STRESS!

Do you recognize the signs?

Physical Responses

NICOLIEN DELLENSEN

Sphere of Influence 360°

Index

Introduction ____ 3

How It Works ____ 3

About The Stress! Coaching Cards ____ 4

Why Should You Learn To Recognize Your Stress Responses? ____ 4

Stress: It's Not All Bad ____ 6

Different Stress Responses ____ 8

Building Up Bodily Tension ____ 9

Rapid Heartbeat ____ 13

Blushing ____ 18

Bursting Into Tears ____ 22

Shaking ____ 26

Sweating ____ 31

Suddenly Feeling Ill ____ 35

Knot In Your Stomach ____ 40

Getting The Chills ____ 44

Suddenly Feeling Tired ____ 49

Introduction

Just suppose for a moment that you had everything under control all the time. There were never any last-minute deadlines to race for, and everyone on your team got along perfectly. Wouldn't you be happier, calmer, more productive? Wouldn't you feel much healthier, both physically and emotionally?

The harsh reality is that life is— and always will be—full of stressors. You can't control what challenges come your way or how other people will behave, and work will always give you deadlines and conflicts.
That's the bad news, I'm sorry to say.

The good news is that you have a lot more control than you think when it comes to stress. By learning what causes you stress and how you react to it, you can dramatically reduce the impacts of fear, pressure, and worry on your day-to-day life. More importantly, you can learn to effectively manage your stress levels for the long term so that you can make stronger decisions, cultivate more meaningful connections with others, and better deal with the challenges that do crop up from time to time.

This ebook will give you the skills to do just that—understand what holds you back in stressful situations, whether it's a sudden reaction like blushing or a gradual build-up of tension that leaves you stiff and sore.
The more attuned you become to your physical stress responses, the better you'll be able to identify what triggers them. Ultimately, the goal of this book is to help you learn to manage unnecessary strains and take back control of your life.

How it works

The Stress! Coaching Cards in this book are designed to spark conversations and create awareness; you can use them to learn more about your own responses or as coaching, training, and facilitation tools to help those you manage or lead.

Each card comes with a few reflection questions that will help you identify whether you experience this symptom—pick the cards that resonate with you most and work through the chapter at a pace that suits you.

You will find a brief introduction to each stress response, including why it happens and the different physical or behavioral ways that each response manifests. Next, you'll learn a few lesser-known facts about the reaction before discovering three exercises that will help you manage your personal response.

But first things first: let's look at what stress is and why we react in the ways that we do under pressure.

About The Stress! Coaching Cards

While we all experience stress, the triggers that set us off can vary widely. The idea of performing in public may send you into a cold sweat, for example, while your colleague might not give it a second thought.

The exact same principle applies to how we handle stressful situations.
Let me illustrate: suppose the idea of mentoring an intern makes you act irritably, or you tend to become sarcastic when something is weighing on your mind. You might know a friend who acts overly nice when they're faced with stress or a colleague who bursts into nervous giggles.

We develop unique ways to protect ourselves in the face of pressure throughout our lives—responses that help us hide our insecurity or feel better about our circumstances. Frequently, these responses are shaped early in our lives and become ingrained in our behaviors, so that as adults, they manifest unconsciously without a second thought.

Over time, these responses generally also become less effective at helping us deal with stressful situations—does snapping at co-workers facilitate teamwork? How helpful is nervous laughter in a job interview? You catch my drift.

The Stress! Coaching Cards that you will find in this book are based on these types of reactions. I have made an effort to select the most common signs of stress that can often appear without our realizing, and which can keep us from performing at our best in the workplace.

Why Should You Learn To Recognize Your Stress Responses?

As you learn about these stress signs, you may come to recognize some of them in your own body or behavior. Don't be worried, that's a good thing—because awareness is the first step to dealing with them successfully.

But you might still be wondering: If everyone experiences stress, why bother to recognize your responses to it?

It's important because we are more prone to acting ineffectively when we aren't aware that we are reacting to stress. Our stress reactions can also be the start of a self-reinforcing cycle—as we notice ourselves unintentionally start to feel or behave a certain way, we often react to those reactions (if you will). If you have ever felt embarrassed about blushing in a social situation, then you'll know what I mean. It probably made you feel even more stressed, or ashamed, didn't it?

This vicious cycle can only be broken when we deal with whatever is causing us strain and pressure in the first place, whether it's an unhealthy work-life balance, lack of support in the workplace, or something else entirely. Research shows that being able to recognize and name your reactions is the biggest step toward coping with them more positively, and that's the first goal of this book.

The next step forward, as you've probably guessed, is learning how to constructively manage your stress responses, in a way that is helpful rather than causing you more shame or distress.

Therefore, my second goal with this book is to equip you with exercises that you can practice on your own. I also hope that by engaging with them, you'll find it easier to overcome the symptoms and behaviors that keep you from connecting with others or staying focused on your goals at work.

Best of luck!

Stress: It's Not All Bad

We've all wished for a more relaxed work environment, thinking it would make us more productive. "If I didn't have so much on my mind," you've probably thought, "I'd definitely do a much better job!"

It might surprise you to know that this probably isn't how things would be. Without some degree of stress, we'd probably not perform as well as we do currently. Why?

While too much of it is clearly not a good thing, stress does serve a useful function in enhancing our performance—up to a certain point.

The image below illustrates this concept, also known as the Yerkes-Dodson Law[1]:

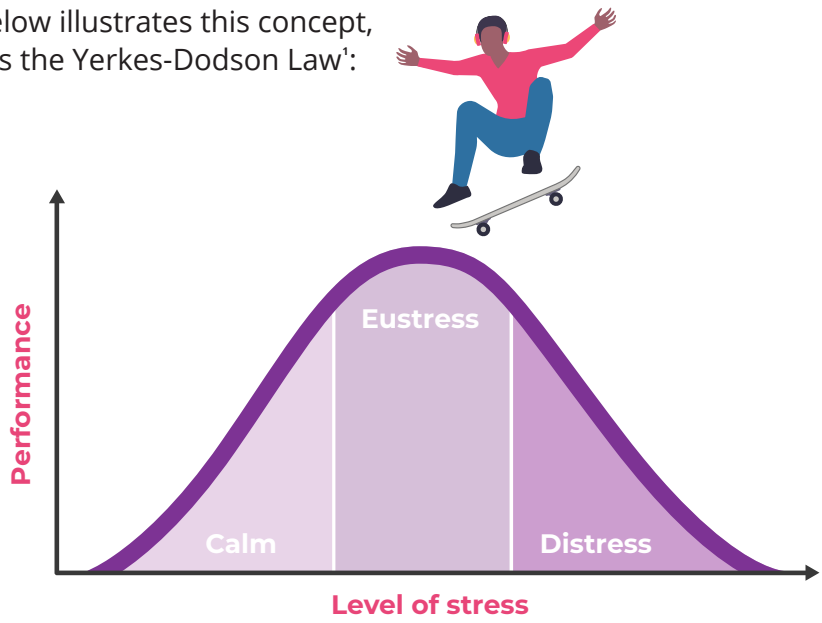


Image 1: Level of Stress vs. Performance

As this graph shows, the Yerkes-Dodson law premises that we perform at varying levels depending on how much pressure we are under.

