the truth about why they hadn't turned up for work. MIND also estimated that greater awareness of mental health could save UK businesses £8 billion per year.

And mental health issues are not exactly uncommon. Every seven years a survey is undertaken in England to measure the number of people who have different types of mental health problems. The 2009 results make interesting reading:

- Depression is found in 2.6 in 100 people.²
- Anxiety is found in 4.7 in 100 people.
- Mixed anxiety and depression is found in 9.7 in 100 people.

In the work that we do as coaches and therapists, it's this last category that we come across most frequently and it's our belief that workplace stress is a major factor in causing this problem.

If these figures seem low, let's put that in context. In 2013, there were 8.2 million reported cases of anxiety in the UK.³

That's just the number that has been officially recorded and isn't a reflection of the number of people who are suffering in silence; remember, mental health can still carry a certain stigma. Admittedly, not all these are caused by stress or even occur within the working population, but many probably are.

And then there's the vexing issue of GP consultations. It has been estimated by the Royal College of General Practitioners that up to 20% of all consultations involve a patient complaining of a very real but medically unexplainable malady. In 2013 there were 340 million GP consultations⁴, so the numbers are huge and so, presumably, are the associated costs. It's not alarmist to ask the question of whether stress isn't playing a big role here. Many experts conclude that it is.

A few things seem clear:

- Mental health issues, in general, are hardly uncommon. You need to be aware of them. They could affect you and the more people you manage, the greater chance you will come across them in the people you lead. Ignorance simply isn't a responsible stance.
- Despite greater awareness of stress, it remains a stubborn problem and it should be on your radar in terms of self-care and the care of others.

- The mental and physical health problems associated with stress are causing a great deal of human misery and you have a part to play in making things better and minimising the risks.
- There's still an unfortunate stigma associated with talking about stress and mental health in general and if you are a manager or team leader, you are an extremely important role model. If you look after yourself and you create an open and supportive environment for others to talk about the way stress and pressure are affecting them, you are doing something very positive.
- This problem is costing a lot of money and, frankly, it could be your bottom line that's going to be impacted.

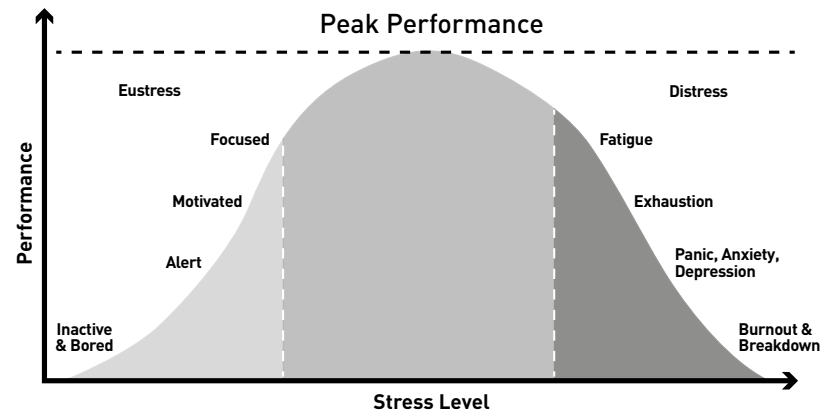
What is stress?

Whilst it's clearly important to have a definition of stress, in practice it's not so easy. There's no unit of measurement that we can confidently point to like we can with blood pressure. For example, if you have a medical review and your doctor confirms that your blood pressure is 150/90, you will almost certainly receive a diagnosis of hypertension. With stress, it's a bit more complex and what's more, we know that some stress and pressure can be beneficial. Let's narrow the definition a bit. It's not the positive stress that we are talking about here (incidentally, this has a name: it's called eustress). What we are concerned with is negative, malignant and damaging levels of stress. In other words, the level of pressure that exceeds your coping capacity and leads to distress.

