

EXECUTIVE STRENGTH STRESS MANAGEMENT

*Tame Your
Fears and Take
on the World*

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Module 4:

More Stuff that Works

Coping

Stress comes from a mismatch between environmental demands and our perceived resources for dealing with those environmental demands. So if we increase our perceived resources or reduce our environmental demands we should be less stressed. This takes us into coping territory.

I can tell you straight out that the best coping strategy for dealing with stress is NOT avoidance. But this is the one that a lot of us like to use. I like to call this one “The Ostrich Technique”. Ostrich’s have this crazy idea that if they put their head in the sand and they can’t see you then you can’t see them either. And that’s how a lot of people deal with stress. “If I don’t look at it, it doesn’t exist.”

I would LOVE it if this actually worked. But as I said earlier – this is possibly the worst strategy you could use.

Some people’s head in the sand is alcohol. “I’ll hide my head in this bottle of wine and all my stress will disappear.” When was the last time you tried that and it actually worked? You can’t actually stay drunk forever, although I’m sure some of us have tried.

Other people’s head in the sand is denial. “It’s not that bad. I’ll just put on my happy face and it will all be fine.” Optimism is a fabulous coping strategy. And I guess there is an element of optimism in this but when you *deny* what is actually happening, it’s way more stressful. Don’t forget your subconscious mind is still working over-time on your stress behind the scenes which means your body is still being triggered into the fight or flight response. AND if you’re in denial then you’re not doing anything to address the source of the stress. This leaves you feeling more out of control which increases your stress.

Also if you tell yourself not to think about the problem you’re more likely to think it about it anyway. There’s a lot of research on thought suppression that says the more you suppress your thoughts the more you think about them.

Try this now. Try NOT to think of a pink polar bear. What was the first thing you thought about?

Mmmmm. Thought suppression failure in action.

So what kinds of coping work?

- 1. We can change the way we look at our stress inducing situations. This changes our perception of the stressful situation (making it less scary).**
 - We can do this by looking for the hope like we did in Module 2.
 - We can ‘reframe’ the problem. This means looking at it as a challenge or as something we can learn from. For example, we could get stressed about the slow week at work *OR*

we could reframe and see this as an opportunity to take care of those foundational tasks that could make us more money in the future.

- We can break the stressful situation into manageable bits (exercise to follow) so that we're looking at it less like a gargantuan problem and more like a series of small monsters to slay.
 - And my favourite.... we can try to see the funny side of the problem. Laughter works a treat for reducing our stress. And looking for the funny side of a stressful situation sure puts it in perspective for us.
- 2. We can find different ways to manage the stressful situation. This changes our perception of our ability to cope with the stressful situation and builds our perceived resources.**
- We're trying to find ways to deal with the cause of the problem with this one. So we might do some research to get a better handle on what's happening. For example, if our stress is from a drop in income we might research what our competitors are doing that's working. We might look at how we could reduce our expenses or what we might be able to introduce to bring in extra money.
 - We might learn new skills to help us deal with the problem. For example we might learn some new marketing strategies or enrol in some courses that upskill us.
- 3. We can look for enriching or meaningful elements in the stressful situation. This changes our perceived ability to cope.**
- This is a great one because it works with positive psychology principles. We might look for the small pleasures available to us even if our life seems to be falling apart around our ears.
 - We might re-evaluate our whole situation based on what is really important to us and change things to be more in line with our values.
 - We might reassess and change our goals if they're the nasties that are making us too stressed.

I've put an exercise for using these principles on page 20 of your workbook.

Being a Control Freak

Who would have thought being a control freak would be good for your stress! Strangely it really is. But not in the way you imagine. Quite often our stress will come from feeling our situation (or our life) is out of our control. The feelings of helplessness and powerlessness that come from feeling out of control are some of the most stressful feelings of all.

Any situation, no matter how bad it is, is more tolerable and less stressful if you feel you can do something about it. Sometimes we have to dig deep to find something that feels controllable. And sometimes the only thing we can control is ourselves.

There are a few different ways of getting that 'in control' feeling back again.

1. **Today. Tomorrow. Later Dude!**

Quite often when we're stressed we tend to lump everything in together. This is because our brains like to make connections between things. And our brains also like to look for all the other stressful things and things to be scared of when we're already stressed (see Module 1).

It goes a little like this:

"I have to move house and there are all these bills that have come in which reminds me that I still have to pay for Jane's school camp trip – she'll be so disappointed if I forget – it's so hard being a mother and working like this – and I have this client project that I really need to finish – honestly I feel like I need to be superwoman just to get everything done – which reminds me I promised to help Felix with his new kitten that he called Superwoman (what was he thinking!– he can't seem to toilet train it....."

