



## Understanding Stress

As human beings, we are gifted with automatic physical responses designed to keep us safe, healthy and well. One of these is an evolutionary response to threat, either actual, perceived, or even anticipated.

When we experience or perceive something as threatening, the primitive part of our brain signals for the release of chemicals (adrenalin and cortisol), which prepare the body and mind for action, so that we can either fight, or run away. This is known as the fight – flight response. This was helpful for our primitive ancestors when faced with life or death situations. However, most threats in modern life aren't about our physical survival. They are more likely to be about our self esteem, our sense of belonging, our psychological well being. The fight - flight response isn't always helpful in the same way.

Once a threat or challenge is perceived, either consciously or unconsciously, our bodies become mobilised, and ready for action. Typically, heart rate and blood pressure increases, breathing becomes faster and more shallow, muscles tense up, non-essential systems like digestion & the immune system close down, and mentally we can have trouble focusing on detail.

If the challenge is linked to a particular situation, or goal (e.g. delivering a presentation, going for an interview), this chemical release creates a heightened state of physical and mental arousal designed to help us perform at our best. Once the task has been completed, and the challenge met, adrenalin and cortisol levels can return to normal.

However, when the fight – flight response is triggered by threats we perceive as being beyond our control, or capability to handle, or by free floating anxiety as a result of repeated or persistent uncertainty and distress, there is no outlet for the cortisol. Levels can build up to a point where they affect memory and learning, raise blood pressure and cholesterol, decrease resilience, and increase feelings of depression and inability to cope. If we are already in this high stress state internally, it takes very little in the outside world to take us over the edge.

We can think of internal stress levels as an internal temperature. Each stressor can raise our temperature by several degrees. If we experience and create multiple stressors, our internal temperature will go up and up. If we are already at 90 degrees, it doesn't take much to take us to boiling point. But if our 'temperature' is only at 40 degrees, we can tolerate a lot more.

So the trick for managing stress response is three fold. One is to monitor our own internal stress 'temperature'. A second is to repeatedly practise techniques and strategies to bring down our internal temperature, and to engage our natural recovery systems. The third is to build up our sense of resilience and ability to cope and thrive.

***"If you stress daily, you need to de-stress daily. It's that simple"***