



# KaziHealth



Give Stress the Red Card: South African Edition  
Workplace Health Promotion Programme

The *KaziBantu* Project, Healthy Schools for Healthy Communities, has been jointly developed by the following institutions:

1. **University of Basel**, Switzerland
2. **Nelson Mandela University**, South Africa
3. **Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute**, Switzerland

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Understanding Stress .....	5
1.1.    Stress – A Part of Life.....	5
1.2.    What is Stress? .....	7
1.3.    Genetic Factors.....	8
1.4.    Critical Life Events .....	9
1.5.    Daily Hassles .....	11
1.6.    Internal Stressors.....	13
1.7.    External Stressors .....	16
1.8.    Cognitive Stress Reactions.....	18
1.9.    Emotional Stress Reactions .....	19
1.10.   Physical Stress Reactions.....	21
1.11.   Warning Signs and Burnout.....	23
Chapter 1: In Short.....	24
Chapter 2: Mindset – A Positive Approach Towards Stress.....	25
2.1.    Change of Perspective .....	25
2.2.    Reframing .....	27
2.3.    Thinking Ahead – Mental Time Travels .....	28
2.4.    Self-efficacy – I Can Do It!.....	30
2.5.    Perfectionism .....	31
2.6.    De-catastrophising – What If.....	32
2.7.    Positive Thinking.....	34
2.8.    Comparison .....	35
Chapter 2: In Short.....	35
Chapter 3: Problem Solving .....	36
3.1.    Social Support – Sorrow Shared is Sorrow Halved .....	36
3.2.    Setting Priorities – First Things First.....	38
3.3.    Time Management .....	39
3.4.    Multitasking – The Myth .....	40
3.5.    Assertiveness – Learning to Say NO .....	41
3.6.    Delegate .....	42
3.7.    Coaching .....	43
Chapter 3: In Short.....	44
Chapter 4: Wellness – Stress and Destress.....	45
4.1.    Relax and Recover .....	45
4.2.    Meditation – Strength Lies in Calmness.....	47
4.3.    Sleep.....	48
4.4.    Nutrition .....	49

4.5.	Ergonomic Aspects .....	50
4.6.	Mindfulness .....	51
4.7.	Smoking .....	52
4.8.	Celebrating Joy – Enjoyment Training .....	53
4.9.	Anger Management.....	54
Chapter 4: In Short .....		55
Chapter 5: An Active Lifestyle – Sport and Exercise .....		56
5.1.	Distraction – A Welcome Change from Stress .....	56
5.2.	Exercise Breaks .....	57
5.3.	Endurance Training.....	58
5.4.	Barrier Management .....	59
Chapter 5: In Short .....		61

## **Chapter 1: Understanding Stress**

### **Khudu ga e lahle legapi la yona**

A tortoise never throws away its shell.

People find it hard to get rid of their long-established, deeply ingrained habits.

African Proverb

#### **Introduction:**

We are creatures of habit and often our habits are the source of our stress. An understanding of what stress is can play an important role in how we deal with it. In this chapter an understanding of what stress entails and effective ways of how to manage it will be discussed. Once you have completed this chapter, you should be able to identify stressors in your life and apply behavioural changes to reduce the impact of these stressors in your life. Stress management is essentially about breaking bad habits and acquiring new ones!

#### **1.1. Stress – A Part of Life**

“I’m stressed”– maybe the most popular expression of our time. Stress has become a disease of the times we live in. Many of us live on the fast track, complain about being overrun with responsibilities and struggle with managing our time effectively. People are complaining more and more about being stressed.

What the individual perceives as stress is highly subjective and therefore raises some difficulties in finding a scientific definition.

The continuous rise of stress levels is a reflection of the fast pace of living that society today demands of us. Changes in the job market play a crucial role. Technological advances and acceleration of operating procedures have increased the demand for efficiency on a global scale. High flexibility and permanent accessibility are expected from employees leaving them in a constant stand-by mode resulting in an increasing amalgamation of working time and private time. This can start a vicious cycle threatening one’s “Work-Life-Balance”. The invasion of work stress into private life can lead to family issues. These issues might then negatively influence occupational performance leading to a perception of higher stress.

#### **Teachers and Stress**

A study conducted by Peltzer and colleagues (2009) found considerably high stress levels among a representative sample of educators from public schools in South Africa. According to their results, job stress and lack of job satisfaction were associated with most stress-related illnesses such as hypertension, heart disease, stomach ulcers, asthma, mental distress and tobacco and alcohol abuse. The study found that high job stressors were associated with time constraints, educational changes, administrative problems, the educational system, professional distress and pupil misbehaviour.

Boshoff and colleagues (2014) found that teachers perceive their occupation as very stressful. They examined the relationship between occupational stress and mental illness symptoms with the assumption that chronic stress makes them more vulnerable to the development of stress-related illnesses. Surprisingly, they did not find any significant association between teachers' self-reported stress levels and their mental health. Despite experiencing severe occupational stress and even symptoms indicative of stress-related mental disorder, the majority maintained a high level of mental health.

**Discussion:**

Identify the stressors in your life. How many of these stressors are directly related to your profession?

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Devise some coping strategies on how to deal with the stressors that you related to your profession.

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**References:**

Boshoff, N., Potgieter, J.C., von Rensburg, E. & Ellis, S. (2014). Occupational stress and mental well-being in a cohort of Black South African teachers. *Journal of Psychology on Africa*, 24(2), 125-130.

Peltzer, K., Shisana, O., Zuma, K., Van Wyk, B. & Zungu-Dirwayi, N. (2009), Job stress, job satisfaction and stress-related illnesses among South African educators. *Stress and Health*, 25(3), 247–257.

## 1.2. What is Stress?

If you ask people to define stress they are often a bit puzzled and seem to have difficulty completing this task. This seems surprising considering how many people complain about stress daily. For those suffering from stress, it is about finding the right balance. Psychologists define stress as a state of imbalance between requirements and personal resources. To be able to talk about actual stress the imbalance must be personally meaningful, otherwise no stress is perceived. This means that stress is highly subjective - what stresses one person may not stress another!

For many people the word “stress” primarily stands for cognitive overload. This is not incorrect, but from the perspective of imbalance, this is only half the story. Underload can be a source of stress as well. People experiencing chronic underload can suffer from a “Bore-out”, showing similar symptoms to “Burn-out” patients.

Did you know that passionate kissing causes stress? Stress does not necessarily have to be bad. A certain amount of stress can have a positive and health-promoting impact on our lives. Stress which is perceived as performance enhancing and positive is called “Eustress” and can motivate a person to act constructively e.g. planning work activities to allow time for fun. Stress that is debilitating or negative is referred to as “Distress” e.g. stress resulting from excessive work demands.

### Discussion:

What is your definition of stress?

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Distinguish between distress and eustress.

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Reflect on how much time you spend on activities related to your role as an employee compared with other life roles (e.g. being a parent, partner, sport player, social activist etc.)

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How can you manage your time better to balance your life roles? (Tip: Think about the requirements of your life roles and the possibility of meeting those requirements).

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### 1.3. Genetic Factors

Some things are inherited by nature. Let's turn back the clock to our prehistoric ancestors. They weren't stress free either. Instead of crashing stock prices and deadlines they were faced with snarling animals. Such situations were life-threatening and therefore only left two options: fight or flight. For this fight or flight reaction, the body supplies a vast amount of energy. The body reacts by elevating the heart rate and blood pressure, accelerating respiration, increasing muscle tension and by releasing stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. Despite the difference in types of threat over the millenniums, the body still reacts the same. Regardless of whether we are stuck in traffic, having an argument with our boss or anticipating an important presentation, our flight or fight response is activated.

The aforementioned stress-provoking situations are admittedly uncomfortable, but they do not require physical effort. The provided energy is not utilised and therefore causes restlessness for the troubled person. Physicians refer to a "psychological imbalance" in this case. The sporadic occurrence, of stress is no need for worry, whereas chronic strain can be dangerous for an individual. Mental and physical impairments might be a consequence of chronic strain (cf. chapter 1.8-1.10).

#### Discussion:

Stress leads to a build-up of energy (fight or flight response). Think of constructive ways to channel this energy using physical activity.

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How can physical activity at work be utilized to become part of your lifestyle in dealing with stress?  
(Tip: Taking the stairs instead of the elevator)

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### 1.4. Critical Life Events

Stress researchers, Holmes and Rahe (1967), requested 400 participants to rate 43 life-events according to their stress intensity. Based on the arithmetic mean they created a rating scale. In their research Holmes and Rahe discussed factors of stress development related to critical life events. The death of one’s spouse was rated as the most stressful life event and received a value of 100 points.

Rank	Event	Points
1.	Death of spouse	100
2.	Divorce	73
3.	Separation from spouse	65
4.	Prison sentence	63
5.	Death of a close family member	63
6.	Accident or illness	53
7.	Marriage	50
8.	Instant dismissal - unemployment	47
9.	Reconciliation with spouse	45
10.	Retirement	45

It is possible that you have experienced some of the abovementioned critical events in your life already or that they might feature later in your life! The difficulty in using this scale lies in the fact that the perception of stress is highly subjective e.g. some people find the prospect of retiring stressful while others can’t wait to leave their workplace!

