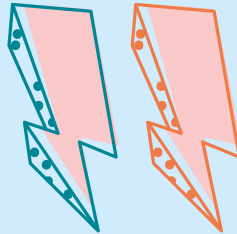
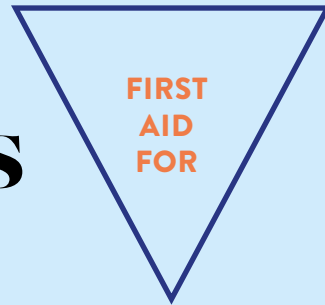


Elke Van Hoof

Stress & Burnout



**‘The best way
to predict the
future is to
create it.’**

— Peter Drucker

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1/ Stress: so what?

Check any newspaper and look for the word 'stress'. Chances are you won't have to search very long. In 2016, the online newspaper and magazine archive Gopress had no fewer than 23,459 articles mentioning the word 'stress'. That's more than sixty a day!

Stress is omnipresent. And the tone used by the media, and ourselves, is usually very negative. People have the feeling that they are no longer in control of their lives, that they are chasing after themselves, that they can't handle the pressure (often self-imposed). The term 'stress' has become some type of collective name for everything that goes wrong in our lives, at work, and in society. Stress should therefore be avoided, we think of it as something bad. But should we?

Indeed, scientific research shows that being exposed to excess stress for too long can have adverse health effects. This includes headaches, muscle pain, abdominal pain, stomach issues, problems concentrating, inability to find solutions for seemingly easy problems, irritation, and even aggressive behaviours.

However, I would also like to underline the positive aspects of stress. Stress is the motor that propels us in our lives, the sounding board that tells us (consciously or subconsciously) that action is needed. Without stress, there would be:

- **no innovation**
- **no progress**
- **no introspection**
- **no self-development**

Step 2/ Look for the lesson

Wait until no new thoughts/moments come to mind. Take a look at both columns and figure out which lesson you could learn from this. In other words: what do these two lists tell you? This could be a future intention, something from the past that you still need to make up for or just the insight that your day, in spite of everything, still went reasonably well.

Step 3/ Describe the action

Translate the lesson into concrete action. Determine what, when and how you will handle it. Determine a time and write it down. Merely reflecting on it is not enough. By writing down the action, the lesson is set and you put yourself in action mode. And connecting stress to action will drop your stress level.

This exercise provides greater clarity about what is going on around you. If you follow these steps it will create a sense of completion, the feeling that you gave it your best shot, and will be able to try it again next time.



The power of our brain

Unlike the heart or lungs, the brain is not a rigid organ that remains unchanged throughout life. The brain is flexible, it can be moulded. The events in your life shape your brain into a unique and individual structure. On the one hand, your brain coordinates what your body needs to do day in and day out, but it also works in the opposite direction: your behaviour can also influence your brain. By always doing the same thing, it becomes automatic, like driving a car with a manual transmission, for example. It's almost impossible not to stall the car the first time you try to drive stick. However, an experienced driver doesn't think twice about what to do put the car into gear. The action has become automatic. The circuit of the brain that helps us drive a car has become through repetition a well-trodden path along which our brain signals follow easily.

Earlier we saw that stress gives you the opportunity to learn something new. Learning is actually nothing else than creating new connections in your brain. Therefore **stress contributes to the plasticity of your brain**. In other words: stress contributes to a vibrant, strong brain. And the better you are able to draw lessons from your stress, the more resilient your brain. But this is only the case if the stress is not crippling you. If you suffer from the negative effects of stress, with only the high-danger alert mode active, it's important to address those symptoms first or to allow sufficient recovery time before starting the learning process.

TIP / BEHAVE LIKE AS A SMOKER

Take smokers, for example. The only benefit to their (otherwise completely unhealthy) habit is that their addiction requires them to take a break on a regular basis. I'm not saying you should take up smoking, but the unbridled desire for a cigarette can remind you that your brain might need some fresh air as well.

