

Beat Stress

AND GET BACK CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE

By Petris Lapis



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Introduction

Stress is a silent killer that sneaks into our lives without us noticing and then slowly takes over. We can cope with stress in the short term; it is when stress is prolonged that we have trouble coping and it starts to impact upon our lives in a way that makes us uncomfortable.

As someone who has experienced high levels of stress for an extended period, I understand first-hand the impact it has upon not only your life, but those around you. I have experienced the mental and physical challenges it brings. I strongly encourage you to take steps to deal with stress before it brings its most serious consequences into your life.

If you are suffering severe stress, I urge you to visit a health professional and have your physical and emotional wellbeing checked.

This book will help you to understand what stress is, how it can manifest and the steps you can take to get back the control of your life. I have also included some information on easy relaxation methods.

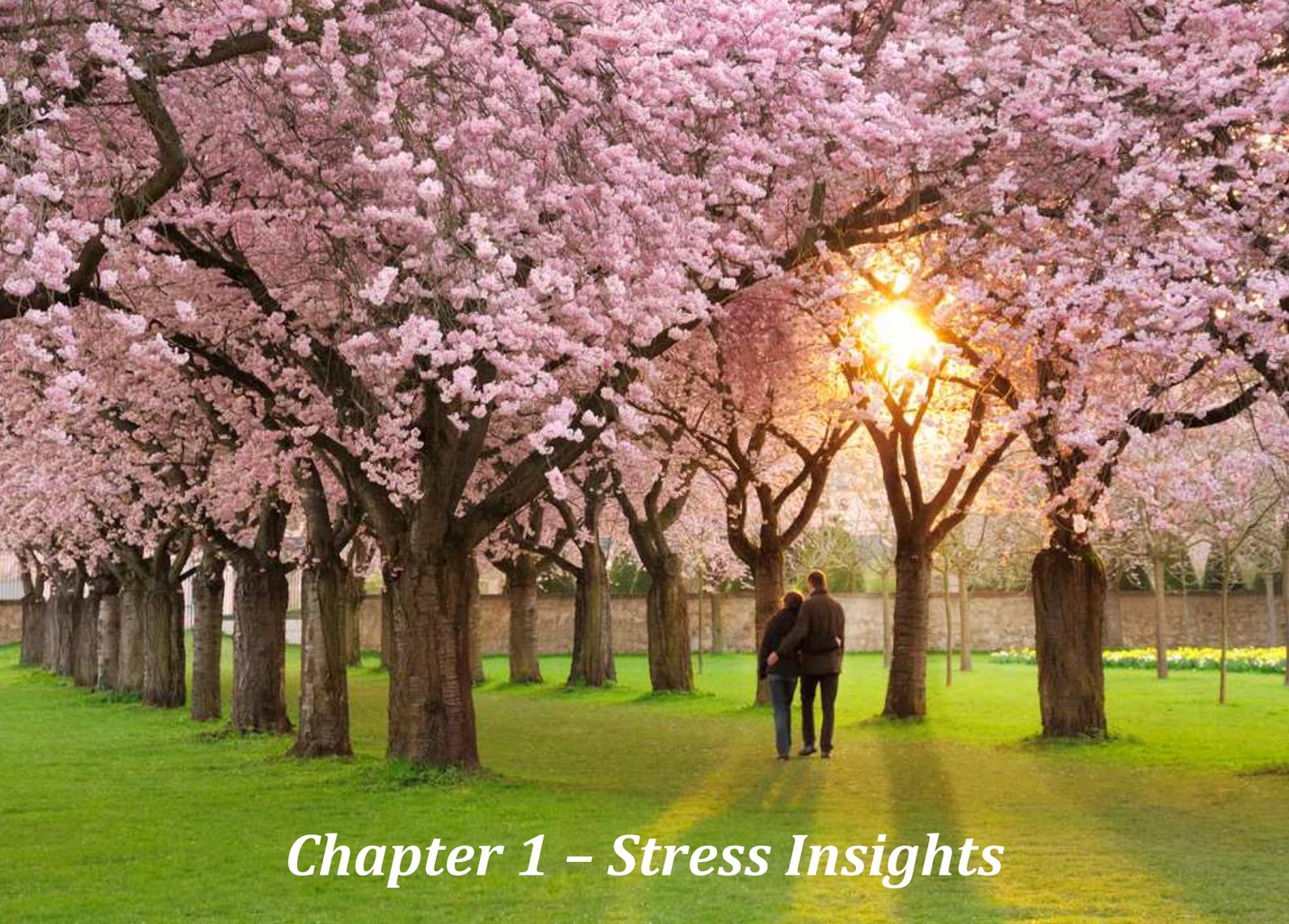
The materials presented in this book are a small part of the corporate personal development programs I offer.

Enjoy.

Warmest wishes,

Petris Lapis

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Chapter 1 – Stress Insights

Stress is imposing an increasing cost on society, businesses and individuals. This chapter has a brief outline on what stress really is and the impact it has upon your mental, social, emotional and physical well-being.

What Is Stress?

Stress is defined as the ‘non-specific response of the body to any demand made on it’ (Hans Selye). It can also be defined as your reaction – mental, emotional, physical and behavioural – to any thought or event that upsets you negatively. It is a normal part of our lives; a little stress is motivating but too much stress is exhausting.

We need some degree of stress for us to perform at our peak. Once we pass this optimum level, however, continued stress begins to have an adverse impact upon our ability to perform. If our stress levels continue to rise, we will reach the point where we are unable to function at all.

When it comes to stress we are all different. We will be stressed by different things, able to cope with different levels of stress for different lengths of time and also display different symptoms, depending upon which part of us is the most vulnerable.



What Happens When You Get Stressed?

The stress response is historic, as our ancestors needed extreme physical reactions and a burst of energy to enable them to fight a wild animal or run away. The American psychologist, Walter Cannon, named it the 'fight or flight' response. The fight or flight response is a physiological reaction that prepares your body to fight or flee a situation.

Our bodies undergo the same process whether we are faced with a frightening animal, dealing with a difficult person, worried about money, having problems in our relationship or attempting to meet a work deadline.

The Ingredients Which Cause Stress

There are three ingredients which cause stress:

1. The situation (external stressors)
2. Your perception of the situation (internal stressors)
3. Your response to the situation

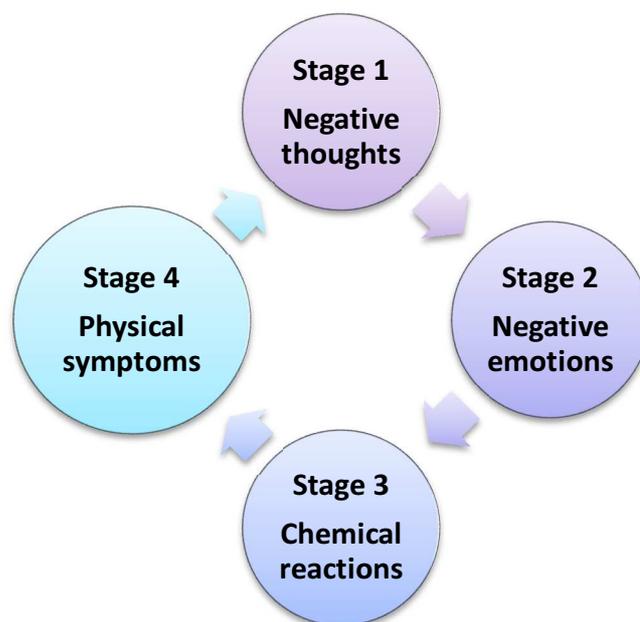
Most of the time, the situation itself is the one which has the least impact upon the amount of stress you are feeling. The more you perceive the situation to be a threat (particularly if it relates to your self-esteem, security or relationships with others), the more stress you will feel. The stress you feel will also get more intense if you feel you cannot constructively respond to the situation.

The Stress Cycle

When we are in a situation we find stressful, our bodies enter the 'stress cycle' (see diagram on the right).

The stress reaction is a four-stage cycle involving your thoughts, your emotions, the chemical reactions in the brain and your body and the associated physical sensations. Once it begins it has a life of its own.

You can see from stage one of the cycle that it isn't an event itself that causes stress, but rather the thought you have about the event or the meaning you place upon it that causes stress. The same event could cause one person to feel a high level of stress, but not bother another person at all.

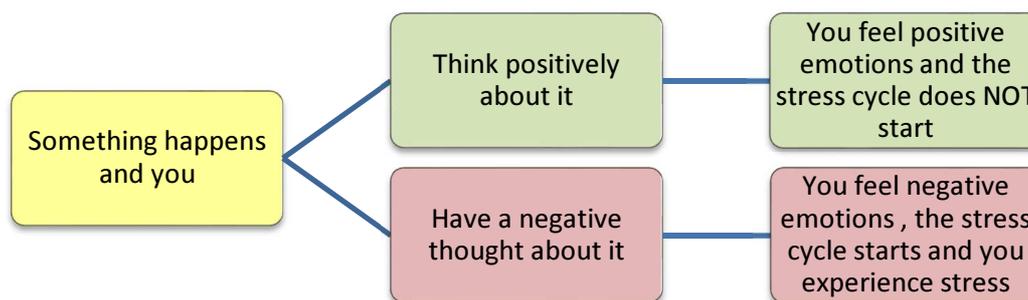


Stage 1: Negative Thoughts

One of my first employers used to tell me that stress was all in my mind. Well, it wasn't all in my mind, but he was right in that, my thinking was definitely what started my stress cycle.