There is no doubt that critical life events play a crucial role in the development of stress. But there are other mechanisms involved too. Nowadays researchers believe that the sum of small, daily stressors – so called Daily Hassles – contribute to more stress than critical life events. In addition, internal stressors like personality traits have a significant impact. This explains why people react differently to the same stressful situations.

**Discussion:**

Refer to the Holmes and Rahe scale above and add up your score. A score of less than 200 indicates that you are not or are barely vulnerable for stress induced diseases. A score of 200-299 indicates that you are vulnerable, and 300 or more indicates that you are highly vulnerable.

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Reflect on critical life events that caused stress in your life.

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Identify the skills you used to manage the above-mentioned events.

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How can you use these skills to deal with future critical life events?

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**References:**

Holmes, T.H. & Rahe, R.H. (1967). The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11, 213-218

### 1.5. Daily Hassles

There are small daily adversities that drive us crazy every day. These include: daily traffic, lack of resources, lack of staff and malfunctioning technical devices.

Researchers refer to them as micro stressors. The counterpart to daily hassles are so called daily uplifts, in other words the daily joys. Daily joys can include watching a good movie, listening to music or having an interesting conversation.

Life events and daily hassles often relate to one another. For example, a car accident where a person is seriously injured is a critical life event that can cause daily hassles (unable to move around, health issues etc.) for the person involved. As a matter of fact, studies indicate a closer relationship between daily hassles and health issues than critical life events and health issues. It's not about singular incidents but rather the cumulated occurrences that are the final straw.

In the 1980s a list with over 117 daily hassles was created. Keep in mind that people will react differently to these daily hassles due to the fact that the perception of stress is a subjective act!

Daily hassles – some examples:

Conflicts at the workplace
Completion of forms
Financial worries
Bad weather
Fears for the future
Loneliness
National financial situation
Social obligations
Lack of time
Unfriendly fellows
Politics
Corruption

#### Discussion:

Identify your daily uplifts or joys. How can you manage your time better to spend more time enjoying your daily uplifts or joys?

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Identify your daily hassles. For this purpose, keep a journal for 4 weeks identifying when these hassles occur and why they caused you stress.

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Which hassles reappear multiple times in your daily life (use your journal) and how could they be managed better? Is there a definite solution for each hassle occurring in your life?

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Regular exercise and relaxation techniques are ways to deal with the frustration of daily hassles. Can you think of any other ways to deal with daily hassles or frustrations?

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### 1.6. Internal Stressors

A sense of control or a perceived sense of influence over one's environment is essential in managing stress.

This perceived sense of influence is dependent on so called internal stressors. These include character- and personality traits, which could negatively affect the successful management of external stressors (see section 1.7).

Take a look at the list of internal stressors:

- Negative thinking patterns
- Fear of failure
- Time constraints, excessive demand for achievement, inflated ambitions
- Impatience, exaggerated competitiveness
- Feelings of helplessness and isolation
- Negative affect (e.g. sorrow)

#### Discussion:

Identify the internal stressors present in your life using the list provided.

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Have you identified any internal stressors in your life that are not on the list? What are they?

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Reflect on how your way of thinking about stressful situations can help to manage the internal stressors in your life.

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Complete the Perceived Stress Scale to explore the impact of internal stressors in your life.

**Perceived Stress Scale**

Answer the following 10 questions about stress awareness. For each question choose from the following alternatives:

- 0 never
- 1 almost never
- 2 sometimes
- 3 fairly often
- 4 very often

- a. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
- b. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
- c. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?
- d. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems.
- e. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
- f. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
- g. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
- h. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?
- i. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?
- j. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Count the number of crosses that you placed in the category "fairly often" or "very often" for questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 9 and 10, and how many times you chose "never" or "almost never" for questions 4,5,7 and 8. If you have three or more crosses, you should consider whether you can improve your handling of internal stressors.

Discussion:

Reflect on your results regarding the Perceived Stress Scale and identify internal stressors in your life that cannot easily be changed. What do you need to do to accept this?

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“You create the stress in your life”. What do you think of the aforementioned statement? Do you agree with it? What stress are you creating in your life?

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**Reference:**

Cohen, S., Kamarck , T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 24, 385-396.

### 1.7. External Stressors

According to psychologists, external stressors (external stress triggers) can be life events (cf. chapter 1.4), daily hassles (cf. 1.5) and physical stressors. The latter include factors like light, noise, colour, humidity, cold, heat etc. These influence our emotional and cognitive processes and thus affect our performance and perceived stress.

Colour can have an impact on cognitive performance and was examined by Canadian researchers (Mehta & Zhu, 2009).

Groups studying in front of a red background scored better results than groups studying in front of a blue background. The researchers concluded that for humans the colour red is associated with fear and mistakes. This association triggers a so called “avoidance motivation” through which humans become more attentive and therefore show more persistence in tasks requiring a high rate of concentration. Blue on the other hand is associated with calmness and openness and induces “approximation motivation” that promotes creativity or the search for new ideas and solutions. An understanding of how our environment impacts on us can help us seek ways to control it and in the process manage stress better.

Several experiments illustrate the potential effects of colour on our work performance. In line with stress management, an extensive analysis of physical environmental factors is necessary, especially the detection and elimination of stress activating stimuli.

#### Discussion

Identify disturbing environmental stimuli at work and at home (such as annoying noise sources) and mention ways to deal with them.

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Your physical condition or physique (which includes poor eating habits) can also be considered an external stressor. What do you understand regarding a healthy diet?

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Does your diet contribute to your stress? If your answer is yes, explain how.

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How can you change your diet to limit its ability to produce stress in your life?

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**References:**

Mehta, R. & Zhu, R. J. (2009). Blue or red? Exploring the effect of colour on cognitive task performances. *Science*, 323, 1126-1229.

### 1.8. Cognitive Stress Reactions

There is a definite relationship between stress and cognitive performance. In other words, stress can and does affect the way you think. One reason could be the way you perceive stressful situations. Researchers detected that stress involves an enzyme activation which affects short term memory, planning, thinking and problem solving. Such limitations of basic cognitive function inevitably evoke problems at the work place. Work performance decreases and induces a vicious circle that gives rise to further stress. Psychologists refer to these stress-related cognitive impairments as Attention Focus Disorder. This disorder is characterised by a constricted thinking pattern which renders creative thinking and the establishment of connections between ideas or interconnected thought processes impossible. People suffering from this disorder are often only able to grasp a single thought and hold on to it. This phenomenon can be extremely restricting, especially in a profession which requires high levels of creativity or interconnected thinking processes. Writers experiencing a writer’s block can tell you a thing or two about it.

#### Discussion:

What happens to your thought processes when you are stressed? In other words what goes through your mind when you are stressed?

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How can changing your thought processes help you to deal with stressful situations better? (Tip: Think about positive self-talk!)

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Do you tend to forget your appointments lately? Do you have difficulties concentrating on a task? How can you deal with these challenges?

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### 1.9. Emotional Stress Reactions

Stress entails physical and emotional reactions. Just think how your heart races after reading about local politics! Our perceived sense of control of stressful situations is often restricted, causing more stress. Those affected perceive this as frustrating. If in addition other annoyances arise, people tend to react in an aggressive manner. Psychologists refer to this as the frustration-aggression-hypothesis. Although frustration does not always have to lead to aggression, various factors – like personality traits – play a major role. Experts refer to different stress types. People who are easily irritable, quick-tempered and tense up easily are referred to as type A personalities. For these people a single outburst is not the problem, but rather the consequences of regular outbursts (that creates more stressful situations) which can lead to chronic stress. Chronic stress tends to lead to higher cortisol levels and high blood pressure and therefore higher risk of cardiac disease. On the other hand, there are type B personalities. Members of this type tend to go into their shell and just hide or “bury” their anger. These people often suffer from a lack of drive and tiredness and are at a greater risk for depression.

#### Discussion:

Observe your own emotional reactions in stressful or frustrating situations. Keep an account of these emotional reactions in a journal for two to three weeks. Using your journal as a reflection tool, would you say that you are a type A or type B personality? Explain.

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Here are some techniques to deal with your emotional stress reactions if you identified yourself as a type A personality:

- Try learning a relaxation technique (Chapter 4.1 and 4.2).
- Make sure you can apply relaxation techniques at work. Challenge perfectionism!
- Critically reflect on your lifestyle. Make sure a healthy diet and regular exercise form part of your lifestyle.

Which of these techniques can you apply in your life if you identified yourself as a type A personality?

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Here are some techniques to deal with your emotional stress reactions if you identified yourself as a type B personality:

- Learn how to say no.
- Exercise regularly.
- Purposely choose activities in which you can let off steam. Engage in fun social activities. Especially during stressful times, make sure you have enough time for your family and friends.

Which of these techniques above can you apply in your life if you identified yourself as a type B personality type?