And on and on it goes.

This becomes a never ending spiral of stress. It all goes around and around in our brain, usually with none of it being resolved. And all that adds up to STRESS for us because it starts to feel out of control. Enter Control Freak.

One deliciously simple way of getting control over this spiral of stress is to break it down into smaller more manageable tasks.

Take a sheet of paper. Turn it sideways. Divide it into 3 columns. (I have actually done this for you on page 21 of your workbook). Add the headings:

Today (or this week). **Tomorrow** (or next week or next month). **Later Dude!** (or just 'later' if you don't want to be a dork).

Start to organise your tasks into the columns.

The most important most pressing go in the first column. Tasks that can wait but still need doing in the near future go in the next column. Stuff that can wait goes in the last column.

Don't fret and stress – you will get to the last column *when you need to*. There's no point in stressing about it now when it doesn't have to be attended to until later.

Next go through the first column and look at what you CAN get control over. Then DO what you CAN get control over. There's nothing like a bit of action to cure fear.

Here's an example:

It's Monday morning. You're looking at everything happening for the week.

You have that presentation to prepare.

You have your marketing budget to assess.

You have that dinner to prepare for your partner's boss on Friday night.

You have reports to write.

You have your personal life to organise for the weekend.

You have your kids' football final or dance recital on Saturday.

You really want to clear out the garage.

You want to research where you're going on your next holiday – you feel like you need something to look forward to.

You have those website changes you've been wanting to make forever.

And you know you should be on LinkedIn creating more connections.

Uh oh you're starting to feel a bit overwhelmed. This week did NOT look this bad only a moment ago.

If you start to sort everything into Today. Tomorrow. Later. Then you will start to feel a little less stressed and a little more in control.

Let's look at that list again. When is that presentation? In 2 days time? Then there's a good chance that needs to go in Today. A bit of time on it today means you're more prepared and less stressed tomorrow.

When is the marketing budget due? Next week? Then it could go into Tomorrow with the option to shift it to Later if Tomorrow turns out to have other priorities or you can stick straight in Later and save the stress.

The dinner? That's not til Friday. That's a definite Later.

Reports? What really needs to be done today? Break them down. The report for this thing needs to go out this afternoon but the one for that thing is not due til Wednesday so it can go in Tomorrow.

So I think you get the picture.

There'll be another stress relieving tool shortly that will help you prioritise your Today list.

2. Exhausting the Control Freak

Sometimes it can be hard to know what you CAN get control over. If we're feeling super-stressed it can be easy to think we can't get control over anything. But maybe it's just a matter of exhausting the control freak.

I'll give you an example:

Part of your stress is because you drive to work in peak hour traffic and it takes you a really, really long time. You know you would be more productive at work and a lot less stressed if you didn't have to do the drive. You start to think about how you could get control of this stressor.

You brainstorm some ideas. You could change jobs but that doesn't feel like an option at the moment. Aha! You could ask your boss if you could arrive an hour late and leave an hour late – thereby missing the traffic!

Your boss says no.

You ask if you can work from home two days a week – the drive won't be so bad if you're only doing it a few days a week.

Your boss says no.

You could car pool and reduce the stress of driving all that way all alone.

No-one lives near you.

So far you have tried to control the external world here and come up against some challenges. But you still haven't exhausted your control freak yet. You can still get control over your inner world. It goes a little bit like this:

You can use this time to do a whole heap of things. You can practice your Mindfulness while driving. You can use this time for personal development – listening to your favourite inspirational people as you drive. You can catch up on some reading – no not book reading – I mean recorded books. Or maybe you can catch up on your phone calls before you get to work – don't get caught doing the dialling/texting thing – all legal stuff please – a fine and loss of points brings a lot of stress you know.

And you just keep going like that until you have exhausted every option and gained control over *something* in the situation. Some *control* is better than no control. Especially for your stress levels.

Pick a stressful situation or problem and see if you can exhaust every avenue you have for gaining control. There's some room to record it on page 22 of your workbook.

That's given us quite a few things to practice for this week so I'm going to leave it there. Keep working on breaking things down, enlisting the Control Freak, and employing different coping strategies to any stressful situations that arise through the week. Otherwise apply them to any long standing stressors you might have. The more you practice this the better you will be at it and the more natural it will be to reach for one of these strategies when a stressor knocks you off your perch.