

UNDERSTANDING AND

MANAGING STRESS:

TAKING CONTROL



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Introduction

This manual is about understanding and managing stress. It's about helping you take control of the pressures and demands in your work and personal life. *Understanding and Managing Stress: Taking Control* contains some of the best, clinically proven techniques for relieving stress. Its main purpose is not only to help you design personalized stress management plans, but also to provide you with the strategies and resources to implement these plans.

This manual is practical, manageable, and can be used immediately to provide benefits to you in both your work and your life outside of work. The writing style is conversational and personal. An effort was made to minimize scientific theory and psychology-related jargon.

Understanding and Managing Stress: Taking Control is divided into six parts:

- **Part I** will help you understand the psychology and physiology of stress and help you assess your personal sources of stress.
- **Part II** will give you step-by-step instructions to guide you through the Stress Model. Understanding and implementing the four step Problem Solving – Action Plan is a key component of this manual.
- **Part III** will provide you the resources to deal with the pressures and demands that come from working with people.
- **Part IV** will provide an overview of some of the most effective deep muscle and momentary relaxation techniques being practised today.
- **Part V** will help you develop a practical set of tools and techniques that will enable you to think in a more rational and reasonable manner.
- **Part VI** will provide instructions and guidelines for helping you develop your own stress management action plans.

Part I

Understanding Stress

1

Definition of Stress

What is stress? Dr. Hans Selye, one of the great pioneers in stress research, defined stress as the non-specific response of the body to any demand. In general terms, he is saying that stress is the rate of wear and tear caused by life.

I define stress as the pressures and demands that life exerts on us and the way these pressures and demands make us feel.

This view indicates that stress is influenced by the individual and by the demands of the environment. Consider, for example, a tragic stress situation such as the destruction of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 by Al Qaeda hijackers. Many people experienced extreme stress reactions as a result of this event. They were shaken, horrified, bewildered, and displayed bouts of hysterical crying. However, there were other individuals like firefighters and police officers, who maintained their composure and responded in a deliberate and collected manner.

Another situation that illustrates this idea is where one particular person is very stressed about a serious demand in their job (i.e., a restructuring of their organization) while another person in the same organization may find this demand challenging and exciting.

There is no predictable pattern for an individual's reaction to a stressful situation or event. What is stressful and threatening to you may be less threatening or not stressful for me.

Here's a question I always present to participants taking my Stress Management Workshop: "How many of you here would like to be peak performers – do incredibly well at your job, be at the technological cutting edge, have a great personal and social life, but at the same time have a stress-free life?" I then ask: "Raise your hand if you want this ideal situation." Almost everybody raises their hands. Here's the punch line: The only stress-free people, God bless them, are dead! If you are alive you are experiencing some type of stress.

Stress is an ever-present, universal feature of living. Hans Selye also recognized that all types of stress are not harmful. Moderate amounts of arousal, anxiety,

and similar mental activity can enhance health and productivity. This positive stress tends to provide excitement and challenge in your life.

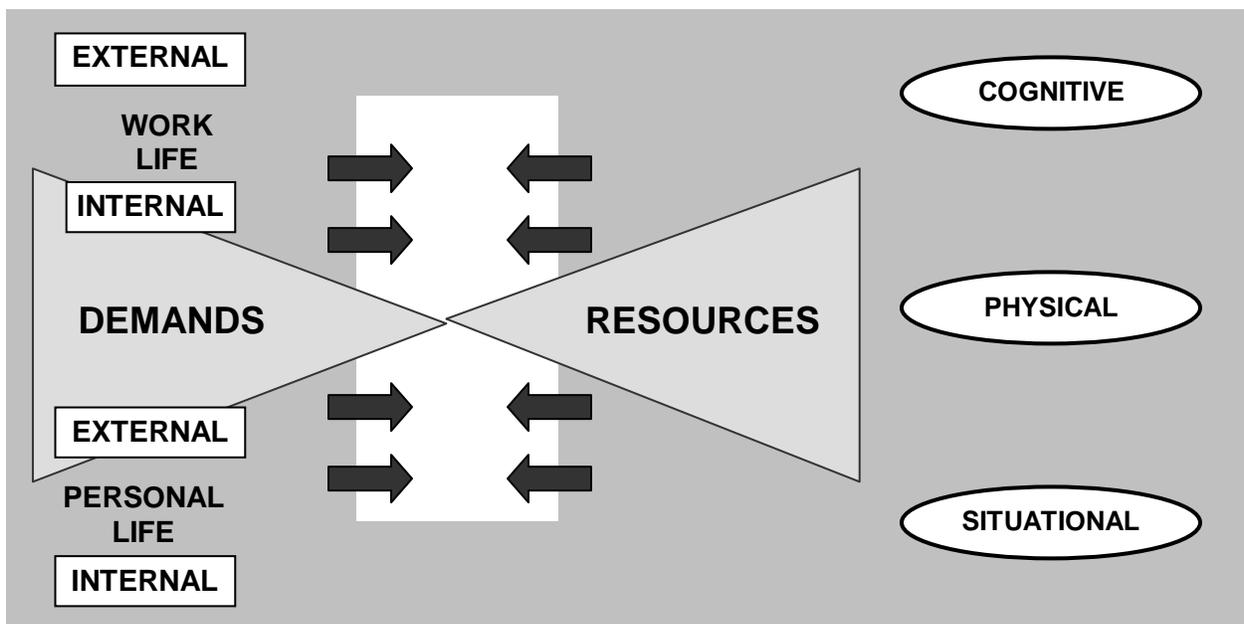
When arousal and anxiety are too high, distress occurs. It is consistent distress that creates discomfort and the symptoms of pain, which many people experience. The problem today is too much unmanageable stress.