- At our calmest (at the far left of the model), we are least aroused, and our performance can suffer due to apathy or boredom.
- While experiencing a healthy and optimal level of arousal, our performance is at its highest; psychologists refer to this moderate level of pressure as eustress. At this level (our performance peak) we are more motivated, more likely to make progress toward our goals, and more positive about day-to-day life.[2]
- Further arousal beyond this point leads to distress. Our performance begins to suffer once more, and this is typically when we might display some of the signs that are covered in the following chapters.

[1] Nickerson, C. (2021). The Yerkes-Dodson Law and Performance. Retrieved from https://www.simplypsychology.org/what-is-the-yerkes-dodson-law.html/

[2] Lindberg, S. (2019). Eustress: The Good Stress. Retrieved from https://www.healthline.com/health/eustress#eustress-vs-distress/

An interesting insight from the Yerkes-Dodson Law is that the optimal level of arousal varies depending on the complexity of the task at hand. For simple tasks (e.g., a 100m sprint), we perform better under relatively high levels of pressure, and for more complex tasks (like writing a report or other work-related tasks), a lower arousal level is required for eustress.

So what does this mean for employees, teams, leaders, and organizations?

As we've seen, aiming for zero stress all the time is unrealistic and probably not ideal. The best approach in today's business context is to learn to recognize when we are displaying signs of distress and take steps to restore an optimal level. That starts with familiarizing yourself with some of the most common signs of stress, which we'll cover now.

Fun Fact!

According to the Mayo Clinic, learning to manage your stress levels can lead to an improved quality of life, better self-control and focus, and better relationships. It may even contribute to a longer, lifespan and greater health.

Different Stress Responses

There are a huge number of potential stress responses, 48 of which are covered in the Stress! Coaching Cards. Broadly, these fall into three categories:

- Physical responses: These are generally related to our physiological "fight-or-flight" response, such as shaking, sweating, or getting the chills
- Cognitive/emotional responses: Included in this category are mental and affective signs of stress, such as being in denial
- Social responses: Such stress symptoms manifest behaviorally and can include overexplaining, blaming, and picking fights.

For this ebook, I chose to focus on ten physical stress responses because they're probably the easiest reactions for you to notice.

Some of these reactions are visible to others, such as blushing, shaking, or sweating. Some are less so, like muscular tension, feeling sleepy, or an elevated pulse. Still others, like stomach knots and cold extremities, can easily be confused for symptoms of an illness. But all of them can typically cause you more stress when you notice them, especially if you aren't sure of what is happening to you physically.

Using this book, you'll be able to recognize them for what they are—signs that you're under pressure—and take positive action to manage your stress.

The chapters that follow each address a different stress response; feel free to jump to those that you find most personally relevant.

If you find yourself relating to a certain stress response, the three exercises that follow are designed to help you handle that reaction either when it occurs or in the long run.

Take your time, see what works for you, and remember that managing stress responses becomes much easier with practice.

If you find that a particular exercise helps you feel or perform better when a certain sign of stress is bothering you, there's no reason why it might not work for another response as well. As I said, stress affects all of us differently. Try them out, make your own notes, and make this ebook your own.

Building Up Bodily Tension

Building Up Bodily Tension

Do your muscles grow tense, even sore when you have too much on your plate? Are you sick of the neck pain, stiffness, or tightness that seems to strike whenever you're dealing with too much? If life's stressors tend to leave your muscles tense and taut, this card will help you manage your tension.

How are you feeling at the moment? Loose, limber, relaxed?
Or maybe...a little neck pain? Sore shoulders, even some tightness in your face, arms, or legs?
Many of us fail to realize when and how we're tensing up in response to stress. We may think we've overdone it at the gym, or slept funny...until a colleague asks: "Why the frown?"

Most of us have experienced tight, aching shoulders before, but bodily tension is a near-automatic defense mechanism that can manifest in many ways. Whether you bite your nails, frown, or clench your jaw, it's good to be aware of how and why your muscles stiffen because you are stressed, so you can consciously release this tension.

Why Does Stress Cause Bodily Tension?

When faced with imminent, or even potential threats, our bodies prime us for survival. Picture boxers in the ring or runners poised to sprint, and you'll notice all their muscles are ready for action.

These are just a few of the same muscles used in our adrenal fight, flight, or freeze responses. When we're stressed, our brains release adrenaline that signals to our muscles that they need to tighten. This helped our ancestors prepare us for self-defense against pain or harm, and today, 'protection mode' remains an almost automatic stress response.

Did you know?

- Because your neck is close to your head, neck tension caused by stress can trigger headaches.
- Muscle tension can range from a dull ache to sharp, shooting pains, or long-lasting aches. Heightened physical awareness will not only help you recognize the warning signs of pressure but will also put you in a prime position for identifying its triggers and resolving stress in the long term.
- Your physical response to tense muscles can also cause further discomfort, for example hunching over due to backache.

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. Pull A Face!

This may sound surprising, but our facial muscles can suffer a lot from bodily tension, especially in the forehead and jaw.

Pulling a silly face gets your eyes, mouth, and cheeks moving, meaning you can target and loosen tense muscles specifically.

Try challenging yourself to pull as many ridiculous faces as you can:

- Balloon your cheeks
- Stick out your tongue
- Wiggle your eyebrows
- Yawn, sigh, gulp like a goldfish, even
- Twitch your nose like a rabbit - how many ways can you move your chin, forehead, and lips?

You can give your face a gentle massage afterward to see if the tension is released, and throw in a temple massage for the extra relaxation factor.

2. Chew Some Gum

According to Cardiff University experts, the physical motions involved in gently chewing gum can help:

- Combat tiredness
- Lower feelings of anxiety
- Decrease depression, and
- Boost our mood.

It's possible that this works by stimulating the neurochemical pathways linked to relaxation, or even by increasing cerebral blood flow - but however it has an effect, chewing gum can work almost any time, anywhere.

3. Listen To Your Body

You can target tension in your body by...listening to it.

More accurately, by tuning into the physical areas where you're carrying stress, so that you can give them the TLC they need to release tension.

1. First, you'll do a head-to-toe body scan: Sitting or lying down comfortably, take a few slow breaths. Once you feel a little more relaxed, close your eyes and begin to 'scan' your body from the head down, noticing the sensations in each part without judgment. Moving from your crown down through your forehead, temple, eyes, ears, nose, cheeks and more to your toes, where do you feel comfortable? How about tight? Heavy? Warm or cold? Repeat back up and down as many times as you like, taking your time.