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### 1.10. Physical Stress Reactions

Physical reactions are common as a response to stressful situations.

A critical life event like the death of one's life partner seems to drastically increase the risk for health-related issues. Can you die of a broken heart? According to Finish researchers (Martikainen & Valkonen, 1996) you can. They reported an increase of mortality of 66% in widowed men aged 35 to 64. Physical reactions do not only occur as a result of critical life events but also in the context of daily stressors. A chronically elevated level of the stress hormone cortisol can result in cardiovascular problems or diabetes, or in worst cases lead to a heart attack or a stroke. Keep your eyes open for physical warning signs.

#### Discussion:

What happens to your body when you are stressed? (e.g. sweaty palms., heart palpitations, nausea)

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The stress hormone cortisol can affect your immune system negatively e.g. stressed people often have a high susceptibility to colds. How can you boost your immune system? Reflect on your exercise routine and diet.

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Regularly check your blood pressure. Chronic high blood pressure counts as a typical stress symptom. How can you combat high blood pressure?

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Stress leads to a decreased blood flow in the digestive organs which can cause constipation as well as diarrhoea. How often do you complain of stomach pains? Can these pains be associated with specific stressors? Identify these stressors and ways to deal with them.

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In stressful situations muscle tension increases. Stress experienced over a long period of time can lead to muscular tension. This muscular tension in turn can lead to issues with one's posture along with back and neck pain. Do you suffer from chronic neck and back pain? What can you do to manage this pain (e.g. stretching exercises)?

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**References:**

Martikainen, P. & Valkonen, T. (1996). Mortality after death of spouse in relation to duration of bereavement in Finland. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 50, 264-268.

### 1.11. Warning Signs and Burnout

Stress can creep up on us and overwhelm or surprise us when we least expect it. This is because the warning signs regarding stress often do not get recognized in time. When stress surprises us unsuspectedly it can be described as “driving down a hill full speed, with a pulled handbrake, without any oil in the motor and with the last drop of fuel, but still with total conviction that the car is running fine”. Sooner or later both human and car will land in the emergency lane – and figuratively speaking both require external help to get back on the road. Professionals refer to this breakdown as burnout, which describes a condition accompanied by physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.

Someone who burns out had to be on fire at one point! The drive to succeed while being under huge pressure and without a concern for personal wellness can lead to burnout. The process of “burning out” follows certain steps e.g. neglecting personal needs, the suppression of anger and social withdrawal to the point of experiencing feelings of emptiness, depression and suicidal thoughts. Out of temporary helplessness a feeling of despair can emerge.

To escape this downward spiral, the person experiencing burnout must be aware of the steps regarding burnout in order to prevent it! This is generally the first step on the journey of recovery. Additionally, external help accompanied by a reinterpretation of values is essential. The latter requires time and patience. In the long run new behavioural patterns need to be acquired. It is necessary to concede more time and meaning to family, friends and recreation and at the same time establish a healthy distance between work and personal life.

#### Discussion:

Have you noticed any changes in your behaviour lately that is concerning you? Identify these behaviours (e.g. aggressive behaviours, smoking more, abusing alcohol)?

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How can you change the abovementioned behaviours?

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Identify any warning signs which could indicate overload or burnout in your life.

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Identify ways to prevent burnout and deal with it when it arises.

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Inquire from friends and family members whether they have noticed any changes in your behaviour recently that is cause for concern. How can they be a resource in assisting you to establish new behavioural patterns?

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### Chapter 1: In Short

- Stress is part of everyday life. Understanding what stress is and identifying stressors in your life is the first step towards stress management.
- Distinguishing between eustress and distress is important to understand that stress is not necessarily bad and can lead to health promoting behaviours
- The fight and flight response is part of everyday life and can lead to a build-up of energy which can be constructively used via physical activity.
- Critical events and daily hassles that contribute to stress need to be identified and managed using problem-orientated solutions e.g. learning relaxation techniques
- Understanding the relationship between internal and external stressors is essential in finding a balance in life. Establishing a sense of control over external stressors (e.g. a positive thinking) will help manage stress pro-actively.
- Memory and concentration are affected by stress. Memory and concentration tests can give feedback regarding cognitive capacity.
- Knowing whether you are a type A or B personality can help to adopt a preventative approach towards stress management
- Stress effects your body (e.g. blood pressure, muscle tension). A healthy diet and regular exercise equips your body to deal with stressors.
- Be vigilant and look out for the warning signs regarding burnout.

### Conclusion:

Stress is part of any profession. Identifying and managing warning signs of distress can improve the quality of your life. Adopting a nutritional diet and healthy exercise routine can establish a sense of control regarding stress management and bring about positive changes in your life. A change of perspective or mindset is therefore necessary and will be discussed in the next chapter.



## Chapter 2: Mindset – A Positive Approach Towards Stress

### Leputlaputla le ja pudi,ledikologa (madikologa) la ja namane ya kgomo

A hasty predator eats a goat; a careful one eats a calf.

A Reckless person achieves little, while one who carefully considers his/her options is more successful.

African proverb

#### Introduction:

When faced with a stressful situation one must carefully consider options to manage it and approach this endeavour with a positive attitude. How we approach stress starts with how we interpret stressful situations. This chapter will explore ways to interpret stressful situations as challenges (and not as obstacles!) and in the process aim to build a better sense of self-efficacy. Once you have completed this chapter you should understand what a positive mindset regarding stress entails. It all starts with a change of perspective!

#### 2.1. Change of Perspective

Have you ever listened to a toddler telling you a story and you weren't able to follow his/her train of thought even though you tried to be as attentive as possible? Don't worry it has nothing to do with you having a modest intellect, but rather linked to a child's narration style. Young children often do not consider the previous knowledge of the listener and therefore tell stories only from their perspective. Developmental psychologists refer to this phenomenon as an incapacity to carry out a change of perspective.

The ability to see things from a different perspective can be very helpful to manage stress effectively. Often a situation is perceived as especially stressful because we hold on to a certain perspective. Successfully changing the way, one perceives a certain situation enables one to distance oneself from the situation and view it in a different light. When faced with a stressful situation we often view it through a microscope instead of through a telescope! Distancing oneself from a stressful situation can lead to a new perspective of the situation and help to manage it better.

#### Discussion:

How does your perception (what you think) about stressful events help or hinder you dealing with it?

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What do you say to yourself when facing a stressful situation? Is this self-talk helping you to deal with the situation positively?

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How can you use self-talk to acquire a positive perspective when facing a stressful situation?

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Think about someone you know who deals with stress well. What can you learn from this person's perspective regarding stress that can assist you in changing your own perspective about stress?

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## 2.2. Reframing

Humans often tend to be stuck in pre-existing or fixed thought patterns. This can hinder problem solving processes. We need to learn to “think out of the box”. This entails breaking out of existing thought patterns. Someone who is able to break out of his conventional framework of thinking is exposed to more strategies to deal with challenges. Unconventional, new thinking patterns can aid stress management. A short case study will clarify this point: Max, a 40-year-old architect, commuted for an hour by train from his hometown to another town before getting to his job. While the hour train ride was not the main issue, the transfers from his home to the station and the one from the station to his workplace were very stressful for him. One day he spotted an advertisement for a foldable bicycle and a week later Max was on the road. Since then he gives a smile to the commuters waiting for the bus at the station as he flies past them, rejoicing in the newly won time after work. To enter the train with a foldable bike under one’s arm seems a silly idea for many people. However, for Max it was the perfect solution and his commuting stress has decreased tremendously.

### Discussion:

How do your friends deal with stressful situations? Can you learn to reframe your stressful situations by copying their behaviours?

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A change of environment can stimulate your flow of thoughts. Break out of your four walls and resort to nature. Take a walk during twilight or early mornings at sunrise and you will literally see your daily stress in a “new light”. Identify an environment where you feel less stressed. What do you have to do to spend more time in this environment?

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### 2.3. Thinking Ahead – Mental Time Travels

What distinguishes humans from chimpanzees? In addition to the obvious differences there is an interesting aspect which is the ability to predict or foresee the future, alternatively the inability to go on mental time travels. African chimpanzees were observed as they used stones to crack open nuts which had a particularly hard shell. Since there were hardly any stones in the area where the nuts grew, the monkeys took the stones with them. After eating the nuts, the chimps threw the stones away. This shows that the chimps did not consider the fact that they might need the stones again in the future.

The ability to foresee or predict the future to meet a (future) need is inherently human. This is evident in the planning and coordination of everyday life. Since we assume that we will also be hungry on Sunday, we shall fill the fridge by Saturday. In spirit, we are experienced time travellers.

Assessing how one may feel in the future and recalling past emotional states can help with stress management. In retrospect, stressful situations are often perceived as far less severe. Sometimes you have to smile about your past stress reactions. It is useful to make use of this fact when dealing with current stress problems. Send your “me” on wanderings and reflect on what emotions a problem may arouse in two months’ time. Psychologists refer to this approach as temporal relativism and recommend its use especially when dealing with small, everyday stress sources. In the future pause for a moment and use this strategy to turn an inflated mountain back into a small dust speck!