Stress begins only when you think negatively about the situation you are in. The following diagram shows that if you think positively or indifferently about the situation, you won't enter

the stress cycle. If you place a negative meaning upon the situation, you will enter the stress cycle.



Assume you see a snake as you are walking down a path. If you are an environmentalist who has been looking for evidence that this breed of snake is not extinct, you will have a positive happy thought and be excited about your discovery. You will not enter the stress cycle. If, however, you are not an environmentalist, you will have a negative thought and fear for your safety. This thought will start the stress cycle and your body will experience the flight or fight effects.

Assume you have a massive credit card bill. If you are a person who is concerned about financial security, you will have a negative thought about the bill and enter the stress cycle. If you are a person who never worries about money, you will receive the same bill and not enter the stress cycle.

What if you were made redundant from your work? If you are someone who worries about financial security, you might think “This is a disaster, what am I going to do?” As soon as you have this negative thought, you will enter the stress cycle. If, on the other hand, you are someone who has always felt comfortable about money, you might think “I’m going look for a position I will enjoy now. This has really given me the push I needed” and not enter the stress cycle.

Sophie illustrates the connection between thinking and stress. Sophie was a farmer who experienced a lot of stress due to the weather, changing produce prices and finances. When she sold her farm, retired and moved to a small block of land her family assumed she would now start to relax and find more enjoyment from life.

What they found instead was that Sophie’s way of thinking about events had become so habitual that her stress levels didn’t change at all. All that changed was the range of things that now triggered her stress. She became just as stressed over political and environmental issues as she had been about issues on the farm.

If you can control the way you think about things, you will also be able to control the amount of stress you have in your life. In case you are thinking it isn’t possible to change what you think about a situation, I can assure you it is. I help people change the way they think all the time through self-awareness, mindfulness and/or short meditations.

Stage 2: Negative Emotions

The negative thought that starts in the cortex of the brain continues to activate other nerve cells in a pathway down into an area of your mid-brain, the limbic system where your emotions lie. The second stage of the stress cycle involves the negative emotions that arise from the

negative thoughts. Negative thoughts produce negative emotions whereas positive thoughts don't.

If you have a positive thought, the limbic system will produce positive emotions. If you have a negative thought, the limbic system will produce negative emotions. So once again we can see that if you had a positive thought about the situation, not only would you not have entered the first stage of the stress cycle, but you also wouldn't have entered the second stage.

By this stage you are now both thinking negatively and experiencing negative emotions.

Stage 3: Chemical Reactions

Stage three of the stress cycle involves both your nervous system and your endocrine or hormonal system. The negative thoughts that have reached your limbic system send nerve impulses to the adrenal gland on your kidneys. This speeds up the action of many of your organs and triggers the release of a number of different chemicals into your bloodstream. The chemicals affect your pituitary gland, which is located under the part of your brain called the hypothalamus, thereby triggering the release of more chemicals and hormones from your adrenal gland. The chemicals include epinephrine or adrenaline, serotonin and a variety of cortico-steroids. Some are neurotransmitters (the chemicals involved in neurotransmission in the brain) and others are hormones.



The result is that every organ in your body works faster. Your heart pounds, your digestion speeds up and your breathing becomes more rapid. You notice it most when you are feeling a very intense emotion like fear or anger, but even when you are thinking a slightly upsetting thought, the same process is happening. Once the stress chemicals are released, everything goes on red alert and you actually feel the physical symptoms of stress in the form of changes in your body.

Stage 4: Physical Symptoms

The physical symptoms you experience from the stress reaction depend on two things. First the intensity of the emotion you are feeling and second where your body manifests its stress most. We are all different. Some of us exquisitely sensitive to stress while others are not.

The range of physical symptoms you experience could affect your heart, stomach, gut, muscles, breathing, saliva, skin and/or brain. Extreme or prolonged stress can also result in difficulty sleeping, dizziness, a feeling of unreality, fainting or lack of consciousness, panic attacks and damage to the immune system. Long term stress can even result in personality changes and relationship breakdowns.

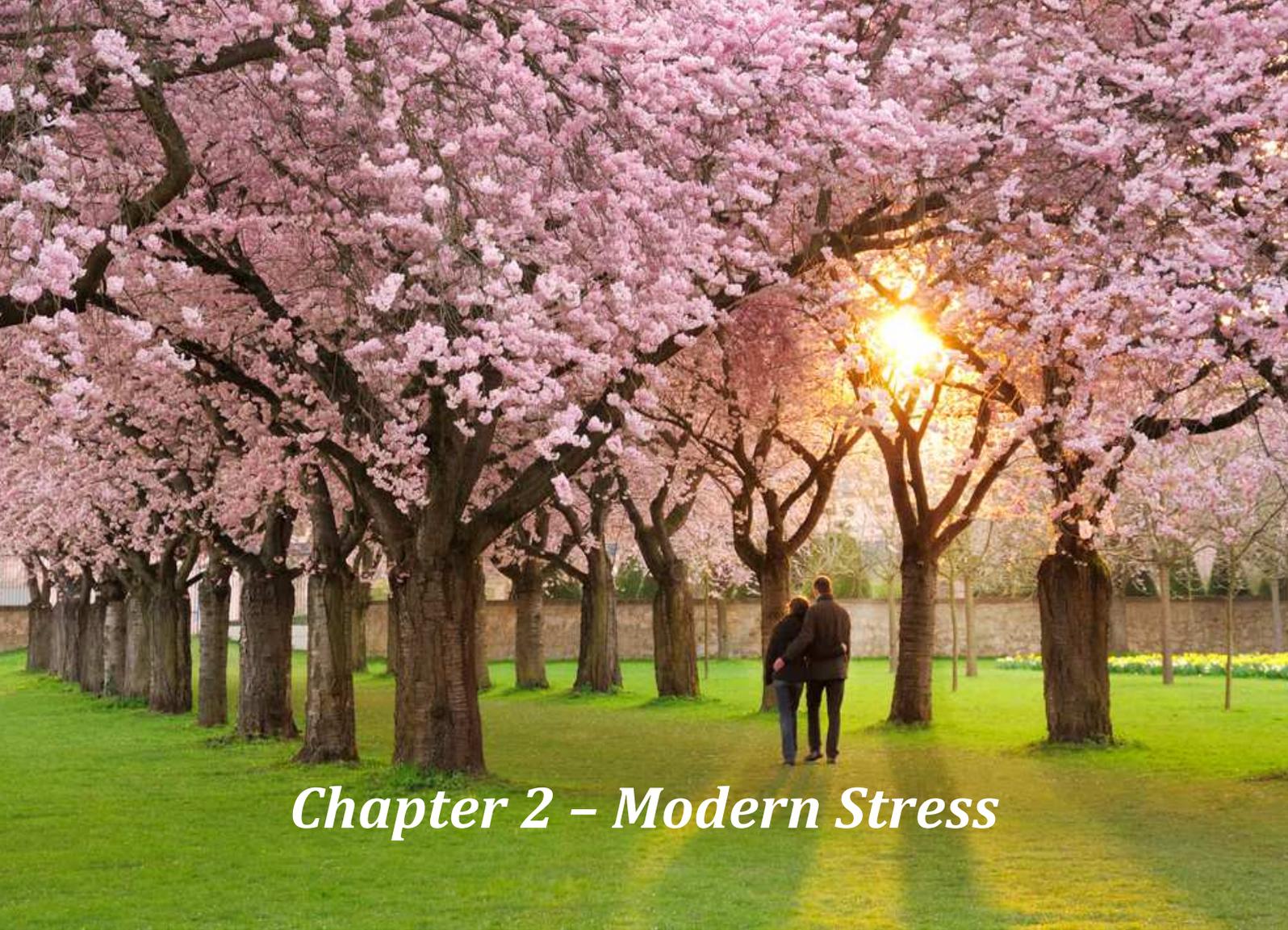
The Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Nervous System

The stress process explained above relates to the sympathetic nervous system. In times of flight or flight while the danger is present our sympathetic nervous system swings into action. When the danger has passed, our parasympathetic nervous system then takes action to calm down the effects produced by the sympathetic nervous system.

How To Successfully Manage Stress

You will be familiar with the feeling this produces if you have ever experienced a physical threat that has gone away. It is the huge feeling of relief, the loosening of muscles, the taking of a deep breath etc., which follows the removal of the threat.

Well, that is how it is supposed to work. Modern stress has a few unfortunate characteristics which means this process doesn't always work as nature intended.



Chapter 2 – Modern Stress

Your body experiences stress in the same way regardless of whether the threat is to your physical or mental well-being. Most modern stress is caused by things other than the threat of physical danger. Modern stress is caused, for example, by worrying about your job, your performance, your relationship, your finances, your family members or your health.

It is usually the way you are thinking about a situation which causes you stress. As a result, the sympathetic nervous system response is triggered, but there is never a point at which you feel the danger has passed to trigger the parasympathetic nervous system response. The stress process continues unchecked. For example, if you are worried about how we are going to pay your monthly mortgage, your stress may continue unchecked for weeks or months. In contrast, if you were worried about a savage dog biting you, your stress would continue for minutes and then pass when the dog was gone.