The idea of a bit of stress being a good thing and too much being bad isn't new. Back in 1910 psychologists recognised that humans operate on what's known as an arousal curve.⁵

We all know what it's like to be on the left-hand side of the picture: ask most teenagers! The thing is, it's here that we can do something to get ourselves going. Some years ago, we used to work with a motivational speaker and one of his phrases was "emotion follows motion". It's good to feel lazy and comfortable occasionally, tucked up in bed or relaxing on a sun lounger on holiday. But lolling about every day soon becomes dull

Human arousal curve



and we feel like doing something. We find a challenge or project that interests us, we become focused and alert and up goes our productivity. We get stuff done. Provided we know how, and with a bit of preventative maintenance, we reach the top of our curve and we continue to achieve.

The curve is different for all of us. It takes longer for some people to reach the peak than others and it takes less input from the outside world for some too. Some of us are easily pleased, some are easily bored. That's personality for you. If we know ourselves, if we act sensibly and if we look after ourselves, we should be able to maintain peak performance for a good while (can you see now why it's called peak performance?).

But what about the right-hand side? It's here that the slope is slippery and dangerous. We all get overstimulated and over-tired from time to time but what if we start to accept this as normal (some psychologists call this creeping normalcy)? What if you don't pay attention to the warning signs in your body and mind? You are likely to find yourself hurtling down the slope, towards breakdown. Even applying the psychological brakes isn't enough. You are out of control. You crash and maybe burn and the sad thing is, picking up the pieces isn't so easy. This is one slope where the reverse gear is hard to find and to engage. It's one place where tracking back is a real effort.

So, stress is the tipping point on your psychological curve, the adverse



"It's Been a Hard Day's Night" The Beatles

reaction to demands that (currently) exceed your capacity to cope. The result is mental and emotional strain and bodily discomfort. Sounds undesirable, right? So, best avoided altogether?

Well, just a minute because the story isn't quite as simple. Just as it's true that a bit of pressure is a good thing, it's also true that your stress reaction was designed for an equally positive reason: to keep you safe.

So, why do we all experience stress? Believe it or not, although it seems obvious to demonise our stress reaction as 'getting in the way' of our lives, it is actually linked to an invaluable survival strategy in our bodies. In fact, 'stress' is our biologically programmed response to any kind of threat or demand, and from an evolutionary point of view this makes perfect sense: in the event of life-threatening danger, a stress-reaction – also called freeze, fight or flight – is triggered. This mobilises us physically, increases our stamina and strength, sharpens our senses, speeds up our reaction times, and allows us to either protect ourselves better or to make a very swift exit. But how?

The physiology of stress

Time for a little physiology. Stimuli reach your brain through your five senses - sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch – where they are pulled together by a part of the brain called the thalamus. It's the job of the thalamus to send this incoming information to another part of your brain that detects threat. This part of your brain is called the amygdala.

Interestingly, sights, sounds and tastes seem to be connected less directly to the amygdala than touch sensations and smells. The latter appear to be wired in directly. Ever been moved by an evocative aroma; something that takes you straight back to a time of your life? Just the smell of geraniums transports one of us back to his grandmother's house; no thought needed. And with that, an immediate flood of emotions ...

The amygdala's job is to pattern match the incoming data. It's on the lookout for danger and its reactions are rapid, powerful and somewhat crude. If you were crossing the road and just noticed a truck bearing down upon you, you'd need to jump out of the way quickly - a more subtle, nuanced reaction wouldn't be that helpful! You might think of this dimension of brain processing as quick and dirty.

Upon perception of a threat, the amygdala sends a signal of distress to another part of your brain, the hypothalamus, which then triggers physiological reactions in your body via the pituitary gland to your autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system has two, balancing arms: one is designed to help you flee or fight, the other is designed to help you rest and digest. You could liken this system to the accelerator and brakes in a car. The side which is associated with the accelerator being pushed is called the sympathetic system and the brakes are called the parasympathetic system.⁶

Foot to the floor, pressing on the accelerator, the first step of the stress reaction is the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, which causes the adrenal glands to release the hormone epinephrine (better known in the UK as adrenalin) into your bloodstream. Particularly in situations where you perceive little relative control over the threat, the adrenal glands also release the hormone norepinephrine (more com-

monly known as noradrenalin). It's this that triggers your 'freeze, flight or fight' response.