There are two key points in this definition of stress. First, there is a dynamic relationship between you and the environment. This relationship determines the degree of your stress response.

Second, stress is an inevitable part of living. To be alive is to experience stress. Stress, in itself, is neither good nor bad. You need some stress to help you do your best. It is after that critical point where too much stress becomes distress that negative results and dysfunction become more frequent. The key is not to remove stress but to manage it so that you can produce the optimum results for yourself.

The Demands and Resources Model (Figure 1) will help to explain how stress can be managed. When the demands and pressures in your life begin to exceed your ability to handle them, a number of negative symptoms, both mental and physical, begin to appear. When you have the resources to deal with specific demands and pressures, you reach a state of balance or equilibrium.

Figure 1: **Demands and Resources Model**



Your demands in life tend to come from two main areas: your work and personal domains. Within either the work or the personal domain, demands may come from either external or internal sources.

External work demands come from outside of you and are out of your direct control. These may include the actual work environment, the nature of the job description, the client population, the specific skills required to do the job, or even the noise of the office space. Internal work demands come from within you. They consist of your beliefs, values, attitudes about your job, perceptions of your coworkers or clients, etc.

External personal demands show up after you have left the workplace. These demands are also outside of you, and may include your family, community, your friendships, and non-work responsibilities. Your internal personal demands come from within. They will include your beliefs, values, and the attitudes you bring to these people and situations.

As you can see in the Demands and Resources Model (Figure 1), the work and personal demands place a lot of pressure on you. Do these demands mean you are experiencing large amounts of stress? Not necessarily, since matching those demands is a component called resources. These resources are the skills and knowledge you have learned over time that have allowed you to survive and excel. If you look closely at Figure 1 you will see the resources arrows pointing directly at the demands arrows. These resources are categorized into three general groups: Cognitive, Physical, and Situational. These three groups of resources will be explained in greater detail later in the manual.

Here is a good example of managing stress: You are parenting an adolescent. For nearly a decade, from birth to age nine, your child provided you with some demands and challenges. You had the parenting skills and resources to deal with those demands. Then your child suddenly became an adolescent. Different hormones started to percolate into their system and they started to change their behaviour. Those same parenting skills that worked when they were three or nine aren't working when they're fourteen or sixteen. Now they are challenging your beliefs and values. You don't particularly like some of the friends they associate with. You may ask yourself, "My gosh, what's happened?" Well, there's a whole new set of demands being placed in front of you and you may not have the tools or resources to deal with them. So, what do you do?

You could become agitated, angry, and get totally stressed out, or you could recognize that you have to learn some different parenting skills that will help you deal with these new and challenging demands. As you learn more about

adolescent development you realize that your son or daughter has changed biologically and socially. Your child is no longer the same person. You will find new resources, apply your new skills and strategies to these demands, and discover that you are much more able to cope with this stressful situation.