#### Discussion:

Identify a stressful situation that you are anticipating in the near future.

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How do you feel about this anticipated stressful situation?

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How can you manage these feelings better by anticipating it?

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Do you think that by reflecting on your reactions to past stressful situations and using it to prepare for future stressful situations can assist you to manage stress better? Explain your answer.

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**References:**

Boesch, C. & Boesch, H. (1984). Mental maps in wild chimpanzees: An analysis of hammer transports for nut cracking. *Primates*, 25, 160-170.

### 2.4. Self-efficacy – I Can Do It!

Self-efficacy entails a change of mindset from: "I will never make it" to "I can do it!" This mindset (I can do it!) assists with the development of self-efficacy. Psychologists define self-efficacy as a belief in one's own abilities to achieve desired results. Self-efficacy expectations play an important role in stress management. People with a strong belief in their own competency are better at dealing with stress and are more successful in their professional lives. Experiences of success have a major influence on the development of self-efficacy. A step-by-step approach is very important regarding self-efficacy development. Achieving partial objectives strengthens the feelings associated with success. Cumulatively, this results in the development of self-efficacy. In other words, breaking tasks down into smaller tasks and celebrating the completion of the smaller tasks helps to build self-efficacy.

The development of self-efficacy can also be achieved in sports, in music or in other areas of life. The mastery of an instrument or the faultless playing of a difficult piece of music produces a feeling of ability. Thereby the musician receives direct feedback, regarding his own abilities. Such direct feedback is often missing in everyday life and especially in the workplace. Often there is no direct feedback regarding our achievements. Researchers discuss a possible transfer of specific self-efficacy beliefs to everyday situations. In this regard, we are talking of generalised self-efficacy beliefs. This means, experiencing a sense of ability and achievement for instance within sports, will initiate beliefs in our abilities regarding other domains in our life. The realization of being able to make an active contribution through one's own action is an important component in coping with stressful situations. The belief in our own possibilities of influence enables us to manage stress better. An example is intended to illustrate these processes: A tennis player who has learned to stay cool prior to and during match points, should not lose his cool in the daily hustle and bustle or even in stressful working situations.

#### Discussion

Reflect on stressful situations that you managed successfully. How can these situations help you to develop your self-efficacy regarding stress management?

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Develop short term goals regarding stress management and reward yourself when achieving these goals. List your short-term goals regarding stress management.

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### 2.5.Perfectionism

The Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto found that 20% of Italian families own 80% of the population’s wealth. He formulated the Pareto principle, which can also be applied to everyday circumstances. In projects, it is often observed that 20% of the effort results in 80% of the outcome whereas the remaining 20% requires 80% of the effort. For example, if you need two hours to create a good document (good = 80%), you would have to invest another eight hours to be holding a perfect product in your hands. The devil is in the details as they say! Is the extra effort worthwhile? Would anyone even notice the difference? People with a tendency to perfectionism would avoid this question. They work overly precisely. In order to avoid any criticism or fault, every work activity is meticulously controlled down to the last detail. Perfectionists have a black and white thinking pattern - if one is not perfect, one is considered a failure. Furthermore perfectionists put themselves under enormous pressure and set the bar so high that it can hardly be reached which in turn leads to more stress. , Psychologists refer to perfectionism as the greatest enemy of satisfaction. The perfectionist will spend hours working on unnecessary details and will eventually waste precious time that could have been dedicated to friends, family and leisure activities. Perfectionists are considered typical burnout candidates. Of course, there are situations where perfectionistic tendencies come in handy - if you are responsible for the safety of a nuclear power plant, you have to be meticulous in doing your job. But in many private and professional activities it is often worthwhile to be not as stringent in carrying out your duties!

**Discussion:**

Identify activities that you spend too much time on only to add unnecessary details to it?

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How can you manage these activities better?

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What might happen if you change your mindset from” the work must be perfect” to "just do the work well”?

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How will you spend the time saved by changing your perfectionistic mindset?

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## 2.6. De-catastrophising – What If...

... tomorrow's presentation fails completely? The posing of such a question is referred to as de-catastrophising. "What if questions" raise awareness to the possible consequences of a stressful situation. This method is particularly useful if you have unrealistic thought patterns, and you tend to exaggerate, catastrophise, and generalise. By anticipating the feared situation, it becomes clear that the possible consequences may not be as serious as originally assumed. Assuming the "worst-case scenario" occurs in tomorrow's presentation, your life will not change fundamentally. The world keeps turning. The presentation, even though it is so important, is only a partial aspect of your life. Through the awareness of all the consequences regarding a stressful situation, it can be defused from the outset. If one's own feelings are perceived as exaggerated, it is easier to deal with a difficult situation. Confronting the consequences of a stressful situation and asking: "Yes and..?" - can lead to a more realistic interpretation of the stressful situation's consequences. This realistic interpretation of consequences (regarding a stressful situation) leads to a more positive assessment of the future. The art is to de-catastrophize without trivializing.

### Discussion:

Do you have the habit of "making things worse than they are?" Explain your answer.

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Think about a stressful situation you are anticipating and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What would happen in the worst case?

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2. How bad would that (the worst case) really be?

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3. What would be worse than this situation?

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4. How important is the outcome of this situation for you? (Is it a "life or death situation"?)

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How did these questions help you to gain a new perspective regarding the stressful situation you are anticipating?

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### 2.7. Positive Thinking

Consider the following idea: You walk to your car and notice halfway there that you've forgotten the car keys. Are you annoyed because you have to go back? Or do you think to yourself: "Luckily, I just realised that, otherwise I would have had to walk all the way back. It is understandable if the first train of thought dominates you. It becomes problematic when the glass is half empty in all living situations, meaning that you always engage in a negative view. Pessimistic people have difficulties in concentrating on a task because they are constantly picturing what could go wrong. This affects work performance and leads to increased stress in the long run. People who always have to have something to gripe about tend to generalize ("I can't do anything" or "All in vain"). The first step to promote positive thinking, is to identify negative internal dialogues or self-talk. The next step consists of programming yourself in a positive way and replacing negative thoughts with positive ones. This does not mean that difficulties should be ignored or "sugar-coated". Adopting positive self-talk can help to bring about a positive or constructive attitude in dealing with difficulties. "Impossible is nothing" or "Just do it", are slogans that large sports manufacturing companies use in their advertising messages. In fact, such positive phrases can help to overcome stressful life situations. Pioneers who told their head-shaking fellow men that people will be traveling in airplanes or talking on the phone over hundreds of kilometres, showed correspondingly positive patterns of thinking.

#### Discussion:

Create a two-column list. On the left, fill in all the negative thoughts that you encounter in your private (home) and professional (work) life. Reflect on how you can interpret negative statements positively. Write down the new positive statements in the right column and make use of these in the future.

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Consider defeats or failures as something temporary, as a short-term setback. Think about what you can learn from a defeat and let it motivate you to strive even harder for the achievement of your goal. Think about a recent setback - what can you learn from it to help you achieve a goal you have in mind?

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Consciously tell yourself to stop whenever you perceive demoralizing or discouraging thoughts. Reinforce this "stop" by a concise physical movement, e.g. by snapping your fingers. Write down a positive phrase (e.g. "Just do it") that can help you move past a negative thought and motivate you to stay positive.

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## 2.8. Comparison

Comparing your stressful situation to someone else's can help you to generalize your own stressful situation ("it is even worse than mine"). Although making use of comparisons does not correspond to a profound examination or reflection of one's own situation, it can - in the sense of a short-term strategy - help to improve the current challenges you are facing.

Caution: Comparing yourself to others can also be detrimental to your well-being if you always compare yourself to those people who are better off than you. The Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard stated: "Comparing is the end of happiness and the beginning of dissatisfaction."

### Discussion:

Do you know of people who are facing a stressful situation? Compare a stressful situation you are facing with theirs. Do these comparisons make you see your situation in a different light? Explain your answer.

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## CHAPTER 2: IN SHORT

- One's perspective of a stressful situation can make it more stressful or manageable. Adopt a positive perspective towards stress management.
- Consider how others who are faced with similar stressful situations are able to manage their stress.
- Anticipating stressful situations is a preventative approach to managing stress effectively.
- Learning from past stressful experiences and believing in your own abilities to manage stress effectively can develop self-efficacy regarding stress.
- Perfectionism wastes time that can be used for other activities e.g. exercise and meditation.
- De-catastrophising is a technique that can be used to put stressful situations into perspective by focusing on the consequences of a stressful situation and defusing it from the onset.
- Positive thinking helps to overcome stressful situations. Watch your thoughts!!
- Comparing your stressful situation with someone else's can give you a new perspective regarding your own stressful situation.

### Conclusion:

How we view stress along with our belief in our own abilities to manage it will determine how we approach it. Through a change of perspective (regarding stress), reframing stressful situations and anticipating future stressors realistically, one can manage stress effectively. Furthermore, a positive mindset and an awareness to eliminate perfectionistic habits can address various problems regarding stress management. Problem solving skills will be discussed next.

