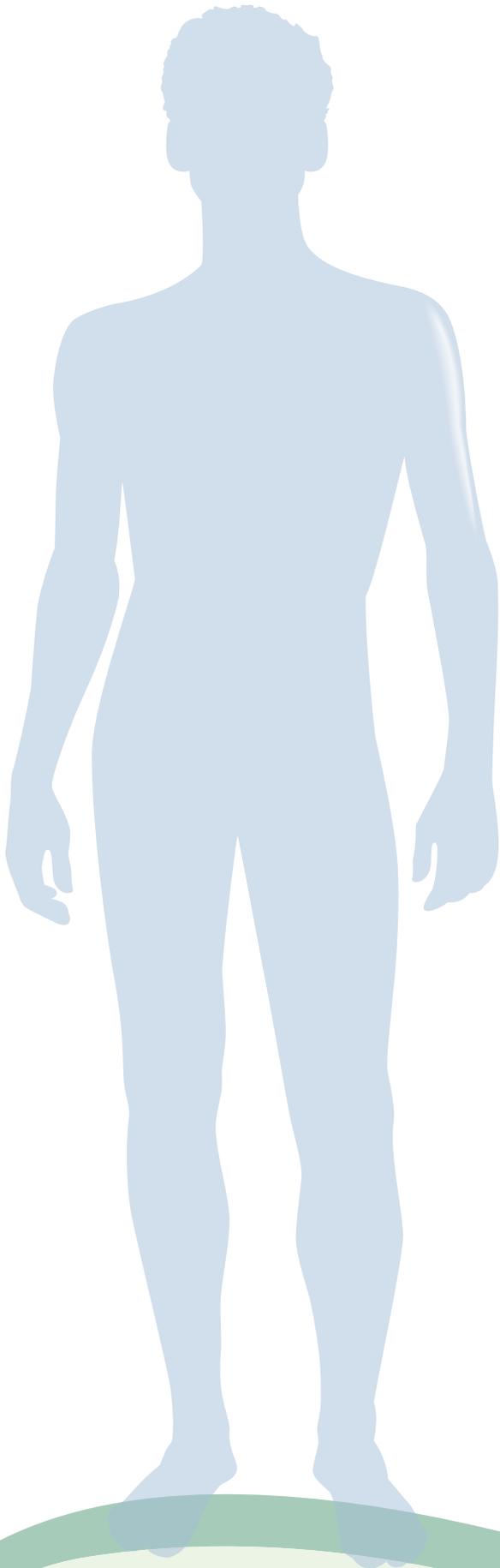




# The Stress Factor

*Your guide to stress*



## **What is stress?**

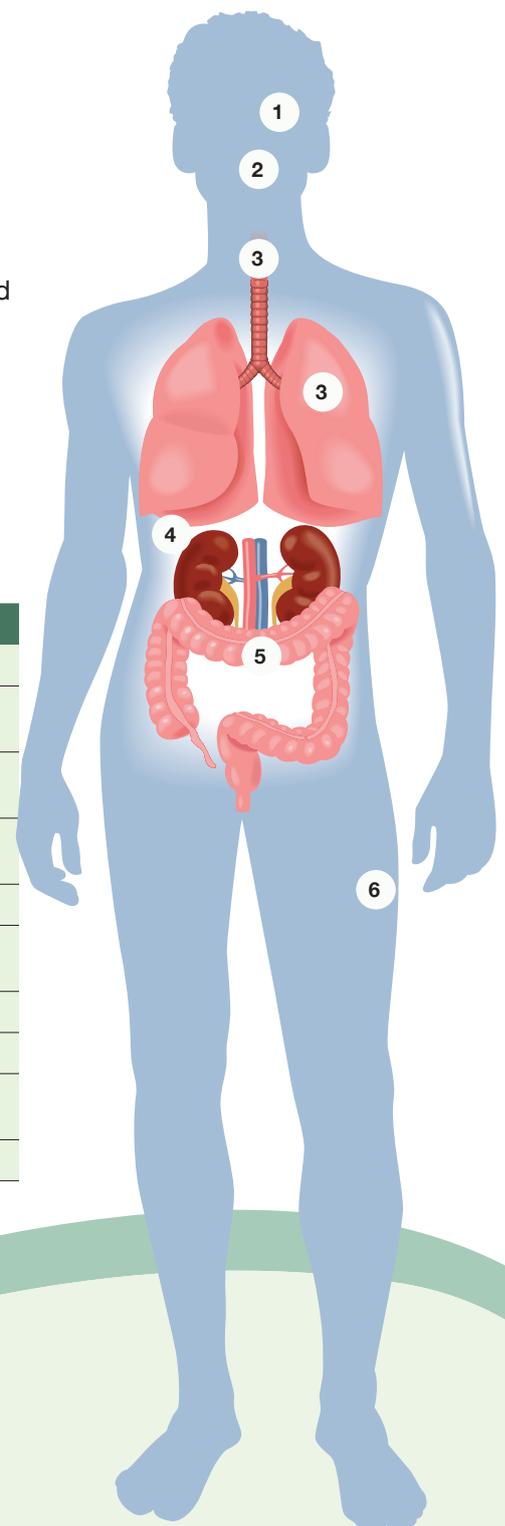
**The word stress is a shortening of the word 'distress' and dates back to circa 1300. In the dictionary stress is defined as meaning 'hardship, adversity, force and pressure'. In a similar vein, when we talk about stress in terms of mental health we are talking about the emotional and physical reaction we have to any kind of demand or pressure put on us. Usually when we refer to 'being stressed' we see it as a bad thing but some stress can actually be good for us.**

