Lesson One
Coping with Stress
Understanding Stress and Active Coping I
Welcome and Lesson Overview

Welcome to the summary and action plan for your first lesson. This course teaches you a variety of strategies that you can implement to take control of your stress.

This is a four-lesson course where we take you through helpful strategies to better understand and manage your stress. Throughout the course we emphasise active coping. This is all about *doing* something to change your situation, get extra help, or to support yourself through the difficult time. Active coping is different to passive coping, which primarily involves unhelpful thinking and behaviours that don’t address the difficulties in your life effectively.

**In this first lesson,**

- We discuss the three-part stress model involving thoughts, behaviours, and feelings (as well as their associated physical components).
- We introduce the idea of reducing demands and increasing resources to help you manage the stressors in your life.

**In the second lesson,**

- We discuss two important skills to help you manage your stress: structured problem solving and assertive communication to deal with interpersonal difficulties.

However, not all situations in life that cause us stress can be altered. For example, if you are dealing with a relationship break up or an ill family member, although there may be practical steps you can take to reduce some of the burden, the situation may remain inherently difficult.

**Because of this, in the third lesson,**

- We discuss skills you can use to assist you in viewing difficulties in a more helpful and adaptive way so as to reduce stress as well as ways to support yourself emotionally.

**In the fourth and final lesson,**

- We discuss how you can use graded exposure to reduce unhelpful behaviours that contribute to your stress.
- We discuss relapse prevention and getting extra help.

Each of the lessons build progressively on the material presented in earlier lessons, and each lesson will take about 20-30 minutes to read. We strongly recommend that you re-read each lesson at least once.

Sue’s story will be used to illustrate what stress is and how you can manage it better. Sue’s story demonstrates the various stressors in her life and how she learns to feel more in control of them and ultimately, less stressed. Of course, the things going on in your life may be quite different to what’s happening for Sue. Your experience will be very personal, but hopefully you will be able to better understand your stress and how to better manage it by following Sue’s story.
The summary and action plan exercises provided after each lesson are the most important part of the program. People who feel immersed in the course and put the most work into the action plan exercises, typically get the best results. Because of this, it’s important to implement the skills you learn in the course on a daily basis. The more effort you put into this program, the greater benefit you are likely to achieve.

Don’t hesitate to contact us if you have any questions at any stage of this program, by email or by telephone 02 8382 1400.

Good Luck!
The Team from THIS WAY UP
www.thiswayup.org.au

Your Goals
Before you get started with reading the summary, it’s important to spend a few minutes thinking about what your goals are for the course. What would you like to achieve as a result of doing this course?

We have listed some common general goals below. Tick the boxes that apply to you:

- [ ] Understand why I get stressed
- [ ] Learn how to manage my stress
- [ ] Be more independent/less dependent on others
- [ ] Feel in control of what’s going on in my life
- [ ] Do more things that I enjoy doing
- [ ] Be more assertive
- [ ] Have better control over my thoughts
- [ ] Feel better about myself
- [ ] Feel more physically relaxed
- [ ] Feel less rushed
- [ ] Structure my time more effectively
- [ ] Be better informed about support services

You can write down any other goals here. Try to make them as specific as possible, using the SMART principle. The SMART principle is a useful guide for setting goals.

Goals should be as Specific as possible, Measurable, Achievable (by breaking them down into smaller steps), Realistic in terms of what you are willing and able to do, and have a Time frame.

For example, rather than “to be happy”, a SMART goal might be expressed more specifically as “to arrange to catch up with a friend within the next 2 weeks”. A time frame can be especially motivating – think back to school assignments – would you ever have handed anything in if there wasn’t a due date attached?
1. Stress Explained

We have many pressures in our modern life, such as balancing family, friends, work, finances and community involvement. When we feel like we don't have the time or resources to meet these demands, we can end up feeling stressed. We are well built to handle stressors; in fact, the physical stress response is very adaptive for short-term stressors. The physical response to stress, also known as the fight-or-flight response developed at a time when our main stressors were physical threats, like wild animals. The fight-or-flight response prepares our body for action, allowing us to either fight or flee the situation in order to survive.
When we encounter a stressor, a number of changes occur in the body to prepare us for action. For example:

- the mind becomes alert in order to identify the danger and get to safety
- heart rate speeds up and blood pressure rises so that oxygen and nutrients can be transported quickly to where they are needed
- breathing rate increases to get air in more quickly
- blood is diverted to the muscles, which tense ready for action.

