

EXECUTIVE STRENGTH STRESS MANAGEMENT

*Tame Your
Fears and Take
on the World*

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Module 1:

What is Stress?

And How Stressed Are
You?

The Fight or Flight Response

Before we start let's find out how stressed you are (Complete the Perceived Stress Scale on page 4 of your workbook).

I think we've all heard of the fight or flight response. That's what we get geared up for (fighting or fleeing) when we experience stress. Back in the good old days stress came from things like being attacked by a sabre-toothed tiger or threats to our food supply.

Let's just say it's a tiger attack. Our body goes into the Fight or Flight Response. Up goes our adrenaline so we're super-alert and charged with energy if we want to flee and with energy and aggression if we want to fight. Our heart rate goes up to pump the blood all around our bodies so our muscles are getting lots of nourishment. Our breathing becomes shallow so we're oxygenated to the max – giving us more energy. Our body wants to rid itself of all things that could make it heavier and therefore slower eg. what's in our bladder and bowels. Unnecessary functions like digestion are put on the back-burner- we can digest that Pterodactyl wing after we get away from the tiger. And our minds become focused on where the stress is coming from – the tiger. Our minds are also darting about the place – looking for other dangers and things that could complicate our escape from tiger teeth.

All these things make sense when we're trying to survive a sabre-tooth tiger attack but how useful are they when we're faced with stressors that don't require fighting or fleeing? Not very helpful at all!

Let's take a look at how this same response plays out in modern times.

We've just heard that a client has been bad mouthing us around town. This could be really bad for business especially in these economic times. Up goes our adrenaline – no matter what they say any publicity is not good publicity. We get nervous and restless (we're flooded with energy). Our heart rate goes up and our breathing gets shallow making us feel more nervous (we're being prepared to do something energetic - not to sit helplessly by). We need to go to the toilet (ridding our bodies of unnecessary weight). We worry about what this client has said, how will it affect me? Who have they been talking to? What have they been saying? Will my business suffer? Am I in danger? Is my business in danger? (staying focused on the source of the threat). We also start to worry about how we'll pay the bills if our business fails, what about that holiday I booked at Christmas, what if I can't feed my children – we'll be living on the streets (darting mind looking for other potential dangers). We wish we could just go and live on an island and not to have to think about these things (flight) or we wish we could knock some sense into that client - after all we went out of our way to give them everything they needed (fight). How dare they jeopardise my reputation!

The other difference is that in tiger days we either got away from the tiger and we had time to recover from our stress or we didn't and we didn't need to stress about anything anymore, ever again. In modern non-tiger time we have ongoing stress and sometimes very little chance to

recover from it. So right after we have stress to the max at work we have this to contend with as well:

We get stuck in a traffic jam on the way home. All we hear on the radio is doom and gloom and danger (more on that later). Our cat decided that our brand new lounge would look better with that 'lived in' clawed look. We realise we forgot to get milk and bread (threat to our food supply). And our (usually supportive) partner has no time to listen to us because they're late for their diabolically expensive art class (another reminder of the pending financial dangers). We sit down in front of the TV news where we hear more about the global financial crisis, failing businesses, the high unemployment rate and how supermarkets are trying to scam us on everything from adding water to meat to creating a monopoly where eventually they'll be able to charge whatever they like for groceries (more threats to our food supply). And that's if we can even hear the TV over the neighbour's heavy metal music.

We can't sleep because our job security threat hasn't gone away. We keep waking up – broken sleep – creating more stress because we can't seem to concentrate as well as usual. That makes us feel like there's more of a threat to our business because we're not working up to standard. And on and on it goes.

This may not be the exact case for you but **no matter what *your* stressors are your body will go into the same stress response.**

I told you our brains were simple creatures – the same response for all things stressful.

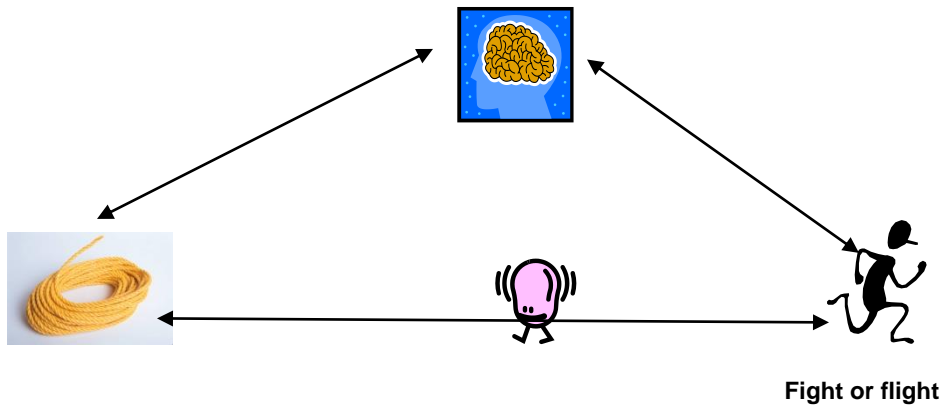
I Stress About Stuff I Don't Even Know is There?