## Good stress v bad stress

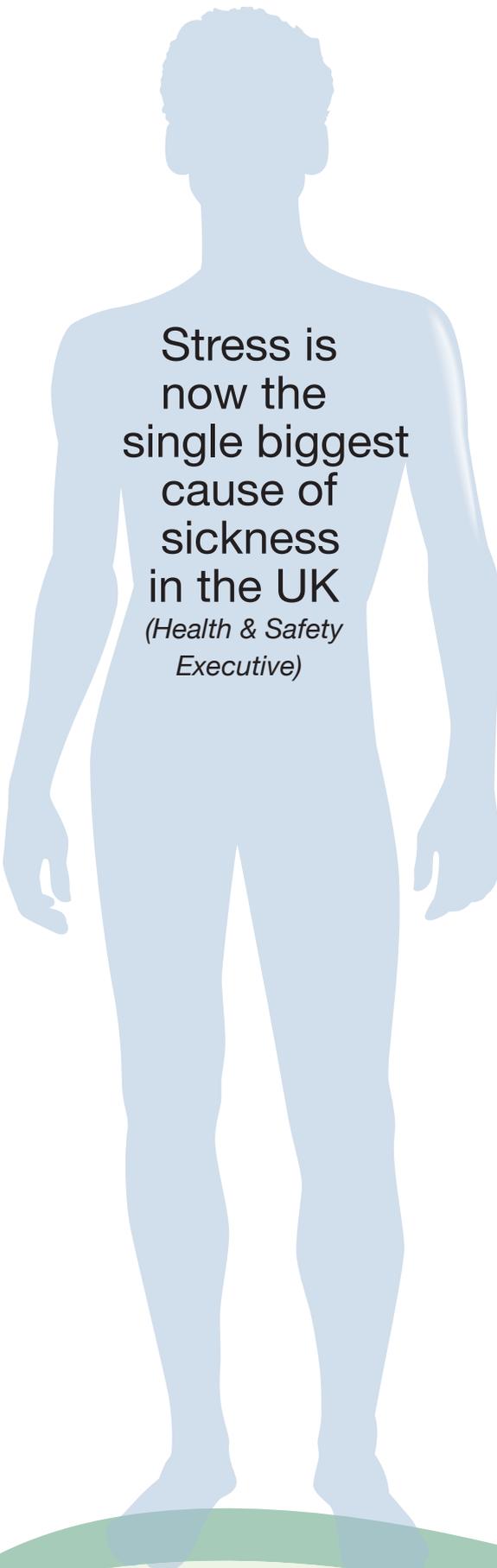
Our ancestors were alerted to the physical danger of wild animals by stress in the form of anxiety. Of course, wild animals are no longer a common threat in our environment but that doesn't mean this 'fight or flight' response is no longer of use as an adaptive survival tool, just that the dangers are likely to have changed (see diagram of body below).

Originally discovered by the physiologist Walter Cannon, the fight or flight response is an inborn response which is hard wired into our brains to protect us from harm. When we perceive something as a threat, this fight or flight response is activated and the hypothalamus in our brains initiates a sequence of nerve cell firing and releases chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol into our blood stream. This causes our bodies to undergo dramatic changes which help us run or fight. The heart pumps harder to send oxygen and energy to our muscles and our respiratory rate increases as our airways widen to let more oxygen in to help the lungs work harder. The digestion slows and the liver releases glucose which both help to provide energy to our muscles. Our impulses quicken. Our pupils dilate and our sight sharpens. Our body sweats to cool our muscles. Our perception of pain diminishes. Our immune system mobilizes with increased activation. All of these responses allow us to fight harder, run faster, see better and breathe easier.

The fight and flight response is therefore an energy conservation device as it allows us to go through our lives using a modest amount of energy for mundane tasks whilst keeping a massive amount of energy in reserve in case of emergency. So if we were attacked we could rapidly, in as little as 1/20th of a second (less than the time between two beats of the heart), increase our physical resources to respond to this threat.



What happens	How you feel
After effects of vision sharpening ①	Visual disturbance, e.g. blurring
Body fluid such as saliva redirected to bloodstream ②	Dry mouth Difficulty swallowing
Airways widen to let in more oxygen and lungs work harder ③	Breathless
Heart pumps harder to send oxygen and energy to muscles	Heart beats faster
Liver releases glucose to provide energy to muscles ④	
Digestion slows or ceases. Blood & energy diverted to muscles ⑤	Stomach feels 'funny', e.g. 'knot' or 'butterflies'
Skin sweats to cool hot working muscles	Sweating
Skin - blood diverted to muscles	Pale skin
Muscles in use - tense ready to react faster ⑥	Tension, aches and pain in muscles - 'shaky'
Calcium discharged from tense muscles	Pins and needles



**Stress is  
now the  
single biggest  
cause of  
sickness  
in the UK**  
*(Health & Safety  
Executive)*

If nothing caused you stress or excitement, life would be pretty boring. So it would seem that small amounts of stress are good however, when we are overwhelmed with excessive stress both physical and psychological, our life becomes a series of short term emergencies. If everything in life causes you stress then this could lead to physical or mental health problems.