Modern stress causes your body to be constantly filled with unhelpful chemicals and hormones from which you receive no natural relief. In fact, modern stress can result in you hopping onto the stress merry-go-round which is a very difficult thing to get off.

The Stress Merry-Go-Round

The stress reaction is not a stop-start process; it is self-perpetuating and difficult to stop once it begins. The chemicals produced in your brain when you have a negative thought are depressant in their nature, thus making it harder to have positive thoughts and break out of the

How To Successfully Manage Stress

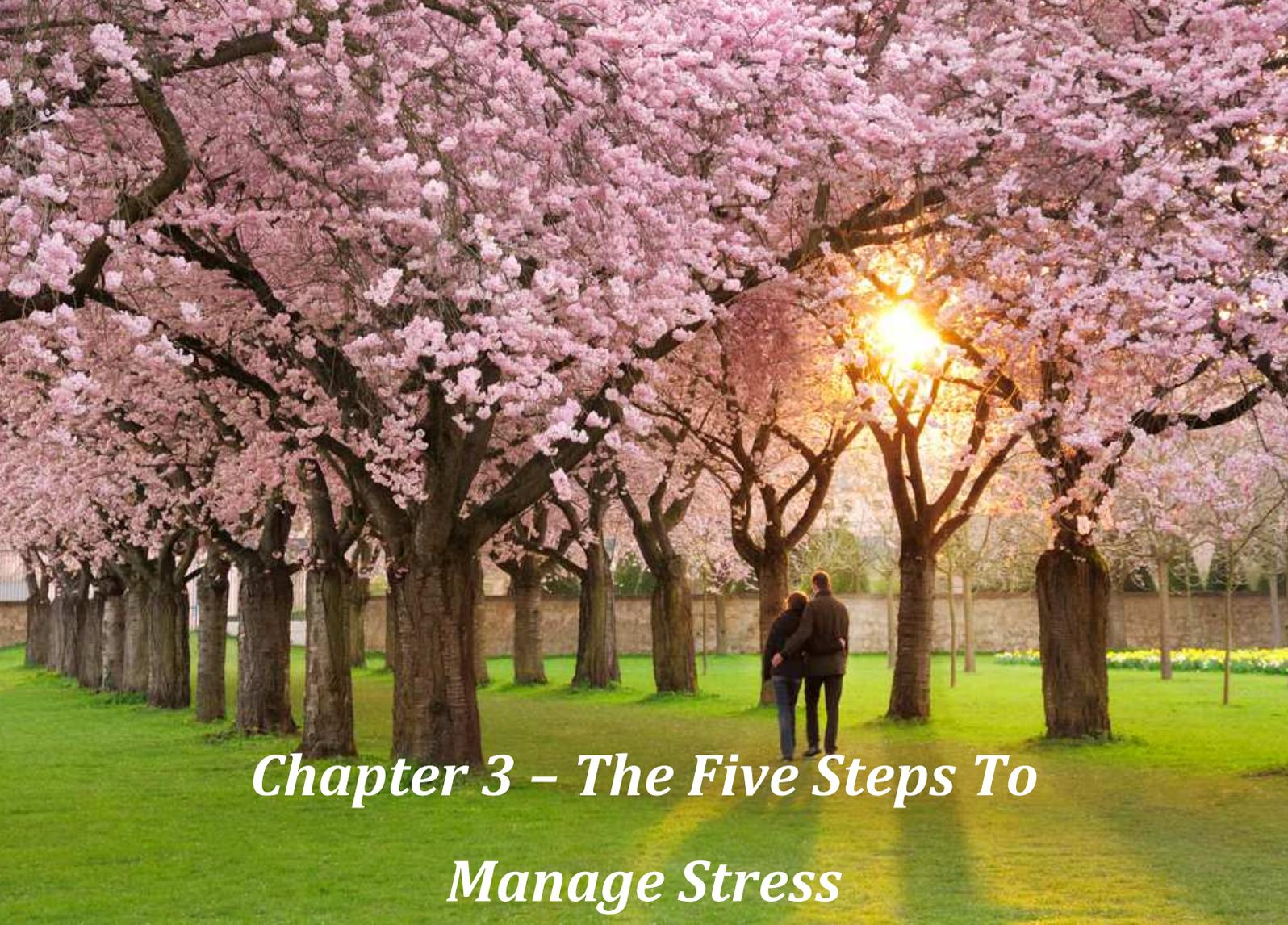
cycle. Each time you have another negative thought you trigger the cycle all over again. The longer you stay in the cycle and dwell on your problems the more upsetting, irrational and paranoid your thoughts become.

Once the stress chemicals start circulating you are also more likely to feel negative emotions. While in the grip of negative emotions you tend to have negative thoughts and then trigger the cycle again. The longer you spend in the grip of the problem, the more stress chemicals you are pumping into your body. If you do not break the cycle, eventually your body becomes exhausted, you will have difficulty sleeping and you will feel unmotivated and drained.

As the causes of most modern stress don't give rise to the parasympathetic nervous system response and it is not healthy for us to continue on the stress merry go round, we need to find artificial ways to decrease the effects of stress in our lives.



Stress can be like getting stuck on an accelerating merry go round; it is harder and harder to hang on and difficult to get off.



Chapter 3 – The Five Steps To Manage Stress

It will usually take more than one thing to fix your stress and regain control of your life. It will usually take all of the following five steps.

Step 1 – Recognise what upsets you. Recognise what upsets you and what you can do about it. If you are having trouble working out what upsets you, carry a small notebook with you for a week or two and when you notice you are feeling stressed, write down what has triggered this feeling.

Step 2 – Change the things you can. Once you recognise what is causing you stress, you can take proactive steps to change stressful things in your life that can be changed. If the things that are causing you stress are out of your control or cannot be changed, then continue onto Step 3.

Step 3 – Change your attitude. There are stress triggers that you either will not or cannot change. If this is the case, then you are left with only one option. You will have to change how you think about the stress trigger. If you cannot find a positive way to think about it, then at least aim for indifference. Remember that positive thoughts don't trigger the stress cycle, but negative thoughts will.

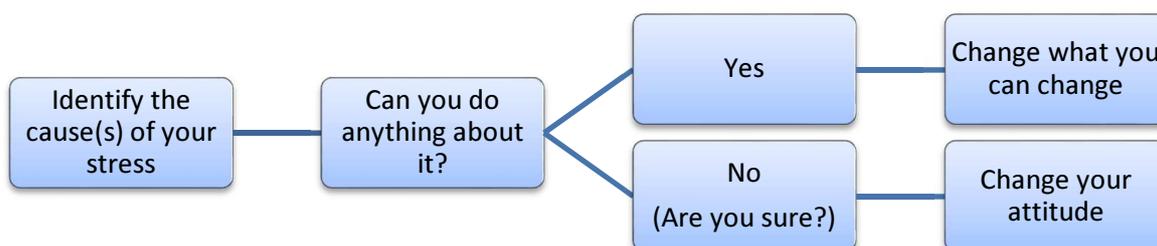
Step 4 – Exercise. Aerobic exercise is the only really effective way to remove stress chemicals from your body. You will feel an improvement in your stress levels if you can do aerobic exercise for 30 to 40 minutes 3 times a week. The side benefits of aerobic exercise are amazing. Not only will you have some natural mood enhancers pumping through your body but you will also have an improvement in your mental wellbeing through increased blood flow to the brain.

Step 5 – Do things you enjoy. Human beings can only focus on one thing at a time. If you are concentrating on the things you enjoy, you aren't thinking about the things that stress you and even for that short space in time you will feel relief from stress. Stress compounds when we judge the situation we are in to be 'bad'. If we find the time to do some things we love, we can counter this effect.

Doing one thing, such as meditation, on its own will not be enough to combat stress. Combating stress will usually involve a combination of the above five things.

One of the keys to combating stress is to determine first what causes the stress and then what you are going to do about it. The process is shown below.

Stress Trigger Process



It is too easy to tell yourself there is nothing you can do about the things that cause you stress. At the very least you can always change your response or attitude towards the stressor. So often during coaching sessions people tell me that they cannot change the thing that is causing them stress. It is not until I ask 'why' or I say 'what would happen if you could?' that people start to see other possibilities. For example:

- The person living in a huge house with three spare bedrooms and a huge mortgage, why couldn't you sell and downsize?
- The person who never sees her children and is working in a career which demands very long hours and lots of overseas travel, why couldn't you change jobs?
- The person who has a very demanding invalid mother living with them, why couldn't you get respite care for her every now and then?
- The person who couldn't possibly leave the husband who gambles money so that they are constantly in trouble with debt collectors, why couldn't you leave and start a life of your own? Why couldn't you take control of the finances?
- The woman who hates her job but 'has' to stay so that she can afford the fees for the very expensive private school her daughter is enrolled at, why couldn't she either change jobs or send her daughter to a more affordable school?
- The man who is emotionally abused by his wife who endures because it is the punishment he deserves for an affair he had, how long do you think you need to pay for this? Why couldn't you have a different basis for a relationship? Is this really what you want for the rest of your life?