2. You're now in a better position to identify tension, and you can mark down any key focus areas on this chart. If you make Listen To Your Body a habit, you may notice particular spots pop up repeatedly.

3. Finally, breathe, relax, and shake it off. If you'd like to target any particular zones you identified, you'll find more helpful exercises in my Listen To Your Body PDF above.

What other people say

"I highly recommend the Stress! Cards to anyone that wants more insight into their stress responses. The illustrations really appealed to me and they made the cards very easy to work with!"

— Dafna – Mesoloog

Notes

Rapid Heartbeat

Rapid Heartbeat

Does your pulse race a mile a minute when you're stressed or overwhelmed? Do big events or scary thoughts make your heart flutter, thump, or pound? Then this card is for you!

Have you ever felt your heart race, your chest pound, or your breath quicken when you're feeling stressed? Perhaps when something big is about to happen, or as you head into your annual performance appraisal?

Our ancestors faced two options when confronted with the threat of danger - tackle it and battle for dear life (a fight response), or flee like the wind (a flight response).

Fortunately, we no longer live in a world of T-Rexes, but our fight or flight instincts still run strong. An elevated heart rate is a normal response to stressors that we encounter every day, but that doesn't mean you can't learn to manage it!

Why Does Stress Cause Bodily Tension?

A fight-or-flight response is an automatic response to perceived threats, whether we're anticipating an unpleasant conversation or getting into an argument with a colleague. It is designed to prepare us for action, and we become much more physically alert.

So what happens inside us, specifically? Our brains release a flood of stress hormones into our system when our sympathetic nervous system becomes active. These hormones - which include cortisol - trigger our involuntary sympathetic nervous system, a division of the autonomic system. As a result, we experience more blood flow to our muscles, faster breathing for a boost of oxygen, and a quickened heart rate.

Did you know?

- A healthy heart can typically handle an increased heart rate and even mild palpitations. While they can cause you to feel concerned, they are generally harmless.
- Other factors that can impact your heart rate include your body size, ambient temperature, and whether you are sitting or standing.
- Caffeine, nicotine, and other stimulants can also cause an elevated heartbeat, so it's a good idea to avoid them if you tend to experience this symptom.

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. Break The Vicious Spiral

Knowing that stress reactions lead to a sympathetic nervous response is key to avoiding a vicious spiral.

Usually:

- Stress (e.g. worry about a meeting) leads to a faster pulse
- Without awareness of what's going on inside your body, you might feel even more concerned ("Oh no, trouble ahead!")
- This adds to your stress, causing your heartbeat to elevate even more.

Understanding this self-reinforcing pattern can help you calm down when you notice your heartbeat quickening. You can take early action to relax a little, freeing you from the vicious cycle of physical and emotional responses.

2. Take A Hike

A walk outdoors, or any physical exercise, can often be a great way to calm your racing heart.

By heading outdoors when you sense your heart start to pound, you can stimulate the release of 'happy hormones' that counter the impact of 'stress hormone' cortisol. This causes you to unwind and relax, helping you to feel calmer and happier while easing some of the discomfort you might feel from other stress reactions, e.g. muscle tension.

You don't need to push yourself to enjoy the benefits of exercise-induced endorphins - according to experts, even a gentle amble is enough to unlock their benefits.

3. Mental Escape

Guided imagery is a therapist-recommended way to relax your brain, calming your body in the process. You can think of it as a "mental escape" by visualizing peaceful, serene pictures with your own imagination.

To create harmony between your mind and body:

- Sit or lie comfortably in a peaceful place.
- With your eyes closed, take a few slow, deep, relaxing breaths.
- Try to picture a tranquil place where you feel happy, content, and at leisure - perhaps an idyllic setting you'd like to visit, or somewhere familiar that you've had a good time.
- Bring your other senses into the visualization. Make it as realistic as possible with your sight (what can you see?), hearing (is it a babbling brook?), smell (like freshly cut grass or sweet flowers), touch (e.g. a soft, warm breeze), and taste (the slight salt of coastal air, for example).
- Including a path in your visualization is a good trick - experience yourself moving forward, and feeling increasingly relaxed as you move further into your mental escape.
- Once you're feeling calmer, spend a few moments appreciating your unwound state. Breathe slowly for several minutes, savoring it.
- Come back gradually and gently into reality in your own time. Remember that you can revisit your private escape whenever you need to; this can help you tap into that calming feeling as your day unfolds. This knowledge can make dealing with anxiety, stress triggers, and other challenges much less of a struggle.
- End the exercise by counting to 3, then re-open your eyes. Do you feel more relaxed, soothed, and tranquil?

One final tip: This visualization can also be done using guided meditation. I've visited many beautiful beaches, forests, and meadows before, but when I was searching online, this waterfall meditation and this forest stroll were the most peaceful to me.

Fun Fact!

Meditation has the exact opposite impact that stress does on the body, as it activates the body's relaxation response. Meditating can help you return to a calm physical state while repairing your body and preventing new damage from the physiological impacts of stress.

Notes

Blushing

Blushing

Have you ever felt your face warm up in a high-pressure situation, such as when it's your turn to deal with an angry customer? Or maybe you've turned bright red after tripping up in public—or even just watching someone else take a fall?

Blushing is the body's way of responding to unwanted attention, but it can also occur whenever social situations are causing us stress. If you get flushed or uncomfortable in stressful situations, you'll know that blushing only gets worse once you're aware of it. Realizing that you're blushing can often exacerbate your awkwardness or embarrassment, leading to a vicious circle of more redness and more stress!

Why Does Stress Cause Blushing?

While it might not seem like a very useful response to stress, studies suggest that blushing has an important benefit—it can make you seem more trustworthy. Because it's impossible to turn red so quickly on cue, a flushed face is considered one of the most honest acknowledgments that you feel shame or regret for whatever you did "wrong," even if it was just a slip on the pavement.

Science shows that this encourages others to trust you and judge you more positively, helping you (involuntarily!) to save face.

Physiologically, feeling hot or flushed in the face is usually a sign that your nervous system is releasing adrenaline in response to stress. This causes your veins to widen and blood to flow closer to the skin of this area.

Did you know?

- The involuntary redness that is caused when you blush usually disappears on its own after one to two minutes.
- Research has found that people are more likely to forgive individuals who blush and that blushing can even avert a conflict.
- Blushing is sometimes associated with hyperhidrosis (excessive sweating).

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. Try Self-Compassion

What's the first thing you think when you realize you're blushing?

Chances are, it's something like, "Oh no, I look like an idiot!" or "This is so humiliating!"

Acceptance and positive self-talk are key when it comes to blushing. If you can become aware of your default thoughts, you can train them to be more self-compassionate and stop adding fuel to your (facial) fire. The next time you catch yourself being harsh on yourself for a reaction that you can't control, try changing your thoughts. Why not remind yourself of the science–that people who blush are trustworthy–or that you're simply having a natural, transient reaction?