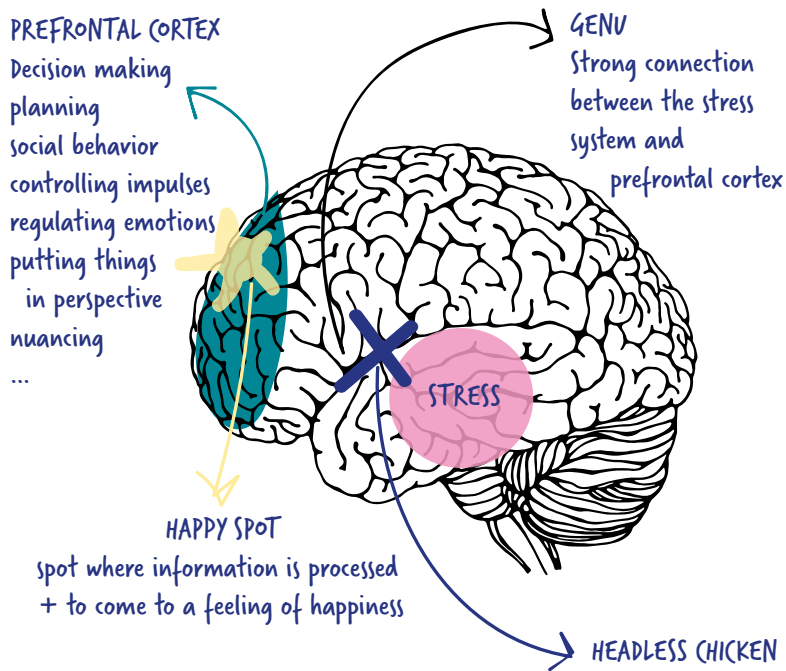


FIGURE 2 / When our prefrontal cortex and our stress system are no longer aligned, we start behaving like a headless chicken.

Especially the role of the **genu** is interesting here. It is presumed that positive emotions (for example comfort) can reduce pain and stress via this area by producing recovery hormones. Negative emotions (such as fear) through the genu area however increase pain and stress. In addition, research has also shown that our brain turns off part of our memory when danger looms, in particular that part of the hippocampus involved with new facts and knowledge. In other words, in case of imminent danger we no longer focus on the here and now. For example, every time I see a black Labrador, I am inevitably reminded of the black Labrador that bit me when I was ten years old. This reflex offers protection: it makes me jump back, making sure I am

EXERCISE

The 'stress champ' of the week

Schedule a round of 'stress champ' every week. During this activity, each person should tell his or her worst experience with stress in the past week. Vote together to decide who is the stress champ of the week. Regardless of whether the stress champ was able to eliminate the negative stress, everyone discusses how best to deal with the stress experience, both as a team and as an individual. This way your team can tap into new resources before stress takes place. Conclude the session as follows: the stress champ faces the wall. The other team members say as many positive

things about him/her as possible. Of course, you can also do this exercise at home with your family members or even in a group session during therapy.



13 During the past four weeks, how often did you doubt whether you are able to do your job?

- 4 very often/constantly
- 3 often
- 2 regularly
- 1 occasionally
- 0 never/hardly ever

14 During the past four weeks, how often did you doubt whether your job is useful?

- 4 very often/constantly
- 3 often
- 2 regularly
- 1 occasionally
- 0 never/hardly ever

GLOBAL BURN-OUT SCORE

19 or less (out of 56)

There are currently no indications you have an increased risk for developing burn-out.

20 to 26

Your answers indicate that if the current situation persists you could end up in a situation with an increased risk for developing burn-out. We advise you to contact your GP, the company doctor, or a mental health professional.

27 or more

Your answers indicate that currently there is an increased risk for developing burn-out. We advise you to contact your GP, the company doctor, or a mental health professional.

Summary

- Stress is a signal that indicates the need for change.
- If you practice handling stress at a time you are not yet experiencing its negative effects of stress, you will be able to make better use of stress to your advantage.
- Stress contributes to a vibrant brain.
- Being aware of your stress level is already a good buffer for the negative effects of stress.

What will you remember from this chapter?

New insights:

How will you set out to do this?