If you think I am too harsh, stress can put you in hospital! Is the thing that you are stressing about really worth your health and wellbeing? Is it even worth the price you are paying now?

Your beliefs about the ways things are (or have to be) and your feelings about the past (guilt, grief etc.) can cause you stress. You can change your beliefs and you can let go of feelings associated with the past and move on with your life.

Ways To Decrease The Effects Of Stress In Your Life

Take a moment and ask yourself, what things are triggering the stress in your life? You need to be honest when you answer the question. Sometimes the things you think are triggering the stress are actually a symptom of the stress.

I had a client who told me his wife was the cause of his stress. When we investigated further, it turned out he was a business owner working long hours and very worried about the financial viability of the business. At the end of the day, if his wife asked him to help her wash the dishes, her request was the final straw in a day of demands. Was she the cause of his stress? Highly unlikely. Was his response to her request appropriate? Highly unlikely, but understandable when you knew the stress he was under.

When we have been subjected to stress for a long time we find it difficult to think rationally about issues. You can probably see from the story that my client's stress was caused by issues other than his wife. He was, however, unable to identify that while in the grip of stress.

I can hope you can also see from the story that untreated stress impacts the people around you and can result in relationship breakdowns.

When you have honestly identified the triggers for stress in your life; ask yourself what things can you do to decrease the effects of stress? What things have you found that work to decrease the stress, to change the situation or your attitude? Have you found things that stop you entering the stress cycle in the first place, things like thinking differently about the situation? What can you do to either stop or reduce the impact of stress in your life?

Write some notes below.



Healthy Practices

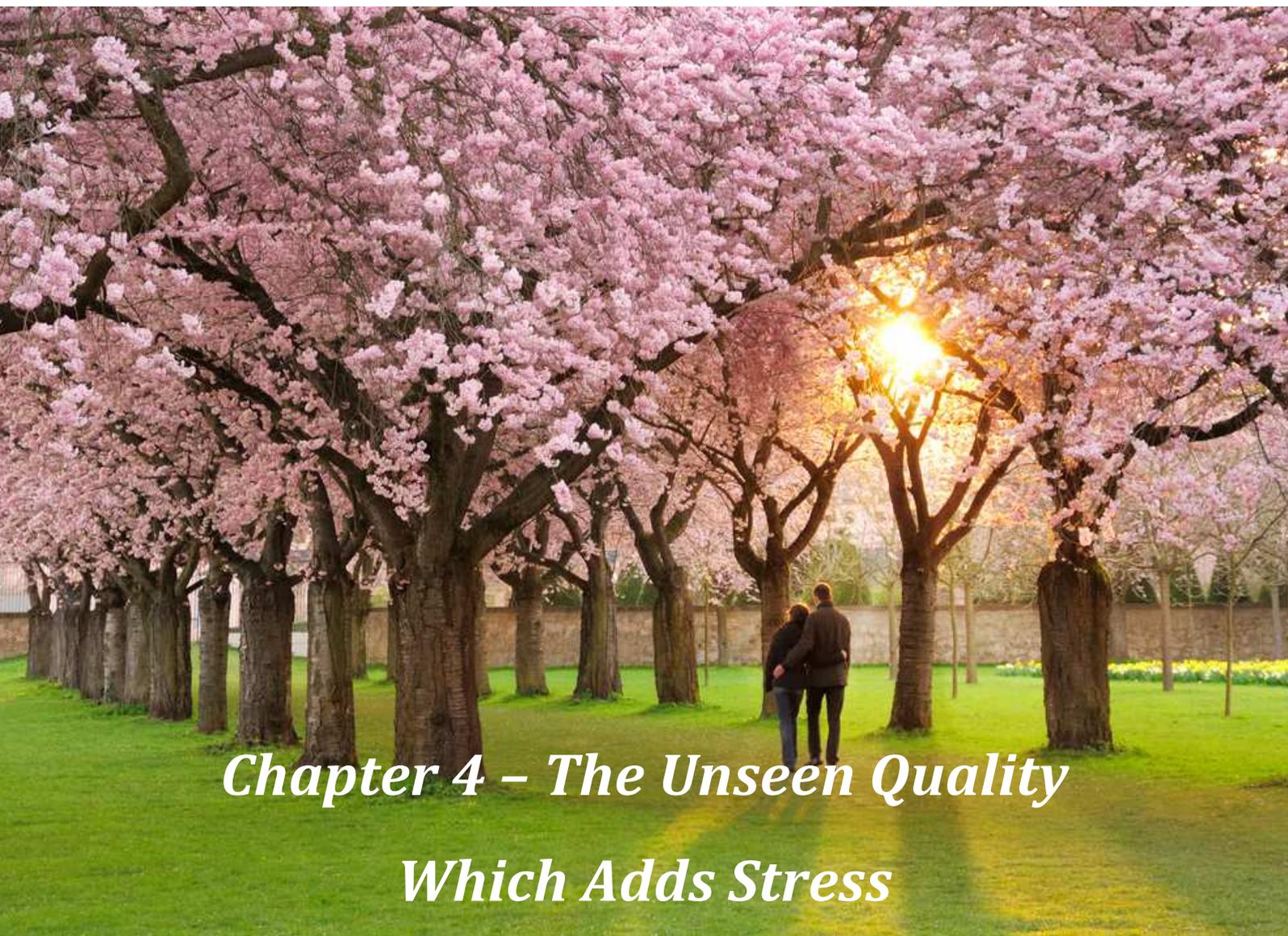
When we are feeling stressed, we tend not to look after ourselves as well as we should. Not engaging in healthy practices (nutrition, rest and exercise) just adds to the stress our body is experiencing. As we saw earlier, exercise is always an essential component of any stress relief or health program.

Are your health habits adding to the stress you feel in your life? Answer 'yes' or 'no' to the following healthy practices questions.

- Yes/No I do not smoke
- Yes/No I rarely have more than an occasional drink
- Yes/No I sleep between seven and eight hours a night
- Yes/No I eat regular meals and no snacks
- Yes/No I eat a regular, balanced breakfast
- Yes/No I take regular exercise
- Yes/No My body weight is right for my size

How To Successfully Manage Stress

If you have answered 'yes' three times or less and you are suffering from stress you may find it helpful to reconsider your health practices. Some of your less healthy habits may already be subjecting your body to stress which will make it more difficult for you to cope if you experience stress in other ways.



Chapter 4 – The Unseen Quality Which Adds Stress

A number of the people I have coached could not initially quantify or identify why they were experiencing stress. Others identified a range of things that were really the symptoms rather than the underlying cause of the stress. What I eventually found was that the underlying cause of the stress was living a life that was not aligned with the person's values.

Every day in so many ways they were experiencing internal conflict which was causing them stress. They were living a life they did not desire to live because either:

- They thought they should ('This is what everyone does', 'This is what my parents expected of me' or even worse 'This is what society thinks people should do'); or
- They were too frightened to make the change ('What will people say?', 'How will I survive?' or 'What will my partner's reaction be?')

One lady I coached came to me after she had experienced a breakdown. She was running a full time business, studying for an MBA (aiming for top grades), renovating a house, raising a small child and providing support to her husband's business when he needed it. She had set herself an incredibly high standard to achieve for all these things. When I asked her why she was doing all these things and putting herself under this degree of pressure, her response astounded me. 'Well, this is what society expects people to do. I am not doing any more or less than society expects. It wouldn't be right of me to do any less because I would be letting society down.'

We then had some conversations about exactly who this 'society' was at it appeared to me that the 'society' other people lived in didn't have the same expectations as her 'society' did. She came to see that it was her own beliefs about what she 'should' be doing and her own expectations of herself that had caused her to experience stress to such a degree that she had a mental breakdown.

