

STRESS *Solutions*

by Bridget Edwards



Every human and non-human animal experiences stress as a basic functional or survival requirement and instinct. It's a natural and normal part of life, and can't be avoided. Stress expert Bridget Edwards shares the typical effects of and responses to daily stressors, and offers some of her top tips for combatting the widespread challenge in daily life.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Essentially, **stress is the body's way of responding to any kind of demand that exceeds one's (perceived) ability to cope.** This could be either detrimental or beneficial, depending on the circumstance and our perception of the situation.

It's perhaps surprising to note that not all stress is negative. **Positive stress - known as eustress - is when our stress motivates and inspires us to make appropriate changes.** Stress can be a catalyst for change, a teacher, a character builder, and an opportunity for reflection and re-evaluation.

Continual, excessive or chronic stress, however, should be regarded as an early warning signal, with appropriate and swift stress management being of vital importance. Stress can really interfere with - and even wreak havoc in - our lives, whether at home, at work, in our relationships, or in our health and wellbeing.

We often erroneously think that complex problems require equally complex solutions or interventions. The reason we make this mistake is because our stress, worry, anxiety and fears often feel overwhelming, so we perceive the problem to be highly complex. Ironically, **our problems often require simple solutions.** This is why engaging an independent and objective third party like a coach, mentor or therapist can be helpful for assessing the situation quickly, cutting to the chase, and helping us draw our own (sane) conclusions.

WHAT CAN CAUSE STRESS?

For most people, the stress response is triggered multiple times a day, and often below our awareness. Everyone responds to stress in his or her own unique way, which can make it difficult to detect. What's more, what stresses you today may not affect you tomorrow.

There are an infinite number of factors that can contribute to stress. Stressors may be emotional, mental or physical. Even a change in one's environment at home or work can be stress-inducing. Positive events such as a job promotion, getting married or buying a house can be stressful too.

Although stress is usually seen as being caused by external factors, it can also be internal and self-generated. Examples of this include excessive worry, pessimism, negative self-talk, perfectionism, rigid thinking, unrealistic expectations and a lack of flexibility, to name a few...

Use this space to list the things that might be causing you stress:

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TYPICAL STRESS RESPONSES

The body's stress (survival) response is controlled by the **amygdala**, a tiny set of neurons in the brain located at the end of the hippocampus, deep within the temporal lobe. The function of the amygdala is to protect the body from any threat picked up by our senses, emotions and thoughts – be it big, small, real or perceived.

Instantaneously, the body is flooded with stress chemicals (adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol), and goes into fight or flight mode. This sets other simultaneous actions in motion within the brain and body – all of which are designed to protect us.

Firstly, we quite simply 'lose it'. Yes, **the brain 'flips a switch' from the logical, rational and linear frontal lobe (control centre) to the animalic (primal) hindbrain**, where we act instinctively. This phenomenon is known as the 'amygdala hijack' – a phrase coined by *Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam Books, 1995) author Daniel Goleman.

As a result, we not only react irrationally, but destructively too. This is when we suddenly catch ourselves 'in the heat of the moment' – doing or saying something inappropriate, embarrassing or regrettable. We then ask ourselves, "What was I thinking?" Well, you weren't really thinking – the amygdala hijack caused your brain to 'flip a switch' to the hindbrain, which acts purely on survival instinct, not thought. Only the forebrain thinks.

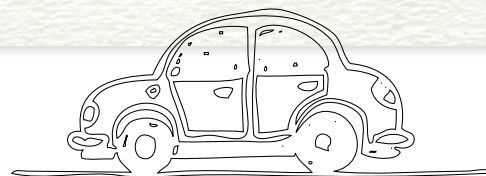
Secondly, in preparation to either fight to protect ourselves (either physically or verbally) or flee from a dangerous situation, our digestive system immediately shuts down, which in turn impairs and compromises the immune system. The digestive process requires enormous energy to break down food, and during times of stress this energy is reserved exclusively for the fight or flight response. This is precisely why **stressed people often suffer from digestive problems** and frequent malaise.

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO STRESS?

The typical stress warning signs are usually a combination of **cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioural symptoms**. Self-awareness and self-understanding are key components of successfully managing stress.

American Psychologist Connie Lillas uses a driving analogy to describe the three most common ways people respond when they're overwhelmed by stress:

- ☐ **Foot on the gas** – An angry, agitated or 'fight' stress response. You're heated, keyed up, overly emotional and unable to sit still.
- ☐ **Foot on the brake** – A withdrawn, depressed or 'flight' stress response. You shut down, pull away, space out and show very little energy or emotion.
- ☐ **Foot on both** – A tense or 'freeze' stress response. You become frozen under pressure and can't do anything.





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EFFECTS OF STRESS

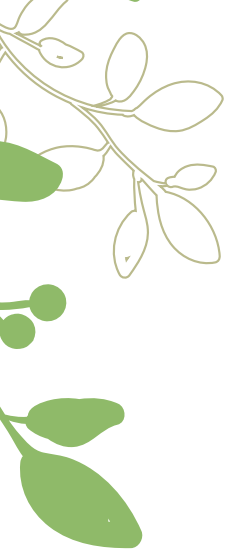
Since stress triggers the 'fight' response, it directly influences our ability to manage anger, especially road rage. It also has a detrimental impact on other mental health challenges, including anxiety, panic attacks, depression, fears and phobias. Together with unresolved trauma, it can influence and exacerbate addictive behavioural tendencies and compulsive disorders too.

Individuals with compulsive disorders such as alcoholism, gambling, overeating or smoking often increase negative behaviour or undergo a relapse after they have been through a stressful period. Anger resulting from stressful situations also plays a part in some addictive disorders. Those who don't express anger outwardly often turn it inward. When this occurs, it may lead to depression. To relieve the discomfort they feel because they have not expressed their anger, these individuals may also begin to overeat or engage in other addictive behaviours. The addictive behaviour then increases the anxiety and stress, perpetuating a vicious circle.

What's more, the effects of stress on our physical health – while less immediately discernable – can have devastating consequences. **Medical practitioners worldwide confirm that 95% of all illness and disease is stress-related.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bridget Edwards is a stress consultant therapist and author of *Stress Gone! How to Identify and Reduce Stress Easily* (Bridget Edwards, 2014). Take her stress quiz and download her free e-course at www.Bridget-Edwards.com.



5 EXERCISES TO TRY IN STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

- **Tapping** – Tapping on the middle of your chest is said to stimulate energies that may help boost the immune system and reduce stress. This is known as the 'thymus tap' in Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT).
- **Nasal breathing** – While breathing through the mouth signals panic, breathing through the nose is more relaxing. Breathe in and out through your nose a few times to calm your body and mind.
- **Hoku point** – To locate the Hoku point, gently open and stretch all five fingers. This will expose a flap of skin between your thumb and index finger. The hoku point is found on the central mound between the thumb and index finger, just above the skin flap. Use the thumb of the opposite hand to gently massage, press or squeeze this area. You may notice a tenderness, so be gentle. Hold or massage this point for 30 seconds while breathing slowly and deeply in and out the nose. Switch hands, and repeat a few times until you feel relaxed. **Note:** do not try this one if you're pregnant.
- **Walk away** - Walking away from a potentially acrimonious stressful situation asserts self-control, and is empowering. It also gives you time to clear your head and gather yourself together. You can resume discussions when you feel calm and have a solution in mind.
- **Pericardium 8 point** – Firmly press and rub the thumb of one hand into the centre of your palm on the other. Hold this pose for a few minutes while breathing deeply in and out a couple of times. Repeat by swapping hands.



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