



# Foothold

AN ENGINEER'S APPROACH TO WELLBEING



## BLOG 14 – REDUCING WORKPLACE STRESS (PART 2 OF 4)

*My last blog discussed the nature of stress, why it's sensible to regulate pressure levels and how to recognise the positive and negative effects associated with different types of work-related stress. Now that we've covered the basics, it's time to explore a stress management strategy.*

### EFFECTIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT

A stress management strategy will regulate work-based pressures and help you stay content, healthy and productive in the workplace. It should help you increase personal resilience and get you through your working day, projects and tasks. A good strategy will include the following;

- Section 1 - Dedicated to raising personal awareness
- Section 2 - Identifies useful and varied intervention methods
- Section 3 – Reviews strategy to keep relevant and effective

When we deepen our understanding of something, we begin to see and experience it differently. With this in mind, allow me to share information and examples that will help deepen your understanding of personal stress management.

## PART 1 – INCREASE AWARENESS

Before we take action to counteract workplace stress, we must understand our situation in greater detail. Here are three steps for doing just that;

---

### STEP 1.1 - LEARN YOUR STRESS INDICATORS

When it comes to managing pressure and stress, the first thing we need to recognise is how stress affects our body and abilities. Start becoming more aware of the type of sensations you experience as pressure and tension levels rise or fall throughout your day. Are you finding it harder to recall information when there's a tight deadline? Write that down. Are you feeling agitated with your colleagues? Write that down. Are your hands sweating for no apparent reason? Write that down too. How is your breathing; is it rapid and shallow? Are you becoming more or less engaged as pressure increases? Record & collect as much detail as you practically can.



---

### STEP 1.2 - IDENTIFY SOURCES OF PRESSURE & STRESS



Now that you've become more aware of your stress indicators and patterns, you can begin to identify common sources of pressure and stress for you. Are there particular events, meetings, tasks or financial periods that you find exceptionally challenging? Are you worrying what others think of your abilities? Fearful of cut-backs and job losses? Start writing such events down.

---

### STEP 1.3 - IDENTIFY WHEN YOU'RE AT YOUR BEST

Start identifying when you're at your absolute best. When are you most productive, relaxed and content in the workplace? Where do you metaphorically 'fire on all cylinders' and what helps you stay focused and comfortable at work? Can you see any patterns emerge? Are you able to discover what your optimal pressure level is? What lowers your stress levels? Record these all these occurrences .



## PART 2 – APPLY AN INTERVENTION

There are a number of ways to deal with workplace stress but I have found the following three interventions most useful;

**Approach 1: Manage the Situation** - We avoid unnecessary situations that cause us stress, or alter the situation to minimise excess pressure

**Approach 2: Manage Perspective** - We examine the thoughts causing us worry, find added value for tasks at hand or adapt by developing internal skills

**Approach 3: Manage Symptoms** – We accept the situation for what it is, and start utilising healthy coping techniques to regulate or release associated physical symptoms

---

### WORKED EXAMPLE

Here's an example to make these approaches a little easier to comprehend: Imagine you chair a weekly meeting/presentation that causes you significant stress. Perhaps you're confident about the engineering content but you struggle when the presentation's scrutinised by a colleague. This causes you to feel sick before, during and after the weekly event.

#### Manage the Situation

If you use approach 2, you could decide to circulate an agenda prior to the meeting and stipulate that any comments be sent to you, a day prior to the weekly meeting. This would help minimise how frequently content gets scrutinised in front of other people, and allow you more time to prepare helpful responses. Alternatively, you could ask for all comments be held until after the weekly presentation has been given, therefore removing the need to juggle a presentation & answer challenging questions at the same time.

#### Manage Perspective

If you were to apply approach 2, you could start to examine why a challenging question causes you so much distress and activate our stress response system? Do you believe that you must know more than everyone else who attends the meeting, simply because you're chairing it? Do you think having a presentation scrutinised is the same as being scrutinised as a person or engineer? By shifting some of your underpinning assumptions, you could minimise the frequency that you're threat response system becomes activated and reduce stress levels.

#### Manage Symptoms

In an attempt to minimise the physical symptoms that are associated with weekly meeting you could apply approach 3. You might use a breathing based technique, such as a series of paced diaphragmatic breaths, to help regulate your nervous system, or you might choose to tense and relax specific parts of our body, with a view to reducing muscular tension.

## PART 3 – PERIODIC REVIEW

All three approaches will noticeably reduce your stress levels, and whilst it takes more time, effort and awareness to utilise approach 2 (shifting perspective) the benefits are significant. In general, I have found it best to take action and manage the situation that causes stress first, then move on to managing and releasing any physical symptoms using a healthy coping technique, and I suggest you do the same.

Of course, when we develop a new approach or solution to anything in life, it makes sense to periodically review and check its effectiveness. Your stress management strategy is no different. Discovering the type of actions, perceptual shifts and coping techniques that consistently serve you will require repeated effort, particularly if your work circumstances change frequently. The aim of your periodic review is to identify and increase what you find helpful, and replace any interventions that make little difference.

## SUMMARY

There are three main parts to an effective stress management strategy; awareness, intervention and review. To begin, it's important you learn to recognise how pressure and stress shows up in your body, work abilities and life. You then need to become aware of what work-based tasks and circumstances are causing your pressure and stress levels to rise or fall. From here, it's about learning to use the three intervention approaches to manage your situation, perception or symptoms. Lastly, ensure you periodically review your management strategy, particularly during periods of change, to maintain and maximise effectiveness.

If you've found this blog interesting and would like to discuss it further, please contact us on [hello@myfoothold.org](mailto:hello@myfoothold.org) or call on +44 (0)20 7344 5498



**Foothold**