## What causes stress?

Many different factors can cause stress from physical threat, of which we have spoken, to emotions such as worry. Being able to identify what may cause you stress is often the first step in learning how to better deal with it. Obviously, different people are affected by different things but stress can generally be classified in terms of internal and external stressors.

Internal stress is stress that comes from within us and is often the most common cause of stress. We often worry about things we cannot control (e.g. whether we are going to lose our job) and we actually put ourselves into situations which we know will cause us stress. Other common internal causes of stress include thoughts and feelings which cause unease such as unrealistic expectations, uncertainty and low self-esteem created by lack of assertiveness and negative self-talk. Some people become addicted to feeling stressed and actively seek out stressful situations. They may also feel stressed about things that aren't stressful.

External stress is stress that comes from the environment. Anything from noise, overcrowding and pollution to relationship/financial problems, major life changes, pressure from work/family or daily hassles. For instance, working too hard or not managing your time well can take its toll.

By identifying what your internal and external stresses are and learning how to manage them this will help you cope with stress.

## How does stress affect us?

Stress can vary in degree and manifest itself in many ways from how we feel physically and psychologically to how we behave. As stress takes hold a variety of symptoms can result (see opposite). Some of these cross over into more than one category.

## Physical symptoms

- Increased heart rate
- Raised blood pressure
- Breathlessness
- Headaches
- Nausea or dizziness
- Sleep disturbance
- Muscle tension
- Cramps or muscle spasms
- Restlessness
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Nervous twitches
- Vomiting
- Dry mouth
- Indigestion/heartburn
- Craving for food - weight gain
- Pins and needles
- Lack of appetite - weight loss
- Sexual difficulties
- Chest pains
- Fatigue
- Tendency to sweat

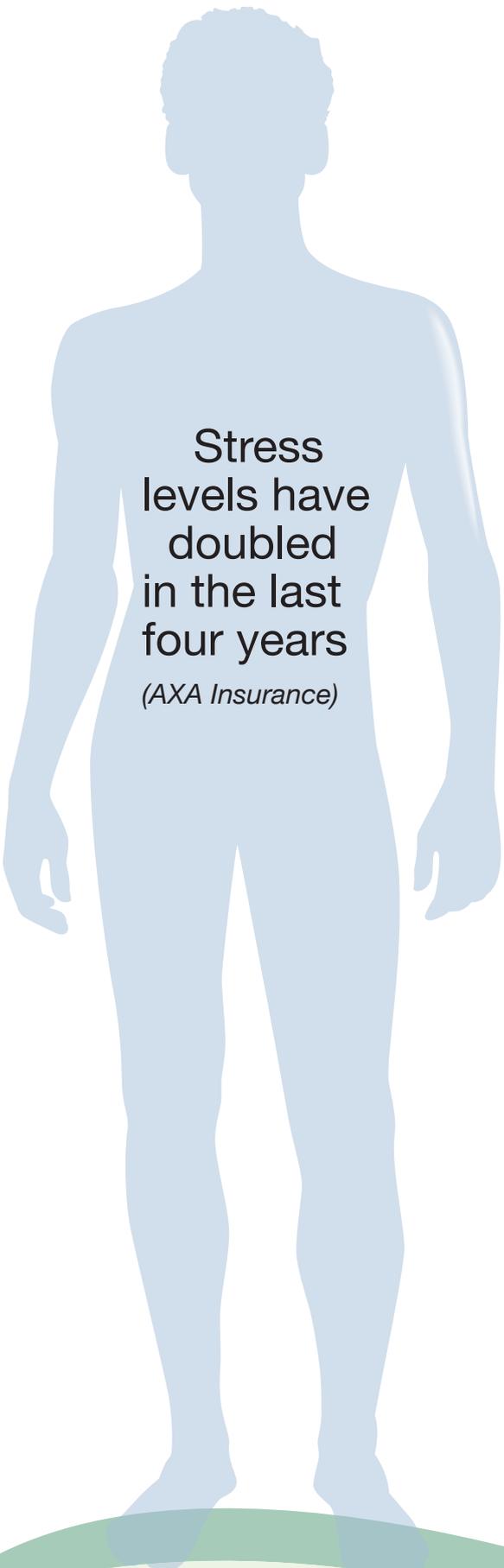
Stress can have a major impact on every part of our being. It can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, contribute to infertility, and speed up the aging process. Long term stress can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

## Behavioural symptoms

- Avoiding difficult situations
- Lack of communication
- Frequently crying
- Changes in appetite
- Difficulty concentrating
- Biting your nails
- Difficulty making decisions
- Teeth grinding
- Altered sleep patterns
- Denying there's a problem
- Use of drugs/alcohol
- Giving excuses
- Changing habits
- Putting off difficult jobs
- Neglect of physical appearance
- Inability to show true feelings.

## Emotional symptoms

- Aggressiveness
- Fearing failure
- Irritability
- Dreading the future
- Depression
- A loss of interest in others or life in general
- Feeling bad or ugly
- Loneliness
- Feeling fearful
- Withdrawal
- Feeling negative
- Neglect
- Feeling unable to cope
- Feeling that there's no-one to confide in
- Having anxious thoughts
- Confused
- Difficulty concentrating
- Frustrated
- Low self-esteem/self-confidence
- A loss of sense of humour
- Difficulty making decisions



Stress  
levels have  
doubled  
in the last  
four years

(AXA Insurance)

## Are you stressed?

You may recognise some of the symptoms above. Indeed, if you suffer from **five or more** of the following symptoms then you may well be suffering with stress.

