



stresscontrol

Face your fears; be more active; watch what you drink

Step 6

Controlling your thoughts

Stress and worry affect the way we think and the way we think affects stress. This helps keep stress alive. If you control your thoughts, this will help control your stress. **Step 6** teaches you two skills that will help you do this:

The Big 5 Challenges

Breaking stress up

Imagine a young woman worrying about going to a wedding. She sits in her room the night before and thinks of all the things that can go wrong. One stressful thought leads to another. Not only that but the stressful thoughts get stronger and stronger. She worries that she won't know many people there. She worries that she won't know what to say. She worries that she will blush or shake.

The woman worries that she will make a fool of herself and that everyone will think that she is an idiot. She will end up so tense thinking about what **might** go wrong at the wedding that she ends up phoning with an excuse to get out of going. The woman has just talked herself **into** stress. Although by avoiding, she may feel better in the short term, she has just made her stress worse in the long run.

Now anyone who believed that these things were **definitely** going to happen would also become stressed. But the big question is - would they have happened? She will never know as she did not go. But if she had challenged the thoughts, what would have happened? She may have got to the wedding. As she controlled her thoughts, she may have felt more in control of her stress. She may have coped better as a result.

Stress puts blinkers on you - you get into the habit of only seeing things that fit with your stress. Pull back the blinkers and you see the wider view. This part of 'Stress Control' will teach you how to talk yourself **out of** stress by **challenging** your thoughts.

The Big 5 Challenges

The **first skill** teaches you ways to challenge your thoughts. This is a straight-forward approach but you will need to practise it a lot before you get to grips with it. It is all about standing back to get a clearer picture. You then challenge your thoughts as soon as you become aware of them.

You will learn about the Big 5 Challenges:

What are the chances...?

What is the worst thing...?

Am I right to think that...?

The five year rule

What is this worth?

The challenge you use depends on the stressful thoughts. The more you practise, the easier it will be to pick the right challenge.

The **second skill** – Breaking Stress Up' – teaches you a way to prevent stress.

What are the chances...?

(‘putting your money where your mouth is’)

This challenge assumes that the things you worry about are unlikely to happen. It asks you how much of your own money would you bet on it happening. Here are some examples:

"If I don't get out of here, I'm going to faint"

Challenge "What are the chances of me fainting? I always think that I am going to faint yet I never have since I was pregnant. On the few times when I haven't been able to get out, I have felt very faint but then the feeling passed and I was OK. So just stay and brave it out. I'll be fine"

"My heart is pounding and my pulse is racing. My fingers are tingling. I'm going to have a heart attack"

Challenge "What are the chances? of me having a heart attack. I've been through this many times before and I've never had a heart attack. My doctor has told me my heart is in fine shape. I saw all my symptoms in the handout. Even although they can come on when I feel calm, I now know that this is normal in stress"

What is the worst thing...?

(‘putting the lid on it’)

This challenge assumes that the things you worry about may well happen but are you making too much of them. So you learn to put the lid on the stress.

"What if I start to blush in front of the people at work? I would want to die"

Challenge "What is the worse thing that can happen? I've blushed in front of them a few times and I was very self-conscious. Nothing else happened. So if it happens again - will it be the end of the world? - will they disown me? - No. So, at worst, I would be embarrassed. I hate it but it isn't going to kill me. Don't make too much of it"

"What if I forget all the prices? I'll come across like an idiot" (salesman)

Challenge "What is the worst thing that can happen? The worst thing is that I'll forget the prices. Big deal - I'll look up my price book. I may not come across like the world's greatest salesman but I won't look like the worst. I've looked up the book hundreds of times in front of customers in the past. Keep things in proportion"

Am I right to think that....?

('weighing the evidence')

This challenge assumes that you may be missing some important evidence. If you look for that evidence, your stress might lessen. Here are some examples (think what would happen if the person doesn't challenge these fears):

'They are all looking at me. They can all see that I can't cope with this'

Challenge 'Am I right to think that they are all looking at me? Look around - they are just getting on with it. They are not bothered about me. I'm being too sensitive. I know I can hide my stress well. I think I look OK. In any case, I might be very tense just now but I am still coping'

'I'm a failure'

Challenge 'Am I right to think that I'm a failure. I know I shout at the wee ones a lot but depression makes me do this. I try my best and a lot of the time, I can be OK. I'm holding down my job - just but I'm still coping. I ask too much of myself - I can't be perfect. I'm far from it but I'm not the worst by a long shot'

The five year rule

(‘the history game’)

This challenge assumes that the thing you are worrying about has happened or will happen. It then asks you to stand back from it and work out how bad it really is. You ask yourself ‘*will this matter in 5 years' time?*’.

