

EXECUTIVE STRENGTH STRESS MANAGEMENT

*Tame Your
Fears and Take
on the World*

DR MICHELLE HANISCH



Module 5:

Prevention is
Better than Cure

Prevention, Prevention, Prevention

One of the world's stress experts (Robert Epstein) did a study that assessed the four main stress management strategies. He wanted to see which was the most effective. The four types are: source management (reducing or eliminating the sources of stress; delegating; organising your space so you can find things easily; relaxation (practicing techniques such as breathing exercises or meditation); thought management (correcting irrational thinking and interpreting events in ways that don't hurt you); and prevention (planning and conducting your life so that you avoid stressors). We've pretty much covered all of these in this course so far but I'm giving you some more.

Robert found that *prevention* was the best way to manage stress. So that means doing things to prevent stressful situations from taking a hold on you. That might include planning your day or year to avoid stressors before they stress you. This could be stuff like planning your budget so you know there's enough money for your holiday and bills or knowing what big things are coming up at work so you can plan to have enough resources (staff etc) to complete the projects on time.

So it's lots of practical stuff as opposed to psychological stuff. I can vouch for the fact that practical stuff **does** work. Luckily for those of us who know how the subconscious mind can rule us (remember it does 90 – 95% of the work) there are also some less practical-looking prevention strategies that work on the subconscious too.

Just for the moment let's stay with practical.

Take a look at your stressors from Module 1. Maybe you've already written down some of the small stressors on your list. If you have, take some of those and add them to page 24 of your workbook. If you haven't you might want to write some things that you hadn't thought of before – that old mobile phone that keeps dying at the most inopportune times, or that pile of tax receipts that bugs you every time you walk past it, or the huge business cost you know you have coming up.

Is there anything on your list that you might be able to take some preventative measures to manage? I'll give you some hints. The dying mobile phone: get a new one. The annoying tax receipts: do them or get a book-keeper. The scary upcoming costs: start putting money away now.

These things sound like small little stressors (you can apply preventative strategies to BIG stressors too) but they can take '*attentional units*' of your brain. We only have so much we can pay attention to at any one time. Think of your brain like a bank account. There's only so much money you can draw on. If you're making withdrawals on annoying little stressors then you have less 'money' to spend elsewhere on things that are important to you. It's important to learn to choose where your priceless attention goes.

So let's just say we're stressed about everything we have to get done in a limited amount of time. We go over and over the mental list of things to do, taking up lots of attentional units of our brain. Because that leaves us with fewer attentional units to play with we miss thinking of better solutions to problems, or we forget that important piece of information our boss or staff member gives us – that vital piece of information that could have made a huge difference to our profits or performance.

To save as many attentional units as possible we need to get organised, to get these mental lists out of our brain and onto paper (do we still use pen and paper these days?). We also need to get all these little unfinished or minorly stressful and irritating things (decrepit mobile phone, receipts) out of our awareness too. All unfinished things take up attentional units at some point in our day.

Here are some other strategies to build your Preventative Stress Management IQ.

Plan your Day

Spending a few minutes at the beginning of the day planning what you're going to do is surprisingly effective. Even if you don't have stacks of things on, this works a treat. If you're one of those busy people who get so caught up in being busy that you think you don't have time to plan in the mornings, think again. I can guarantee that you will get more done and get more of the important things done if you plan first.

This *Preventative* Stress Management Strategy also helps you gain a sense of *control* over your day. And we all know that control is a very important part of staying de-stressed. It also makes your day much more predictable and yes.....predictability is fabulous for keeping us de-stressed. The more predictable life is the less stressed we are. Think back to caveman days. If we had most of our life as predictable then when something unusual and potentially dangerous happened we'd really, really notice it. Predictability makes us feel safe.

Here's another poor rat story: rats show a much, much smaller stress response if they get a warning (a little bell sounding) that they're going to get electric shocks than if the shocks just come out of the blue. The shocks have the same intensity, the rats still have no control over them and can't stop them but *knowing* when they're coming, having the shocks as *predictable*, significantly lowers the amount of stress the poor rats feel. And I think it's fairly safe to assume that humans are the same.

So.... let's make life as predictable as possible.

First of all you want to start with a list of what's on your agenda for the day. It doesn't have to be written in any particular order.

Then you want to go through and give everything that is uber important an A. You can see all this on page 25 of your workbook.

Then you want to go through the remainder and give the things that are important but not urgent a B.

Anything left is a C. C's are fabulous. They can probably be left til tomorrow or the next day if they're not done today.

Next you want to go through the A's and number the most urgent one as a 1. The next most urgent as a 2 etc etc. Then do the same with the B's and the C's.

Then..... the most important bit of all. Choose 3 things from your A's that you would feel really proud and happy to get done. Only three. Remember that the more control you feel you have the less stressed you are. That's why choosing only 3 things works. It's not impossible to get done so you're not creating too much pressure and therefore not stressing. It doesn't mean you have to stop at 3 – you can keep going with the whole list – but it means you gain a sense of achievement when you've done your 3.