- Obesity and overeating
- Increased or excessive drinking of alcohol
- Loss of appetite
- Smoking more (if you smoke)
- Increased coffee consumption
- Excessive and continuing irritability with other people
- Substance abuse
- Difficulties making decisions, large or small.
- Inability to concentrate
- Increased and suppressed anger
- Feeling out of control and unable to cope with life
- Jumping from one job to another without finishing things
- Excessive emotion and crying at small irritations
- Lack of interest in anything other than work
- Permanently tired even after sleep
- Decreased sex drive / libido
- Nail biting

### Another measure of stress - biofeedback

Another way, besides questionnaires, to assess and manage stress is biofeedback. Biofeedback uses instruments to help you become aware of your various physiological functions. Its goal is to be able to manipulate these physiological functions ultimately without the use of this equipment. The physiological functions that can be controlled using this method are heart rate, muscle tone, brainwaves, skin conductance and pain perception. Biofeedback can be used to improve health as changes to thoughts, emotion and behaviour often accompany these physiological changes.

Biodot is a good example of an instrument which is useful in biofeedback to aid relaxation and management of stress. Biodots are small self-adhesive, temperature sensitive discs that are placed on the skin to monitor the skin temperature. Changes in skin temperature are due to changes in the amount of blood flowing through the skin. When a person is tense the skin blood vessels constrict, reducing the blood flow and when a person is calm and relaxed the skin blood vessels dilate, increasing blood flow.

## How do we deal with stress?

The cause of stress and the affect it can have on us may vary from person to person. Equally, how people handle stress differs for each individual. Indeed, it has been shown that coping styles are fairly stable over time and are influenced by a number of factors such as personality, age, gender, intellectual ability and cognitive style. The style of coping we adopt is often the result of both prior experience and previous learning.

### What is your stress style?

There are four main ways in which we experience and deal with stress.

#### **1. To freeze**

Stress causes this person to become immobilized. They worry they will make the wrong decision which can result in no decision being made at all and often refer to others for guidance. They can feel overwhelmed by too much choice and consequently, lose the ability to prioritise, weigh up options and problem solve. Although they would like someone else to take responsibility, at the same time they fear relinquishing control because they have perfectionist tendencies. In performance related tasks they may not move, speak or remember what they are doing which can lead to increased pressure and worsen this freeze response.

#### **2. To flee**

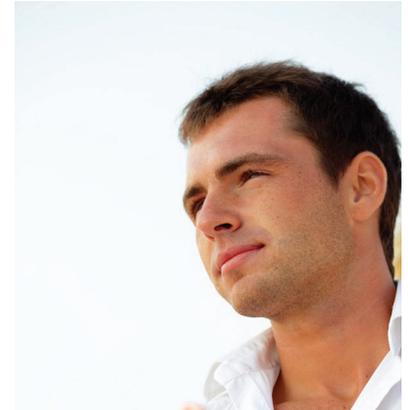
Stress makes this person want to escape as they fear being trapped or attacked. They deal with their problems by avoiding stressful people/ situations and leave others to sort things out. They may also avoid painful feelings by masking these with alcohol, drugs or food, etc. When they are unable to physically escape, they may retreat into fantasy world/ TV and may as a result experience panic attacks.

#### **3. To fight**

When this person feels stressed, they become aggressive and involved in conflicts. This person tends to blame others and this fear causes them to take the offensive in order to get their own way. They may appear very self-assured but are usually riddled with self-doubt and try to undermine the reputation of others, or support of individuals, seen as threatening to their safety by gossiping and bringing up past mistakes. They can be quite intimidating and hard to get along with and bossy under stress.

