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# The Key to Unlocking Your Potential

## Module 5: Managing Stress

With Vicki La Bouchardiere

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We all have degrees of stress to deal with in our working and personal lives, and in this module we'll be looking at how to develop a positive attitude to stress in order to benefit your performance all around.

### What happens when you aren't coping well with stress?

We tend to hear about stress being a bad thing, and it isn't always the case.

Any kind of stress is basically a burst of energy that signals something needs to happen. In small doses it can be advantageous, giving you the spur and motivation to get things done. It has even been found that a certain amount of stress helps you focus and accomplish tasks more quickly, and even boost your memory power.

As well as a motivator, stress is also a vital warning system, and it produces the fight-or-flight response. When the brain receives signals from the senses, stress is felt when it starts flooding the body with chemicals like epinephrine, norepinephrine and cortisol. This creates

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a number of physical reactions such as increased blood pressure and heart rate. When all is working well, the senses develop a laser-like focus so you can avoid physically stressful situations — such as running away from a charging bull!

However, when you are exposed to too much stress for extended periods of time, it can have a detrimental effect. If you are under emotional stress for several weeks or months it can cause high blood pressure, fatigue, depression, anxiety and even weaken your immune system. It can also be harmful to your heart and change how the arteries and cells regenerate.

## How do you know when you're suffering from too much stress?

It can be difficult to spot when good stress turns bad as it can creep up on you slowly. There's also the tendency to dismiss the symptoms if you feel you don't have time to slow down or come up with a Plan B, so you need to get really honest with yourself and maybe ask for feedback from your nearest and dearest to help you decide if you need to make some changes.

Here are some common symptoms of a reduced ability to deal with stress:

- Focus: Your ability to focus on tasks becomes weaker
- Immune System: You may get ill more often with minor illnesses such as colds, or autoimmune diseases like eczema or ulcerative colitis flare-up.
- Aches and Pains: You might notice more body aches and headaches.
- Mood swings: You might become more irritable, anxious or tearful.
- Sleep problems: You might have trouble falling sleeping or staying awake.
- Skin and hair problems: You might get acne, psoriasis or hair thinning.
- Appetite changes and digestive problems: You might want to eat a lot more or you may lose your appetite completely, or you may feel nauseous or have heartburn.
- Menstrual changes: In women, stress can affect their menstrual cycle.
- Sexual disorders: impotence, premature ejaculation or loss of libido.

## How does this affect your overall performance?

In the Judgement Index, we measure a number of indicators including the ability to cope with stress, and this is the first indicator I look at when someone has other development areas showing up on their report. This is because when someone isn't coping with stress, it can affect almost all their other indicators.

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The good news is the stress indicator is the most sensitive and changes more quickly than the other indicators when given attention. For example, if I see someone has development needs around their ability to deal with difficult people and difficult situations, or they are struggling with solving problems, if their stress indicator is at the wrong end of the scale, I'll suggest they work on reducing stress levels first before focusing on anything else, because any other issues are likely to improve on their own if that person reduces their levels of unhealthy stress.

## How can you help yourself deal with stress better?

The most important thing about treating stress is to recognise you are suffering from it in the first place. You might be putting pressure on yourself to be able to cope with everything, and owning up to overwhelm might feel like a weakness. It isn't. The greatest weakness is the lack of self-awareness. Once you know there's a problem, you can start working on it.

There's also the danger of ignoring the stress of others within your company. Not many business owners realise how much stress impacts on productivity and therefore their bottom line. If you could see the effects easily, you'd start paying as much attention to stress management as you do to your sales figures.

1. Keep a stress diary: Make a note of the following things: The date, time and place of each stressful episode. Give your stress levels a rating from 1-10. Note what you were doing, who you were with and how you felt both emotionally and physically during the episode. Also, make a note of what you did that helped you feel better. This will help you get excellent at identifying the triggers and remembering strategies for self-help.
2. Get good at managing your time. You must accept that you cannot do everything at once and make an effort to organise your to-do list and identify the real priorities. Work out what needs to be done today, this week, this month or whenever you have time. Get someone to help you with this if *everything* seems important and urgent. Also, ask yourself what you can delegate to others, and what can be deleted from your list completely, and don't be afraid of doing so.
3. Watch your self talk. Are you talking yourself into a frenzy? This is known as catastrophising.
4. Take control of your problems. When you're feeling overwhelmed, take each problem at a time and write down a list of possible solutions. Decide the pro's and con's of each solution and then decide on the best way forward and make a strategy including:
  - a. What is the action that needs to be taken
  - b. Break it down into stages if it's complicated
  - c. Decide who needs to do things
  - d. Decide when they need to do it by
  - e. Work out what resources are needed and arrange them