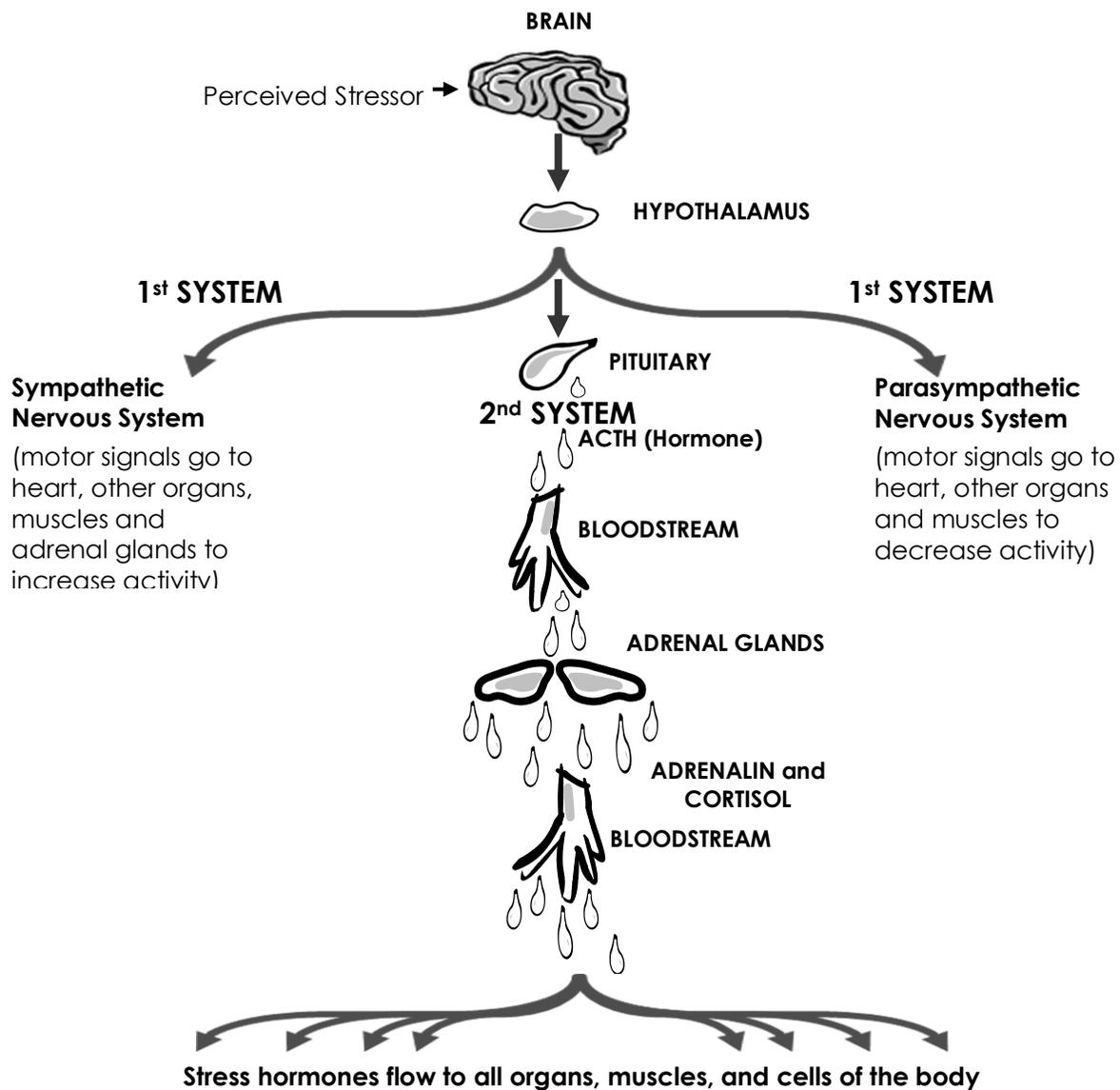
When you have the resources to deal with the demands, you have a balance in your life. Demands in themselves, as long as you can manage them, will not cause you distress. They will put pressure and stress on you but they won't put you under.

2

Physiology of Stress

Let's take a look at how the stress response works. The brain uses two major communication systems to regulate bodily functions during the stress response. The first system is the autonomic nervous system and the second is the endocrine system. Both of these systems are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: **Physiology of Stress**



Autonomic Nervous System (1st System)

The autonomic nervous system does its job via the combined action of its two branches, the “sympathetic branch,” used mainly for its lifesaving or emergency fight-or-flight capacities, and the “parasympathetic branch,” used for its calming “stay and play” capacities.

The hypothalamus, a small collection of nerve cells located in the middle of the brain, regulates the activities of the autonomic nervous system. When the hypothalamus activates the sympathetic nervous system (emergency branch) all the parts of this system stimulate major parts of the body to act above and beyond its normal everyday function. This is your first wave of defence to a stress response. The sympathetic nervous system also activates a part of the adrenal gland to produce adrenalin. Your heart starts pumping faster, your breathing accelerates to take in the extra oxygen, and your muscles tense in preparation for the fight-or-flight response.