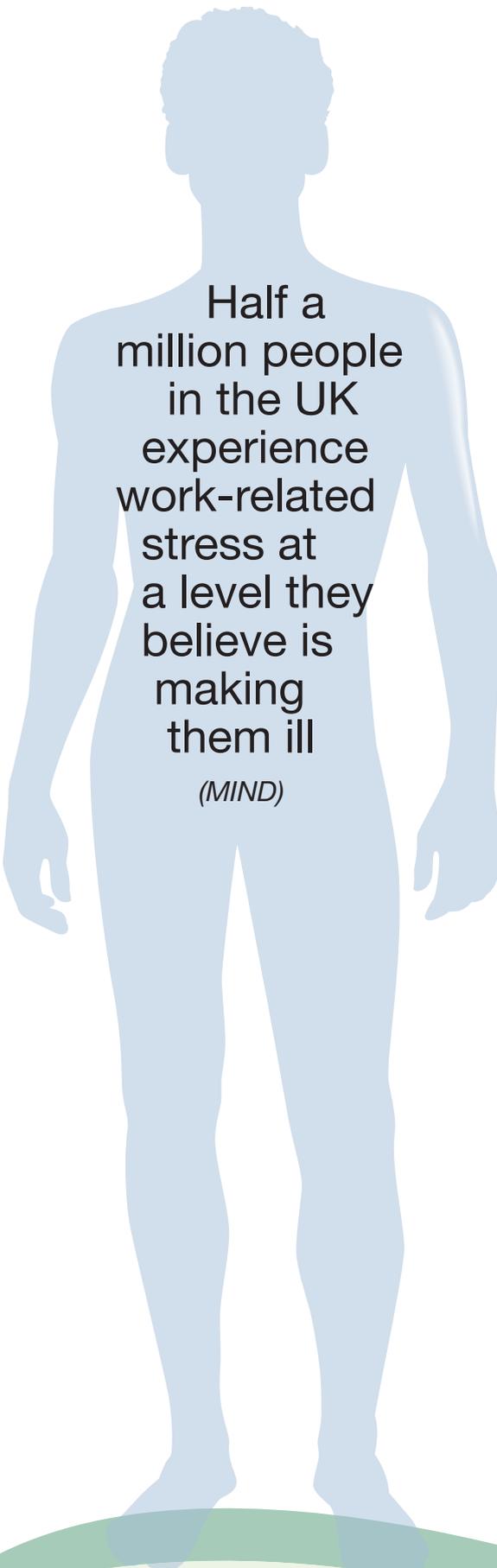
#### **4. To submit**

Stress causes this person to submit to the wishes of others to remove the stress. They want to please people and are willing to sacrifice themselves for the common good but are hurt if these sacrifices go unnoticed. Resentment about this can lead to passive-aggressive behaviour which in turn, can lead to self-sabotage. This style can result from an oppressive upbringing and lead to non-assertive behaviour which may further worsen this tendency to submit when under pressure.



#### **The four stress styles**

- To freeze
- To flee
- To fight
- To submit



Half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill

(MIND)

## The vicious cycle of stress

Avoidance is a common type of coping style which has many facets. It can be as obvious as someone simply avoiding a problem by 'burying their head in the sand' or be more subtle whereby an individual uses mood altering substances to find relief from stress. Although these approaches may help in the short term, in the longer term they only serve to make the problem worse as only the symptom has been addressed (i.e. the stress) and not the cause, and so the problem still exists.

By constantly turning to mood altering substances to provide relief from stress, your 'tolerance' to these substances eventually builds up which means you begin to need more in order to get the same effect. This is dangerous not only because these substances have negative effects on your health such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer but because they can also lead to a vicious cycle of dependency and addiction, and higher stress.

Avoidance, in whatever guise it takes, can be demonstrated clearly using a cognitive behavioural model. According to the premise of CBT, stress is caused and then maintained by unhelpful patterns of thoughts, emotions and behaviour.

If we have demands on our time (stress) - we think we can't cope/don't have enough time - this makes us feel stressed, tense, headache, unable to concentrate - due to this we avoid the problem, we start things and never finish them, we put off doing them - which results in even more demands on our time and even more thoughts of being unable to cope and so the vicious cycle of stress continues until it is broken and parts of it are addressed such as the avoidance.

## Identifying how stress affects you

If you are still unsure about how stress affects you, it might be an idea to keep a stress journal.

A stress journal can help you identify the regular stressors in your life and the way you deal with them. Each time you feel stressed, write down the following in your journal and as you do you should start to see patterns and themes emerging.

- What caused your stress (if you are not sure hazard a guess)
- How you felt, both physically and emotionally.
- How you responded.
- What you did to make yourself feel better.

By doing this it should help you identify whether the coping strategies you use are healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive. Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that make the problem worse.

### Unhealthy ways of coping with stress

Although these ways of coping may reduce stress in the short term, they are likely to cause more damage in the long run:

- Smoking
- Drinking too much
- Overeating or undereating
- Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities
- Using pills or drugs to relax
- Sleeping too much
- Overwork
- Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems
- Procrastinating
- Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence)

### Healthy stress styles

None of the above will make you feel better emotionally and/or physically for a long period of time and so it is important to find alternative ways to deal with stress. However, healthy ways to manage stress all require change whether that be changing the situation itself or your reaction to it.

Everyone experiences stress in different ways and so there is no 'one size fits all' way of dealing with it. The best thing to do is to try these different strategies and see which works best for you in terms of making you feel calm and in control. These changes are referred to as the four A's: avoid, alter, adapt, or accept.

Change the situation	Change the reaction
• Avoid the stressor	• Adapt to the stressor
• Alter the stressor	• Accept the stressor

### **Avoid the stressor**

We are not advocating avoidance of situations that need to be addressed as this is an unhealthy way of coping. It is not always possible to avoid stress but you can minimise its effect by taking the following action:

- Learn how to say "no"
- Avoid people who stress you out
- Take control of your environment
- Avoid 'hot' topics
- Reduce your to-do list

### **Alter the stressor**

If you can't avoid the stressor then try altering it by changing the way you function or communicate in everyday life for example.

- Express your feelings, don't bottle them up
- Try to compromise
- Be more assertive
- Manage your time better