You will notice the effects of these two hormones in physiological and physical changes in your body:

- In your brain, adrenalin and noradrenalin increase arousal and alertness, promote vigilance, enhance formation and retrieval of memory and focus attention;
- In the rest of your body, the hormones cause your heart to beat more quickly, enabling a greater blood supply to our muscles and vital organs;
- In addition, your circulatory system diverts blood from non-essential functions to large muscles and the brain. Your legs, arms and torso get the oxygenated blood the muscles need to function and your gut and other associated digestive functions are told to wait;
- Your breathing becomes more rapid and shallow. You can begin to feel very uncomfortable and quite light-headed, as if you are gasping for air;
- Your attention becomes acutely focused to the degree that you may have tunnel vision and loss of hearing and your sense of pain is diminished;
- The heightened levels of adrenalin activate the production of glucose which acts as an energy booster;
- The hormone cortisol is also released into your bloodstream. This breaks down fatty acids into more available energy and gets the body ready to re-adjust once the adrenalin rush is over.

Together, these processes, which happen within milliseconds and often occur before you even become consciously aware of the threat, recruit all available energy sources to mobilise your body and maximise your efficiency and strength.

What the amygdala also seems to do is inhibit higher cognitive processes. Sometimes called "executive control", these process-

es happen in the part of your brain that is the most recent development in evolutionary terms – the neocortex. In an emergency, all you really need is black and white thinking to get you out of trouble. You might have read Steve Peters' book, *The Chimp Paradox?*⁷ He likens the actions of the amygdala and the associated structures of the emotional brain or limbic system to an inner chimp. The "chimp" exists to keep you free from danger; to protect you from threat. It's five times stronger than the human side of you, so you can't overpower it: you have to learn to live with it and manage its behaviour.

Once the perceived danger is gone, the process is ended with the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, which acts like a brake by releasing the neurotransmitter acetylcholine which is responsible for your "rest and digest" response.

What's 'chronic' stress?

The system above all sounds fine. It's the mobilisation of essential bodily resources to get us out of trouble. The problem arises from the fact that whilst your freeze-fight-or-flight instinct was a crucial survival strategy in prehistoric times, where you would have been exposed to life-threatening dangers that needed an immediate physical response, it can be less useful in the modern world.

The real disadvantage is that your amygdala perceives not only certain physical stimuli as life-threatening, but also reacts to emotional stressors. Hence, the 'threats' that you are exposed to today are less likely to be a tiger wanting to eat you, but are instead a delayed train, a job interview, an extortionate phone bill... you name it. And here's a really important point: your brain cannot distinguish between actual sense data and thoughts. See something that frightens or upsets you and you will react; just think about it and the same reaction occurs.

What makes matters worse is the fact that your daily life is full of these emotional stressors. Just take an average day: you might oversleep by a few minutes, rush to get ready for work, miss a train, get angry at a taxi driver for taking a long route, have a testy meeting with a customer, come home late from work and upset your partner – it is like meeting fifty tigers one after another! This is when stress becomes 'chronic'!

On top of that, emotional stress isn't just triggered by external stimuli, like work or major life changes (even positive ones like Christmas, weddings and birthdays) but also by the way you think and what you think about: if you have high standards, they can easily lead you towards crippling perfectionism. You beat yourself up for not being a good enough parent (more about the challenge of leading a balanced life in a later chapter), you worry that your performance at work isn't up to scratch, you fret about financial security and so on.