That whole prioritising thing leads me to one more thing.

Lowering your standards. That doesn't sound right does it? But having external pressures AND the internal pressure of feeling like we need to do everything or do everything perfectly adds *way* too much stress. If you have way too many things on your list and you feel like you have to get them all done *no matter what* then you are going to be stressed before you even start. And stress results in brain cell death which means you can't concentrate as well, you can't solve problems as well and if you're like some of us you'll be looking at your list so stressed about not getting it all done that you'll waste heaps of time trying to decide which takes priority in a stressed state. That's like trying to decide "should I climb that tree to get away from the tiger or just run for my life or try hitting it with that big stick. Oh no I can't decide which is the most important!" You want to know your options as early in the process as possible.

So here are some less practical but just as effective Preventative Stress Management Strategies.

Visualisation

Visualisation can be used in so many ways. You might remember me saying that your brain doesn't know the difference between what's real and what's imagined. So what that means is that whatever you imagine your brain perceives as true. So let's just say you have a speech coming up and like 99% of the population you're stressed by the idea of public speaking. In your stressed state you imagine yourself making all sorts of mistakes, fumbling over your words, forgetting what you were going to say and generally making a fool of yourself. You may also remember me mentioning the monolith that is your stress-induced negative thinking networks:

more stress = more focusing on the bad stuff. (Three to one positive to negative thoughts as the cure people!).

One way we can get our 3:1 ratio happening AND fool our brain into believing something other than we will be verbally challenged during our talk is to visualise. We visualise ourselves being confident and breezing through the talk. Maybe even being super relaxed and wooing people with our winning ways. The more we visualise this the more our brain believes that's how it is. And the more likely it is that when we put ourselves in that same situation we've been visualising that we'll be smooth, confident, sharp, and engaging.

Visualising really works – sports people do this before competitions. The areas of their brain that light up when they're *actually* moving are the same areas that light up when they're *imagining* moving. Some experiments have even shown that people have built muscle strength simply from imagining but not actually doing exercise. Crazy huh!

So if you use Visualisation before the stressful event and imagine you doing it in a non-stressed way you build your confidence beforehand AND your brain has already watched you and *believes* that you're in control, capable and confident. Easy!

There is one small trick to visualisations. For the visualisation to be the most effective we need to do it as though we are looking out of our own eyes. We don't see ourselves performing as though it's happening on a movie screen. If we're visualising giving a speech we don't imagine watching ourselves up on stage, we imagine the microphone in front of us and the audience watching us with rapt attention.

Try it now – just for a moment. Imagine something that you usually stress over. Now imagine yourself breezing through that situation – doing it in exactly the way you would like to be able to do it. Handling it effortlessly. It feels good doesn't it?

The more you do this before any stressful situation, the more your brain will believe it as the truth. I have a bit of a ritual where I spend some time when I go to bed or when I wake up in the morning visualising going through my day in a calm and collected way, dealing with anything life throws at me with grace and ease. I have to admit that since I've been doing it I have handled stress a whole lot better when life throws a curve ball.

I've recorded a little something for you to start with. Once you have the hang of it you can develop your own internal script.

Find Outlets for Frustration

We deal with stress so much better when we have Outlets for Frustration. Imagine you're a monkey in the wild that gets beaten up by a bigger monkey. You get a lot of stress relief from

turning around and beating up the even smaller monkey behind you minding his own business. You have an Outlet for Frustration.

Again with the poor lab rat stories....The rat that gets stressed by being shocked has a much smaller stress response when he's allowed to bite the crap out of another rat. Another Outlet for Frustration.

Now I'm not recommending this kind of Outlet for Frustration. Biting is not socially acceptable. At least it wasn't the last time I looked. But you can see how a lot of us do this. We take out our frustrations on our partners, our dogs, or on the poor unsuspecting drivers that happen to make a minor traffic error.

Preparing some Outlets for Frustration will help enormously with your stress levels. It kind of works in two ways. First there's a release of the stress hormones if we do something immediately after being stressed and second it gives us something positive to look forward to in a world of stress.

So Outlets for Frustration can be anything from kicking the crap out of a punching bag to developing creative habits such as dancing, playing guitar or painting. You could even try singing really loud in the car. Maybe it would be a little like roaring at your tiger. Anyway – anything to release that frustration.

If you go to page 26 of your workbook you'll find a space to brainstorm some Outlets for Frustration.

Build Social Support Networks.

As you can guess if you don't already know – it takes time to build good social support networks. So this is definitely a 'to do' if you want to be prepared with in your stress management strategies. So get to it. Start building.

Social support is the number one protective factor against most physical and psychological disasters. People with social support live longer, have less chance of contracting awful illnesses and are happier and healthier. People who are socially isolated when there are stressors are more likely to suffer with high blood pressure and 2 to 5 times more likely to develop heart disease.