‘I really messed things up this morning. I made a real fool of myself. I’m not going back

Challenge ‘**How big a deal will this morning be in five years time?** Get things in perspective here. It was awful this morning but it is over and I am still on my feet. I’ve learned something and it won’t happen again. If that is the worst thing to happen to me for the next five years then I will be lucky. Stick in there’

‘My life will never change. I would be better off dead’

Challenge ‘**Will I feel the same in five years time?** How should I know? I can’t read the future. I do feel in the pits just now but I’ve been here before and picked up. I can do the same again. But this time, I have the chance to learn better ways of coping. Life can change - don’t give up’

What is this worth?

('is life too short?')

This challenge asks you, given all the other things in your life, whether you are spending too much time thinking about things that don't deserve it.

'I go to bed each night worrying about how I coped today. Did I say something silly to my neighbour? was I too hard on the kids? I always feel I have failed and I feel that I am stuck in a very deep rut'

Challenge Is life too short to worry like this? No-one at home says I'm failing. In fact, they often say how well I deal with the kids. My neighbours always talk to me so they must think I'm OK. On one level, things are going fine. Yet my life feels miserable. I should learn to pat myself on the back a bit more'

'I feel envy and hatred towards so many people. I hate myself but I don't make any moves to change. I am wasting my life

Challenge Is life too short to think like this? When I'm on my death bed, do I want to look back on all the chances I have not taken? all the people I've snubbed? all the fears that have held me back? I've only going to be on this earth once. I've got to confront life. I've got to give it my best shot. If things don't work out then at least I've tried.



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Stress Challenge

Write down the stressful thoughts. Then stand back from them and pull back the blinkers. Then use one of the five challenges to fight the stress

Stressful thoughts	Stress Challenge



Stress Challenge

Write down the stressful thoughts. Then stand back from them and pull back the blinkers. Then use one of the five challenges to fight the stress

Stressful thoughts	Stress Challenge



Stress Challenge

Write down the stressful thoughts. Then stand back from them and pull back the blinkers. Then use one of the five challenges to fight the stress

Stressful thoughts	Stress Challenge



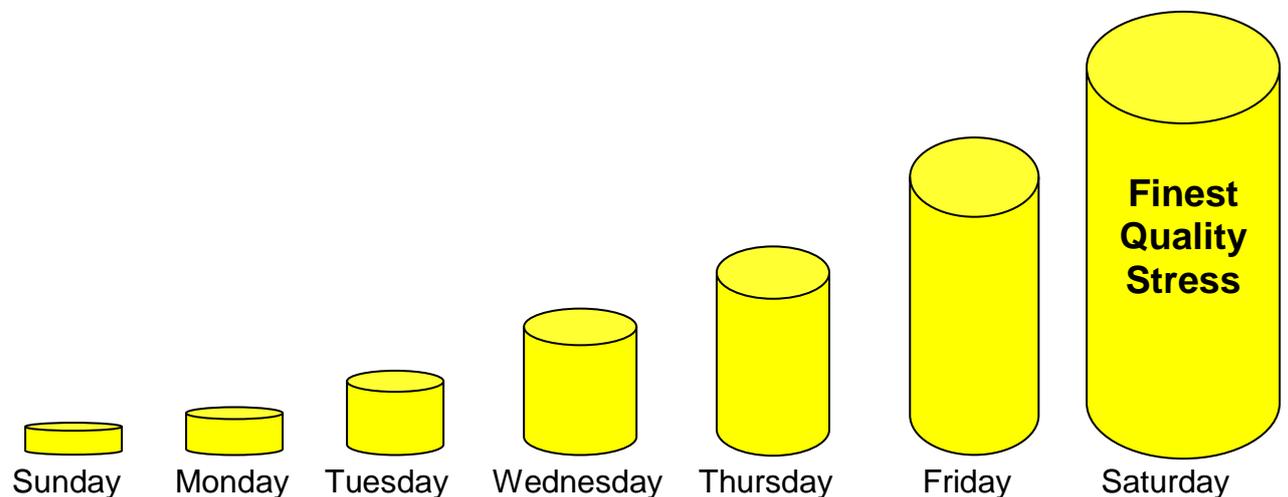
Breaking stress up

This is a great skill for those of you who can see a link between stress and what is going on in your life. So if you know your stress will rise if you have something coming up, you can use this skill to help.