To make matters even worse, your brain is much more sensitive to negative stimuli than it is to positive information. It's like it's Teflon-coated for the good stuff and Velcro for the bad stuff. Whilst this makes sense in evolutionary terms, it's potentially bad news for your level of stress and feelings of happiness.

All too soon, you become chronically hyper-aroused and you forget what it feels like to be relaxed. We see this all the time in our work as coaches: people who have completely lost the sense of a normal baseline and who imagine that it's normal to feel stressed out all the time.

Well, it's not normal. It's not good. It will damage your health, shorten your life, reduce your creativity and capacity to solve problems and leave you a lot less able to solve problems in a creative and resourceful way!

So let's talk about physical health for a moment because it's not just what's going on between your ears that is going to suffer if you are chronically stressed. Your body is going to pay a high price too. It's been established for some time now that there are serious health risks associated with chronic stress, as stress interferes with almost all your bodily functions, including your immune system, heart and circulation, digestion and your ability to sleep.

Do any of these sound familiar?

- Dizziness/fainting, breathlessness
- Sleep problems, such as insomnia
- Neck/shoulder and muscle pain
- Palpitations and chest pain

- High blood pressure, heart disease
- Sweating
- "Butterflies"
- Loss of libido and reproductive issues
- Headaches
- Colds and flu
- Nervous twitching, nail-biting
- Indigestion/heartburn and digestive problems, possibly leading to weight problems
- Urinary malfunction
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome
- Psoriasis and skin conditions such as eczema
- Depression and anxiety
- Cognitive and memory problems

All of the above can either be caused by stress or aggravated by it. And in a sense, these issues are the tip of the iceberg because left unchecked, they have a nasty habit of developing into something more.

Your body is designed to maintain balance or homeostasis. Think of an aircraft: its fundamental mode of operating is straight and level flight, with short periods of intense thrust. You are designed to be calm and to have short periods of emergency.

You are not designed to have the alarm system permanently engaged!

Stress and behaviour

How do you know if you or someone you are working with is stressed? It might sound like a silly question given all we have talked about above, but are there any warning signs before it all comes crashing down?

Fortunately, there are. But first, you need a baseline. If it's you we are talking about, you need to know how you are thinking, feeling and behaving and if it's someone else, you need to know what's normal for them. Tuning into yourself and others is, therefore, an essential skill.



Broadly we can think of stress as having three stages: transient, chronic and breakdown.

Stage 1 – Transient Stress

This is unpleasant but not at all uncommon. What should we be watching out for?

- **Overplayed strengths.** Imagine that you are normally a structured and tidy person. This could be a quality that you really value in yourself. But what happens when the pressure is on? Chances are, you tend to overplay this capability. This is the road towards mental inflexibility. Or you might be shrewd and then you start getting downright mistrustful when you are stressed? Perhaps you are loud, colourful and ebullient and then you become “a bit much”? You get the message: strengths are strengths until you overplay them.
- **Behavioural tics.** We all develop little mannerisms that we display when under pressure. It could be that you click the end of your pen (thereby probably causing stress to others in the process), jiggle your feet, fiddle with your cufflinks or jewellery... the list goes on. If you catch yourself doing this or if you notice someone else doing so, pay attention - it could be a sign that you or they are stressed and don't even know it.
- **Withdrawal.** When it all gets too much, you are likely to want to turn the volume down on your life. If you are quiet and reserved, you'll probably do this sooner than if you are extroverted and outgoing. It's good to detach a little, particularly if this gives you a chance to recuperate or to see things from a different angle. The problem occurs when you detach too quickly or completely. As we shall dis-

cuss later in this book, nobody is an island and social support has been shown to be highly protective against stress.