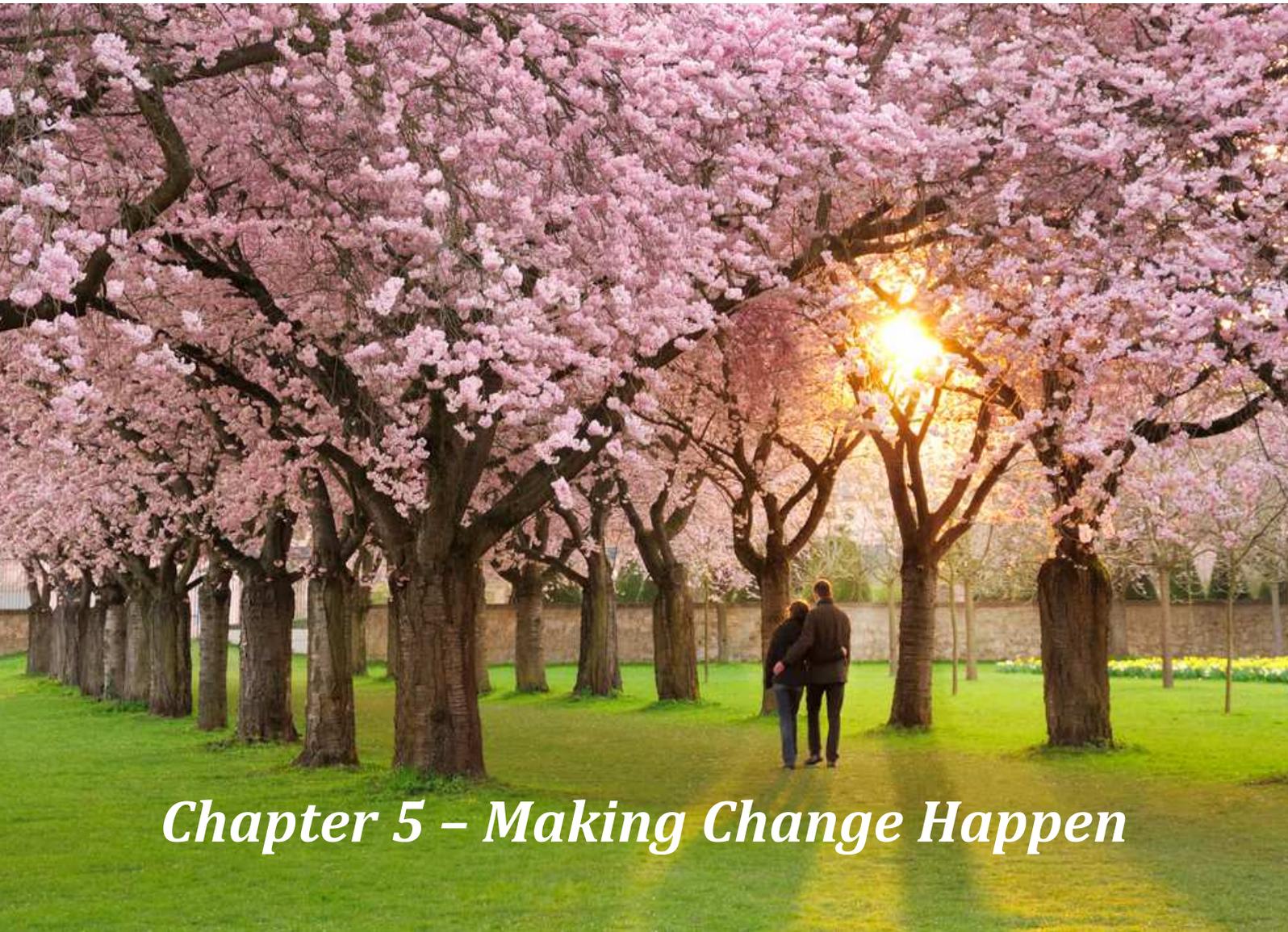
Values

If the unseen stress quantity is living a life not aligned with our values, then we need to ask ourselves, 'What are our values?' Values are what are important to us. Our values drive us; they define who we are and the rules by which we live life.

If we put ourselves into situations that are in conflict with our values, we will experience internal conflict. For example, two of my values are honesty and fairness. I am strongly motivated by these values. I began my professional life working as a tax adviser and found myself in situations where my values conflicted with what I was directed to do. This conflict caused me stress. As I could not find a way to live happily with this conflict, I followed step two of the five step approach to dealing with stress and changed employment.

What are your values? What is important to you in the context of your life or career? Write them down.

When you have done that write a short description of the way you are currently living life (people, job, location, health etc.) Then write a short description of your ideal life (people, job, location, health etc.). Identify any areas that are in conflict between the two and determine what you can do about it.

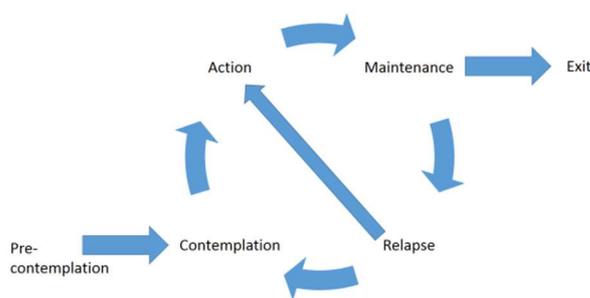


Chapter 5 – Making Change Happen

Hopefully you have now identified some areas of your life that could be changed so you will experience less stress. Knowing that you need to change is not enough. You have to ask yourself are you at the point in your life where you will make the change that is needed?

What do I mean? What I mean is best explained with a very brief explanation of ‘the cycle of change’ postulated by two researchers, Proschaska and Diclemente (see diagram below). They believe that people go through the following cycle when it comes to making change in their life. (You will have to make change if you wish to manage your stress and regain control of your life). Although the length of the cycle varies with each person, once a person enters the cycle for a particular change, it usually lasts for about 12 months.

People start in the *pre-contemplation stage*. This is the stage where you don’t see any reason to make change yet, so you don’t. You will move out of this stage only when you get a personally compelling reason to do so. For example, losing your house may be a personally



The Cycle Of Change

compelling reason to change a gambling habit; losing your partner may be a personally compelling reason to get healthier stress management habits.

After people have experienced a personally compelling reason to make change, they will enter the *contemplation stage*. (Without a personally compelling reason to make the change, they will not enter the cycle of change and no change will occur). The contemplation stage can last for up to nine months and is the stage where you consider the issue and making change in your life. You will move into the next stage when you believe you have enough energy to both make a change and stay motivated to do so.

After you have considered the change and found the energy to take the steps towards making change you will enter the *action stage*. During the action stage of the cycle you implement the change in your life. You will find it relatively easy to maintain this phase for as long as it remains a novelty (usually about 3 months).

After you have been taking action to make the change for a while, you will enter the *maintenance stage*. This happens naturally. This is the stage where you monitor your success to date and adjust your actions if needed. If the change has been successfully implemented (usually as an unconscious behaviour or habit), you will exit the cycle of change. If things aren't progressing as well as you hoped, you will implement changes so you can successfully exit the cycle at a future stage.

We don't all make change successfully on our first attempt. If we haven't been successful we enter the *relapse stage*. If we have been successful, we never go into this stage as we are already out of the cycle. If you have not fully integrated the change into your life, you may have a relapse into your previous behaviour. At this point, you may also be giving yourself a 'test' to see whether you have been successful. They are character traits reflecting both the light and dark sides of your personality. For example, an alcoholic may go out with friends to see if she can have just one drink.

After a relapse you will return to either the contemplation or the action stage of the cycle. You do not enter the pre-contemplation stage again as once you have considered the issue it can never again be unconsidered. Your way of looking at the world has changed forever. Regardless of where you re-enter the cycle, you are better off than you were before as you now have more information about your personal habits, barriers, boundaries and strengths than you had before you entered the cycle. You also have a better understanding of what is likely to trigger a future relapse. Once you re-enter the action stage of the cycle, you will usually stay there until you exit.

Ask yourself, are you still in the pre-contemplation stage of the cycle or have you entered the contemplation stage? If you are in the pre-contemplation stage of the cycle, reading this book is unlikely to provide you a personally compelling reason to change your behaviours and you are better off waiting until something happens to 'force' you to make the change.

If you are in the contemplation stage of the cycle, then you will successfully make the necessary changes to become better at managing stress. If you don't manage it the first time, don't worry, once you're in the cycle of change you're almost guaranteed of success; it is just the time frame within which we each accomplish the change that will differ.

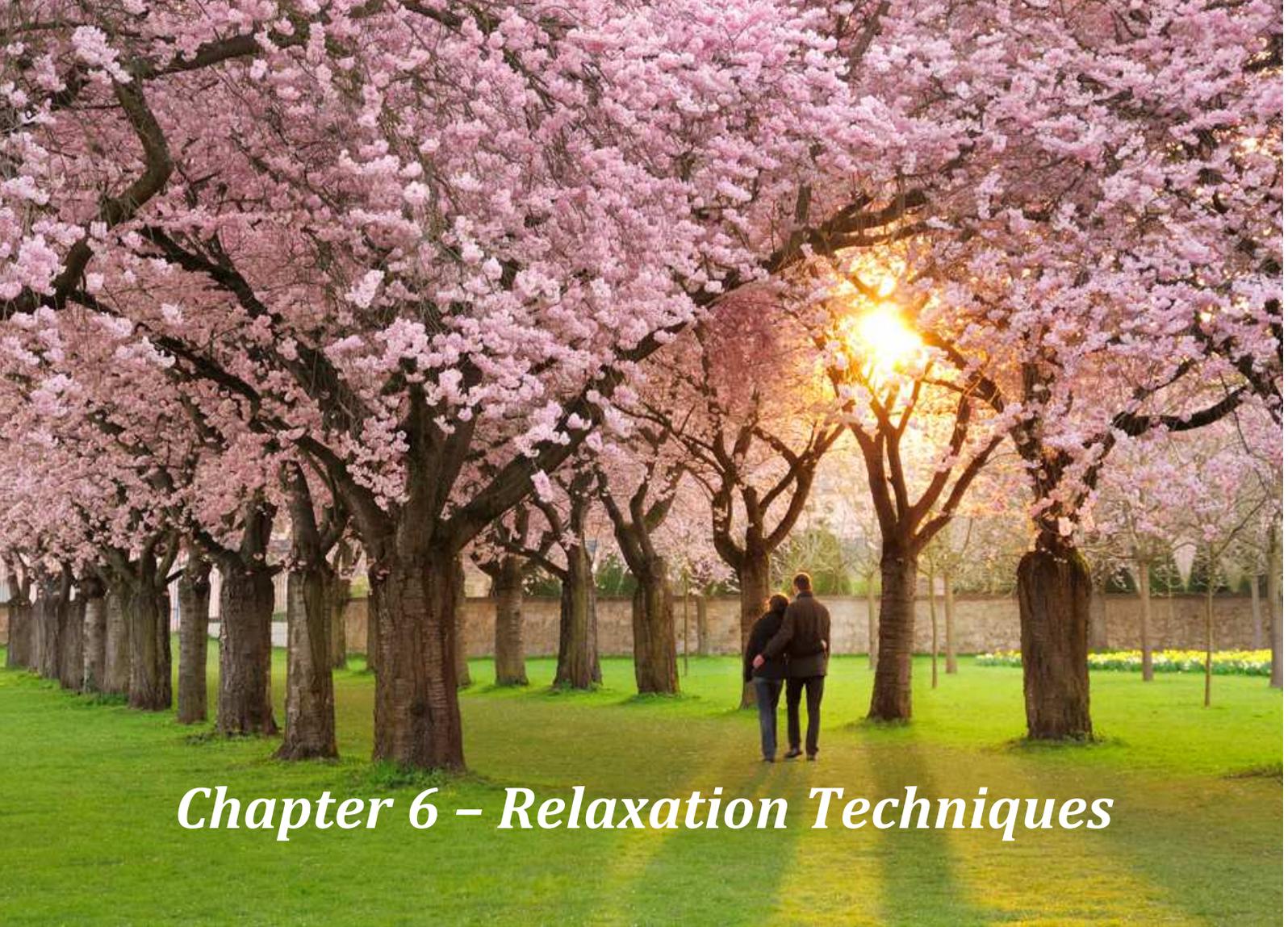
Once you have decided to make the change, the next important step is to make it happen. You do this by:

- Setting yourself some goals; and
- Taking action.

The best goals are the ones that are specific and focus attention on what you want to achieve (as opposed to what you don't want). For example, instead of your goal being 'to stop being so unfit', it would be better if your goal was 'to exercise for at least 30 minutes three times a week'. Instead of your goal being 'to go home earlier', it would be better if your goal was 'to work 45 hours a week'.

Once you have worked out your goals to help you decrease the stress in your life, it is time to take the actions necessary to turn them from goals into reality.

Although I try not to advocate fear as a form of motivation ... when it comes to stress, it is one of the most powerful motivating forces on the planet. If you are having trouble making change in your life to reduce stress, find a quiet place to sit for five minutes. During that time, close your eyes and imagine your future if the level of stress you are under continues or even escalates. What will happen to your mental, physical and emotional wellbeing? What will happen to your relationships? Will you be able to perform at your peak? Then open your eyes and decide to take your future down a different path.



Chapter 6 – Relaxation Techniques

A relaxation technique on its own will not remove stress from your life. It is, however, a great tool to have in your toolkit. It will help you to better cope with some of the physical and emotional symptoms of stress. It will also aid you in both being aware of how you think about situations and in thinking more positively about them.

Slowing your brain down and relaxing (meditating) will help you to see past distracting thoughts, help you to think more clearly, allow you to find answers to problems, improve your health (heart rate, blood pressure, breathing), allow you easier access to your intuitive intelligence and creativity, help you recover from the effects of stress, enable you to remember things more easily and aid a feeling of well-being.

What Happens in Your Brain When You Meditate

The electrical activity in your brain cells produces a brain wave pattern. These brain wave patterns change depending upon what you are doing. When you relax, your brain has a different brain rhythm from when we are stressed or sleeping.

The five major brain waves are delta, theta, alpha, beta and gamma.

The *delta brain wave* is the slowest brain wave (in terms of cycles per second). It is associated with deep sleep, coma and basic survival.

The *theta brain wave* is the second slowest brain wave. It is a dreamy state where it is hard to focus on things. It is a trance like state and is the realm of deep emotions. Control of functions such as the heartbeat and digestion occur here.

The *alpha brain wave* is the middle brain wave. It is a relaxed state of mind; to the extent that you can often lose track of time while in this brain state. This brain state enhances creativity, helps with healing, boosts your immune system and the production of norepinephrine, serotonin and beta-endorphins. Between 5 and 15 minutes in this brain state can aid in the restoration of depleted sodium and potassium levels in the brain (associated with mental stress). This is the brain wave you aim to get into when you meditate (unless you are skilled at meditation in which case you may be able to consciously access the theta brain wave).

The *beta brain wave* is the second highest brain wave and is the one used by adults the most during the day. It is associated with perception, concentration and mental activity. This is the realm of mental stress and uses large amounts of your body's resources, depleting the sodium and potassium required for your brain to function properly.

The *gamma brain wave* is the highest brain wave and is associated with extreme focus, energy and ecstasy. Recent research points to gamma waves as being the brain's signature of higher states of consciousness.

When you are stressed, your brain is in the beta brain wave chewing up your body's resources (including sodium and potassium levels in the brain). This is why at the end of a day when you have been stressed or doing a lot of high level thinking you will feel mentally exhausted.

A short time relaxing your mind and entering one of the slower brain waves will help you to overcome that feeling of exhaustion and replenish the supplies your brain needs to keep functioning well.

The other benefit of learning a relaxation or meditation technique is that it slows down your thoughts so that you can be more creative and more easily find the solution to some of your problems. When you are suffering from stress your thoughts seem to spin furiously in unhelpful circles. You are unable to be logical or to make good decisions. Practicing a relaxation or meditation technique can help you to slow your thoughts down and find a way through the mess.

As much as anything else, slowing your thoughts down gives you insight into what you are thinking. An awareness of the thought(s) that is triggering your stress reactions is always the best place to start your stress management plan.

Using An Anchor For Your Focus

The aim of meditation in this context is to give your mind a break by taking it away from its habitual thinking and worrying. The best way to do that is to find something else to anchor your mind on. The easiest thing to use as an anchor is your breath.

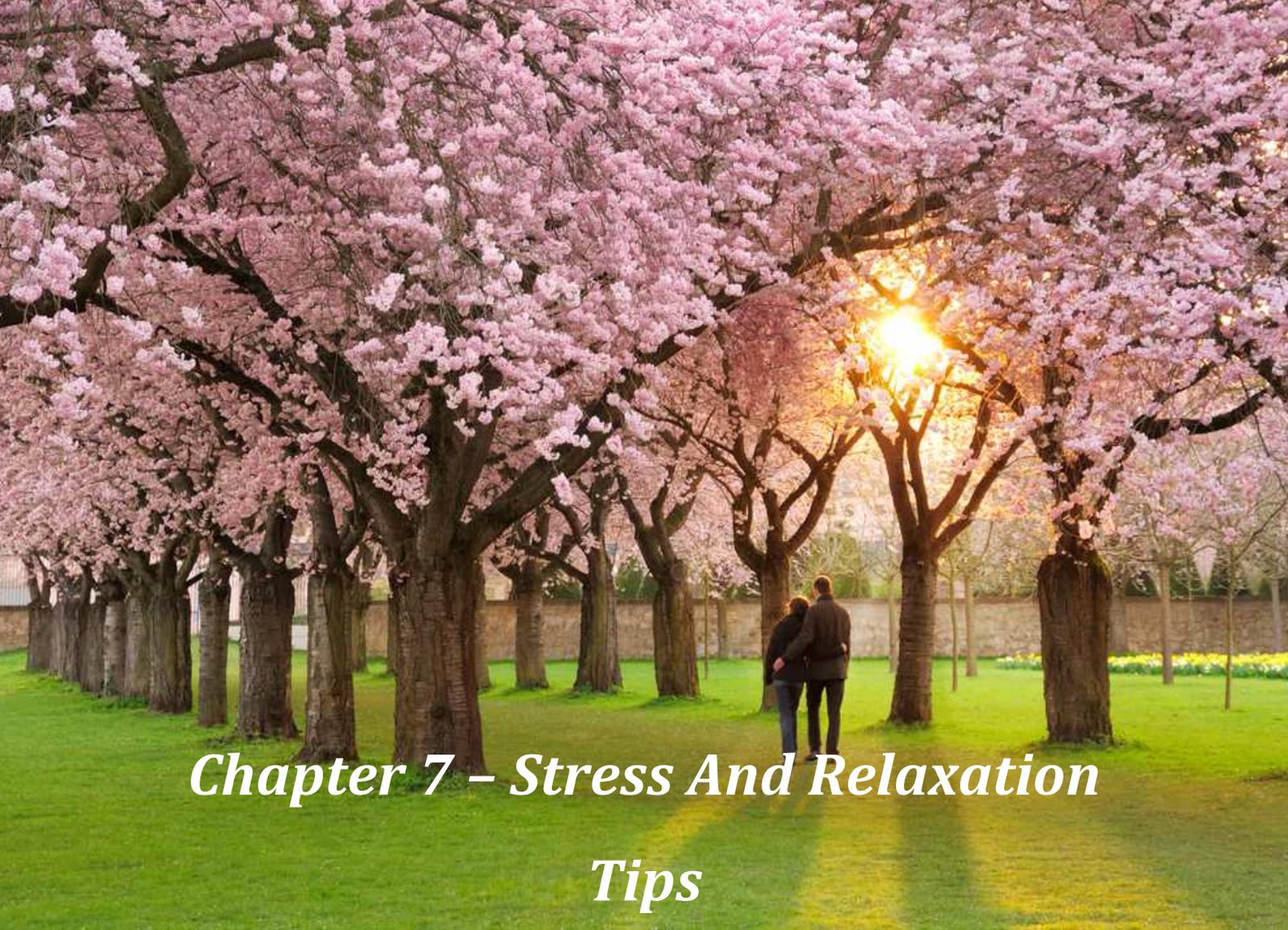
Meditation is then as simple as this:

- Sit. Sit upright in a comfortable position with your hands on your lap and your eyes closed.
- Breathe. Breathe normally and focus upon your breath in one place, either at your nostrils, in your chest or in your tummy.