### Chapter 3: Problem Solving

#### Letsopa le kgobja le sa le metse, la oma le hlaba

Clay is taken out while it's still soft; allowed to dry, it becomes hard and scratchy.  
Problems are better solved while they are still fresh.

African Proverb

#### Introduction:

The causes of stress are often unidentified problems. In order to manage stress, you must identify problems in your life while they are fresh and seek solutions through constructive decision making. The factors that have an impact on decision making will be addressed in this chapter. Once you have completed this chapter, you should be able to identify problems in your life that are causing you stress and be able to seek solutions for these problems using the factors that influence decision making.

#### 3.1. Social Support – Sorrow Shared is Sorrow Halved

People who have a good social network tend to be more stress-resistant. Social support can be obtained from the family as well as from friends and acquaintances. It is carried out in the forms of emotional, instrumental and informational help. Emotional support refers to consolation, warmth or compassion. Instrumental support refers to assistance on a task, at work or the provision of financial resources. Informational support involves the transfer of information or even good advice. The type of support is different from person to person: From people who are close to us, we may wish to receive emotional support, whereas information is more likely to be obtained from experts. Social support takes place both preventively, in the sense of stress prevention, as well as during phases of acute stress. It is not only the social support in itself that is important, but also the mere knowledge of the possibility of receiving social support can be enough to reduce stress. Medical examinations have shown that social support positively affects both our immune and cardiovascular systems as well as providing hormonal benefits. A Canadian study showed that elderly people in isolation have significantly higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol than socially well-integrated contemporaries.

#### Discussion:

Do you tend to deal with stressful situations on your own? Explain your answer.

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Who can you call on to assist you when facing a stressful situation or problem? Identify what kind of support (emotional, informational and instrumental) these people can offer you?

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How can you prevent feeling isolated during stressful times?

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Make sure to set time out to socialize. For example, book every first Saturday of the month for a family day and write down the dates at the beginning of the year in your calendar. Identify monthly dates when you are able to spend time with family and friends and how you will spend this time?

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**References:**

Comeau, S. (2002). Stress, memory and social support. *McGill Reporter*, 35, 2.

### 3.2. Setting Priorities – First Things First

Setting priorities implies good time management. This means doing the most important things first, then the less important things and finally what is left to do! Human beings do not necessarily follow this approach. When work is pending, a variety of individual behavioural patterns appear like procrastination. Procrastination entails putting off tasks - unpopular tasks, even if they are very important, are often postponed. This can lead to stress especially with various deadlines pending. Deadlines do not lead to stress but failing to prioritize commitments and not managing one's time effectively to deal with these commitments does. Make it your core business to prioritize those activities that you tend to avoid and cause you stress!

#### Discussion:

List activities you tend to postpone that cause you stress.

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A to-do list helps you to spend your time productively. List all your activities and prioritize these activities according to their importance: very important (A-priority), important (B-priority) and less important (C-priority). Note: Make sure to include the activities that you tend to postpone!!

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### 3.3. Time Management

Managing your time is a skill that needs discipline and practice. In our fast-paced society, time has become a deficient commodity. People complain about not having enough time daily! According to a German study (Wegner, 2000), 40% of the interviewees wanted a day that has 30 hours. Modern man/woman is confronted with a paradox. Technological progress has given us many "time-saving" appliances such as cars, microwaves, washing machines or airplanes but the bottom line is that we do not end up with more available time. We wash our laundry faster, but also have much more laundry than in the past. Although we enjoy fast means of transport, we also have to travel much longer distances. If time is defined as a luxury item, it is important to divide it wisely, especially in the workplace. Comparable with a top sportsperson who follows an elaborate training plan, it is worthwhile to have a "training plan" for your professional life. Priorities need to be identified and time allocated to address these priorities. Around these priorities all other activities need to be arranged. Make sure to identify time-wasters or those things that "rob" you of your precious time! These can include cell-phones, the internet, television and procrastination.

#### Discussion:

The following tips can help you manage your time better:

- Ensure that your work blocks do not exceed 60 minutes.
- After a working block, insert a short break of 5-15 minutes.
- Combine similar activities into work blocks.

How can you manage your time better to avoid the stress that is associated with deadlines?

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Identify time-wasters in your life and suggest ways to manage these.

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#### References:

Wegner, J. (2000). Zeitmanagement: Mit neuen Konzepten gegen die Hektik des Alltags, Focus, 1, 94-102.

### 3.4. Multitasking – The Myth

The ability to do more than one activity or task at a time is called multitasking. There is in fact no such thing as multitasking. Our brain is not able to capture two things at the same time. In fact, multitasking actually refers to a fast switching between tasks. This switching process takes time. Switching back and forth between activities does not only take more time but also leads to exhaustion. In this context, the brain researcher Wolf Singer asserts: “Multitasking mashes up our brain.” Being interrupted during concentrated activity results in about 10-15 minutes needed to regain full concentration on the task at hand. Switching between activities therefore breaks one’s concentration and effectively wastes time! Multitasking therefore affects work efficiency as it can lead to some tasks being neglected due to time constraints. Furthermore, multitasking is not only inefficient, but sometimes dangerous too. Drivers who make phone calls during the trip are 3-4 times more likely to have an accident. In the case of SMS writing, the risk of accidents is even 23 times higher.

#### Discussion:

Reflect on times when you multitasked. What led to you having to multitask?

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How can you prevent multitasking in your life?

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Here are some tips to stay focused and avoid multitasking:

- Turn off your mobile phone and computer when pursuing a concentrated activity.
- Do not reply to emails randomly. It makes more sense to create a time slot to address all emails at once.
- Define time slots during which you want to work undisturbed. Communicate these to your co-workers.

#### References:

Olson, R. L., Hanovski, R. J., Hickmann, J. S. & Bocanegra, J. (2009). Driver distraction in commercial vehicle operations. Blacksburg: Virginia Tech Transportation Institute



### 3.5. Assertiveness – Learning to Say NO

The inability to say no to people can be detrimental to your well-being, especially in a work context where more and more is expected of you. The ability to say no to people is called assertiveness and those people who find it difficult to be assertive will take on more responsibilities than they can handle. This in turn will cause them more stress especially if they are already inundated with work-life responsibilities and will ultimately have a negative impact on their quality of work. When the quality of work provided is affected negatively, managers can become disgruntled, which in turn can have a negative impact on the work environment! Why then do some people find it so difficult to say no? In many cases, the inability to say no were acquired at an early age e.g. one wants to be a "lovely child" who thinks that saying no to a request will lead to rejection. Other reasons are the fear of missing out on something, the desire to be needed and not appear heartless, as well as the fear of negative consequences. The latter fear may be justified, but in most cases unfounded. It is sometimes appropriate to put your own interests first. It is important to find a balance between concern for oneself and others! If you tend to neglect your own needs because you can never say "no", you need to make a change!

#### Discussion:

How has your inability to say no impacted on your life?

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Why do you find it difficult to say no to requests from people at work?

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Here are some tips to help you say NO!

- Do not say yes hastily to a request. Take your time to ponder the request.
- Reflect on the negative consequences of saying yes.
- When saying no, be clear without being brutal. Show empathy for the person who requested something from you and justify your "no".
- Sometimes, a 'partial' no can be a sensible answer to a request. ("I can fulfil a part of this request...") or make a counter-proposal and encourage another idea ("I do not have time myself, but how about ...")

### 3.6. Delegate

Delegating properly is not easy. Often it is difficult to find the right person for a certain task. Incorrect delegation ultimately means more expenditure of time. Leaders often feel that delegating tasks is a sign of weakness. Especially those who have climbed the career ladder as a “self-made (wo) man” are accustomed to taking matters into their own hands and assigning tasks to others is difficult. But, the higher one rises in the hierarchy of a company, the more extensive and complex the scope of tasks becomes. Whoever neglects delegating certain tasks not only endangers his/her own health, but also disadvantages the institution they work for. In some cases, even a real fiasco can be imminent.

#### Discussion:

Which tasks can be delegated to others in your life?

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Identify the people you will be delegating tasks to.

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How can you spend the time you save from delegating tasks to improve your health and wellness?

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### 3.7. Coaching

If you are suffering from stress, you must be pro-active in seeking ways to manage it. This does not mean that you have to do this on your own. Various resources are available to support you - coaching being one of them. On the one hand there are external people who do not understand your work, but who can open up new perspectives for you (see chapter 2.1). On the other hand, you can also benefit from specialists who have a lot of experience about the job market and have already dealt with similar stress-related problems. To consult a consultant is not something new. Kings and emperors have done so for hundreds of years. What might be new is that a whole coaching industry has established itself on the market, an army of good and bad consultants offering their services.

Each individual has his/her own stress! The stress phenomenon has a strong individual component. Correspondingly, a good coach will not be able to present you any panacea (solutions or remedies) but will set up a few signposts for you to guide you on your stress management journey. The onus rests on you to make this journey productive.

#### Discussion:

Identify someone who can serve as a good “stress coach” for you.

