

Priming Your Tank: Strategies for Dealing With Stress

Sarah Watson
FarmRight Limited

Introduction

Why should you be “Priming Your Tank”?

Think of a car. You keep oil, water and petrol full or at least with something in the tanks. You let one get empty and what happens? Eventually the car will grind to a stop. It does not matter if two are full, if one is empty, the car is not going to work properly. We use gauges to tell us when the different things are getting low. What happens if we ignore these warning signs? At best, the car stops (out of petrol) or seizes (out of oil) or we blow a head gasket and crack the engine (out of water). Isn't it interesting that one of the things that can cause the most damage (and is the most expensive to fix) is the cheapest ingredient, water.

If we don't look after ourselves or listen to our gauges, the effect of stress can be the same as not looking after our car. Stress can creep up on us and our 'water levels' can get low. If we don't listen to our gauges, then BANG, we have blown a head gasket, cracked the head and it is going to be costly to get running again.

A recent article in “Management Matters”, the newsletter distributed by NZ Institute of Management, talks about a survey of 540 business managers in New Zealand and shows that the real issue is not whether there is too much or too little stress in our lives. In fact the real issue is being able to cope with the different kinds of stress which occur and our emotional responses which are likely to follow.

So what is stress?

Stress is a subject we do not usually like to talk about, admitting to feeling the pressure of the job or of life in general. Mentioning stress can cause people to suddenly become very defensive. Failure to talk about stress can add to the problem.

Research has shown that excess stress can cause poor performance in the workplace. We can all think of situations where we have felt under pressure, too much to do in too little time, and afterwards, with the benefit of hindsight, we think how much better we might have handled the situation if only we had taken the time (which of course we didn't have) to step back and look at what had to be done. Research has also shown that people have varying capacities to cope with

stress. As employers we should be aware of these issues in regards to our staff as well as for ourselves.

The good news is that stress can be used to our advantage. When managed properly and when we have a good level of ‘personal resources’, stress can be a motivator. Problems can be seen more as challenges and catastrophes do not tend to cause signs of distress. We’ll call this good stress.

Problems arise when stress exceeds our resources (or ability) to manage it. We then get into a state of distress and fail to manage our time successfully and often productivity takes a dive.

Table 1 Myths and Truths about Stress

Myth	Truth
Stress only happens to weak people	Stress happens to all of us. It is a natural response to the need to cope or adapt
Stress is just a mental thing	Stress is a complex mix of physical changes that interact with how we think and process information
Stress is a bad thing	Why? Stress channels energy to help us cope or adapt – is that bad?
Stress is exaggerated – nothing really happens	It is real
Once this particular hassle goes away, I will be fine!	Stress is cumulative in its effects. It also takes some time for the body’s reaction to subside
Stress happens! Just accept it, there is nothing you can do to prevent it	We can learn and choose how to react. We can prevent ourselves becoming so stressed
You cannot get stressed if you are doing something you like	Yes you can. It is usually the same response to most challenges we face in life. It can be addictive!

Stress is not what happens to us, it is our response to what happens to us. We have choice.

How do we recognise stress before it causes us harm?

Following are some common symptoms of distress. Remember that we all produce some of them sometimes. But when they become a constant, typical reaction to situations, we may have moved from good Stress to distress.

Physical signs of stress

- Tiredness, fatigue
- Difficulty catching breath, frequent deep sighing, shallow or rapid breaths
- Increased perspiration, maybe even when sleeping
- Cold hands (because the blood moves towards the body under stress)
- Muscular tension. Others may see clenched or jutting jaw, frowning, stiff neck, shoulders carried high, frequently fidgety movement, difficulty keeping still, wringing of the hands
- Grinding teeth, sore muscles, tight stomach
- Frequent urge to urinate
- Increased illness, especially colds that won't go, small rashes
- Headaches, migraines, tinnitus (head noise)
- Dry mouth, difficulty swallowing (saliva dries up under stress)
- Diarrhea and stomach upsets, heartburn
- Easily startled, jumpy, nervous, anxious
- Trembling or shaking
- Significant weight change (without dieting).

Behavioural & performance signs of stress

- Difficulty sleeping, sleep not restorative
- Changes in appearance, slipping personal standards
- Routines breakdown, apathy and indifference
- Reduced activity levels; a tendency to "cruise" or "blob-out"
- Disorganised, difficulty concentrating, forgetting things
- Too many things on the go, many not done well

Notes:

- Missing deadlines, meetings, appointments, etc.
- Work piles up and quality drops
- Avoid certain people or situations
- Calls not returned
- Absences, increased sick days
- Increased use of smoking, alcohol, drugs (including painkillers), overeating, partying.

Relationship and emotional signs of stress

- Cynical, hostile or rigid attitudes to work or other circumstances
- Hardening of stances on touchy issues
- Reduced tolerance, inability to see both sides of an issue, grumpy with partner or children
- Marked mood swings or changes
- Unhappiness with life, finding fault; irrational blaming
- Powerful emotions; distress, anger, fear surface more often
- Withdraw from friends, lovers
- Avoid some social situations and commitments
- Sexual appetite falls away
- Able to talk only about problems, generally negative attitude.

How can I diagnose and predict stress in myself and others?

There are two crucial questions to ask yourself when trying to identify if you or others are stressed:

1. What kind of stresses/stressful situations have I or this person been facing?
2. What kind of person has been facing these stresses or stressful situations?

There are a number of things about each of us that will effect how we react to different stressors in our lives. That is why two people may react completely differently to the same stressful situation. We need to understand that our personal reserves will effect how we will react to situations we face. The same is true of other people around us.