- **Errors.** We all do daft things when we are stressed. Whether you put your car keys in the fridge, throw your wallet or purse in the bin, completely forget where you put your mobile phone or omit to put your parking ticket on the windscreen of your car, under pressure you will make more errors.
- **Increased sedative consumption.** Chocolates, cigarettes, an extended visit to the Dog & Ferret – you get the drift!
- **Loss of contact with your feelings.** Numbing out is a common problem when you are stressed. The problem is, if you are a leader who isn't in touch with your feelings, you aren't likely to be in touch with anyone else's either. Keep doing this and someone from HR will start making helpful suggestions about your development needs.
- **Putting relaxation, rest and recuperation off.** Which is fine if you do it occasionally but not fine if you put your much-needed downtime on hold permanently. It's all too easy to play a game of 'when and if': when I get to the weekend I will relax or after I have finished this project I will start going to the gym. No wonder the practice of mindfulness, with its concentration on the here and now, has become so popular. More about mindfulness later.

Consider these as early warning signs of over-stimulation. Take some action – time out, rest, exercise, pay attention to your diet. We talk more about what you can do further on in this book.

Stage 2 – Chronic Stress

This is far more than unpleasant. It's serious. If you are in this place you are already starting to feel demoralised, anxious and/or depressed and your work is suffering. Here are some red flags for you to consider:

- **Problems sleeping.** This is a cardinal symptom that something is amiss. The pattern is either problems falling asleep or waking up at around 3am and struggling to get back to sleep. It's frustrating and exhausting.

- **Memory loss.** Stress plays havoc with your memory and all the more so if you aren't sleeping well (one role of sleep appears to be the consolidation of memory). You struggle to recall important information and you find it hard to concentrate.
- **Anxiety, demoralisation and low self-esteem.** You question your performance, your ability and ultimately your right to hold your job. Your self-talk is negative and you ruminate endlessly about what might happen in the future. You imagine all sorts of things going wrong and you catastrophise, blowing the slightest worry out of all proportion.
- **Intolerance and impatience.** When we ask people on the courses we run on stress management what is a typical behaviour associated with stress, they nearly always volunteer this one. Many stressed people are far from a bundle of joy to be with. If this is you, then everything sets you off; you are living your life with an emotional hair-trigger and your reactions to even minor frustrations are upsetting to all around you as they are so disproportionate.
- **Working long hours.** This is a common tactic when stressed. You work longer and longer hours but at the same time your productivity is falling. You simply get less done. So if you are sitting at your desk 12 hours a day, five days of the week and then taking work home, you'd be well advised to stop. This isn't sustainable, healthy, creative or productive and what's more, it's an awful role model for others.
- **Displacement activity.** Sometimes you can't focus on what you need to do or you are so agitated that you don't know where to start. Instead of calming yourself, you start beavering away on some inconsequential and pointless task, just so that you can say you have accomplished something.
- **Significant self-medication.** We aren't talking about a couple of drinks here or a few chocolates. This is much worse – whole bottles of wine every night to make the unpleasant feelings go away, excessive comfort eating, uncontrolled use of illegal drugs, chain smoking. Self-medication never really works.

It's essential that you take these Stage Two warnings seriously. You are already well over the peak of your performance and if you continue to behave like this, you are going to become seriously unwell. If you are already here as you read this, take swift action. Ignoring the problem is dangerous. If you are managing someone in this position and you are doing nothing, then you aren't doing your job as a leader. It's as simple as that. This is the place to seek out specialist support, before it's too late. You might approach your EAP (employee assistance programme) if you have one or you might try and find some counselling. Later in the book, we talk about how to deal with problems like this by building up our resilience or bounce-back ability. Whatever you do, do something. If you don't, you run the risk of Stage Three.