David's GP asked him to come to 'Stress Control'. At the time, he thought this was just what he needed. When he read the handouts I sent him, he was sure the course was for him. Yet the week before the course started, he started to have doubts:

'What's the point of going? I won't change. I don't want to waste a place that someone else could have. I just don't have the energy for this. It is taking me all my time to get through the handouts. I get worked up at these things. I would be better not going'



If David does not challenge these thoughts, his stress will rise and rise as the week goes on. He may not make it to the class. He has fed his vicious circle.

He could wait until the night of the first session to challenge his thoughts. But why wait? – look how his stress rises in the days prior to the first class. Challenge the thoughts the second they appear. This would let him prevent stress building up. He could stop the stress in its tracks.

Maybe if he could just try to forget about it, to deal with it when the day comes, that would work. Common sense would go along with that. The problem with that is:



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Don't think of a skating penguin

Do not think of a skating penguin





Chances are you just thought of one even though you were told not to. This is a daft trick to make a big point: The more you try not to think of something, the more likely you are to think of it. So trying to put a stressful event to the back of your mind won't work. Thinking about it and working out ways to deal with it makes a lot more sense.

So David should challenge his thoughts as soon as he can. This new skill is all about doing just that. It breaks the stress into 'bite-sized' bits. You will learn how to:

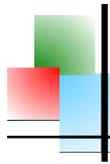
STEP 1: Prepare to face stress

STEP 2: Face the stress

STEP 3: Review how it went

In Step 1, David will take control of his thoughts instead of the thoughts taking control of him. If he **prepares** well, by the time the first session comes along, he will be much more in control and more likely to make it. Then, when he **faces the stress**, he will be more in control and more likely to cope with the first session. When he **reviews**, he can pat himself on the back and so his self-esteem will rise.

'**Breaking stress up**' links up well with a skill in the next session called '**Problem Solving**'.



Step 1

Prepare to face stress

This is where you set up your plan for coping. You will fight stressful thoughts at this stage. Some helpful thoughts for David could be:

- I am not going to hide or run away from it
- I can work out a plan to deal with going to the class
- I can expect to feel stressed - that's OK
- I won't know how it will go until I get there. So make sure I get there'
- How real are my fears?

David could use the Big 5 Challenges:

'What's the worst thing that can happen if I go? I might not get better. But my GP seems to think it can help and I do see myself in the handouts. So give it a go'

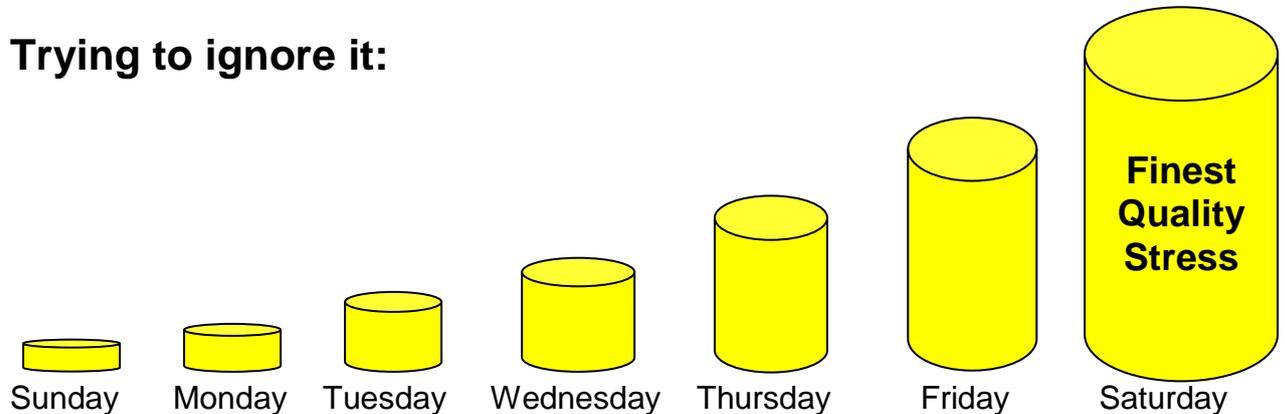
'Am I right to think that I don't have the energy to go? I get tired at the thought of doing something. If I force myself to do it, I often cope better than I thought. So tell myself I am going and work up to it'

