

Skillbook

Stress Busters

Stress
Management



Mindtools

Stress Busters

Skillbook

This Skillbook is published by Mind Tools Ltd.
21 Young Street, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH2 4HU.

Copyright © Mind Tools Ltd, 2025.
All rights reserved.

Version 8.0.

This Skillbook is protected by international copyright law.
You may use it only if you are a Mindtools member or have
received it under corporate license.

If you have any queries, please contact us at
mtecustomerservices@mindtools.com.

Contents

| | | |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1. | Introduction | 1 |
| 2. | Coping With Stress | 2 |
| 3. | Action-Oriented Strategies | 4 |
| 4. | Emotion-Oriented Strategies | 11 |
| 5. | Acceptance-Oriented Strategies | 15 |
| 6. | Key Points | 17 |

1. Introduction

For most of us, life and work can be stressful. There really is no getting around this.

Some people will tell you to “smile and get on with it” when you’re feeling stressed. However, stress isn’t a trivial matter. It can cause minor health conditions like headaches and fatigue, as well as more serious problems such as heart attacks, high blood pressure, and strokes.

It also costs organizations millions of dollars in lost production every year.

This is why it’s important to know how to deal with stress.

This **Skillbook** highlights specific tools and skills that you can use to combat the stress in your life, and it gets you thinking about a long-term approach to managing it.

You’ll learn about four approaches for dealing with stress. They are:

1. **Workload management strategies:** for preventing stress by organizing your schedule more effectively.
2. **Defense building:** for reducing stress by eliminating stressful situations.
3. **Thinking-based techniques:** for dealing with stress by thinking about things differently.
4. **Relaxation exercises:** for coping with stress in situations that are out of your control.

Warning:

Stress can cause severe health problems.

While these stress management techniques have been shown to have a positive effect on reducing stress, they are for guidance only.

Readers should take the advice of suitably qualified health professionals if they have any concerns over stress-related illnesses, or if stress is causing significant or persistent unhappiness.

Health professionals should also be consulted before any major change in diet or levels of exercise.

2. Coping With Stress

There are many definitions and explanations of stress.

One common definition is attributed to psychologist Richard S. Lazarus. He said, “Stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.”

We can simplify this by saying, “Stress is what we experience when we feel that we’re not in control.”

With stress, perception is important. What one person perceives as stressful may not be to another. The level of stress that each person experiences also differs.

People’s reactions to stress also vary. Some people react negatively to stressful situations, while others suffer very little. Factors such as personality, social support, and physical and mental conditioning all affect the amount of stress that people experience.

Note:



It’s important to note the distinction between pressure and stress. People can work very effectively and produce excellent results when they’re under pressure, but there are rarely any positives when working under stress.

So, as a manager, it’s important that you don’t put your team members under too much pressure, then blame them for being “weak” when they can’t cope. You can explore the relationship between pressure and performance in our article, [The Inverted-U Model](#).

Some of the symptoms of stress – tiredness, anxiety, inability to relax – are found in a stress-related condition called “hurry sickness.”

Cardiologists [Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman](#) coined the term “hurry sickness” after noticing that many of their patients suffered from a “harrying sense of time urgency.” They defined it as “a continuous struggle and unrelenting attempt to accomplish or achieve more and more things or participate in more and more events in less and less time.”

There are three types of strategy that you can use to deal with stress, no matter how bad it makes you feel. These are:

- **Action-oriented:** with these strategies you take action that, in time, will help you to take more control over your life. You simply do whatever you sensibly can to control and eliminate the sources of stress.
- **Emotionally oriented:** these psychological strategies help you to intercept destructive negative thinking, and they allow you to think more positively about the situation that you're in.
- **Acceptance-oriented:** these strategies temporarily relieve stress symptoms when you can't regain control.

In Chapter 3, we'll start by looking at some action-oriented strategies that you can use to deal with the stress that you experience.



3. Action-Oriented Strategies

First, we're going to look at action-oriented approaches to stress, where you take action to reduce or eliminate the stressors in your life. These strategies can help you to gain control of stress-inducing situations, and to develop patterns of behavior that promote a less stressful lifestyle.