Stage 3 – Breakdown

It's very unlikely that you would reach this point without realising it but if by some miracle you have, your erratic and disturbed behaviour will be all too clear for others to see. Whether you like clinical labels or not and whether the medical model of mental distress sits comfortably with you, you are undoubtedly ill. It's impossible for you to function safely and effectively if you are showing these signs:

- **Exhaustion.** Excessive prolonged stress causes extreme agitation and this impacts on your ability to relax and to sleep. You end up utterly exhausted and doing even simple tasks seems to take almost superhuman effort. It's like dragging a huge lead weight behind you all the time.
- **Inability to make even simple decisions.** You become almost completely dysfunctional. The easiest of challenges feels insurmountable and everyday tasks are bemusing. This causes more self-doubt, self-criticism and feelings of worthlessness.
- **Tearfulness.** You cry at the slightest provocation and minor frustrations that you used to take in your stride leave you in floods of tears. Your emotional responses are completely out of proportion to what is happening to you.
- **Burnout, anxiety and clinical depression.** These speak for them-

selves. Utterly broken, you end up in medical and/or specialist care and you take a significant time to recover, if you ever really do.

You are so ill at this point that if you don't sign yourself into specialist care, someone may do it for you.



"Hakuna Matuta" Elton John/Tim Rice

Spotting the warning signs in others

Being a good leader in respect of stress isn't complicated really. All you need to do is understand what stress is, how it impacts on your body and behaviour and be prepared to talk about it. Then it's a matter of setting the conditions in which other people feel happy talking about it too. A little understanding and compassion go a very long way. You don't need to be a psychologist to lead others but you do need to be somewhat psy-

chologically minded. The number one reason that engagement levels fall in organisations and people leave is a poor relationship with their boss and top of their list is likely to be feeling they are not listened to or understood. Know your people well. Take an interest in them as whole human beings and not simply units of production and you will reap the benefits many times over. More than anything else, show compassion. It's not a dirty word.

In the meantime, here are a few things to prime your radar. Watch out for any of these in your team:

Table 1: Stages of stress to watch out for

Stage 1	Increased mistakes Drop in usual performance Reactive and on the back foot Difficulty prioritising
Stage 2	<i>Any or all the above, plus</i> Changes in appearance (looks tired, ungroomed) Excessive hours being worked Conflicts with colleagues
Stage 3	<i>Any or all the above, plus</i> Dramatic emotional changes Seeming inability to make even simple decisions

A last point – checking in with yourself

Whilst many of us find it hard to exactly describe our feelings, there is a small proportion of the population for whom it is almost impossible. This condition is sometimes called alexithymia.⁸

If you are one of these people, it will be exceedingly difficult to navigate your own emotional landscape and even if you aren't, you might be surprised by how stressed, anxious or depressed you are feeling when you stop and take stock.

Here are some behavioural indicators of depression and anxiety. If

SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER

you are still not sure, try a simple test such as: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Mood-self-assessment.aspx. This isn't an official diagnosis in the same way that this book isn't an exhaustive volume on mental health, but it is a useful indication. We discuss mood maintenance in more detail later in this book and we also have a chapter on the subject in *Staying Sane in Business*.⁹

Table 2: Indicators of anxiety or depression

Indicators of anxiety	Indicators of depression
Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	Little interest or pleasure in doing things
Not being able to stop or control worrying	Feeling down, depressed or hopeless
Worrying too much about different things	Difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep or sleeping too much
Trouble relaxing	Feeling tired or having very little energy
Being so restless it's hard to sit still	Poor appetite or overeating
Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	Feeling bad about yourself – or that you are a failure or that you have let yourself or your family down
Feeling afraid as if something awful is going to happen	Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the news or watching TV
	Moving or speaking so slowly that other people notice. Or the opposite – being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual
	Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way

So that's an overview of stress for you. It exists, in some ways it's really positive, but in many ways and, particularly as a result of modern life, it's not. The next chapter introduces the idea of resilience: what can you do to protect yourself from stress in the first place or to bounce back if you have been stressed?