It's not your fault!

2. Name It

Going red is both natural and temporary. So why hide it?

Another option is to acknowledge that you are blushing—give it a small amount of attention–and you'll likely realize that it's not as terrible as it seems in your head.

With a one-sentence explanation like "Oh, I get red sometimes, it passes," you can then shift your conversation partner's attention elsewhere, such as by asking a question or moving on with your meeting.

If you're in a presentation or you can't deflect attention with a question, try shifting the focus of your audience. Direct their eyes to your slides, or integrate some group discussion time so that you don't have to be continually in the spotlight.

3. Stay Cool!

When you are mentally cool, your face will cool down too. With a little self-hypnosis, you can practice relaxing your body and mind and calm yourself automatically when you feel the redness arise in social situations.

Choose a moment when you're naturally calm and comfortable, then:

- Picture yourself in stressful situations where you tend to blush, e.g., during a presentation or when you're giving a speech.
- Imagine that you're collected, at ease, and relaxed in this scenario, breathing deeply and performing at your best.
- If it helps, incorporate helpful imagery such as a cool breeze sweeping across your face and cooling your cheeks

These visualizations can send powerful signals to your unconscious mind and body when you're next in a stressful scenario. The more often you practice, the more ingrained they will become, and the more automatically you will be able to keep cool under pressure. You can even take a short pause to visualize your calming scenario when you're in the situation itself!

What other people say

"I received the Stress! Coaching Card deck last week. Super efficient! I have used it for a week in coaching sessions and I really like it👍 It brings depth and lightness!!"

— Govert - Executive Team Coach, Facilitator, and Bestselling Author

Notes

Bursting Into Tears

Bursting Into Tears

Have you ever felt like laughing with relief after a solid sobbing session? Or "had a good cry" and felt better about that argument, mistake, or insult? Crying is a completely normal reaction to emotionally stressful situations, and it's even one of the healthiest responses we're prone to.

Research reveals that we release three kinds of tears: basal, reflex, and emotional tears. The latter, emotional tears, are one way for our bodies to excrete stress hormones that can build up when we are under pressure. These chemicals, which include cortisol, can cause a lot of health problems such as heart diseases, heart attacks, high blood pressure, and strokes—so crying when you're tense may have its benefits.

Why Does Stress Cause Tears?

Emotional or stress-related tears play a lot of beneficial roles when we humans are under stress. In addition to helping us release stress hormones, crying can also be a healthy outlet for negative feelings that we might otherwise keep inside or repress. It can also relax some of the bodily tension that we may experience when our sympathetic nervous system is overactive, which is why you may often feel much more relaxed after "a good cry!"

Did you know?

- Crying lowers our levels of manganese, an element that leads to irritability, stress, and aggressive behavior.
- Emotional tears also release feel-good hormones such as oxytocin (the 'love' hormone) and leucine enkephalin, the body's "natural pain killers."
- All our tears are released through the same (lacrimal) gland, but emotional tears stem from a different source than basal and reflex tears. Rather than being produced by the eye region that's being irritated, emotional tears come from the limbic system, where the body processes emotions such as pain, sadness, and hurt.

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. Take A Literal Step Back

"He made me cry!" or *"She hurt my feelings!"* are just a few things we often hear from tearful children, but as we grow up, we tend to realize that's not quite accurate. Why is that?

Behavioral psychologist Jerry Bubrick summarizes it nicely: "It's not what the other person says that's causing you to cry," he explains. Rather, "It's how you interpret it."

If feelings of hurt or frustration have you on the verge of tears, Bubrick recommends putting some physical space between you and the person who's causing the upset. Take a literal step back and choose not to let this particular offense reduce you to a crying mess–you'd be surprised how often this can be enough to divert the waterworks.

2. Trick Your Brain

Have you heard of facial feedback? This behavioral scientific theory, which is often linked back to Darwin and James, hypothesizes that our facial expressions can impact how we cognitively process emotions.

A Columbia University study investigating the phenomenon even reports that participants who viewed a scary video described feeling less intense emotions when they simply didn't frown through the screening.

This ties in with research showing that simulated tearing of participants' eyes was related to higher reported feelings of sadness–simply wetting their cheeks with fake tears was enough to make 53.8% of subjects feel unhappy.

Based on this research, keeping a neutral face is another potential way to stop a surge of unwanted tears. The next time the urge to cry strikes when it's really not convenient, try avoiding the triggers that lead to tears:

- Lower your eyebrows
- Stop them from knitting together, and
- Relaxing your mouth.

3. Do The Opposite!

One way to stem the flow of tears is by seeking out an action that's completely the opposite of crying. Like laughing: look up jokes online or check out a funny video!

Data has long shown that smiling can boost our mood and emotional health while positively impacting the way that we're perceived by others. But it's also a brilliant way to prevent us from crying, which can help you save the tears for a more fitting time and place.

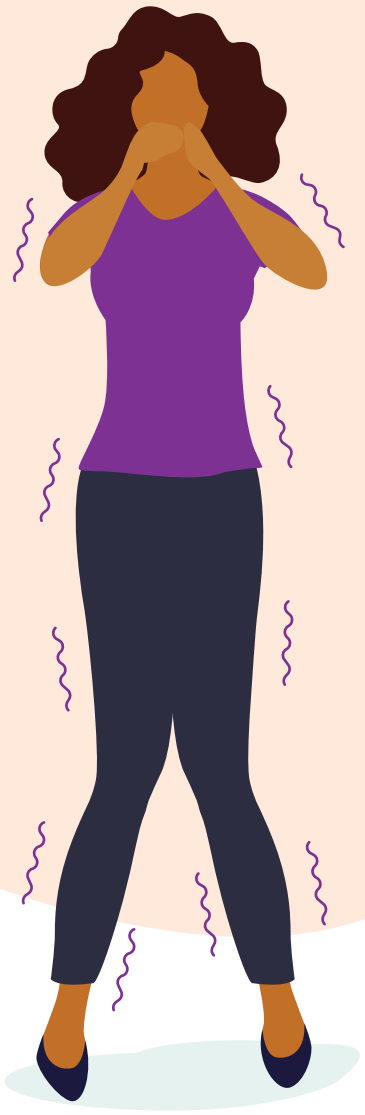
So go ahead and smile or laugh, and don't be afraid that you're suppressing or internalizing your feelings. Your goal is only to feel a little calmer in the moment, so you can process your feelings later on–in a place that suits you much better.

Fun Fact!

Adrenaline and cortisol are two of the main hormones released when your body is under stress. Adrenaline boosts your heart rate, increases your blood pressure, and makes energy supplies more readily available, while cortisol, boosts blood glucose, increases your brain's glucose usage, and improves the availability of chemicals that repair your tissues.

