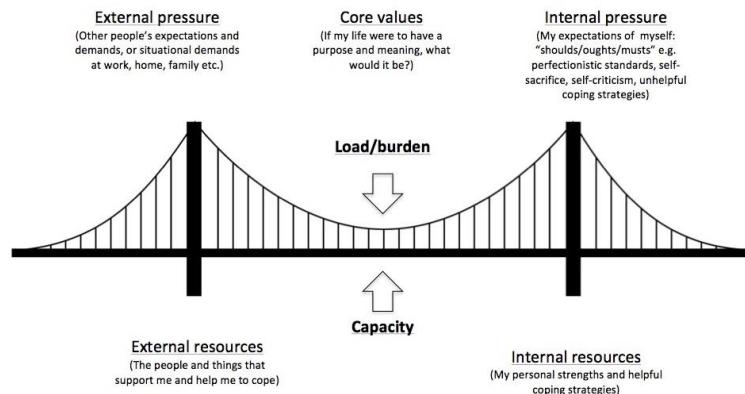


Online CBT Resources

Managing stress

Use the managing stress worksheet to help balance the demands of life with your ability to manage them.



The amount of stress we experience is relative. Think of the picture of the bridge above. A bridge is a useful device for getting from A to B (and back again). To function well a bridge needs to be sufficiently strong and stable to carry the load or burden expected of it but not so overdesigned as to be wasteful. A bridge that was designed for pedestrians will be ill equipped to carry articulated lorries; similarly, a bridge that is only needed for foot traffic doesn't need to be so robust as to carry a fleet of trucks. If our bridge is under-specified then it runs the risk of collapse; if it is over-specified it is a waste of time, effort and money. So it is with life. We need to ask ourselves what our life is meant to be about: what "load" are we willing to carry to live a life that meets our values, hopes, and dreams. Are we over-stressed in that we are carrying too heavy a burden with too few resources, or under-stressed, not pushing ourselves to achieve the things we want and need from life?

If we were to look at stress as an equation we could say that stress is proportional to the demands life places on us multiplied by the expectations we have of ourselves divided by the external support added to our internal resilience. A demanding life with relatively high standards will feel satisfying and stimulating to the extent that we have the personal capacity plus the right people and things to manage those demands, and stressful to the extent that we are poorly equipped to cope. This can be summed up in the following equation:

$$\text{Stress} \propto \frac{\text{external demands} \times \text{internal demands}}{\text{external resources} + \text{internal resilience}}$$

Life can be stressful when we are doing something we care about but the circumstances mean we are being pushed too hard. Perhaps circumstances have changed so that what we used to be able to cope with now exceeds our capacity; for example: a new baby, redundancy, moving away from home. Any or all of those will affect the demands made on us and our ability to meet those demands. An undemanding life that doesn't utilise our capacities will feel unfulfilling because we are selling ourselves short.

Our goal is to achieve a balance between what is expected of us, what we expect of ourselves, the resources available to us, and our coping skills. If life places too few demands on us then it will feel unsatisfying, whereas if we try to achieve too much with too little support, we risk burning out and becoming depressed. Start by thinking about your core values: If your life were to have a meaning or purpose, what would that be? Then list all the pressures on you at present. What are your main roles in life and what are the duties or responsibilities attached to each role including work, study, home life, social life, and your interests and hobbies? Include all those areas of your life where you feel you have little control, for example poor housing, debt, ill health or other difficult circumstances.

Then list all your personal expectations: these are the "musts, oughts and shoulds" and the "always and never" rules that you have learned. For example "I must always do a perfect job", "I should never make a mistake", "Other people should always come first", "I must never complain", or "I ought to be able to cope because other people do". The clues to your personal rules are in the situations that make you uncomfortable, anxious or angry. For example if you feel anxious or awkward about saying no, or asking for help, then you probably have a rule that is influencing your expectations and approach.

Next list all the sources of support in your life and the ways in which these people and things are resources for you. For example, "it helps that...we have a secure tenancy, my mother can take care of the kids after school, I can work flexible hours" etc. Once you have listed all the demands and responsibilities our goal is to make the demands more manageable and to improve coping and support. For each of the four areas try to think of ways that you could 1) reduce the demands that life is placing on you, 2) make your personal expectations a little kinder and more forgiving, 3) increase your level of support by creating new opportunities or making better use of the support you have, and 4) develop your strengths and take better care of yourself to increase your resilience, for example focusing on diet, exercise and time out to relax.

Online CBT Resources

Managing stress

Core values: what meaning or purpose would you like to guide your life?
<i>Your answer...</i>
External pressure: what pressures or changes in circumstances are you having to manage?
<i>Your answer...</i>
Internal demands: what are your strongest rules, assumptions and beliefs?
<i>Your answer...</i>
External support: who or what are your main sources of support?
<i>Your answer...</i>
Internal resilience: what are your main strengths?
<i>Your answer...</i>
Reduce pressure: in what ways could you reduce the demands that life is placing on you?
<i>Your answer...</i>
Reduce demands: in what ways could you be kinder and more forgiving towards yourself?
<i>Your answer...</i>
Increase support: in what ways could you make better use of the support available to you?
<i>Your answer...</i>
Increase resilience: in what ways could you develop your strengths or take better care of yourself?
<i>Your answer...</i>