### **Adapt the stressor**

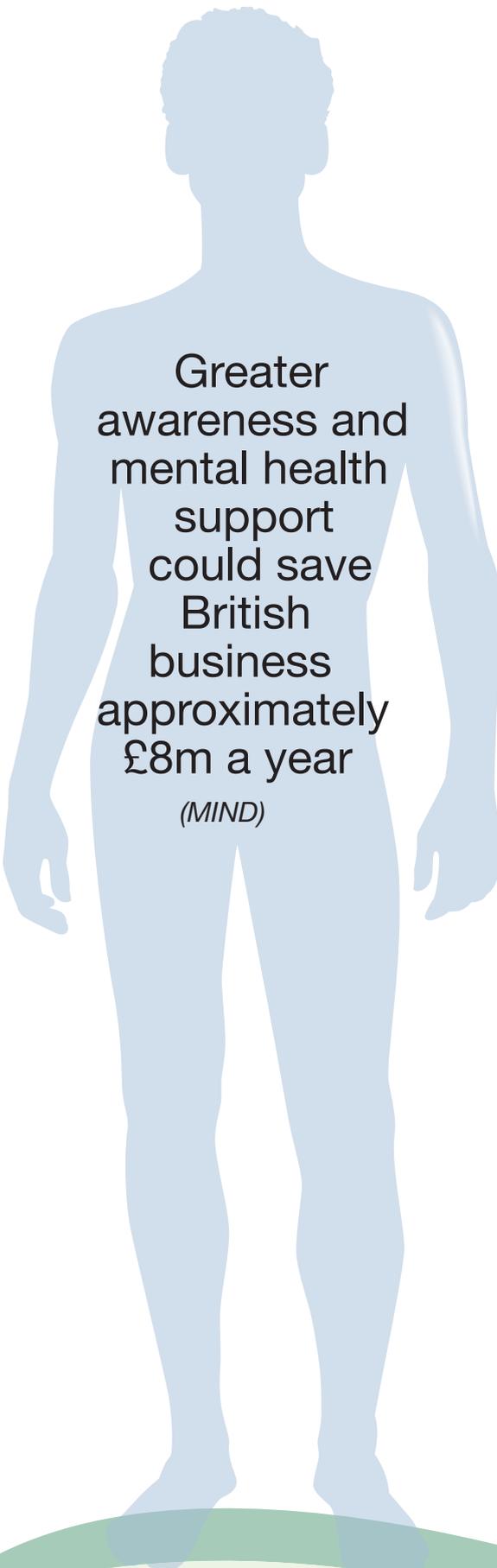
If you are unable to alter the stressor then you may have to change yourself. By adapting your expectations and attitudes, you may be able to regain control.

- Reframe your problems
- Look at the big picture
- Adjust your standards
- Focus on the positive

### **Accept the stressor**

It is impossible to control and prevent certain stressors in life such as illness, recession, or the death of a family member or friend. Although it may be difficult, the best way to manage this stress may be to accept things rather than fight against them.

- Don't try to control the uncontrollable
- Look for the upside
- Share your feelings
- Learn to forgive



Greater  
awareness and  
mental health  
support  
could save  
British  
business  
approximately  
£8m a year  
*(MIND)*

## Positive ways to manage stress

We live in uncertain times but being stressed out doesn't have to be a way of life. Stress is not just dangerous to our mental health but also makes us more vulnerable to physical illness. It is often a matter of how we think in different situations and how we view stress that causes us problems. Here are a few techniques you can use to help manage stress.

- Assign a rating to your stressor, with 1 being a minor hassle to 10 being a catastrophe. By doing this you should find that most of the problems you encounter rate somewhere in the 2 to 5 range and this will help you get things into perspective.
- Compose a short, positive statement that focuses on your coping abilities. By repeating your mantra 'I feel calm, I can handle this' it will help relieve your stress.
- Don't be a victim and don't give up at the first sign of stress. Focus on being proactive and don't wallow in self-pity.
- Write down your stressors/problems (in a journal perhaps) and list possible solutions and then try them out.
- Schedule 'Worry Time'. Some stressors have to be dealt with immediately but many can be dealt with later. Write down your stressors and then assign a time later to think about them so that you control your worries instead of them controlling you. Remember, most things that we fear often do not happen.
- Say 'no' and be clear about your limits. Stop trying to please everyone all the time.
- Make plans and organise your time so that you are not constantly in a hurry and have something to look forward to which provides calming perspective.
- Forget about it. Once you've done your best to deal with a situation, avoid speculating about the outcome.
- If you find a problem or task too big then break it down into smaller, more manageable chunks so that you don't feel overwhelmed.
- Don't try to be perfect as this may create unnecessary stress in your life. Don't be too hard on yourself or overly critical but instead learn from your mistakes and move on.

- Resist comparisons with others as this can destroy your confidence and create stress. Instead make your own standards against which you set future goals for achievement.
- Visualise success. By focusing on your strengths and not your weaknesses you can build confidence and minimize stress.
- Look at problems as opportunities for improving yourself.
- Seek professional help. Talking to a counsellor, CBT therapist or psychologist may help you identify the problems that create stress.

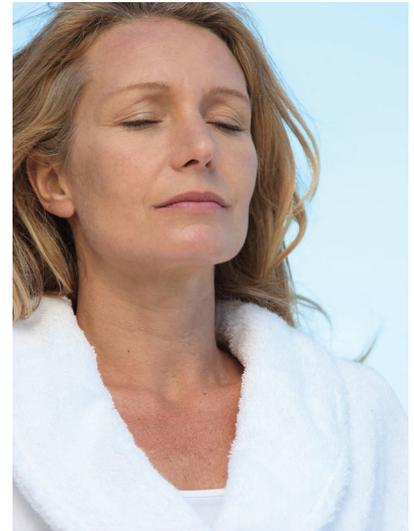
As well as a can-do attitude and proactive approach, it is important to nurture your body and mind. If you take time to relax and have fun, you'll be much better placed to handle life's unexpected obstacles. Here are some quick and healthy ways to take time out and relax (see right).

## Relaxation

Relaxation, for most of us, conjures up ideas of lying in bed at the weekend or zoning out in front of the TV. However, these activities do little to reduce the harmful effects of stress on the body or mind because they do not trigger the body's natural relaxation response (the opposite reaction to the stress response) which is needed to bring the nervous system back into balance.

