The “Stress Puzzle”

Stress is not an event that “happens to us”. Our beliefs and perceptions of events are more important than the actual events in determining our level of stress.
The “Stress Whirlpool”

Thoughts

Behaviour

Emotions
Crooked Thinking Habits

Many of us fall into the trap of ‘Crooked Thinking’. This term refers to patterns of thought that increase our negativity, fears or worry levels, and as a result elevate our stress levels as well. Such patterns end up altering our view of ourselves and of the world around us.

It is important to note that all Crooked Thinking involves some form of distortion. A number of these distortions seem to be very common and are shared by many in Western society. The good news is that distorted thinking is simply a bad habit. And like any bad habit, one can eliminate or minimize the habit to a point where it no longer is a problem. The first step is to understand what Crooked Thinking actually is and what common distortions are present in most cases.

Here are some common forms of thought distortions. You can find more on these and other common thought distortions in any book written by Dr. David D. Burns:

**Personalization.** When we hold ourselves responsible for things over which we have little or no influence, or which have only a minimal connection to us, we are participating in personalization. For example, if a colleague is in a grumpy mood, it would be rational to ask ourselves, “What’s going on that he’s in such a bad mood?”. However, if we engage in the habit of personalizing, we ask, “What did I do?”. Two useful tools to break out of the crooked thinking pattern of personalization are:

1. asking ourselves, “Does this realistically have anything to do with me?”, and
2. reminding ourselves of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can change, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

**Magnification or Minimization.** This thinking habit occurs when the impact of an event, or our role in it is exaggerated. “Awfulizing” or “catastrophizing” fall into this category. For example, if I’m having difficulty at work, but I tell myself that I am about to be fired, I am engaging in catastrophic thinking. To challenge this bad thinking habit, we need to ask ourselves, “What is an accurate, realistic description of my actions, or this event?” Talking about an event with others can be helpful, since they can often provide a third-party perspective to help us examine the situation rationally.

**All-or-nothing thinking.** This type of crooked thinking occurs when we think in absolute black and white terms, with no room for grays. I’m either perfect, or useless. Someone is either wonderful, or hopeless. The future is either heaven or hell. To move into a realistic framework, all-or-nothing thinkers need to learn to look for middle ground where people and events are a mix of good and bad, positive and negative, helpful and unhelpful.

**Mind reading.** When we engage in mind reading, we assume that we know what others are thinking, or what they need or want - usually to our detriment. For instance, going to a party and thinking people are not talking to you because they know you’ve just gained five pounds is taking the “mind reading” distortion to an absurdity. When we are guilty of mind reading, we
need to remember to gather data and information from other people not to assume that we know what they are thinking.

**Discounting the positives.** This thinking error occurs when the negative aspects of an event are attended to and the positive aspects are ignored. The phrase, “Seeing the glass half empty” speaks to this particular thinking habit. To break this thinking habit, we need to see events in their entirety, not to focus only on their negative aspects.

**“Should/ought/must” thinking.** When we engage in should/ought/must thinking we habitually set perfectionistic or unrealistic standards for ourselves and others. Statements such as, “My children should be more obedient” or “My husband ought to be more thoughtful” suggest that the current status quo is inadequate, thereby creating stress. To break this habit, we need to become more accepting of “what is” and set standards that can be realistically met.

**“Blame” thinking.** Blaming others or oneself for events that have occurred, whether or not this assignment of blame is accurate, is a common thinking error. It is premised on the belief that if something has gone wrong, someone must be responsible for it. But this is not always the case, or accurate accountabilities may be complex and inter-related. To alter this thinking habit, we need to be willing to take the time to understand how events occurred, and not immediately point fingers at others.

Adapted from David Burns, *Feeling Good*. 
Negative Thought Diamond

Self
“I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

Others
“He’s so incompetent! He probably can’t even tie his own shoe laces without help.”

World
“The world is full of crazies these days. There’s nowhere safe to live.”

Future
“I’m sure they’ll find this lump is malignant.”
Thought Sampler

- No one else seems to struggle the way I do =
- I just know we’re destroying the ozone layer quicker than experts say, soon we’ll have nothing left =
- Feeling like an outsider will always plague my life =
- My boss is making unreasonable demands =
- I’ll never be able to get my life “together” =
- No one loves me =
- The way things are today, kids don’t have a future =
- The problem is so big, I won’t be able to cope with it =
- She didn’t really mean what she said, you can’t trust anyone =
- No one ever helps me. They just don’t care =
- I’m hopeless =
Steps for the “Daily Catch”

1) Recognize when you are participating in excessive negative thinking or experiencing excessive stress in your body

2) Record the situation/events which triggered the negative thoughts or stress

3) Record all Negative Thoughts that emerged (at least 4-6 thoughts)

4) Identify if these thoughts focus on self, other, future or the world

5) For each Negative Thought, write down other, more reasonable response based on a clear, rational assessment of the facts (at least 3-4 responses for each negative thought)
### The “Daily Catch”