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What would you require from this person (coach) and the coaching process in general?

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To cope with the stress, cooperation with a coach can be enriching. The following features characterize a good coach:

- Authenticity and credibility
- Loyalty, appreciation
- Subject competence
- Empathy
- Ability to listen
- Trustworthiness and discretion
- Life and work experience
- Education and profound expertise
- Mental agility and flexibility
- Proximity and distance (commitment and neutrality)

### **Chapter 3: In Short**

- Determining priorities in your life will save you time and lead to less stress
- Good time-management ensures that you are in control of your daily life - plan how you use your time daily, weekly, and monthly!
- Multitasking creates more problems in your life. Decide to address priorities in your life one at a time!
- Decide to say NO! Balance concern for yourself with concern for others!
- Learn to delegate tasks. Deciding which tasks you can delegate and to whom, prevents you from feeling stressed. Delegation is not a weakness, it's a useful tool to negotiate problems.

### **Conclusion:**

The successful negotiation of problem situations requires a pro-active approach towards solving them. This entails deciding to determine the priorities in your life, managing your time effectively, delegating tasks and being assertive. Along with the support of a good coach you can be on your way to optimal wellness. The following chapter will look at how you can charter your journey towards optimal wellness.

## Chapter 4: Wellness – Stress and Destress

### Tshiwana ye e sa hweng e leta monono

An orphan who doesn't die is awaiting great riches.

A person who persists in spite of tragedies and problems is ultimately rewarded with success.

African proverb

#### Introduction:

We have come to accept that stress is part of life. But what about fun or leisure activities in order to destress? Do these activities feature in your life? In order to persist in life despite stressful situations being ever present, time should be set aside to recover from stress and regroup. This entails relaxation activities to manage stress successfully. On completion of this chapter, you should be able to manage your stress better by making constructive relaxation activities part of your lifestyle in an attempt to recover from daily stressors and strive towards optimal wellness.

#### 4.1. Relax and Recover

According to the vernacular, "if you snooze, you lose ". However sometimes a snooze is just what you need to recover from a stressful day. To deal better with stress, we need time-outs from stress. Many do not allow themselves this "right to relax" and consider it inconceivable to take a break from their responsibilities. Stress researchers point out that many people have simply forgotten how to recover from stress. Not only does stress itself cause illness, but the lack of recovering from stress adds to its negative consequences. Experts refer to this as a lack of "recovery and relaxation competence". Many people suffering from stress often do not know how to distance themselves from the stressors in their lives and solace is found in the idea that only a holiday can bring some relief from it. Yet many people do not find the peace and relaxation they seek during their holidays. Stress needs to be managed daily and one way of doing this is to allocate ample time for leisure and recreational activities in your daily schedule. Don't wait for the holidays to recover from stress. Stress management should be a daily priority to ensure your wellness.

#### Discussion:

How can you recover from your daily stressors?

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Which activities (that you do during holidays to relax) can you incorporate into your daily schedule to recover from a stressful day? E.g. swimming, jogging etc.

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Exercise is a wonderful way to recover from stress. How can exercise feature more in your daily routine?

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#### 4.2. Meditation – Strength Lies in Calmness

E-mails, Twitter®, Facebook® and SMS - Modern man is exposed to a constant flood of information. Psychologists compare this permanent over-stimulation with a "monkey gaggle in the head" that can lead to physical and psychological stress. Meditation is a way to break away from the constant flood of information we experience daily.

Deciding to meditate does not mean becoming a monk! Meditation has many roots in world religions but can be easily practised without any religious reference. The aim lies in the soothing and gathering of the mind. Translated from Latin, it is about "aligning to the centre" and, somewhat broader, the "thinking about something." The latter can be very helpful for the stressed-out individual, when he/she no longer knows where his/her head is at and is missing the forest for the trees. To see the forest, meaning the whole situation, requires some distance. Distancing yourself from stressful situations can give you a better perspective of it and in turn assist you in managing these situations better. Where do I want to go with my life? Am I satisfied as it is now, or do I need a change of course? These are some of the questions that you can meditate on. According to scientific studies, meditation has a number of advantages. These include: anxiety and depression can be alleviated and stress-induced symptoms or psychosomatic symptoms such as hypertension, insomnia, or muscle tension can be counteracted. At a cognitive level, the ability to concentrate is improved when meditation is practised.

Furthermore, meditation enhances well-being or overall wellness, sensitizes one to the needs of one's body, and creates an awareness of stress responses.

#### Discussion:

The following tips on how to meditate may be useful:

- Create a quiet place where you can meditate undisturbed.
- Find a comfortable posture for yourself and ensure to gently lift your spine.
- Establish beforehand how long you want to meditate and commit to meditating for the full time you allocated, despite getting bored or feeling indifferent at times.
- Deeply inhale a few times before you start and relax your body consciously during exhalation.
- Do not build up expectations in terms of what you want to achieve or learn during meditation.

Identify times and places that you will use for meditation. In other words when and where will you practise meditation? Remember meditation can be practised at work too!

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What are some of the questions you can use to meditate on? E.g. what do I want to change in my life?

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### 4.3. Sleep

We spend a third of our lives sleeping - and that's a good thing. Sleep researchers agree that sleep in adequate duration and quality is the best way to recover from mental and physical exhaustion. In other words, it is just the right medicine for stress-strained workers. But during these intense stress phases, when we urgently need a restful sleep, we often find it difficult to sleep. This is because our psychophysical level of arousal is greatly increased. This means that we are, to a certain extent, so energized that we cannot "switch off" and relax. If we cannot sleep after counting millions of sheep, it can be related to high levels of adrenaline. This adrenaline is the result of stressful situations experienced during the day. Research shows that adrenalin levels are the highest during the late evening for stressed individuals and can therefore prevent a good night's sleep. Frequently, sleep disturbances are associated with an excessive expectation to sleep. Wanting to fall asleep at the push of a button and impatiently looking at the clock every 5 minutes will usually result in a struggle to fall asleep. In other words, we start to stress about not being able to sleep! Stress-induced habits, such as smoking or increased consumption of caffeinated drinks, can also lead to insomnia or an inability to fall asleep. It is important to have a bed-time routine that helps you to relax before you sleep and in turn makes you fall asleep faster.

#### Discussion:

Is your bed-time routine helping or hindering your sleep at night? Explain your answer.

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What changes do you have to make to your bed-time routine to ensure a good night's rest?

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A bed time routine can help you relax before going to bed and fall asleep faster. Here are some tips to establish a bed-time routine:

- Make sure you do not consume any caffeinated drinks 3-4 hours before your bedtime.
- Exercise regularly. Avoid sporting activities immediately before going to bed.
- Do not go to bed until you are really tired.
- You have made your bed, now lie in it! Make sure you have good conditions, for example ensure that your bedroom is darkened and cool (ideal temperature: 14-18°C).
- Take a "power-nap" of 20-30 minutes at noon. Long naps after 3pm can lead to sleep disturbances at night.
- Do not fall asleep in front of the television. Dozing off for a few minutes can disturb your sleep at night.



#### 4.4. Nutrition

Would you increase your food consumption if you were to lock yourself into a cage together with your boss? Admittedly, this trial design has some ethical concerns. Under stress, our bodies produce the appetite stimulating hormone cortisol. Not only love, but stress as well, goes through one's stomach. In stressful situations people often develop an insatiable desire for foods rich in fat and sugar. Experimental studies show that subjects, who had been "artificially" stressed by means of horror films or unsolvable intelligence tests, subsequently exhibited a higher food intake. Those affected tried to compensate their hardships (stress) with pleasurable foods to distract themselves or as reward. Coincidentally, stressed read backwards reads as desserts. The intensified desire for sweet things in stressful situations is no accident. Sugar releases the chemical serotonin in the brain and creates a good mood. This effect, however, only lasts briefly. As fast as the blood glucose level rises, it falls back down again. Grasping for the next chocolate bar is inevitable. The excessive intake of sugar and the lack of regular exercise is disastrous for one's health. Obesity is a serious health risk. Doctors agree that obesity is directly related to diabetes, cardiovascular disease, arthritis and cancer.

#### Discussion:

How are your eating habits affected by stress?

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What can you do to change your bad eating habits?

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Here are some tips to establish healthy eating habits:

- Avoid eating while working. Do not eat while walking or standing. Take your time - Slow Food instead of Fast Food is the motto!
- Take a walk for your digestion after eating. Movement guides the food substrates to the muscles and activates metabolism.
- Avoid big meals. Instead, try to consume smaller in-between meals throughout the day. Make sure you always drink enough water (at least 2 litres per day).
- Limit your sugar, alcohol and caffeine intake.

#### References:

Pudel, V. (2007). Anmerkungen zur Ernährungspsychologie. Ernährung, 1, 162-166.