It is important to build relaxation into your daily routine because not only does it help lower stress but it also boosts energy and mood and makes you feel better able to tackle what life throws at you.

Relaxation is a mentally active process which is not difficult to master but it does take practise. Most health professionals suggest practise for at least 10 to 20 minutes a day which may sound a lot but can be incorporated into your existing schedule, for example, on your daily commute. There are numerous relaxation techniques but not every method may work for you so it is important to find the one that does, which may vary according to your needs, level of fitness, preferences and reactions to stress. These techniques include meditation, yoga, visualisation and rhythmic exercise such as running and cycling. We will briefly touch upon some of the more popular techniques used such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and body scan (see over).



### Taking time out

- Go for a walk
- Listen to some music
- Spend time in nature
- Take up a hobby
- Have a massage to relieve tension
- Get plenty of rest
- Take a long, hot bath
- Breathe easily
- Get a good night's sleep
- Stretch your muscles
- Call a good friend
- Take lunch breaks
- Sweat out tension with a good workout
- Eat well
- Switch to decaffeinated coffee
- Drink plenty of water
- Practise mindfulness
- Avoid excessive alcohol



Over  
105 million  
days are lost  
to stress  
each year,  
costing UK  
employers  
£1.24 billion

*(Health & Safety  
Executive)*

### **Technique 1: Deep breathing**

Although breathing is something we do naturally, over the years many of us have got into the bad habit of doing it incorrectly. That is to say, our stomach sucks in when we inhale and it puffs out when we exhale when it should be the other way round. Focused, deep breathing if practised correctly can be a powerful technique in combatting stress and is the foundation of other relaxation practices.

With deep breathing the key is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. By doing this you inhale more oxygen which makes you feel less anxious and less tense.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight with one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise but the hand on your chest should barely move.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should barely move.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you find it difficult breathing from your abdomen while sitting up then practise lying on the floor.

### Technique 2: Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation involves systematically tensing and relaxing different muscle groups so you become aware of the difference between these two feelings in the body. By relaxing the body, this will relax the mind and consequently, you should learn to identify the signs of tension in the body when you start to feel stressed. This technique may not be appropriate for individuals with a history of back problems, muscle spasms or other injuries which may be worsened by muscle tensing.

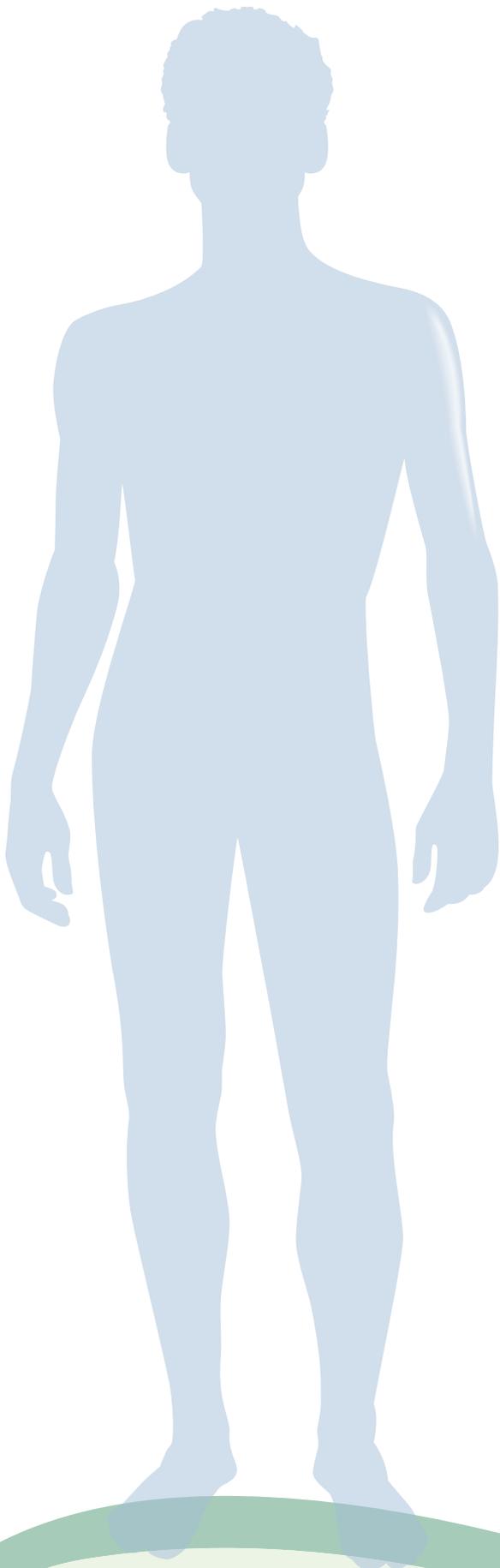
- Get comfortable - loosen your clothing and take off your shoes.
- Take a few minutes to relax - take slow, deep breathes in and out.
- When relaxed and ready, turn your attention to your right foot and focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of ten. You may want to start with your left foot if you are left handed.
- Relax your right foot. Focus on how your foot feels as the tension flows away and it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When ready, focus your attention on your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release as before.
- Continue tensing and relaxing your muscles, starting with the feet and moving slowly up your body (see the recommended sequence below). Try to only tense those muscles you are working on.