How To Successfully Manage Stress

- **Focus.** The aim is to focus your mind upon the sensation of breathing. When you first begin it will be like training a wild horse. Your mind will want to run every else, rather than be still and calm and anchored to your breath. It will want to do what it has always done and cause you the mental stress it habitually causes you. Each time it wanders away, gently bring your focus back to your breathing. If it helps you to focus you can count while you breathe.

There is no right or wrong length of time or way to meditate. You will begin to notice an improvement in your thinking and feeling with as little as ten minutes a day. Make it part of your daily routine and for the first time in ages, enjoy the feeling of nothing to do but relax for the time you are meditating.



Chapter 7 – Stress And Relaxation

Tips

Life Stress Relief and Relaxation Tips

- Identify the source of your stress. Whether it is a child’s behaviour, relationship problems, money worries or health problems, you need to figure out what’s making you miserable so you can take the steps to deal with it.
- Practice good time management skills. Start by making a list of tasks you have to do, prioritize them and then tackle them in order of importance. Do the high-priority items first.
- If you have something particularly unpleasant to do, get it over with early so you will enjoy the rest of the day more.
- Get rid of unnecessary tasks from your to do list.
- Have a hobby. While your mind is focused on your hobby, it isn’t focused on the things that worry you.
- Keep a log. Make a list of all the demands on your time for one week. On a scale of 1 (not very intense) to 5 (very intense), rate the intensity of stress that each demand causes. Pay attention to events that you ranked as very stressful. Select one of them to explore and implement a solution and then focus on the others.

How To Successfully Manage Stress

- Seek professional help. If your life feels too chaotic to manage, talk to a professional counsellor or doctor.
- Find something to laugh or smile about. Research shows that when we laugh or even smile, blood flow to the brain is increased, endorphins (that give us a sense of well-being) are released and levels of stress hormones drop which allows an increase in white blood cell production which increases immunity. Stress causes blood flow to slow by 35% while laughter increases it by around 22%.¹
- Learn to recognise the symptoms of stress in your body. Recognising that you are feeling stressed can be the first step to taking control of it.
- Be aware of stress triggered compulsions. Unhealthy and destructive urges are sometimes triggered by stress. Excessive eating, drinking, smoking, unnecessary risk taking, reckless driving etc. Notice when you are doing these things and attack the cause rather than the symptom of the behaviour.
- Do a worst case scenario check. Ask yourself what is the worst that could happen in relation to the thing that is causing you stress? You will then either realize that it isn't that bad or work out what you could do if this scenario happened. Often what causes us more stress is our thoughts about the thing rather than the thing itself.
- Go for a walk outside.
- Go for a swim.
- Breathe. Notice your breathing patterns and practice uninterrupted breathing from your diaphragm.
- Get rid of anger and pent up emotions. Find ways (preferably nonviolent) to clear your baggage. You may need to be direct, assertive and forthright (tactfully). Writing down your feelings helps you to objectify and clear them. Visit a counsellor or hypnotherapist if you are having difficulty doing it by yourself.
- Write down everything that is stressing you and then take the list out into the garden and burn it. As you do affirm to yourself that you are letting any stress associated with these issues go.
- Stop, be still and focus upon just being in the 'now'. Unless it is a threat of imminent physical danger, what causes most of us stress is thinking about the past or the future. When we focus upon just being in the 'now', the cause of the stress disappears.
- Have regular breaks from the thing(s) that cause you stress. Go for a walk, sit in the sunshine, do anything that will take your mind off the thing that is causing you stress
- Eat good healthy foods and drink plenty of water.
- Avoid eating sugars and fats. These junk foods stimulate the release of epinephrine and intensify the stress reaction.
- Cut down on caffeine.
- Remember that you are in control of your life. People who feel in control experience less stress than people who don't feel in control.

1. Study at University of Maryland, Baltimore USA.

How To Successfully Manage Stress

- Remind yourself that an optimistic approach to life can be learned and will be more helpful to your happiness and stress levels than a pessimistic approach to life. There is a silver lining in every cloud. Look for the positive in the situation you are in.
- Take back control of your life. Remember that you are in charge. The more you take charge of your life, the more you are likely to reach your goals, the more you will believe in yourself, the less stressed and depressed you will be, and the more you will continue to control your own destiny.
- Negative thoughts start the stress cycle. Positive thoughts do not. Watch what you are thinking and pull yourself up when you think a negative thought. Doing this will start to decrease the stress in your life.
- It is not what happens that causes you stress, but how you think about it. Read the sentence again and really think about what it means.
- You need to ask yourself who is in control of your life. Your greatest freedom lies in seeing the chains that bind you and knowing how to sever them.
- If you can recognise what upsets you and attack your problems before they set off the stress cycle, you will save yourself emotional anguish, physical trauma and further stress. If you don't make any efforts to recognise the cause of your stress, you cannot decide what to do about them.
- Exercise can be as effective as anti-depressants in reducing the effects of stress and in combating the recurrence of depression.
- You can only concentrate on one thing at a time. If you are concentrating on things that you enjoy, you're not going to be worrying about the things that upset and stress you.
- Exercise regularly. Start doing in regular physical exercise 3 to 5 times per week for 30 minutes. This could be walking, jogging, swimming, biking, dancing aerobics etc. Exercise releases mood enhancing chemicals.
- Find yourself an exercise buddy. If you are a person who finds excuses not to exercise, get yourself an exercise buddy and commit to meeting them at a particular time and place so that you must go. They will keep you committed to exercising and give you someone to talk about life's challenges with (remember to be there for them also).
- Have a warm salt bath.
- Try writing in a journal. Research shows writing that analyses our problems and expresses our emotions is stress relieving.
- Learn to let go. Stressed people are often clinging to a belief or ignoring or denying key aspects of reality. Learn to let go of your view of the world and see it as it really is (i.e. face the reality of what is going on around you and what you are causing to go on around you).
- Allow yourself space to grieve. It takes time to recover from loss. Give yourself the time and the space to do so.
- Find a space to retreat and be alone. You don't always have to be strong. Give yourself time to heal and recover from difficult situations but don't stay stuck in them.
- Break bigger overwhelming projects into smaller achievable bits and then get started.
- Set strong personal boundaries on self-defeating and overwhelming goals and workload expectations.

How To Successfully Manage Stress

- Seek out others with similar issues and see what they have done to survive.
- Consider forming a support group.
- Learn to laugh at yourself.
- Take a holiday – away from work, family and commitments.
- Take a deep breath and count to ten. This will add oxygen to your system and help you to relax. It has the added benefit of giving you time to think before you open your mouth and say something you will regret.
- Stretch often.
- Smile. Try it! You'll feel better!
- Do something else to take your mind off the thing that is worrying you. Chances are that when you come back to it, it won't seem nearly so overwhelming.
- Stop and smell the roses: Remember to enjoy the journey as much as arriving at the destination.
- Make time for the things and people that really matter to you.
- Avoid the need to be competitive. Especially in relationships.
- Give yourself 'me' time. Find time to do the things you love.
- Have a gratitude journal and every week write in it the things you are grateful for.
- Sleep on problems. Continuing to fret and worry about a problem often doesn't bring you the answer you need. Instead sleep on it. Before you go to sleep at night, tell yourself that while you are asleep you will receive the solution you need. Keep a pen beside your bed. Sometimes the solution comes to you in the middle of the night and sometimes it comes to you the next morning.
- Remember that out of everything challenge comes something great; sometimes it is as simple as strength of character or personal resilience. Sometimes it is a gift even more profound.
- Know your own limitations and endeavour not to exceed them.
- Learn to say 'no'.
- Don't take on other people's challenges and problems. Listen and be there for them, but remember they are not your issues so don't immerse yourself in them.
- There is no blame. Be kind to yourself.
- Seek help from others if you need it. There are no prizes for having made it on your own through life. If you need help and others are offering, graciously accept.
- Listen to your favourite music.
- Join a sporting group to get both exercise and friendship.
- Talk to a friend about your problems rather than holding them in. Remember to return the favour.