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5. The important thing is to take some action immediately, however small, towards solving the problem. We can get paralysed by indecision, and the only way to make your way out of that state is to do something. Don't worry about getting it wrong - you must learn to forgive yourself if you have perfectionist tendencies.
  6. Learn to say "No", One of the biggest cause of stress and overwhelm is biting off more than you can chew. This trait is usually caused by some very good characteristics in people - namely positivity (you think you can do more than you can) and high empathy (you don't want to let anyone down). It's great to help other people, but it's also important to recognise when it's having a negative impact on you. You'll be no use to anyone if you end up rocking in a corner!
  7. If you feel ill, then take some time out. If stress has affected your immune system, then you're not going to help yourself if you keep pushing on while you're ill. Take it as a warning signal from your body that you're overdoing it and start working on your self care.
  8. Don't bottle up your feelings. Talk to someone you trust if you're feeling stressed. You could feel instantly better just by sharing your thoughts with another person. You don't have to worry about sounding like a whiner. Just reach out and tell someone you're struggling. If they aren't sympathetic, don't take it to heart. Not everyone gets it, so it's more a statement of their ignorance if they tell you to pull yourself together and get on with things. If you feel like you can't talk to a friend go straight to the next point:
  9. Talk to your GP. Don't worry that they'll put you straight on drugs. They can't force you to, and they're more likely to help you with good advice first and foremost. Saying that, if they offer you medication that might help, it's worth considering. Sometimes a short spell on medication can help you over the worst of your problems whilst you focus on changing things going forwards. A course of therapy could prove helpful and give you the tools you need to combat any future stressful times.
  10. Try Relaxation techniques. There are many different ones to try such as guided meditations (you can find these on YouTube), breathing exercises where you focus on your inhalations and exhalations, and you can also focus on repeated words such as "calm" and "peace" or mantras such as "I'm feeling calmer and more in control with every breath". Alternatively, you might like to try some mindfulness exercises such as adult colouring books or simply watching the birds outside your window. All these things can stop your mind racing away in a whirlwind of stressful thoughts.
  11. Exercise. The effects of exercise on stress have been very well researched. You don't have to join a gym, just daily walks can be helpful for stress management.
  12. Watch what you consume. Try avoiding or cutting down on alcohol, caffeine and nicotine. All these things can worsen the symptoms of stress. Caffeine and nicotine are both stimulants and thus can increase the jittery feelings. Alcohol is a depressant when taken in larger quantities than your body can cope with, and can act as a stimulant in small quantities - neither of which are helpful to you if you are suffering from stress.
  13. It's also a good idea to cut down on refined sugars because these can cause energy crashes after the initial sugar high. Keep to a healthy diet full of fruit and vegetables to keep your immune system strong.

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14. Sleep as well as possible. Lack of sleep can cause a vicious circle with stress, both causing it and/or making it worse. Aim to develop good habits before bedtime, taking time to ease into relaxation by avoiding working immediately before bedtime, including looking at your phone where you might get emails and messages that keep you awake. Make sure your bedroom is tidy and tranquil, with no reminders of any stressors around you. Make sure your mattress is of good quality and renew it every 8 years or so. Try taking a bath to relax you before bedtime, and maybe even use sleep mist for your pillows. All these things give you the best possible chance of a good night's sleep thus making the following day easier.

## Module 5 Worksheet: Your Stress Management Action Plan

Thinking about what we've discussed above, what do you feel you need to take action on? If you are feeling stress-free, then perhaps go through this exercise with someone who might need some help.

- Feelings of overwhelm
  - Do you ever feel as if things are getting on top of you? If so what are those things? Are they mainly work tasks or does your personal life impact on your work life?

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- Are you managing your to-do list well?
    - Do you have a clear list of priorities or does everything seem both urgent and important? Write down when you will put aside one hour to organise your list properly, paying special attention to what could be delegated or deleted.

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- Is there anyone in your life who is adding to your stress? It could be partners, children, employees, clients, friends, parents or siblings. What can you do to help yourself feel better? It could be seeing less of someone, telling them how you feel especially if you need to say “No” to them more often, or changing your thoughts about your relationship with them. For example, you can suffer in silence and feel bitter and resentful about your co-director not pulling their weight, or you can own the situation and consider it your responsibility to either gladly do it all yourself or have a difficult conversation with them. If you accept responsibility for everything that happens to you, you’ll never feel like a victim, and this can help lower stress levels as you begin to feel in control of your life.

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- What can you do to improve the quality or quantity of your sleep?
  - How can you improve your bedtime routine or your sleeping environment?

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- What do you need to limit in your diet in order to keep your mood better?
  - Could you cut down on alcohol, caffeine, sugar or nicotine?

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## Making a Stress Diary

If you think it would be helpful to keep a stress diary, then here's a template you could follow:

Date	Trigger: What were you doing?	Stress Level 1-10	Who were you with?	What were your physical and/or emotional reactions?	What helped you feel better?

Good luck with everything, and I'll see you in Module 6

All the Best

Vicki