EXERCISE

Have a
worry-session
every day

- ▼ Set aside twenty minutes in your planner daily. During those twenty minutes, write down what is occupying you at *that* moment/what you are thinking about at *that* moment.
- ▼ Do this every day, all week long. At the end of the week read everything again and try to summarize the problems. Ask yourself with each problem why it is a problem, whether you can do something about it and if you can't, who can help you:

What is the problem?	Why is it a problem?	Can I do something about it?	If not, who can help me?

Now determine the order in which you want to tackle the problems. Give it a number. It is possible that something that is not as important, but easy to solve, receives priority. That's OK.

- ▼ Don't try to tackle all the problems at the same time, just do one at a time. Do keep to a pre-established timetable, so you don't drag your feet on certain things.

The power of self-compassion

Maladaptive perfectionism and harshness towards yourself mean that you will be living life too cautiously in order to avoid all pain in your life. This is how you remain in a constant, never-changing status quo. Your prefrontal areas are being extinguished due to lack of use. The solution to this is simple: other people. We must look for empathy and warmth. So ask for feedback or help to get you past the threshold. Look for role models in your organisation and get together every now and then. Ask them how they deal with failure and what they learn from it. And above all, be kind to yourself.



- ▼ Walking has a beneficial effect. Label each inhalation and exhalation: '1... out ..., 2... in..., 3... out...' and so on.
- ▼ Walking and focusing on nature is one way to bring mildness into difficult situations. While walking, name everything you see: grass, tree, fence, apple...

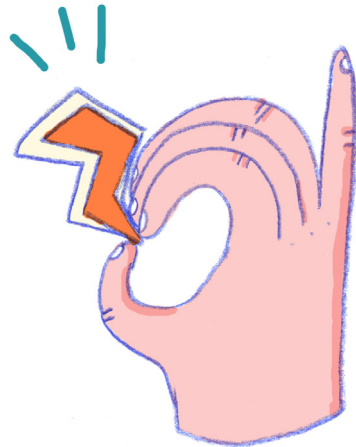
EXERCISE

Handling rejection

No one likes to be rejected. Feeling safe in a group is considered one of our basic needs. Fortunately, there are ways to better handle a 'no'.

- ▼ **Ask questions when you are rejected.** The magic words are 'what makes...'. Often this will bring to light the underlying reason for the rejection and it gives the rejected person a chance to solve the problem in a different way.
- ▼ **Retreat (without fleeing).** By not giving up after a rejection, instead making a less demanding request, chances are you will still get a 'yes' for an answer.
- ▼ **Work together and do not start an argument.** Everyone is entitled to their opinion. Look at the goal: do you have that in common? Then try to work together to find a solution.

- ▼ **Engage in dialogue, but don't give up.** If you are about to give up, take a step back and see if you can submit your request to someone else, in a different environment, or subject to other terms.



Summary

- Perfectionism itself is not wrong, it does however become a problem when you don't allow errors for yourself.
- Maladaptive perfectionism makes it harder to deal with stress.
- Perfectionists can help themselves by increasing self-kindness.
- Insights from mindfulness, such as self-compassion, can help here.

What will you remember from this chapter?

New insights:



4/ Prevention is better than cure

Prevention is better than having to find a cure, especially when it comes to chronic stress and burn-out. People who are confronted with burn-out sometimes need months or even years to regain their stress resistance. In this chapter I would therefore like to focus on the importance of a good lifestyle and proactive coping, so that you don't end up being burned-out.

Advantages of being a proactive copier

Proactive coping means that you recognize, acknowledge and then anticipate undesirable situations and deterioration to prevent future problems. After all, life consists of a succession of things that don't go as well. Be aware of that and try to prepare for it. We notice that whomever scores well in this regard, generally suffers less stress-related problems. However, someone who has less developed coping skills, will go through the stress continuum faster. In other words: he who appears at the start well prepared, is better equipped to deal with the obstacles that will appear on his path no matter what. The harder you are on yourself, the more difficult it gets, as seen earlier in connection with maladaptive perfectionism and fear of failure.

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