The thing with social support is you don't have to go crazy trying to make as many new friends as you possibly can. All you need are a few good quality friends.

The thing for some of us stress heads is that we're not used to relying on other people for support. So we keep all our stuff to ourselves and stress ourselves out even more. We don't want to be a burden. We want to be seen as strong. Other people are worse off than us or too

busy or too something that prevents us from sharing with them or leaning on them when we need them.

This is bad news people. Get with the program and ditch some of those beliefs. NOT relying on people. NOT having people to have a laugh with (if that's one of your preferred stress management strategies). NOT being able to tell someone your stuff so that we get to realise other people feel that way too. NOT staying involved in life and isolating ourselves when we're really stressed can KILL us. Yep – heart disease and early death here we come.

So if you're an isolator it might help to start looking at your beliefs about seeking support and try to change them. If you play nicely with others already then good work.

There's some space in your workbook on page 27 to write down your beliefs about seeking social support and some ideas on how you could start to build it.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness – there is so much research to say that Mindfulness changes our stressed little brains to much less stressed little brains so it's a perfect Preventative Stress Management Strategy. If we could practice it on a regular basis then we could be almost as chilled as the Dalai Lama. I mean, have you seen any worry lines on his forehead? Have you ever read a newspaper article that mentioned how stressed the Dalai Lama was looking before his appearance at the latest Happiness Conference? I didn't think so. Although I did have someone mention how stressed he looks when he's jogging. I YouTubed it but couldn't find it.

When you practice Mindfulness (and actually other meditative/spiritual things) it increases activation in the left side of your brain which is associated with positive emotions. Stress is not a positive emotion and it's not that easy for negative emotions to exist at the same time and positive ones. So more left hemispheric activation – less stress.

Mindfulness also has the benefit of relaxing your nervous system and reducing the stress response even though it's not really designed to do that. Developing Mindfulness helps us be here now rather than in our heads worrying about all the stressful stuff in our lives. Mindfulness also makes us realise that we can deal with anything because everything is dealt with in this moment. And each moment is not only not unbearable - it's probably not even that stressful.

As a bonus, if we realise that we can deal with anything then we have also changed our perceived ability to cope. Remember I said that's half the reason we get stressed – external stressors seem greater than our perceived internal ability to cope. If we change our perceptions of our ability to cope from “I can't deal with it” to “I think I can” to “I know I can” then stress disappears. Mindfulness gives us the “I know I can” attitude.

I'd love to teach you all Mindfulness in this course but there's an awful lot to it and I'd be selling it short. And that would stress me.

So keep an eye out. I may just develop a Mindfulness course for you too.

Get Happy

There's just one last thing I'd like to say about the prevention of stress and that is GET HAPPY. There's a lot of research that says that happiness is the cure all for just about everything. Laughter makes your health better. Optimism is associated with less stress. And there is definitely a reciprocal relationship with more happiness and less stress.

I haven't gone into detail about how to get happy here because that's basically all covered in my How to Be Happy course. There are over 25 strategies to get and stay happy. That's a lot of ways to increase your happiness. Check my website for details on how to access this course.

Checking Your Vitals

It's always a good idea to check how much you've progressed at the end of any course. I'd recommend re-doing the Perceived Stress Scale from Module 1 to see how much your score has dropped. If you're still finding it quite high you might want to spend some more time doing the exercises and finding ways to incorporate the strategies into your life.

If you're one of those "I'm too busy to **do** these activities" people then you probably need to do them more than other people. You're probably on a fast track to burnout. A few minutes here and there now could save you months of recovery later.

Thanks

Unfortunately all good things must come to an end. I have thoroughly enjoyed spending this time with you. I have also enjoyed being reminded of all the wonderful and diverse ways I can deal with my stress.

In my experience as a psychologist and as a person I have found the hardest thing is making anything new a part of your life. So if any of these Stress Management Strategies are new to you then your challenge from here on in is to incorporate them into your life.

In the initial stages I recommend an accountability buddy. Someone who will keep you on track. If you don't want to do that, try to become your own accountability buddy. Find some ways to remind yourself of your preferred strategies – stick post-it notes around the place, set an alarm on your phone that has a reminder, schedule strategies into your daily planner, set a routine time each day where you record your 3:1's. Anything you can find that will be helpful. That should turn these strategies into habits. And habits stay with you for a lifetime.

Even with an arsenal of Stress Management Strategies, sometimes external stressors actually *do* exceed our internal ability to cope. Use your list of signs of stress (pages 6 and 7) to recognise these times and seek some support – whether that's social support or professional support. I have had clients that have had unbelievable amounts of stress to deal with. Sure they would have gotten through themselves but I can tell *you* that they tell *me* it was a whole lot easier with support.

Finally..... get out there and THRIVE. All these skills you're learning will help you achieve a life that is fulfilling, successful and generally much more wonderful than it would have been without them.

xxxxx Dr Michelle