'Is life too short to feel like this? I feel at my lowest ebb in years. So what if I get worked up for one night? If that puts me back on the road to recovery then it is well worth the hassle. Don't shut doors – go for it'



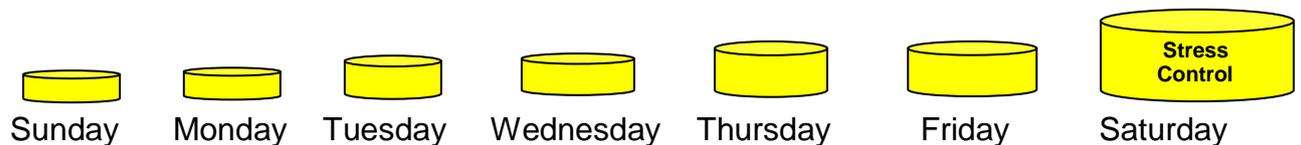
If he can get a grip on the stress as the week goes on, look what happens to his stress level compared to if he did not challenge his thoughts:

Trying to ignore it:



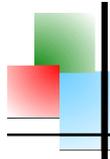
So, by the time starts, David will not be in control of his stress. He is not all that likely to make it to the first session. He will feel he has failed again. He will feel more depressed.

Preparing to face stress



So by the time the course starts, David will be much more in charge of his stress. He is much more likely to get to the first session. Now, he must work on ways to cope with the first session.

So he now moves to Step 2.



Step 2

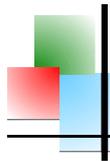
Facing stress

Your task here is to put your plan into action, to stay focused on this plan, to use your new skills such as relaxation. Some helpful thoughts for David could be:

- **Take it one step at a time**
- **Relax, I'm in control. Keep the breathing sorted**
- **I feel a bit stressed - -that's normal. Just stay in control**

When David comes to the first session, he might work on the 'take it one step at a time'. So he might work out a plan for dealing with the first 10 minutes. Once he does this, he can then deal with the next 10 minutes. After this, his stress level will be coming down and he may not need to make any more plans as he knows he is well in control.

Even if all goes well, it is crucial that he works at Step 3:



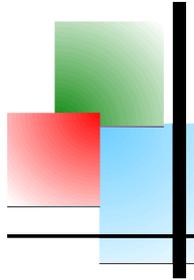
Step 3

Review

Your task here is to see how well or badly your plan worked, to see if you could improve it for next time and to pat yourself on the back for going through with it. Some helpful thoughts for David could be:

- **Well done. I could have got out of it but I faced up to it**
- **I had to leave - so it did not work - what can I learn from this? Can I get back next week**
- **I've taken a step forward - I'm getting there slow but sure**

You can use the 'Breaking Stress Up' forms to sharpen your own skills.



Summing up

Controlling thoughts is hard work. But it is crucial if you want to get a grip on your stress. You can use these skills with any emotion like anxiety, depression, anger, panic or jealousy.

So we will come back to these skills later in the course and see how you can combine them with the other skills you will learn on the course.

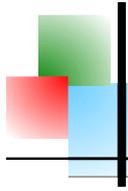


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Last words

The aim of Step 6 is to help you challenge your thoughts and to nip stress in the bud. The next task builds on this by teaching you ways to fear your fears, tackle problems and get rid of 'safety behaviours'. Make sure you pick up this handout at Session 3.



'Stress Control' Breaking Stress up

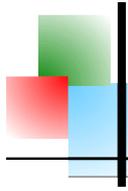
Fill this out as you plan ways to cope with a stressful event.

Event to be tackled

Preparing

Facing up

Reviewing



'Stress Control' Breaking Stress up

Fill this out as you plan ways to cope with a stressful event.

Event to be tackled

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