How To Successfully Manage Stress

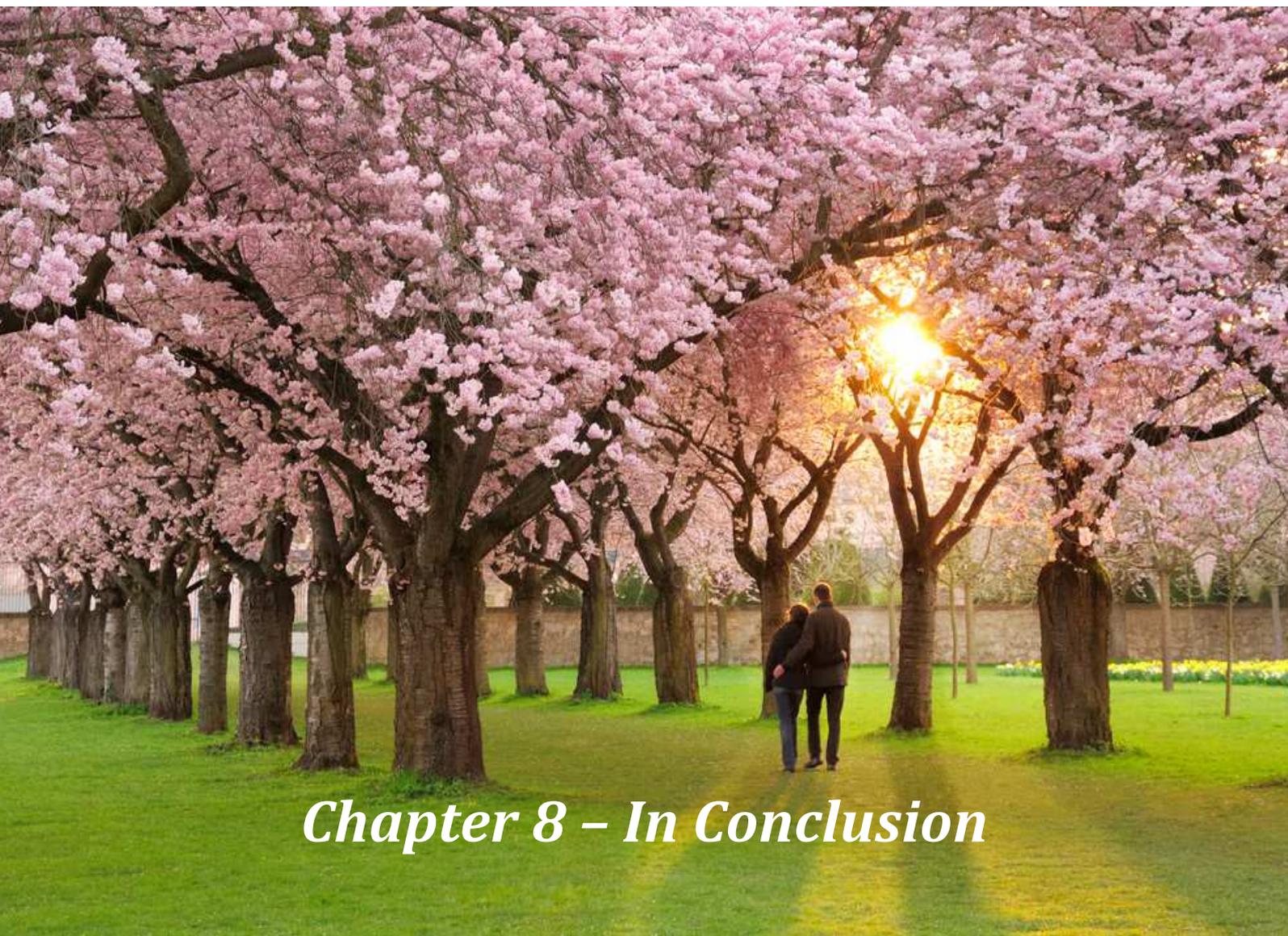
- Get a massage. Massage can relax muscles, ease muscle spasm, increase blood flow to skin and muscles and relieve mental and emotional stress.
- Read a book.
- Express your feelings and thoughts. It is far better to talk to a friend or a professional about the things that are stressing you than it is to keep them inside.
- Make time in your life for relaxation and fun. All work and no play makes you a very??
- Remember things that you enjoyed as a child and take time to explore them again.
- Get rid of negative things from your life: Take a hard look at the people surrounding you. People who are negative and prone to 'moods' spread negativity to others. Learn to say 'no' to negativity and remove it from your life wherever possible.
- Don't expect to be right all the time.
- Remove the 'shoulds' from your life. Do the things you really want to do, not the things you think you 'should' do. They only add to your stress.
- Don't expect to have harmony in your life all the time.
- Examine your expectations of yourself. Are you creating stress by having unrealistic expectations of what you can achieve? Don't let ego and social pressure force you into being/doing something that you are not or would rather not do.
- Get over the need to be perfect. Most of the time 'close enough is good enough' and in reality, it will never be perfect anyway.
- Learn how to be flexible.
- The only person you can change is yourself: If you are trying to change someone else, you are causing stress for both of you and you may be ruining a relationship in the process.
- Accept the situation. If it cannot be changed or you have no control over it, you are left with accepting that is the way it is. All you can change in this case is your attitude.
- Take your phone off the hook for a while.
- Learn some relaxation techniques like yoga, meditation, breathing etc.
- Consider removing yourself from the stressful situation. Is there some way you can remove yourself from this situation by moving homes, ending a relationship etc.?
- Have a comedy night in with a good DVD and popcorn.
- Take your lunch outside and eat it in the sunshine.
- Sit near water and feel calm.
- Go to the ocean.
- Spend a week without watching the television, listening to the radio, reading the newspaper or looking at the internet. You will be amazed how much better you will feel without all the advertising and mayhem in your life.
- Organize to spend time with a friend.

How To Successfully Manage Stress

- Set yourself realistic goals.
- Be cheerful, it deflates the stress and anxiety others are feeling.
- Crying helps to release stress chemicals.
- Take control of your stress before it takes control of you.
- Pull your shoulders back, raise your chin and paste a huge silly grin on your face. You will feel better straight away.
- Understand that you have made the choices that have led you to this point. Trust in yourself enough to know that you wouldn't have put yourself into a situation that you knew you couldn't ultimately cope with.
- Go to a meditation class and start to make it a regular part of your life.
- Focus on the bigger picture rather than the smaller troubling details.
- Imagine yourself ten years in the future looking back at now and see the problems that are causing you distress for what they really are.
- Ask yourself whether worrying will help the situation? If not, ask yourself what you could do instead with all the energy you have been putting into worrying.
- If your stress is due to an unfair distribution of workload, talk to the other people involved, explain how you are feeling and agree to a more equal distribution. (Other people will happily let you be the one to suffer if you don't speak up).
- Take a break from the activity you are working on and do something different. Sometimes it helps to come back to a stressful task later when you are feeling more relaxed.
- Listen to relaxing music while you work. Listening to classical music has been shown to lower your heart rate and slow your breathing.
- Read the weekend newspaper from cover to cover.
- Practice relaxation imagery: Imagine a warm, comfortable, safe place and enjoy it in your imagination. Make it your favourite place in nature and enjoy all the feelings you have when you are there.
- Give yourself a regular treat. This could be seeing a movie, dining out, seeing a show or visiting a friend.
- Change into loose, comfortable clothing and do something you enjoy.
- Go to the gym. Working out is a great way to relieve built up stress and anxiety. Not only do you get into shape and feel better about your body image, working out creates the hormone dopamine within the body which is known to create happiness and stimulate creativity.
- Count slowly to ten. Breathe deeply in on the odd numbers and breathe out on the even numbers.
- Tighten your entire body from head to toes. Then, slowly relax the muscles in your body starting with the toes and working your way up to the neck and shoulder muscles.

Work Stress Relief Tips

- Identify the problem source. Whether it's an unrealistic workload, job insecurity, office politics or a hostile work environment, you need to figure out what's making you miserable and then you can take steps to deal with it.
- Meet with your manager. In addition to your formal appraisal, meet with your manager every couple of months. Use these meetings to discuss your performance, your job and issues that may be causing you stress.
- If your employer offers a course in time management, sign up for it.
- Avoid scheduling things back to back or trying to fit too much into one day.
- If you feel the stress building, take a break. Try walking around the block or getting involved in some other activity that is relaxing and gets your mind off work.
- Get away from your desk for lunch. Stepping away from work to recharge will help you be more, not less, productive.
- Develop friendships at work. Just knowing you have one or more colleagues who can listen while you off-load will reduce your stress levels. Just remember to be there for them when they are in need.
- Delegate responsibility. Let go of the desire to control or oversee every little step. You'll be letting go of unnecessary stress in the process. You don't have to do it all yourself, if other people can take care of the task, why not let them? In the long run it doesn't take more time to teach someone else than to always do it yourself.
- Unplug. Leave work at work. Make a conscious decision to separate work time from personal time.
- Take advantage of your options. Find out if your employer offers flexi hours or job sharing for your role. The flexibility may alleviate some of your stress and free up some time.
- Your company may provide counselling or professional help for work related stress.
- Remember that jobs are disposable while your friends, family and health are not. If you are really unhappy and nothing else seems to work, it may be time to start looking for a new job.
- Take a holiday, remove yourself from the situation and get your perspective back.



Chapter 8 – In Conclusion

Now you have an understanding of what stress is and what it can do, I hope you understand why I cannot emphasise strongly enough the importance of taking action if you are experiencing stress. If the stress is severe it is important to get advice and help from the medical profession. Untreated stress has terrible long term health consequences affecting your physical, emotional and mental well-being, some of which will be difficult to reverse.

I wish you every success as you move forward managing stress in your life. It absolutely can be done (I say this from the place of someone who has done it) and the rewards on the other side are fabulous. You can have a demanding job and still live a life where you feel well mentally, emotionally and physically.

Warmest wishes

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