Notes

Shaking



Shaking

Do stressful situations give you the shakes? Do your hands tremble as you pass important documents to your new boss, for example, or do you give wobbly-voiced replies in job interviews?

Shaking from anxiety is very normal and nothing to be too alarmed about in most cases. But if you find it unsettling or unpleasant, it helps to remember that trembling is simply a sign that your nervous system is overloaded, and adrenaline is pumping through your body to increase your available energy.

It is also good to know that most people are unlikely to notice your shaking or trembling, and it may well be less visible than you think.

Why Does Stress Cause Shaking?

When you are stressed, your body releases excess adrenaline as part of its natural fight-or-flight response (a process known as upregulation). At the same time, it begins its own recovery process to burn up the extra adrenaline (downregulation). This can trigger shaking limbs, buckling knees, and an unsteady or trembly voice.

Downregulation continues until your body has brought your adrenaline levels back to normal, which is when the vibrating stops. Hopefully, you feel a little better at this point, even if you're still somewhat "shaken!"

Did you know?

- Some researchers believe that upregulating or shaking your body deliberately can help you manage stress before it builds up. Also known as "shaking therapy," this practice involves focusing on different bodily areas and wobbling them around on purpose!
- An excess of substances like alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine may exacerbate stress symptoms such as trembling.
- Research shows that Insufficient sleep can often intensify stress-related tremors. If you are sleep deprived, you might experience jitteriness until you catch up on your sleep debt.

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. 1-Minute Meditation

A 1-minute meditation can be a good exercise if you've got a quiet moment, and as the name suggests, it only takes 60 seconds.

While one minute might seem like too short of a period to meditate (or too long, if you've never tried!), it can still be highly beneficial when your goal is to de-stress and downregulate.

During this 1-minute meditation, you'll take your mind off whatever is triggering your stress by concentrating on your breathing instead. You will naturally stop doing whatever you were doing as you focus on inhaling and exhaling, which can help you reconnect with your body.

There are a few ways to go about it; the first is to find a guided audio meditation online, sit comfortably somewhere you won't be disturbed, and listen to it on your phone.

The second, from Buddhist mindfulness teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, is called "walking meditation." To do this:

1. Begin walking, focusing on each step that you take.
2. Pay attention to how many paces you take during each inhale and exhale, as well as the speed at which you're walking.
3. Focus on your lungs rather than trying to control either your step count or breathing.
4. Try matching your steps to your breath, e.g. count three steps per inhale and three per exhale.
5. Allow your feet and lungs to fall into a natural rhythm.
6. Optional: You can repeat a mantra that works naturally with your walking pace, for example: "With each step, a gentle wind blows."

2. Practice Deep Breathing

Your sympathetic nervous system is activated when you're stressed out and shaking, and your parasympathetic nervous system is what eventually calms it down.

One way to activate your parasympathetic nervous system is through deep breathing—the precise opposite of the panting or short, shallow breaths we take when anxious.

Deep breathing can help you calm down, provided you do it as naturally as possible (i.e., don't force it):

- Sit or lie down comfortably.
- Inhale through your nose and fill up your diaphragm with fresh air.
- Exhale through your nose.
- Put one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.
- Feel your diaphragm or tummy rise as you inhale and lower again as you exhale. You'll know when you're breathing deeply enough because the hand on your stomach will move more than the one on your chest.
- Repeat this three more times, continuing to fill your stomach with air. Feel it rise and fall with each breath you take.

3. Try Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a step-by-step relaxation exercise that targets all the muscles in your body.

Lie or sit down comfortably and take a few deep, relaxing breaths (see the last exercise!).

Tense the muscles in your forehead and hold that tension for 15 seconds, noting how they become increasingly taut. Next, gradually release your forehead muscles over 30 seconds.

You'll start to notice the huge change in your muscles as they start to relax; keep going until your whole forehead is completely at ease. Continue to inhale and exhale naturally and at a slow pace throughout.

When you've done this, you can repeat the exercise with the following body parts:

- Jaw
- Shoulders and neck
- Arms and hands
- Backside
- Legs
- Feet

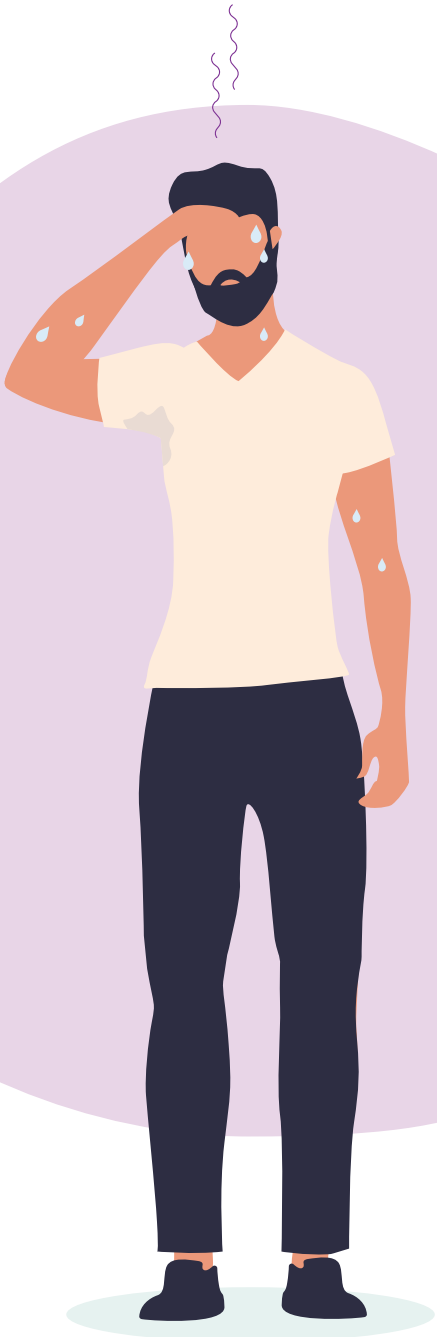
What other people say

"Insight, peace, understanding, togetherness. These are what I see happening every time I have a session with the Stress! Cards."

— Benny – Owner Walta Coaching

Notes

Sweating



Sweating

Do you ever find yourself wiping beads of sweat away, even when you've barely moved a muscle? Does the thought of a looming deadline cause your t-shirt to soak, and cause clamminess on the palms of your hands?

Sometimes, our racing thoughts are all it takes to make us break out in a sweat. Maybe you just realized you forgot to reply to a client, or worse still, you overheard colleagues discussing how "you'd be the perfect person to deliver that funding pitch!"...

We each have unique triggers that can cause us to experience this symptom. But if you know that being under pressure turns you into a sweaty, emotional mess, it helps to understand why you sweat when you're stressed out in the first place.

Why Does Stress Cause Sweating?

It's important to differentiate between sweating from heat or hard physical work (regular sweat) and our body's drippy, damp reaction to being under pressure.