So what makes up 'personal reserves'? There are five key areas that we look at when determining what our (or others) current level of personal reserves are:

1. Bodily health or physical reserves
2. Our/their state of mind
3. Productive skills or performance we achieve
4. Things, like our possessions, assets, status
5. The people in our lives, family, friends, colleagues, etc.

We all have strengths and weaknesses in different areas, but these five areas will interact constantly. The value of each of them in supporting and strengthening us during stressful periods is usually in the following priority order:

1. Mind and people
2. Productive skills
3. Body
4. Things.

Coping strategies

There are two options that reduce the stress being faced:

1. Reduce the amount of actual stress being faced by reducing the physical aspects.
2. Increase personal reserves and so increase ability to manage stress.

Managing stress is very much about managing ourselves and what is right for one person may not necessarily help another. Some of the following are strategies you could use:

- Have clear realistic goals. Unrealistic goals add further pressure
- Look after your body. Exercise and nutrition are vitally important
- Learn to relax your body and mind
- Sleep well and for long enough
- Maintain a support system. The people around us are important so make sure they are positive
- Act assertively in your dealings with others. Communicate clearly and effectively so that expectations are clear for all parties
- Keep stimulation and variety in your life, maintain balance
- Manage time to achieve your goals. If you don't have enough time, reduce the number of goals you are trying to achieve or prioritise them
- Manage your financial and material resources and work within these. You can keep adjusting your goals as these resources increase if necessary
- Manage the changes in your life. We all face change in our lives. Ensure you factor change in and learn to adapt and review your position and your goals as things change. Remember there are some things none of us can control.

Notes:

- Know how to solve problems. Have a system for solving problems that suits you, for example take some time out to think about the problem, look at the different options for solving it, assess the positives and negatives of each option, make your decision and stick to it. Remember we are not trying hard enough if we do not make mistakes and as long as we use these times as an investment in our education it is not all negative.
- Ask for help when you need it. Suffering from stress is not a sign of weakness, it happens to us all from time to time

Stress management – releasing your frustrations harmlessly

How do we deal with the daily small stresses we all face which can sometimes build up and overwhelm us?

Everyone encounters frustrations in their lives, some things will frustrate some people more than others. We learn to adjust to most of them easily, without hurting our relations with others.

However, sometimes a major frustration or series of frustrations may cause our feelings to boil to the point where we lash out verbally and seriously injure or destroy a relationship that we value. Most frustrations tend to be job oriented, however personal frustrations can add to the strain.

Frustration can be defined as, The feeling of disturbance or anxiety you experience when you meet a temporary block to your immediate goal.

Major frustrations occur when something happens to keep you from reaching a goal that means a lot to you. Whereas small frustrations may be caused by the day to day incidents that slow us down, things that prevent us from achieving all we wanted to, things that require our input where we don't wish to have input, etc... I am sure you can all think of a dozen things that can occur on a daily basis that cause you to feel frustrated.

Small frustrations can usually be dealt with quickly, major ones often need to be controlled for days or weeks before an adjustment can be made.

So what happens when we get frustrated? Almost always we become aggressive. When a steam boiler builds up too much pressure, some of the pressure must be released or it will explode, often with serious consequences. For example, a driver is frustrated by a slow-moving car on the way to town. Reactions might include:

- Cursing (verbal aggression)
- Leaning on the horn and speeding around the other car (physical aggression)
- Refusing to speak to anyone (passive aggression).

We all need to learn to release our aggression in acceptable ways without hurting our relationships with others. As a mature, mentally healthy person, you can seek and find

acceptable releases for your inner aggression. The fewer frustrations you have the fewer times you will have to seek acceptable releases.

It is just not possible to eliminate all frustrations. Expect to have to release feelings occasionally as it is not always healthy to keep tensions bottled up. That is when small frustrations can move to big frustrations.

The effect of positive energy

We all need to ensure our 'fuel tanks' stay as full as possible. Every person you talk to or meet either takes energy away from you or gives you energy. That is why we speak of some people as being draining. It is also the reason we dread certain people ringing us up.

Think for a moment. Where is your energy tank right now? Is this where you usually keep it? Are you always (as in the song) 'running on empty'? We often treat our bodies as we treat our cars: ten dollars worth at the time, bald tyres and long overdue for a tune-up!

You might like to look at the people in your life and consider how they help or hinder your fuel reserves. Sometimes people realise that their friends are simply stealing energy and giving nothing back. Time to find some new friends! People who were once good for us may now be a source of only negative feelings. You can, if you wish, change the way you interact with people so that you move to positive exchanges instead.

Now that I am stressed about my stress what can I do to keep my tanks full?

So where too from here?

- Identify what stresses you deal with daily, weekly, monthly
- How many can you remove, delegate or ignore
- Work out where your personal reserves are at. Which areas do you need to increase your reserves in?
- Identify ways to release your frustrations so you don't burst your boiler
- Who are the people you associate with who add to your energy levels, i.e they are positive? Spend more time with them.

And most importantly: Choose how you respond to stress. Don't let stress control how you respond to it.

Notes:

Acknowledgements and References

Consumers Institute of New Zealand. 1997. The less stress book: How to turn stress to your advantage. New Zealand.

Froggatt W. 1997. Good Stress: The life that can be yours. New Zealand.

Chapman E N. 1996. Your Attitude is Showing: A primer of human relations. USA.

Jarvis W. 1999. 4 Quadrant Leadership. Australia.