#### 4.5. Ergonomic Aspects

Sitting properly is not that easy – just ask those people who sit in an office chair daily! In the long run, sitting in an office chair daily can take its toll, leading to back and neck pain. Complaints about back and neck pain due to operating activities is no longer only a farmer’s or construction worker’s concern. Office workers huddled in front of the PC are also considered at risk for these pains (back and neck). Hours of sitting, ergonomically unfavourable workstations, and lack of movement result in back and neck pain. Muscular problems can also be the result of mental stress. If one is constantly in a state of stress, the body reacts with increased muscle tension. In the long run this stress turns into tenseness and finally physical pain. This is because long-lasting muscle tension leads to an excitation of the pain sensors in the tendons, joints and muscles. In addition, there is a lack of oxygen in the affected muscles as a result of the pressure on the supply vessels. As a result, metabolic products are produced which lead to the enhancement of the pain. This is a vicious circle as the back pain or physical pain causes more stress. This physical pain can lead to absenteeism from work and poor work performance. People affected are not able to cope with their workload, feel anxious about losing their jobs and feel even more stressed.

#### Discussion:

How can you make yourself more comfortable at work (office space)?

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Identify physical pains that you experience at work. What is the cause of these pains? What can you do to find relief from these pains?

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Here are some tips to prevent neck and back pain while working:

- Frequently change your seating position at the workplace. Alternatively, it is recommended to carry out some work while standing.
- The height of the chair should be selected in such a way that the thighs are horizontal or fall slightly forward when sitting. The height of the table should be set so that the shoulders are not pulled up while working.

#### 4.6. Mindfulness

Completing routine tasks through automated habits, saves time and is an economical way of working. It becomes problematic when one spends one's entire life in autopilot mode. Such people run the risk of missing out on their own lives. They function, but they do not live. Life in this case only consists of a seemingly endless "to-do list" or "what to do next". The American molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn recognized this danger and formulated the principle of mindfulness. This is referred to as an orientation to the current moment or being present. Everyday things experienced are associated directly with a task in mind e.g. while admiring the rain in the early morning one is already thinking about an umbrella or wearing gumboots instead of sneakers. In the state of mindfulness, one's gaze wanders over the rainy environment. Maybe one's eyes just wander and appreciate the rain, or one reaches out one's hand to feel the rain drops. Caution: Mindfulness should not be viewed as a way to avoid life's realities. The umbrella and the gumboots still have to be ready. Rather, it is about the fact that stressed people can find relief by practising to stay in the moment. Psychologists speak of a process of de-automation from own thinking and feeling routines. Being present and able to recognize unconscious behaviour patterns helps to gain a new perspective on stressful situations and in turn helps to manage them better.

#### Discussion:

How can "being present" contribute to your lifestyle? Explain your answer.

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Some tips to develop your mindfulness follow:

- Look for a place where you will not be disturbed. Turn off your phone. Sit down and close your eyes.
- In the beginning, focus your attention on your body. Guide your focus to your breath, perceive where the back of the chair presses against your back, or try to feel your toes on the ground.
- Now focus your attention on your feelings. How is your mood, which emotions dominate you today?
- Focus your attention on your thoughts. Give them full scope and notice what is happening, which thoughts might come into mind.
- Open your eyes. (Decide whether this is after 3 minutes or after 30 minutes before committing to the exercise)

#### References:

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2009). Die heilende Kraft der Achtsamkeit. Freiamt im Schwarzwald: Arbor Verlag.

#### 4.7. Smoking

Smoking helps relieve stress - this is a widespread misconception. The reason for this assumption is that smoking can have a relaxing effect in stressful situations. However, medical experts caution against the aforementioned statement and point out that the relaxation experience associated with smoking is only the elimination of withdrawal symptoms. In other words, a low nicotine level leads to a state of internal tension, irritation and restlessness in smokers. The stress is therefore self-inflicted, and a cigarette counteracts this negative state. At the same time, the smoking consumption of cigarettes must be constantly increased in order to perceive the desired relaxation state. Stress and nicotine dependency are mutually reinforcing. In fact, smokers have higher stress hormone levels than non-smokers. Studies also show that people who had quit smoking reduced their stress levels. Despite this, many smokers are convinced of the stress-reducing effect of smoking. According to surveys, adolescent smokers believe that smoking helps them to overcome difficult situations. In addition to the short-term relief of physical withdrawal symptoms, it is presumably much more the social interaction associated with a “smoke-break” and not the smoking per se, which has a positive effect on stress perception. The interaction with other persons, random conversations and a change of location provides a break from the daily work routine. Those who attribute the stress-reducing effects of these activities to the recently smoked cigarette are mistaken. So why do you smoke a cigarette? “To produce some ashes” – seems to be the honest and most humorous answer. There are no more plausible answers. Quitting the habit of smoking is not easy. Those who quit smoking and who do not have alternative coping techniques, fall into old behavioural patterns during stressful periods and once again find themselves lighting a cigarette.

#### Discussion:

Which stressful situations trigger the need for a cigarette in you?

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How can you manage these stressful situations better without smoking?

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The following measures can help you to avoid a relapse after quitting smoking:

- Change your environment. Avoid having objects within reach that can cause a desire to smoke.
- Throw away the cigarette packs and hide the ashtray and lighter. Do not carry a cigarette with you.
- Treat yourself to small gifts with the money you would have spent on cigarettes. These rewards motivate you to not take up smoking again and compensate for the loss of the enjoyment through smoking.
- Keep two lists and read them whenever you want to smoke - A list of reasons why you stopped smoking and a list of your personal techniques to fight against the urge to smoke.

#### References:

[www.stop-tabac.ch](http://www.stop-tabac.ch)

#### 4.8. Celebrating Joy – Enjoyment Training

“One who does not enjoy, will become unenjoyable”, warns the German songwriter Konstantin Wecker. Many people however find it difficult to simply enjoy things. In the context of stress management programs, this incapacity is challenged. Through “enjoyment training”, people suffering from stress learn how to balance work and fun. The longing for enjoyment seems to be present but buried deep in many people. Frequently, work responsibilities and habits interfere with leisure activities. Experts speak of the "leisure trap" in this context. Perfectionism, the drive to impress, a hectic pace and consumerism, determine leisure activities and offer little room for enjoyment and leisure. We seem to strive to be filled instead of fulfilled. Enjoyment training refers to appreciating and enjoying the things of everyday life. Many miss the little things while waiting for this big fortune of joy.

In everyday life, it is also necessary to plan pleasant activities (create time windows for leisure, meeting friends or family etc.). This has the advantage that you not only enjoy the activity as such, but also celebrate the anticipation of the event. Surely you remember how happy you were as a child at Christmas time and how you could hardly wait to unpack the presents.

#### Discussion:

Identify three things that you’d like to do but seldom do, and three things that you have never done, but always wanted to do that will be fun.

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Identify times that you will spend on leisure activities. How will you spend this time?

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Enjoyment takes place in the present! How can you establish boundaries between work and leisure activities?

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### 4.9. Anger Management

Anger makes you sick! This is due to the fact that anger causes physical excitement which subsides slowly and adversely affects the cardiovascular system. Stressful situations are often accompanied by anger. Typically, anger manifests itself as feelings (associated with anger) that are either expressed or suppressed. The latter is referred to as anger in by psychologists, while using swear words and throwing objects around is referred to a so-called anger out behaviour. In both cases one is in a rage which causes blood pressure, respiratory rate and heart rate to accelerate skywards. Both forms are dangerous from a health perspective. An acute increase in blood pressure leads to structural changes in the vascular system. People who get angry often can suffer from a calcification of the vascular walls and thus have an increased risk of heart attack or stroke. But anger does not only entail danger at the level of the individual, but also at the level of a society as a whole. If the Korean Zen master Young San Seong Do is credited, the misfortune of the modern world arises because one is not able to control anger and fury. "An angry person is more dangerous than a poisonous snake," the master is quoted. But anger is human and can be managed – psychologists refer to this as anger control or management. People who struggle to deal with their anger (having difficulties expressing it appropriately or suppressing it) should invest in learning anger management techniques (see Discussion).

#### Discussion:

Identify a time/place when your anger made a situation worse.

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How could you have acted differently or managed the above-mentioned situation better?

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Here are some techniques to manage your anger effectively:

- Create a time window in which you allow yourself to be angry and tell yourself: "Right now I have no time to get angry, I'll engage in this anger tonight from 20:00-21:00". In most cases, the anger will have vanished by then. "The most effective antidote to anger is postponement".
- Do not act in anger. ACT and do not REACT. Ask yourself the question: "how is being angry making the situation better?"
- Try using humour to defuse an explosive situation.
- Take a break and take a step back. Sporting activities or exercise (chapter 5.1) are good ways to distract oneself.

#### **Chapter 4: In Short**

- Meditation is a means to both escape and manage the constant flood of daily information.
- Having a structured and relaxing bed-time routine produces better sleep.
- An awareness of the detrimental relationship between stress and unhealthy eating habits can prevent serious health issues.
- Physical comfort at work is a priority - muscle pains can be prevented by sitting properly while working and moving around more often.
- Mindfulness is about being present and enjoying the moment.
- Smoking does not reduce stress.
- Identifying enjoyable activities and making sure they feature in your daily life helps to manage stress effectively.
- Managing anger when faced with a stressful situation can prevent further stress.