- The modern world we live in presents you with complex challenges. Accept this. You are not a machine!
- There is some solid evidence that stress is a problem – according to the Labour Force Survey (HSE), stress accounted for 45% of all working days lost due to ill health in the UK.
- Not all stress is bad. There is positive stress (eustress) and negative stress (distress). In little doses, stress can be motivating, incentivising and can increase our productivity. It is only when the level of pressure (currently) exceeds our capacity to cope that it leads to distress with all its emotional strain, bodily discomfort and harmful consequences. The tipping point, of course, is different for all of us.
- Stress is a natural survival mechanism, i.e. your 'freeze, fight or flight' response. Designed to mobilise your body when you perceive a threat, automatic physiological and physical changes that happen within milliseconds upon encountering danger, enable you to flee or attack more effectively by recruiting all available energy sources to maximise your strength and efficiency.
- The 'freeze, fight or flight' response happens as follows: stimuli reach your brain via your senses, and if they are decoded as threatening by your amygdala, a signal of distress is sent through your body, triggering physiological reactions. Your autonomic nervous system is activated which causes your adrenal glands to release the hormones epinephrine (more commonly known as adrenalin) and norepinephrine (noradrenalin). These hormones then lead to changes in your body, including an increased heartbeat and blood flow to essential muscles and the brain, more rapid breathing to ensure heightened oxygen supply and release of the hormone cortisol which breaks down fatty acids into more available energy.
- Your stress response was designed for short-term, immediate responses to physical, life-threatening stimuli. But your amygdala also reacts to emotional stressors – of which there are a great

number in the modern world - as well as to internal stimuli such as negative thinking.

- Some of us experience so many 'stressful' events so constantly that we become chronically hyper-aroused and forget what it feels like to be relaxed – this the birth of chronic stress.
- Chronic stress can be detrimental to your physical health, shorten your life expectancy, reduce creativity and stop you solving problems effectively.
- In line with our bodily changes, consistently high levels of stress can cause behavioural changes in us. These can act as warning signs. Pay attention to them.
- When stress becomes chronic, we start to feel demoralised, anxious and depressed and cannot keep up our performance at work. Warning signs are sleeping problems, memory loss, anxiety, demoralisation and low self-esteem, intolerance and impatience, working long hours, displacement activities as well as significant self-medication. The breakdown stage is where sufferers are undoubtedly ill. The following behavioural changes will be marked and all too clear for others to see: exhaustion, inability to make simple decisions, tearfulness, burnout, breakdown and clinical depression.
- There's still an unfortunate stigma associated with stress and mental health in general and if you are a manager or team leader, you are in a particularly important position. If you know what stress is, how it impacts your body and behaviour and if you are prepared to talk about it, you are creating a supportive environment where others feel more comfortable opening up. Equally, as a role model it is important that you look after yourself.



"Under Pressure" Queen/Bowie

**INDIVIDUAL REALITIES:
stories of how some people have responded to stress in real-life
situations - Part 1**

Stress is like gravity. It exists all around us, powerful yet unseen. Not always good, not always bad. Stress can move us forward, or it can pull us back. Or keep us going round in circles.

And it affects us all, doesn't it? As Professor Maier says in his foreword to this book, none of us are immune. Even Professor Maier himself, who has fought his battle with stress and emerged the other side, stronger and more resilient, admits that stress remains a risk that must be managed – positively, proactively and robustly.

In other words: when you're feeling stressed, you suddenly have something in common with every other man and woman on the planet – even your role models and any heroes you may worship.

How stress affects us all can vary. Just as each of us and the lives we live are distinct and unique, so too are those forces that influence us – physical, mental and emotional. Somehow, somewhere, something in your life – and the lives of everyone you know and don't know – is generating stress right now. For you. For them.

Work doesn't have exclusive rights to stress, by any stretch of the imagination, but chances are that if we say 'stress', you think 'work'. Given that work can – no, really – be a rewarding and fulfilling part of life, both vital and vitalising, it's a great shame that it affects so many of us in ways that we regret.

Of course, we could easily say the same about marriage, parenting or owning a car. Can you identify any aspect of life and living that is truly stress-free?