Stress sweat, the latter, is triggered by emotions we experience, such as excitement, anxiety, anger, or stress.

Sweat from heat or physical exertion is produced by the body's eccrine sweat glands, but stress-related sweat is produced mainly by the apocrine glands.

Stress sweat is an involuntary sympathetic response to perceived threats, such as:

- Fear at the idea of public speaking
- Anxiety about upsetting your client
- Anger at arguing with a colleague, or
- Stress about forgetting an important event.

Like other types of stress responses, such as bodily tension and speaking too fast, it's caused by a surge of "react now!" hormones such as adrenaline, which kick your sweat glands into high gear.

Did you know?

- One theory suggests that we sweat under pressure because it makes our skin more moist and slippery, helping us physically escape the grip of predators.
- Another theory suggests that stress and regular sweat have different scents, and the former is a warning signal to prime others around us for danger.
- It is also suggested that emotion-induced sweat has a distinct scent that can communicate our feelings to others. Psychologists investigating this theory found that volunteers who smelled fear-derived sweat samples showed fearful facial expressions, just like the sample donors.

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. Break The Vicious Cycle

Does the first sign of stress-induced dampness make you even more alarmed and sweaty? If so, you'll know that anxiety and sweating can be mutually reinforcing—it's like a vicious cycle.

You can break this cycle and free yourself by making the 'sweating part' less stressful:

- Wear colors that hide sweat stains, such as black and white.
- Choose breathable fabrics that wick away moisture from your skin, such as silk, cotton, and other natural materials.
- Use your antiperspirant/deodorant twice daily, both in the morning and before you head to sleep.
- Let evaporation work for you—try to notice when your stress reactions are causing you to warm up and sweat more, e.g., balling your hands into fists or putting them in your pockets. Open up your hands and expose them to the air instead to dry them naturally.
- Pack an extra shirt to wear if you're worried about becoming too sweaty.

2. Debrief With A Friend

Share your emotions with a family member or friend who will make you feel better. Talking about anxiety, anger, or panic can be extremely helpful, especially if that person is emotionally similar to you.

This tip is easy:
stop for a chat or phone a friend!

3. Think cold thoughts!

Sometimes the thought of being cold is enough to cool you down! When I recently found myself sweating from tension, I used the memory of diving into an unheated swimming pool. As I recalled the icy shock of cold water on my skin, getting goosebumps, and shivering, I began to feel less overheated and started feeling a little better.

What's a cold, freezing memory that you could use?

What other people say

"The Stress! Cards are useful self-reflection tools, and not only in a coaching or training setting. They are interesting for anyone who wants more insight into how they typically react to stress and who wants to learn to deal with it differently."

— Margriet - Entrepreneur

Notes

Suddenly Feeling Ill

Suddenly Feeling Ill

Feel like you're getting a fever? Or wondering if you ate something funny? It's often hard to tell when stress is the reason that you feel unwell, but it happens to more people than you'd think.

Stress can play havoc with your emotions, triggering symptoms of genuine sickness. Sometimes it's obvious, such as dizziness before a first date or nausea when you receive bad news, but at other times, it can cause more serious symptoms such as dizziness, hyperventilating, and even fainting.

The experience of hyperventilation, dizziness, and fainting are unpleasant enough as it is. On top of this, they can frequently add to your agitation and cause you to worry about your health and feel unwell. But if it sounds like a lot of unwanted bad news, it isn't the end of the story. There are plenty of techniques that can facilitate stress release and help you take control of your symptoms.

Why Does Stress Cause Feelings of Sickness?

Being under significant stress can cause your body to enter a state of autonomic activation. As your nervous system kicks into survival mode, your breathing quickens, and the oxygen levels rise in your blood.

The more oxygen is pumped to your muscles and organs, the less there is for your brain. This can lead to feelings of dizziness and even loss of consciousness.

Nausea is another common side effect of stress that scientists believe is linked to the hormones released by your body in its activated state.

Did you know?

- Corticosteroid is a stress hormone that can decrease the effectiveness of our immune system. This is partly why we are more susceptible to infections and illness when we are stressed.
- Interestingly, however, studies have shown that short-term autonomic activation in response to stress can actually stimulate immune activity.
- This may be an evolutionary adaptation to the fact that life-threatening situations often result in wounds and infections, so our body is giving us a much-needed boost!

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. Balancing Breathing

This is an especially good exercise for enhancing brain activity and reintroducing calm into your body. It can also help cleanse your lungs, strengthen your energy flows, and feel more invigorated afterward.

In this exercise, you will aim to balance your breathing between your nostrils:

1. Sitting comfortably, take a few normal breaths, and relax your shoulders.
2. Close your right nostril with your right thumb and inhale through your left nostril at a natural pace.
3. Repeat it five times, then open it up again.
4. Close your left nostril with your right index finger and repeat the breathing exercise using your right nostril.
5. Use normal breaths throughout the exercise without trying to force anything.
6. Once you've done both sides, you can try alternating between your nostrils. Close the right nostril and inhale once through the left, then exhale on the other side. Close the left and inhale through the right, and you have completed one round.
7. Continue for three to five rounds, and you will probably find that this mindfulness exercise has taken your mind off your worries.

2. Soap Bubble Visualization

This exercise is perfect for when you find a quiet moment to imagine yourself somewhere relaxing. Like most visualization exercises, this is easier and more powerful the more you practice it.

1. Lie or sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Inhale and exhale quietly and naturally a few times and let your tension fall away.
2. Now imagine a bubble forming around you and lifting you off the ground. Feel yourself float gently up in the air and away.
3. You are in charge of your bubble, so where do you want to go? Take yourself out of the room to a pleasant place such as a garden, beach, or anywhere you feel peaceful.
4. Land your bubble in the place that most appeals to you. You can stay here for as long as you like, so feel free to immerse yourself in the scenery and make it as realistic as you can. What can you see, hear, and feel?

5. Step back into your bubble and float home once you're finished. You should feel calmer, re-energized, and much better at this point!

3. Hypnotize Yourself!

This self-hypnosis exercise takes no more than ten minutes and helps you relax whenever you feel tense. It's called the Five-Finger exercise and has four steps that you should memorize in advance.

1. **Tired:** Touch your thumb and index finger together and recall a time when you felt pleasantly tired, e.g., after a fun workout.

2. **Love:** Tough your thumb and middle finger together. This time, recall an experience where you felt loved, such as receiving a hug from a loved one, an intimate lovemaking session with your beloved, or similar.

3. **Admired:** Touch your thumb and ring finger together and recall a time when someone gave you a meaningful compliment. Accept it and revel in it—let yourself feel good!