Managing your workload is one of the most important strategies. Let's look at the skills you need to do this.

3.1 Workload Management

Poor time management is a large contributor to stress. A seemingly simple task can become stressful when the pressure to complete it is too high, or when you're feeling overwhelmed by your workload. Effective workload management is your first line of defense against this.

There are some common patterns of behavior that increase time-related stress, which many of us fall victim to. These include:

- **“Fail to Plan, and You're Planning to Fail”**

This is true of your time, just as it is of other things. Scheduling your time properly is something that you absolutely have to do if you're overloaded.

- **Doing Things That Are Urgent Before Things That Are Important**

We often say “No” to important requests to make time for the more urgent ones. This can make us feel overwhelmed, because the important issues aren't being addressed.

- **Doing Things That Are Easy Before Things That Are Difficult**

When you do this, your time will invariably get eaten up by easy, routine tasks, leaving little time to complete more difficult ones.

- **Failing to Delegate**

Delegation is very effective for combating work overload. If delegating is a problem for you, read our **Skillbook** on Delegation.



Action:

Answer the questions in the box, below.

Do you manage your workload as effectively as you could? Which of the patterns on the previous page are you most guilty of?

What three steps will you take to manage your workload more effectively?

1.

2.

3.

3.2 Building Defenses Against Stress

There are many techniques that you can use to build defenses against stress, and to protect yourself from stressful situations. Here, you can explore how developing a network of support can be a very powerful defense.

Developing a Support Network

[Studies](#) have found that if you have a strong network of friends, family and co-workers who can support you, you're less likely to experience stress and you're better able to cope with it when it does surface.

When you have a well-developed system of support, you can get the assistance that you need, when you need it. You'll always have someone to turn to, to talk to, to help you to bring your thoughts back to reality, or to brainstorm solutions with.

Your support network can include a variety of people, such as:

- Friends.
- Family.
- Co-workers.
- Managers.
- Team members.
- Mentors.

While it might seem easiest to build your network with friends and family, you do need to form meaningful relationships with people at work, too. These people can provide you with more specific assistance when stress is work related.

Two ways to develop supportive relationships at work are:

- **Find a Mentor:** a good mentor provides an excellent opportunity for you to learn new skills and to reinforce your self-worth. To make sure that the relationship is not just one way, be prepared to provide information to your mentor and to do your very best to follow their advice.
- **Work in a Team:** when you work closely with others on a dedicated task or project, you can turn a working relationship into one of mutual support and assistance.

Remember, the dynamics of working closely with a mentor and other team members can help to build trust between you. This can make it easier for you to talk about what's causing you stress, as well as to generate ideas for dealing with it.



Action:

Take some time right now to think about your support network. Use the table below to record the names of four people that you can turn to for support when you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed. Note down the basis of your relationship: are they friends/family, your boss, or your colleagues? Ideally, you'll have a variety of people who you can turn to.

Then, think about why you consider them a part of your support network.

- Have they provided you with support in the past?
- Do you provide mutual support to one another?

Record the history of support between yourself and each individual.

Then, look for evidence of one-way relationships. Record what action you intend to take to improve your contribution to them.

| Current Support Network | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Name | Relationship | Support Provided | One-Way or Reciprocal? |
| | | By them: | |
| | | By you: | |

| Current Support Network | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Name | Relationship | Support Provided | One-Way or Reciprocal? |
| | | By them: | |
| | | By you: | |

| Current Support Network | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------|---|------------------------|
| Name | Relationship | Support Provided | One-Way or Reciprocal? |
| | | <p>By them:</p> <p>By you:</p> | |

| Current Support Network | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------|---|------------------------|
| Name | Relationship | Support Provided | One-Way or Reciprocal? |
| | | <p>By them:</p> <p>By you:</p> | |



Action:

Think about a time when you felt frustrated or disempowered because your voice wasn't heard. Why do you think you lacked influence? What did you do? Now think of another person with whom you can develop a mentoring relationship, and who might have the time to do so. This person could be well known in your network, a senior manager, or simply someone who has been in the same company or profession longer than you.