- |                        |                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Right foot          | 2. Left foot          |
| 3. Right calf          | 4. Left calf          |
| 5. Right thigh         | 6. Left thigh         |
| 7. Hips and buttocks   | 8. Stomach            |
| 9. Chest               | 10. Back              |
| 11. Right arm and hand | 12. Left arm and hand |
| 13. Neck and shoulders | 14. Face              |

### Technique 3: Body scan

Body scan is similar to progressive muscle relaxation but involves focusing on sensations in different parts of the body rather than tensing and relaxing muscles.

- Lie down on your back, legs straight out and your arms by your sides. Close your eyes if you wish. Focus on your breathing, allowing your stomach to rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Breathe deeply for about two minutes or until you feel comfortable and relaxed.
- Focus on the toes of your right foot and notice any sensations you feel while continuing to focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focused on this area for one to two minutes.
- Move your focus to the sole of your right foot. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body and imagine each breath flowing from the sole of your foot. After one or two minutes, move your focus to your right ankle and repeat. Move to your calf, knee, thigh, hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort.
- Move your focus to the fingers on your right hand and then move up to the wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, and shoulder. Repeat for your left arm. Then move through the neck and throat, and finally all the regions of your face, the back of the head, and the top of the head. Pay close attention to your jaw, chin, lips, tongue, nose, cheeks, eyes, forehead, temples and scalp. When you reach the very top of your head, let your breath reach out beyond your body and imagine yourself hovering above yourself.
- After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then open your eyes slowly and take a moment to stretch.



## Mindfulness

Mindfulness, which has been popularised by the likes of Jon Kabat-Zinn, involves a whole range of approaches to combat stress. Mindfulness is concerned with the ability to focus on the present and how you're feeling right now, both internally and externally, on a moment to moment basis. This helps you to stop dwelling on the past or worrying about the future and allows you to bring your nervous system back into balance.

Mindfulness often focuses on a repetitive action such as breathing or repeating words/phrases, and can entail following and releasing certain thoughts and sensations. It can also be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, eating, or meditation.

The following are essential for mindfulness practice:

- A quiet environment - anywhere where you can relax without distraction or interruption be it your home, office, place of worship or the great outdoors.
- Get comfortable - find a comfortable position whether that may be sitting up straight in a chair, cross legged on the floor or in the lotus position but avoid lying down as you may fall asleep.
- Find a focus point - concentrate on something either internal or external. i.e. a feeling/image, an object in your environment or a meaningful word or phrase that you repeat throughout the session. You can meditate with eyes open or closed.
- Be observant and not critical - you are bound to have distracting and intrusive thoughts while practising mindfulness but don't chastise yourself for these or try to fight them. Simply observe them and turn your attention back to your point of focus.

## Flow

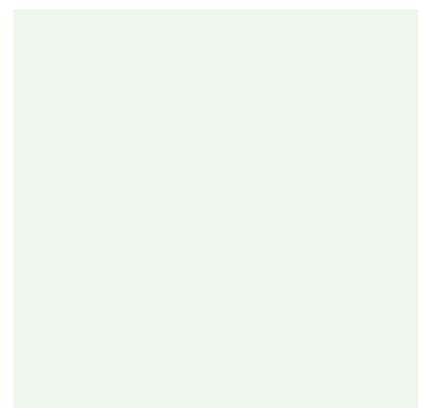
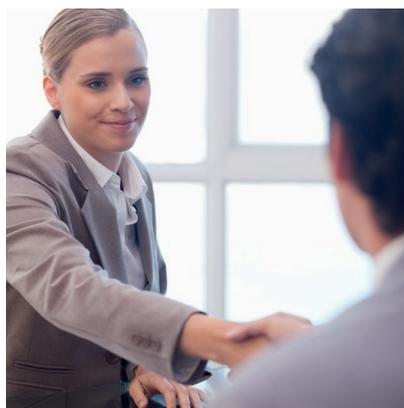
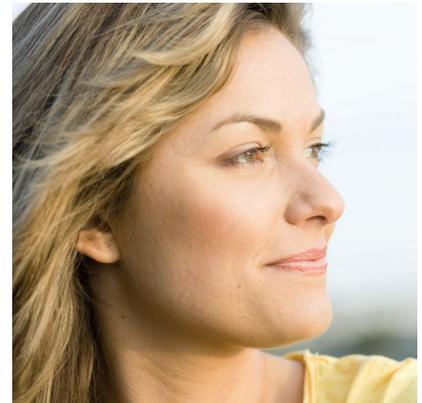
Often we are full of thoughts, ideas, judgements and perceptions. When we perform a task or activity we find ourselves consciously trying to do it well and because we think so much about it rather than just doing it, this can lead to anxiety and stress. However, when we experience flow we are fully immersed and involved in what we are doing and free of these fears and worries of doing it 'wrong'. This mental state is often referred to as being 'in the zone, on the ball, wired in or in the moment' and it is about optimal experience and deep focus on nothing but the activity, not even one's emotions which are positive and energised as a result.

The experience of flow can be characterised by the following dimensions:

- Concentration
- Clear goals
- Merging of action and awareness
- Distorted sense of time
- Immediate and direct feedback
- Control over the situation
- Experience of intrinsic reward
- It is neither too hard nor too easy

Flow could be described as that feeling when you do something without thinking and unconsciously do it well like driving a car. In order to achieve flow, it is essential to be less critical and trusting of yourself and by doing this, you will worry less and feel freer about getting things done.





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