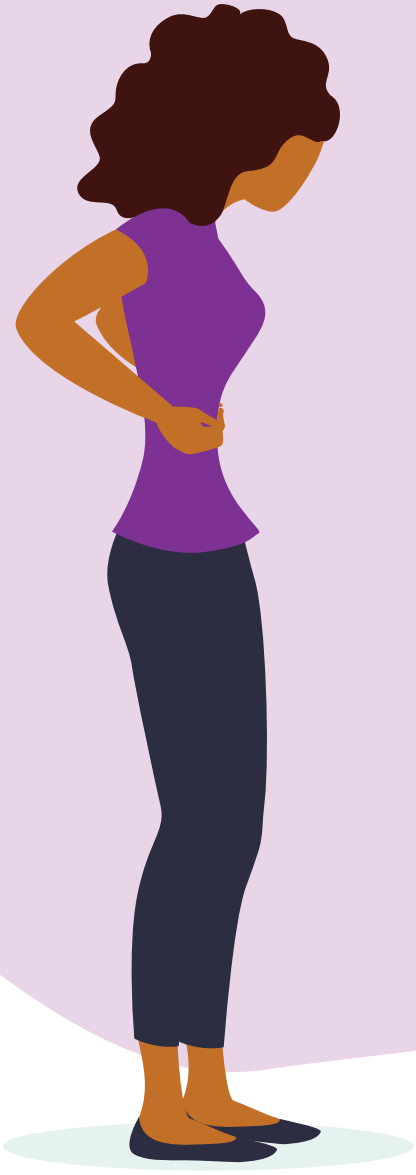
4. **Beauty:** Finally, touch your little finger and thumb together. Now imagine a beautiful place where you have felt happy and let yourself remain there for a while.

Fun Fact!

Shallow, upper chest breathing is a typical reaction to stress which can be reduced through conscious breathing. Scientific studies have shown that specific breath exercises can be helpful in managing stress and stress-related conditions, especially when it comes to symptoms such as shallow over-breathing or hyperventilation.

Notes

Knot In Your Stomach



Knot In Your Stomach

Almost all of us have experienced that tight, churning sensation in our stomachs under stress. You may have felt it before an interview, a big test, or just before sitting down for your annual performance review—the feeling like your stomach has tied itself up into a big, nervous knot.

A "stomach knot" is a side effect of your body releasing fight-or-flight hormones in response to a perceived environmental threat. If you feel your stomach churning or feeling heavy when you're under pressure, you'll know that it can happen quite suddenly and without a seeming cause.

Why Does Stress Cause Stomach Knots?

To understand stomach knots, it helps to know a little about your digestive systems, otherwise known as your gastrointestinal systems. This group of organs, which is responsible for metabolizing everything you eat and drink, has its own enteric (nervous) system. Your enteric nervous system can regulate digestion without conscious control.

When your brain detects an event that it interprets as potentially threatening, it releases stress hormones that are picked up by the enteric nervous system. Essentially, your brain tells your body that there are more pressing issues to attend to than digestion and redirects your resources to other functions.

So, when you're rehearsing your answers before that customer Q&A or adjusting your hair before an interview, your brain is essentially redirecting blood away from your stomach to help you focus.

That's what you feel as "a knot."

Did you know?

- A nervous stomach can range from mild 'butterflies' to feelings of nausea and gastrointestinal upset. Symptoms can vary from person to person, and different events may cause different levels of stress.
- Your intestines are roughly 15 feet in length - that's a lot of GI tract that can be affected by your nerves!
- Your brain is very much connected to your stomach and intestines. For example, just as a nervous gut can send signals to your brain, the thought of eating can cause your stomach to release gastric juices in anticipation of a meal.

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. Calmness Visualization

Mental imagery can be useful when trying to relax in a stressful situation. By visualizing yourself in a calm state, you can also create a mental picture to refer back to in all kinds of anxiety-inducing scenarios.

- Close your eyes
- Breathe in and out gently and deeply
- Imagine yourself calmly handling the situation that is making you nervous.

You might like to picture yourself relaxed and focused, even doing a wonderful job of what you set out to do—the more you practice, the better you will become at using visualization to unwind and manage your nervous belly.

2. Sit Up Straight

Do you ever hunch over when you feel a knot coming on? You are not alone!

We humans often react to stomach pains by making ourselves smaller, slouching forward, or rolling up into a fetal position—it's instinctive.

One way to get rid of knots is by doing exactly the opposite: sitting upright and straightening your shoulders. Try the following steps:

- Sit up straight and close your eyes.
- Imagine you have a string attached to your head, and someone is pulling it upward.
- Push your chest out while you inhale through your nose, and your shoulders will naturally go backward and down.
- As you exhale through your mouth, it will feel like you're blowing away all of your tension.
- Repeat these steps, lifting your shoulders as high as you can each time you breathe in (this will require you to tense your muscles). Each time you exhale, lower and relax your shoulders once more.

3. Have A Warm Bath

A little gentle heat is a great remedy for all kinds of stomach aches, whether it's a hot water bottle or a relaxing soak in the bath.

If your stomach is cramped up from knots, take a warm shower or bath, and the heated water will relax your muscles, easing away the pain.

What other people say

"The cards are insightful and wonderfully applicable in coaching. They clearly show the various possible effects of stress. For one person, it's visible in their behavior; for another, it's a feeling; for yet another, it is a way of thinking. The cards cover all these variations, which allows the user to create an image of their own 'stress signals.'"

— Maartje - Strategic Organisational & Management Professional

Notes

Getting The Chills

Getting The Chills

Does the thought of receiving feedback, attending a big interview, or a looming deadline make you shiver with cold? Have your fingers ever gone numb as a stressful event approaches? If being under pressure quite literally gives you the chills, then this is the card for you.

While "it gives me the chills" is a well-known expression, anxiety is not the first thing most people think of when they start to feel cold for no reason. But chills can be a very common sign of stress, whether it's the idea of making a critical mistake or getting on the wrong side of a very scary boss.

If you've ever experienced cold hands and feet or a shiver down your spine when you're feeling anxious, it's probably a good idea to stop and think about why you might be shivering. The better able you are to recognize stress symptoms such as feeling cold, numb, or chilly, the more equipped you are to tackle the root causes of your anxiety and manage your symptoms.

Why Does Stress Cause You To Feel Cold?

When we experience stress, our bodies respond by getting ready for action. This autonomic stress response is triggered by a surge of hormones that redirect blood to our muscles and away from less "urgent" processes and organs.

First, as blood is rerouted to more vital organs (your torso muscles, for example), circulation decreases in your extremities. You may experience this as cold fingers, hands, or feet, and it can be worse when you are under a large amount of stress.

A second reason you may "get the chills" is that your body releases epinephrine when you are anxious. This neurotransmitter causes blood vessels to tighten and further reduces circulatory flow to your fingers, hands, feet, and skin.

Did you know?