Using the table on the next page, create a goal statement that describes what you'd like to achieve in this potential relationship within the next six months. List some specific actions that you could take to accomplish this goal.

Finally, think about what you could do to make this is a reciprocal arrangement. This will help you to formulate your initial request, as well as help you to maintain a positive relationship, if this person is happy to take part.

| |
|--|
| Developing a Mentoring Relationship |
| Name of Potential Mentor: |
| |
| Goal Statement: |
| |
| Action Plan: |
| |
| Reciprocal Activities: |
| |



Note:

Not every relationship can be a perfect balance of “give and take.” There may be people who you take from more than you give to. Try not to feel guilty about this, as you may have other relationships where you give more.

If you’re struggling to cope at work, don’t be afraid to reach out.



Tip:

There are actions that you can take to relieve stress caused by factors other than your workload.

For example, you can learn how to be assertive, to ensure that your needs are met fairly. You can also identify any training or development needs that you have, to help you to feel more confident and prepared in your role.

Exercise is another good stress buster. People who exercise regularly enjoy better health and wellbeing at work, and can fight the physical symptoms of stress more efficiently. What’s more, exercise builds your physiological resiliency, especially when you focus on cardiovascular conditioning and controlling your diet.

4. Emotion-Oriented Strategies

By strengthening our emotional response to stressful situations, we can become less vulnerable to them.

One of the most powerful strategies for changing our emotional response to stress is changing our thinking. If we can remove our negative thinking from the equation, the situation can often be less stressful.

We can do this with a group of techniques called thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking.

Using Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking

We all get stressed sometimes because of what we're telling ourselves. Perhaps we think that someone doesn't like us when, in fact, they are just having a bad day. Perhaps we're scared of a situation that we don't understand, or maybe we're just seeing the negatives and not the positives.

This is where thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking can help us to strengthen our emotional response.

When we realize that it's our perception of what's going on that causes us stress, rather than the situation itself, we can try to take control of our thinking and turn our negative thoughts into more positive and rational ones.

By practicing thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking, you consciously record your negative thoughts as they occur and then take deliberate action to replace them with more appropriate ones.

Let's look at using this technique step by step.

Step 1: Write Down Your Negative Thoughts



Action:

Think about some situations that are currently causing you stress, or have caused you stress in the past. For each one, write down the negative thoughts that you're experiencing in the first column of the thought awareness worksheet on [page 14](#).

Some examples of negative thinking are, for example, "I'm stupid," "I'm in over my head," or "Everyone expects me to fail."

Think about why you're feeling stressed. What is it that's causing you anxiety? Do you feel confident in your ability to deal with the situation or overwhelmed?

Step 2: Replace Your Negative Thoughts With Rational Ones

Once you're aware of your negative thoughts, you can replace them with rational and well-balanced ones.

To do this, you must think about the situation from a more objective perspective. You have to challenge your perceptions, and determine whether your thoughts are reasonable and accurate.



Action:

Look at each thought on the worksheet on [page 14](#), and ask yourself if it's reasonable. Be objective in your assessment.

Then, adopt another person's perspective and, again, determine how rational the thought is. Would your colleagues, boss or friends agree with it?

If the thought is unreasonable or irrational, as is often the case, rewrite it to express the truth of the situation.

Here are some examples of how you could turn your negative thoughts into more rational ones:

- "I'm stupid." – "I have the skills and knowledge I need to perform the task."
- "I'm in over my head." – "My boss is confident that I can complete this assignment well."
- "Everyone expects me to fail." – "My co-workers are dependent on my success and they have a vested interest in helping me to succeed."

If you write down a negative thought that **is** representative of reality, this is your opportunity to deal with the underlying concerns. Maybe you don't have all the skills that you need to perform a task. If that's the case, work with your manager to create a development plan that brings your ability in line with what they expect of you.

Rational thinking can relieve you of stress, regardless of how truthful your negative thought is, because it gives you something real to focus on.