#### **Conclusion:**

Wellness requires an awareness of daily stressors and ways to deal with these stressors to recover from them. Healthy eating and sleeping habits, practising meditation and mindfulness, and prioritizing enjoyable activities are some of the factors that contribute to a more relaxed state of mind and present a pro-active way to both prevent stress and deal with its aftermath. An active lifestyle engaging in exercise or sports provides a further means to manage stress and will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: An Active Lifestyle – Sport and Exercise

### Nkwe hwa le mmala wa yona

A tiger dies with its stripes

Said of a notorious person who died without having changed for the better

African Proverb

#### Introduction:

Are you one of those notorious people whose new year’s resolutions always include a commitment to regular exercise but who never see it through? Adopting an active lifestyle is a change for the better that can help you manage stress better. Once you have completed this chapter, you should understand the value of an active lifestyle and adjust your own lifestyle to include more exercise.

#### 5.1. Distraction – A Welcome Change from Stress

People can be easily distracted. Statistics prove that poster campaigns with seductive underwear models lead to an increase in car accidents. Distraction, that is the redirection of attention from the object of attention to the source of the distraction, does not have to be bad. Regarding stress management, sport scientists formulated the distraction hypothesis. This implies that attention focused on exercise is a way to be distracted from daily stressors. Indeed, during sports, the work day with its associated challenges becomes a thing of the past. You do not have to become a professional athlete. Choose a sport that you enjoy and start having fun! The phenomenon of forgetting the world around us during exercise has been studied extensively. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi created the concept of flow and described the feeling of complete emergence in an activity. When we are in flow, our feelings, desires and thinking are in sync. In other words, we are present. As we pursue the activity, neither time nor own interests matter, and action is effortless. Of course, this experience of flow is not limited to sports. Similar effects can also be achieved with musical or artistic activities.

#### Discussion:

Identify sporting activities that you enjoy.

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How can you incorporate these activities more in your life to serve as distractors from daily stressors?

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#### References:

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2005). *Das Flow Erlebnis*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.



## 5.2. Exercise Breaks

It is important to structure your work day and to ensure that short constructive breaks form part of it. This will increase work efficiency and contribute to stress management. If you are pursuing a sedentary occupation, the use of physical activity may not feature predominantly in your life. Anyone who lingers for hours in front of the computer with a curved back and head titled forward, will sooner or later complain about muscle pains and tension experienced in the neck, shoulder and back area- not to mention the strain your eyes experience from staring at a computer screen the whole day! Exercise breaks provide relief for your eyes and reduce the risk of muscular diseases. Furthermore, sport scientists emphasize that exercise breaks lead to a generally increased work performance with fewer errors during the execution of tasks.

### Discussion:

What do you do during your breaks at work?

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Can exercise feature during your breaks at work? Explain your answer.

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Here are some tips to incorporate exercise into your work breaks:

- Begin by sitting back in your chair, sprawling and stretching. This will help to relieve tension.
- Sitting upright - the feet touching the ground - lift and lower your heels alternatively. This strengthens calf muscles and promotes blood circulation in the legs.
- In an upright seated position, fold your hands behind your neck and turn your upper body slowly to the left and right. This exercise contributes to the mobilization of the thoracic spine.
- In an upright position, stretch your arms upwards and grab towards the ceiling, alternating hands. This exercise is designed to release some tension.
- In an upright position, place the palms of your hands against each other and lift them above your head. Pull your elbows slowly backwards without pulling up your shoulders. This strengthens shoulder muscles.
- In an upright position, cross your arms in front of your body. The back of the hands lie on each other. Push the arms slowly forward. The shoulder muscles are stretched.
- Sitting upright, circle your shoulders a few times slowly from front to back and then from back to front. Tension in the shoulders is released. The musculature of the shoulder strap is stretched, and tensions are released.
- In an upright seated position, tilt your head slowly and alternately to the right and left side. The lateral neck muscles are stretched.

Try to use at least one of the abovementioned activities once a day at work during your breaks!

### 5.3. Endurance Training

Exercise is often associated with jogging or walking. This narrow view of exercise often prevents people from exercising daily, especially if they do not enjoy jogging or walking the first time out! There is a wealth of exercise activities available to explore and accommodate your needs. If jogging and running is not for you, then what exercise is? Jogging brings many advantages but is not for everyone. If you are not the type for running, there are alternative endurance exercises that bring similar effects, but may be more fun for you. You can exercise on shore (jogging, walking), on rollers and wheels (cycling, inline skating), in the water (swimming, aqua gym), on the water (rowing, kayaking, canoeing) or in the gym (stepper, cross-trainer). All these exercise activities contribute to stress management. Sport scientists attribute this to various mechanisms. On the one hand, accumulated energy can be released and therefore reduced. In other words, it is a good way to “blow off steam”. Furthermore, high stress levels can be normalized through regular exercise. In addition, endurance athletes have a lower resting pulse and blood pressure, making them better equipped to deal with stressful situations. Last, but not least, “drugs” (endorphins, catecholamine) produced naturally in the body are released during exercise. These have a mood lightening effect and can contribute to stress reduction.

#### Discussion:

Identify exercise activities that you enjoy doing.

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How can you benefit from the abovementioned activities?

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How can you create diversity in your exercise regime to prevent it from becoming monotonous? Can you perhaps combine certain exercise activities to exercise different muscle groups?

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How can these exercise activities feature in your daily life?

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### 5.4. Barrier Management

In your hands you are holding a stress management manual full of ideas for stress management. If you have the intention to reduce your stress and live healthier, you are in good company. According to a survey in 2009 on New Year's resolutions, the desire for stress reduction came first, followed by the desire to spend more time with the family / friends and to exercise more. It is often the case that one does not stick to these resolutions as obstacles can derail any plans to attain them. Psychologists refer to these obstacles as barriers and subdivide them into internal barriers (e.g., sluggishness, fear of disgrace, low self-esteem) and external barriers (e.g., no time, high costs, bad weather,). It is important to identify barriers (internal and external) beforehand and to take appropriate countermeasures in an attempt to realize your resolutions.

#### Discussion:

Identify internal barriers that can prevent you from managing your stress better through exercise.

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How do you intend to deal with these internal barriers?

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Identify external barriers that can prevent you from managing your stress better through exercise?

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How do you intend to deal with these external barriers?

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Here are some strategies to manage the barriers in your life better:

- Create a sporting schedule at a fixed time and place and, if possible, involving a person ("Every Thursday at 18:00, Max and I will go for a run").
- Put your arrangements in your schedule and treat them like your other appointments.
- If a gym is on your way home from work, you will be more likely to visit it than if you have to make a big detour to find one. Don't drive past the gym!
- Inform people about your commitment to exercise and what you wish to achieve through exercise. This will motivate you to stick to your commitments.

#### References:

DAK (2010). Neujahrsvorsätze 2009. Hamburg: DAK.

### 5.5. To the finish line

The implementation of stress management techniques requires discipline and persistence. We are creatures of habit – changing or alleviating stress-promoting behaviors does not happen overnight. Laziness and reluctance often thwart our plans. It is important to watch negative self-talk and adopt a positive mindset. Negative inner dialogue (for example, "I always fail at exercise") demotivates any movement towards positive change (see section 2.7). It is important to monitor your thoughts for any negative thinking patterns and replace them with positive ones. A positive mindset is the start to an active lifestyle - a healthy mind lays the foundation for a healthy body!

**Discussion:**

Identify any negative thoughts you may have regarding exercise. Replace them with positive ones.

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Identify stress promoting behaviors (behaviors that cause stress in your life) that you wish to change.

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What do you need to do to stay committed (or motivated) to change these behaviors?

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Here are some tips to help you persist in the implementation of stress management techniques:

- Set your goals and determine what you want to achieve and by when. Set specific, measurable realistic and time-bound goals. If you are like most people who are probably easily distracted (see chapter 5.1). A good goal formulation can help motivate you to set out what you intend to achieve e.g. "In the next six weeks, I have a two-hour time window twice a week, where I am completely shielded (no mail, no phone, no TV) and when I will work on something else".
- Keep a record! Let your achievements motivate you.
- Do not give up and do not be discouraged by setbacks which are learning opportunities!

### **Chapter 5: In Short**

- Exercise is a constructive distraction from daily stressors.
- Regular exercise breaks at work lead to more productivity.
- Exercise is a personal choice, so personalize it!! There are innumerable exercise activities to choose from.
- When planning an exercise schedule, it is necessary to identify barriers that can prevent you from committing to your schedule.
- We are creatures of habit. Changing stress-promoting behaviours does not happen at a whim. It takes dedication and commitment!

### **In Conclusion:**

Regular physical exercise promotes a healthy way to manage stress. Planning an exercise regime involves having a positive mindset towards exercise and a preventative approach towards those factors that can negatively impact on your exercise aspirations.

### **African Proverbs Reference:**

a Motana, N. 2004. *Sepedi (Northern Sotho) Proverbs*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.



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