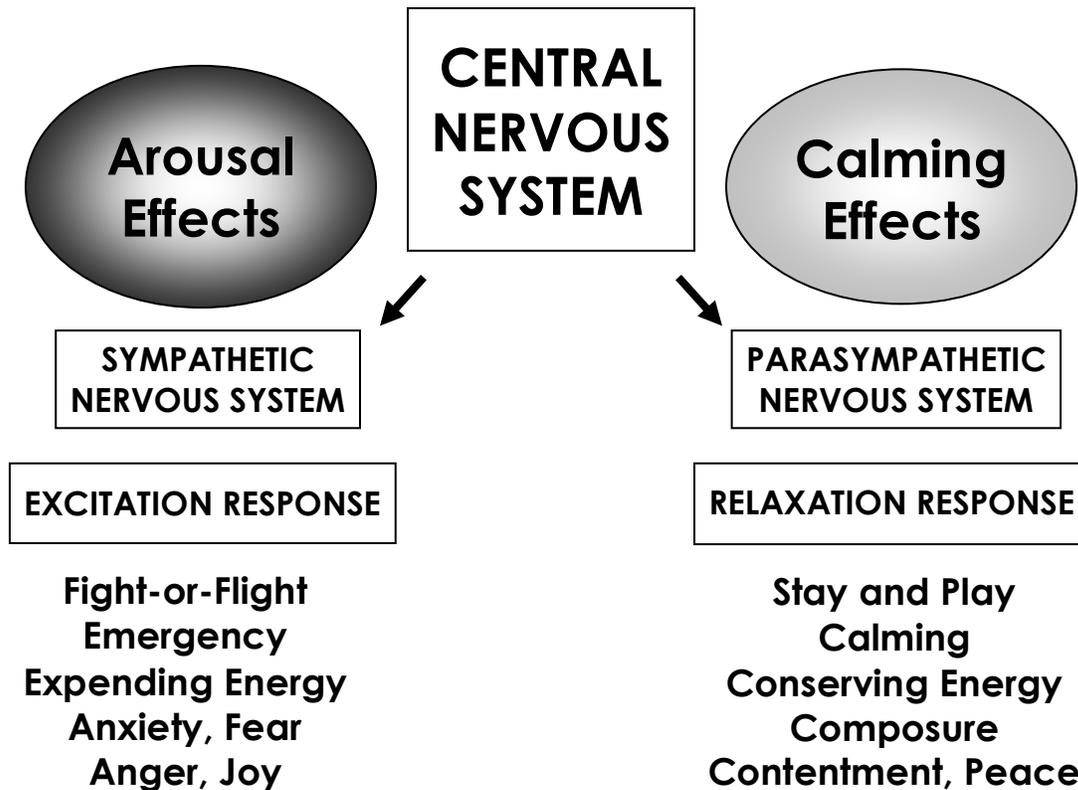
The other branch of the autonomic nervous system, the parasympathetic branch, would, by contrast, inhibit the action of some organs and increase the action of others to allow a degree of physical recovery in the body. This branch would slow down the action of the heart, dilate most blood vessels, and increase the rate of salivary production.

Endocrine System (2nd System)

The second major communication system available to the brain is the endocrine system, which acts as a second wave of defence to a stress response. The endocrine system consists of glands within the body that secrete substances called hormones into the blood stream. The two key glands that regulate the stress response are the pituitary and the adrenal. When the hypothalamus activates the pituitary gland, it secretes a hormone, ACTH, which then activates the adrenal gland to produce cortisol (the stress hormone). Cortisol makes the emergency branch of the nervous system keep going.

Let’s take a look at how the autonomic nervous system works. I will describe this system as your “hardware.” Figure 3 summarizes some of the structure and function of this hardware.

Figure 3: **Autonomic Nervous System**



You have a central nervous system which consists of your brain and spinal cord. Attached to the central nervous system is the autonomic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system produces the excitation response. It gets things in your body ready for fight or flight. This is part of your survival mechanism and it works very well if you have to respond to a stressful event. However, sometimes you can't fight and you can't run. Sometimes you have to learn to flow; to hang in there. That's where this system doesn't work so well. When the excitation response is overreacting, you end up stewing in this toxic soup of destructive hormones. This is where the symptoms of *distress* begin to appear.

The saving grace for the autonomic nervous system is the parasympathetic nervous system, which generates the relaxation response. This system, when activated, produces a state of relaxation, maintains calm, and conserves energy.

Let us use the analogy of a computer. A computer operates on two fundamental principles. First, you have hardware; that's your mainframe. The programs that drive the computer and make it work are the software. The

software program in this system is your mind, or more specifically, your conscious mind. Your hardware is the autonomic nervous system. How you use this hardware depends on the kind of software (thoughts and beliefs) that you feed into it.

Have you ever seen the acronym, GIGO? It stands for "Garbage In, Garbage Out". Well, that's how computers work. If you put garbage into a computer, then you're going to get garbage out. Your autonomic nervous system works the same way. If you feed it a lot of anxious messages, it's going to respond in an anxious way. If you feed it controlled and rational messages, it will respond in a steady and rational manner. So, your software does have some control over your hardware.

What you are going to learn from this manual is how to use specific resources that will help you recognize and manage your stress response. You will be adding some new tools to your toolbox.

The complete manual:
**Understanding and Managing Stress:
Taking Control**
- can be purchased by going to
Dr. Don Melnychuk's website, eStore.
www.donmelnychuk.com