Step 3: Affirm Your Reality With Positive Thinking

Now that you know the reality of the stressful situation, you may still need a boost to help you to cope with it. You can build your confidence and self-esteem by taking your thoughts to the next level and by thinking positively about yourself.

Knowing that you have the skills to perform a job well is reassuring, but telling yourself that you'll complete the task superbly is inspiring. A positive message about yourself and your ability can help to heal the damage caused by repeated negative ones.

Try to make your positive statement as specific as possible, and put it in the present tense to enforce its meaning. Making an emotional connection with it can make it more memorable and believable.



Action:

Look at each rational thought on your worksheet and create a positive statement that will help you to build your confidence in that area.

Record your positive statement on the worksheet and include any opportunities you can think of for putting it into action.

Examples of positive statements include:

- "My skills will allow me to complete this project superbly."
- "I can complete this assignment expertly."
- "I deserve respect and support from my co-workers."

Practicing thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking can help you to become emotionally stronger.

Thought Awareness Worksheet

| Negative Thought | Rational Thought | Positive Thoughts and Opportunities |
|------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

5. Acceptance-Oriented Strategies

A cceptance-oriented approaches to managing stress recognize and accept that it's a part of life, and that sometimes you have **no** power to change a situation. They help you to deal with stress in the “here and now.”

Accepting that you genuinely can't control or influence something is not a sign that you're ineffective, passive or apathetic. It's a sign of confidence, maturity and intelligence! It shows that you have a proactive way of coping.

Often, when you're in a stressful situation, you simply need to relax and take a break, so that you can regain your focus and concentration. If you can, try to find a buffer or “safe place” where you can take refuge from your stressors.

Being able to slow down and relax is a proven stress buster, and we look at that in more detail, below. But sometimes slowing down isn't enough – you need to **stop**. You can't just “down tools,” but you can take a proper vacation.

A week or two of relaxation away from the workplace can do wonders to reduce your anxiety. It allows you to view the causes of your stress from a distance, and perhaps get a different perspective on them.

This is also a good time to use the support network that you set up ahead of your stressful situation. In Chapter 3 we explored how you can seek specific help from friends, family and colleagues, but don't underestimate the positive impact of informal interactions with them, too. Enjoy evenings out or time in the company of the people who matter most to you without giving work a second thought!

Other popular acceptance-oriented approaches to stress-busting include:

- **Imagery:** retreating to a stress-free “place” in your mind.
- **Meditation:** consciously relaxing your body and focusing your thoughts on one particular thing for a sustained period.
- **Work-Life Balance:** achieving a balance that allows you to pursue both work goals and the personal interests that you love.
- **Physical relaxation:** using deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises.
- **Exercising:** improving your health, energy and psychological wellbeing.



Action:

Follow the steps on the next page to practice a useful relaxation technique.

Deep Relaxation Exercise

1. Find a quiet place to sit down.
2. Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply to calm down. Instead of breathing with your ribs, breathe so that your lower belly expands. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, and focus on what it feels like to fill your lower belly with air. Then, breathe out slowly through your mouth.
3. Keep breathing deeply, and picture yourself in the most peaceful environment you can imagine. Use all of your senses to immerse yourself in the experience, and include as many details as possible.
4. Relax, for as long as you feel comfortable, or for as long as your schedule allows.
5. When you're ready, let your mind turn back to the situation at hand, and return to work. You'll feel an inner calm that will stay with you until you need to repeat this, or try another relaxation exercise.



6. Key Points

In this Skillbook, we've looked at three kinds of strategy that you can use to manage stress. These are action-oriented, emotionally oriented, and acceptance-oriented strategies.

Each approach includes specific tools and techniques that you can use to combat short- and long-term stress, such as workload management, defense building, thought awareness, and relaxation exercises.

You can use these methods to help you to relieve your symptoms of stress, to regain control in stressful situations, and to intercept your negative patterns of thinking, both “in the moment” and in the future.

It's important to remember that everyone reacts differently to stress and that the tools that work for some people might not work for you. Practice using a variety of techniques and adopt the ones that are most effective for you and your situation.