We all have to find our own way to reconcile the good with the bad. Our individual ability to respond, function and relate in and around stressful conditions and circumstances depends on how and why we experience stress, and how well we can resist and recover from it.

So, let us introduce to you some people we know very well. Each of them has kindly agreed for us to share their story here, though we have of course changed their names and certain details in order to protect their identities. We will follow their experiences throughout the book.

This is who they were when we first met them:

MARGOT

Margot had recently celebrated her thirtieth birthday. She wasn't particularly thrilled about reaching her thirties, but quickly saw the bright side: forty was still ten years away. She was three years divorced and a single mother to four-year-old Sapphire and her late parents' cat. A creative and social soul, she left school early to pursue a career as a hairdresser. After the divorce, though, she abandoned her dreams in order to pay the rent, childcare, bills, etc. Several temp roles later, Margot managed to secure a permanent job in the shared services centre for a large corporation. That all went rather well and she was promoted to a line manager position – leading a team of eleven – in recognition for her energy, attitude and approach. In the evenings and at the weekends, she continued to do a bit of hairdressing, to earn a little extra, except on Tuesdays when she attended a Spanish class at the local college. She had always daydreamed about travelling around Spain, though I don't think she believed it would ever really happen.

NATHAN

Nathan was forty-five and had been happily married for eighteen years. He was Deputy Company Secretary for a large, international organisation, and had been there ever since being head-hunted out of the Civil Service. He was very comfortable in that role, good at what he did, and had no ambitions beyond it. When not in the office, he could be found in the kitchen of his cottage – fantasising about winning MasterChef; in his garage – polishing his beloved Triumph motorcycle; or at the village hall – performing his duties as treasurer for the parish council and engaging in all manner of local events and fundraising activities.

PATRICIA

Patricia didn't have time for birthdays. Her husband and two teenage sons were aware that she was nearing fifty but she herself had barely noticed and couldn't have cared less, quite frankly. To those who didn't know any better – and even sometimes to those who did – work appeared to dominate Patricia's every waking moment. Her focus was her career – always hungry for the next big promotion. She was a Senior Finance Manager, but had her eyes on a Finance Director role. It had been that way ever since completing her degree in accountancy. Quite the impressive financial career. At that time she had five direct reports, responsible for a total population of about forty. Meanwhile, she was fiercely determined that her personal life would all go strictly to plan, though in truth she gave it little time, leaving most of it to her husband. It was he, for example, who spoke with the staff of the nursing home whenever her father took a turn for the worse. Her boys were both in boarding school, but she would sometimes see them when visiting in her capacity as school governor.

MARK

Mark was thirty-three. His wife was pregnant with their first child, and whilst that was cause for joy and celebration, of course, he was feeling the weight of responsibility settle ever more heavily upon his shoulders. Once upon a time he'd been an engineer in the army – and a very happy one. But his military career could not defend itself against the disapproval of his fiancée, who made it very clear there would be no marriage – and certainly no family – unless he packed in the army and found himself 'a normal job'. Head over heels in love, he agreed, on the condition that he could at least join the army reserve. Several dead ends later, he was trying to build a new career for himself in private sector project management, with the help of a project management assistant almost as green as Mark was. Outside of work, Mark enjoyed running – training for at least one marathon every year, and tropical fish – spending more money on his aquariums than his wife felt appropriate and occasionally writing for *Practical Fishkeeping* magazine.

SHAHZAD

At twenty-six, Shahzad was one of the youngest employees ever promoted to a senior business partner position. From his humble beginnings at the front line, and working his way up through increasing health, safety and environmental responsibilities within the operational environment, Shahzad had recently transferred into head office life via his successful application to the organisation's high-potential development programme. The steep learning curve, combined with a long, difficult commute from home to the company's headquarters, cost him much of his personal time, but Shahzad believed he was more than up for the challenge, urged on by his family and giddy at the prospect of FTSE 250 salaries, bonuses and career progression.