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<th>Negative Thought</th>
<th>Focus of Negative Thought (Self, Others, World, Future)</th>
<th>Reasonable Response</th>
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<td>My boss just called and asked about the progress of the last project he assigned</td>
<td>- I should have had it done by now&lt;br&gt;- He’s so useless! He knows nothing at all about delegating!&lt;br&gt;- He’s checking because he thinks I’m incompetent&lt;br&gt;- I’ll never be able to get it done&lt;br&gt;- He’ll probably fire me because he’ll be upset when he discovers it’s not done</td>
<td>Self&lt;br&gt;Other&lt;br&gt;Self&lt;br&gt;Future&lt;br&gt;Future</td>
<td>- I have not done it by now, because there was no deadline on the project&lt;br&gt;- He told me other projects were priority right now&lt;br&gt;- I did complete significant pieces of it, so it’ll be clear that I am dedicated and competent&lt;br&gt;- He asked about the “progress” – not if it’s done&lt;br&gt;- Even if he is upset, he won’t fire me – he wants the project completed. If he’s upset, I’ll explain myself, and then we’ll prioritize tasks and work out a reasonable timeframe</td>
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**Negative Thinking and Organizational Change: The Deadly Duo**

Many of us experience “tough going” when we’re surrounded by organizational change. A merger, a round of downsizing, changes in senior leadership – these all create enormous stress. Less extreme changes like getting a new IT system, or a new supervisor, count too! And most of us respond to these stressors by participating in negative thinking. When our means of earning a livelihood starts to shake, we react with fear. Thoughts such as, “I’m going to lose my job”, “I can’t work with this new person” or “The end result of all these changes will be a disaster” fill our minds and at times seem to swamp us.

So...if you’re experiencing organizational change, take note! If a lot of people are impacted by the change, anticipate to see negativity in the work environment. But you don’t have to be part of the problem. Use the Becoming Aware tool frequently to catch small negative thoughts as they pop up. Recognize the stress you’re experiencing, and find ways to manage it that are more helpful than indulging in negative thinking. Maintain a proactive, flexible and patient attitude. Look for opportunities in the new changes. Be an exception to the rule, and react to workplace change positively. Decide to be part of the solution!

**There’s more than one way to...**

When we get stuck in looking at an issue from only one perspective, our body reacts with by becoming stressed! Being able to see a situation from more than one perspective is a skill we can all develop to reduce our stress levels. In the book “Managing Your Mind”, Butler and Hope offer the following list of questions to help us get better at seeing both the forest and the trees:

- What are the facts?
- Does my thinking fit the facts?
- Could I be making a mistake in how I’m thinking?
- Am I thinking straight?
- What other points of view are there?
- How would someone else (my partner, my boss, a friend...) think about this?
- What is the worst that can happen?
- What can I do if that worst case scenario happens?
- Who can help me with this situation?
Gratitude Exercise

1)__________________________
2)__________________________
3)__________________________
4)__________________________
5)__________________________
6)__________________________
7)__________________________
8)__________________________
9)__________________________
10)__________________________
Related Resources

**Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness**

Jon Kabat-Zinn (ISBN 0 385 30312 2, approx. $20)

This book is full of good information about reducing and managing stress, but don’t try to read it from cover to cover. Pick and choose the chapters that apply to you. For instance, you might choose to read Ch. 21, “Working with Symptoms: Listening to Your Body” and follow it with Ch. 28, “Work Stress”. Kabat-Zinn is an expert on stress management, and this book outlines the program that he and his colleagues developed at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre. Bite off small chunks of this book and you’ll find plenty of good ideas to chew on.

**The Best Guide to Meditation**

Victor N. Davich  (ISBN 1 58063 010 3, approx. $25)

If you’re wanting to learn more about meditation, but don’t know where to start, this is the book for you. It’s an easy-to-read manual which presents a full menu of meditation practices. Better yet, it addresses all the reasons that we resist doing things that are good for us, and encourages us to move beyond our doubts and resistance. So if you decide to read this book, you’ll have no good excuses left to stop you from “changing your mind” and reducing your stress.

**Managing Your Mind – the Mental Fitness Guide**


Since our mind often suffers greatly when we are stressed, reading this book makes perfect sense. The book helps you strengthen your mind and deal with many problems created when we are stressed: distorted thinking, inability to sleep, depression, alcohol, worry and anxiety, plummeting self esteem and more. A serious yet succinct treatment of a host of issues that are created by – and greatly contribute to – our stress.

**Ten Days to Self Esteem**

David Burns (ISBN 0-688-98455-4, approx. $22)

From the leading expert in the field of Cognitive Therapy, this book delivers much more than its commercialized title would suggest. Guiding you through the most common thinking distortions that contribute to stress, the book offers numerous self assessment tools, exercises, and strategies for dealing with the biggest culprit in our personal stress picture: our own mind. Highly recommended even if you choose not to do even one of the exercises.

[www.mandalacoach.com](http://www.mandalacoach.com)

If you are interested in exploring guided imagery and meditation, try this website. Meditations which encourage self-awareness and relaxation are provided for your use. Your role will be to give yourself some time to practice them.

[www.lifepositive.com](http://www.lifepositive.com)

If you like lots of choice, this website offers an extensive collection of resources to help you address stress. The “stress” and “meditation” sections provide activities and articles relating to stress reduction, and they link to other related websites. This site’s format encourages you to browse through lots of stress management alternatives and options to inspire you to take action.

[www.meditationsociety.com](http://www.meditationsociety.com)

This website explains how meditation literally “changes our minds” by replacing scattered thoughts with focused concentration. It provides many meditations to move “seekers” from an intellectual understanding of the benefits of meditating to an experiential one. It lists many classical meditation texts in its “suggested readings” section.
We’re here anytime and anywhere you need us.

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