Just when you thought you had it all worked out – no sabre-tooth tigers, no complaining clients, no reasons to be stressed – you're going to have to think again. A lot of our stress comes from unseen or unconscious sources.

Our brains are like a big danger sensing organ. So anything that can potentially be stressful is on the radar. We don't even need to be conscious that there is a stressor in the environment. Our brains will respond to it anyway. It goes a little bit like this:

We see a coiled rope in the corner in the dark. In a matter of milliseconds the information that this could be a dangerous snake gets sent to our amygdala and the flight or fight response kicks in. This has happened even before we're consciously aware that we've seen the coiled rope. This process is *speedy but not very accurate*. At the same time but much, much slower, this same information gets sent to the reasoning, conscious part of our brain. Our reasoning brain says "Mmmmm. No scales, no beady eyes, no fangs. NOT a snake. Turn off the fight or flight response and relax."

Our rational, reasoning brain says “no snake, no stress” and turns fight/flight off



Rope or snake? information gets sent to the Amygdala and it says “Run away from the snake!”

This works great when there are obvious things for us to reason about. We can easily use our conscious brain to tell us that there’s nothing to stress about. But what about when it’s non-obvious things like hearing about people dying of terminal illnesses on the news, terrorists bombing yet another building, how the financial crisis has left millions of people destitute? We’re bombarded by these images and stories so quickly that our conscious brains may not have time to think “I’m perfectly healthy. There are no terrorists in this neighbourhood, and I’m not living off food stamps.”

We’re sucking up those stressful things all day long. And our unconscious brains are working overtime. And so are our bodies – it takes a lot of energy to maintain the fight or flight response. So we come home exhausted after work, wanting to just zone out in front of the TV and wondering what’s wrong with us for being so tired which could leave us stressing even more.

When there’s so much going internally – our subconscious brain is making our body work overtime – we become extra sensitive to other stressors like noise and bright lights and crowds and other demands and responsibilities.

Which brings me to the next bit.

What are Stressors?

Before you read this section turn to page 6 of your workbook and write down everything that you find stressful in your life. These are your Stressors. And these will be the things that we’re going to learn to get control over.

Now I'm going to tell you some more stressors – probably some you hadn't thought of. And I'm going to tell you how stressful these things rate for most people.

Turn to page 7 of your workbook to see how many high stress rated events have happened in your life in the past 12 months. You can calculate your score so you can get an idea of how stressful your life has been over that period. All these scores are going to give you a base-line of your current stress levels. You can go back after you finished the course and see how much has changed.

How Do I tell if I'm Stressed?

Apart from wanting to start a new life somewhere warm where you have no responsibilities and can drink cocktails on the beach (flight) or being irritable and cranky with everyone around you (fight), how do you know if you're stressed?

If we have so many stressors on a daily basis then surely we must be feeling stressed on a daily basis too. How much stress we *actually* feel depends on how much **control** we *believe* we have over things and our *perception* of our ability to cope. It's kind of like a balance between how many resources we feel we have to deal with what's going on in our lives and how much there is actually going on in our lives. But more on this later.

Sometimes we think we're doing really well dealing with the stress we have. Sometimes we are doing really well. And sometimes we're fooling ourselves. Maybe because sometimes there's just too much subconscious stress happening in our brains.

So what do we look for?

Physical signs:

- Tiredness & lethargy
- Muscle tension & pain – especially around the neck and shoulders
- Feeling short of breath, sighing a lot or feeling like you have to take a deep breath but can't
- Racing heart
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Trouble sleeping
- Indigestion, diarrhoea, constipation, nausea
- Headaches
- Restlessness
- Lowered sex drive and desire for intimacy
- Getting sick more often

Behavioural signs:

- Grinding teeth at night
- Overuse of alcohol, smoking more, compulsive eating
- Critical of others and maybe even more bossy than usual
- Irritable or more aggressive
- Withdrawing from friends and social events

Emotional signs

- Mood swings
- Boredom, lack of meaning
- Unhappy for no reason
- Overwhelming sense of pressure
- Anxiety and apprehension
- Feelings of failure, low self-worth
- Feeling isolated

Cognitive signs:

- Hard to make decisions or work out what to prioritise
- Preoccupation with trivial details
- Difficulty concentrating
- Short-term memory impairment and being forgetful
- Loss of creativity and sense of humour
- Constant worry
- Racing thoughts, can't quiet your mind

Could you say yes to a lot of those? Then there's a good chance you're stressed.

Stress Buster:

Your mission should you choose to accept it for this week is to keep adding to your list of stressors. This is not an exercise in torture, making you realise just how stressful your life is. This is an exercise that is going to come in handy later.

And I will see you later for Module 2.