- Muscle tension may also play a role in causing your hands and feet to get the chills. When your body is redirecting physical resources to your muscles, circulation in your extremities is drastically reduced.
- Another potential reason why you may feel cold when you are stressed is if you are hyperventilating. As irregular breathing causes your blood to flow less efficiently, it's not unusual to experience sensations of being cold.
- Feeling cold due to stress is only temporary. As your stress response decreases, your circulation normalizes and blood flow is restored to the affected areas, warming them up once more.

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. Have a Cold Shower

This tip might sound counterintuitive, but there are good reasons why a shower might raise your body temperature and help you regain sensation if you feel numb.

- Cold showers stimulate your blood circulation—when your core temperature drops, your heart starts to pump more blood. Because stress causes a rise in your blood pressure, this movement of fresh blood can help to lower that hypertension.

- They can also feel good! Studies have shown that cold water can lower the cortisol levels in your blood and stimulate endorphin release. With fewer stress hormones (cortisol) and more feel-good chemicals (endorphins) flowing around, your fight or flight responses may start to ease up, causing you to feel a little warmer and more normal.

- Taking a cold shower can also be a mindful experience. As you practice being "in the moment" and focusing on present sensations, your mind is naturally distracted from whatever was causing you stress in the first place. Try thinking about how the water feels on your skin, the cold temperature, and even the sounds of water rushing, and see if you start to feel better!

2. Massage Your Hands

You can often restore circulation to your hands with a little self-massage. Massage can reduce your blood pressure and help you relax, sleep better, and feel more positive.

All you need is a little moisturizer and a few minutes to knead your hand. Try these steps:

- Rub your thumb across your palm in wide circles, starting at the middle and working outward.

- Using long, linear movements, rub downward from your knuckles toward your wrist.

- Wrap your hand around each finger and rotate it in circles—as if you were stirring a pot with a cooking spoon.

- Working from the base of each digit, rub your finger in small circles. Move upward toward your fingertip.

3. Hug Someone Special!

Human contact releases oxytocin, also known as a happy hormone or “the love hormone.” This can counteract the negative effects of cortisol and norepinephrine, helping you relieve stress when you are under pressure.

The best thing about this tip is that it’s easy, relaxing, and completely free. Your cuddle partner will also feel better for it—you’ll start to feel warmer pretty quickly!

Fun Fact!

Laughing and having fun can reduce your cortisol levels, with research by psychiatrist William Fry indicating a relationship between laughter and decreased levels of stress hormones. Additional studies have demonstrated the advantages of taking things lightly, laughing, and having a sense of humor.

Notes

Suddenly Feeling Tired

Suddenly Feeling Tired

Does bad news, a tight deadline, or too much work make you tired? Do stressful events leave you exhausted and worn out - even before they've occurred? If you answered "Yes" to the above or similar, then this is a card for you.

Picture this: you're at work, desk piled high. Emails flood in on your screen while colleagues shout back and forth around you.

Tensions are running high, and yet...you can't stop yawning.

If you've ever felt your eyelids droop with a big presentation looming or craved a lie down before a critical meeting, you may have been experiencing stress-related tiredness.

Any time bad news makes you want to sleep your troubles away or a tight deadline triggers weariness, it's worth considering whether you need to take some steps to manage your stress levels.

Why Does Stress Cause Sleepiness?

Stress takes a very real physical toll on our bodies, releasing floods of adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol when we are under pressure. These chemicals trigger a range of physiological responses, ranging from tense muscles to an elevated heart rate.

As these responses use up glucose in our brain and body, we may experience fatigue, exhaustion, or sleepiness - even when we can't afford to drop the ball.

Did you know?

- Prolonged stress levels have been linked to hyperactivity, reduced sleep time, and impaired rapid eye movement sleep, which leads to poorer quality sleep. By managing your stress levels, you can prevent these physiological responses from causing you further stress.
- Cortisol release can lead to increased oxygen in the brain and a surge of energy. Excess cortisol, caused by sustained stress levels, can deplete the adrenal glands and result in chronic fatigue.
- According to the American Psychological Association, studies show that adults with lower self-reported stress levels report an average 7.1 hrs of sleep a night, compared to 6.2 hours for adults that reported higher stress levels.

Three Tips To Manage This Reaction

1. Drink Cold Water - Or Splash Your Face

A short, sharp, bracing shower does wonders for combating stress-related sleepiness, but when that's not possible, a cold glass of water can be just as effective.

Just as caffeine injects adrenaline into your system, a glass of icy water diverts your blood flow to your brain without the after crash or jitters. Splashing cold water on your face also does the trick, so pop to the nearest work bathroom, turn on the tap and pat your face for a brief jolt of adrenaline.

2. Try Aromatherapy

Certain natural scents are tried-and-true ways to wake up from a case of the sleepies.

If you can, treat yourself to a few long, deep breaths of the following:

- **Coffee -** The smell of coffee alone can be enough to improve your mental alertness, improving your attentiveness and memory
- **Lemon -** The whole citrus family, and lemon especially, can have great mood-enhancing properties, activating your brain and body, and
- **Peppermint -** A game-changing sleepiness-buster, peppermint also enhances your mood, sharpening your focus. If you haven't got essential oils handy, try mind-flavored chewing gum or candy.

3. Take a Stretch Break

A quick stretch break can get your blood moving and brain working again when you feel stress-related tiredness setting in. It can also help to:

- Release muscle tension
- Boost your blood flow
- Detoxify your tissues
- Slow your breathing, and
- Trigger energy-releasing hormones in your system.

These three handy stretches are particularly good and work beautifully in any office. I recommend trying to slow your breathing to a deep, conscious pace throughout:

1. **The Shoulder Roll:** A simple, but effective stretch. Sit upright with your hands by your side, and roll your shoulders in slow circles - as large as comfortably possible. Repeat five times forward, and 5 backward.

2. **The Mini Arm Workout:** I came across these arm exercises online, and can confirm they're energy boosters that make you feel more alert! Choose from ceiling punches, desk pushups, or 'flying' spread-eagled. If they don't work instantly, at least they'll make you smile.

3. **Reach For The Sky!** This full-body stretch involves standing up tall and marching in place for 30 seconds, with both arms up and your palms toward the roof. Marching boosts the blood circulation from your hips downward, while reaching up releases neck and shoulder tension. This is my go-to exercise as a yoga fan because it puts you in a similar stance to the 'power pose' by lifting your chin and raising your arms in a triumphant 'V-shape'. As social psychologist Amy Cuddy points out, it's a proud, powerful posture not unlike a champion's stance, and can be a wonderful way to raise your testosterone while lowering your cortisol. To feel more like a champion, Amy recommends holding your winning stance for 2 full minutes.

What other people say

"The feedback on the cards has truly amazed us, they give people deep insight into their own habits and the habits of others. We have seen beautiful changes in this respect over the short term. Vulnerability in openness."

— Q-Share Security & Safety Specialists

Notes

Sphere of
Influence 360°