This response can be helpful when you need to break suddenly to avoid a car accident or when you need to fight off an attacker. It sharpens your focus so that you can kick the winning goal or respond effectively to questions when giving a speech.

![Graph showing the relationship between stress levels and performance.](image)

Your performance is optimal when your stress levels are moderate.

Whilst it’s clear that the fight-or-flight response is really useful for short-term threats, when it is chronically activated, it can negatively affect our mood, health and relationships. In addition, our fight-or-flight response is activated simply when we perceive a threat, whether or not the threat is real. For example, if we think there is a shark in the water, even if there isn’t one, our fight-or-flight response will be activated.

Similarly, if we are worried that a friend is upset with us, even if they are not, we are likely to feel stressed. What is clear is that although some stress is helpful to motivate us to get things done, too much stress can become problematic. Therefore, it can be really helpful to understand how to better manage our stress. As detailed on the next page, stress isn’t just a physical response; it also involves our thoughts, behaviours, and emotions.
2. The Three-Part Stress Model

In lesson 1, Sue learns that it is not simply her life circumstances that are contributing to her stress, but it is also the way she responds to stressors that is keeping her feeling stressed. How we think and behave make a big difference to how we feel. Sue learned that when she thought that she couldn’t cope, she felt stressed and tense. She also noticed she was getting more headaches than usual and began avoiding doing activities that she enjoyed.

There are three parts to the stress model:

1. **Feelings** (emotions) & associated **Physical Sensations** (what you feel in your body)
2. **Thoughts** (what you think about the situation; self-talk)
3. **Behaviours** (what you do or don’t do)

Here’s a reminder of Sue’s three-part model of stress:

- **Feelings** & **physical sensations**
- **Thoughts**
- **Behaviours**

**Doing too much:** overworking, taking on extra responsibilities; or
**Doing too little:** procrastinating, avoiding exercise, crashing out in front of the TV.

**Feelings:** Stressed, tense, irritable, anxious, hopeless.

**Physical sensations:** Heart racing, headaches.
Your stress model:

Now have a think about your own stress cycle. We have listed some common thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours below. Tick the ones that apply to you.

**Thoughts:**
- [ ] I can’t cope.
- [ ] There’s so much to do that I’ll never get through it.
- [ ] There’s nothing I can do to fix the situation.
- [ ] This is hopeless.
- [ ] I’m on my own.
- [ ] My life is out of control.
- [ ] I don’t want to burden other people.
- [ ] I’m going to fail.
- [ ] Everyone else is on top of things. Why aren’t I?
- [ ] There’s no one to help me.
- [ ] Thoughts specific to your stressor. For example:
  - [ ] My Dad will die
  - [ ] I won’t get the job
  - [ ] I’ll fail the exam
  - [ ] I’ll never find another boyfriend/girlfriend again
- [ ] Other ____________________________

**Feelings**
- [ ] Tense
- [ ] Agitated
- [ ] Upset
- [ ] Worried
- [ ] Anxious
- [ ] Overwhelmed
- [ ] Down
- [ ] Nervous
- [ ] irritable
- [ ] Hopeless
- [ ] Other __________

**Physical sensations**
- [ ] Problems sleeping
- [ ] Pounding heart
- [ ] Fatigue
- [ ] Sweating
- [ ] Nausea or abdominal discomfort
- [ ] Headaches
- [ ] Muscle tension
- [ ] Feeling faint or dizzy
- [ ] Other __________
Behaviours:

Doing too much:
☐ Not saying no
☐ Taking on too many responsibilities (e.g., work, family, friends, community)
☐ Working long hours
☐ Not asking for help
☐ Perfectionism/trying to complete tasks to unrealistic standards

Doing too little:
☐ Procrastinating
☐ Zoning out in front of the TV or computer
☐ Not exercising
☐ Sleeping too much
☐ Withdrawing from friends and family
☐ Going out less
☐ Having no “down time” to rest and relax
☐ Other __________________________

Other unhelpful behaviours:
☐ Drinking too much
☐ Taking drugs
☐ Smoking
☐ Poor diet
☐ “Taking it out” on other people; lashing out

Doing too much or too little tends to make people feel stressed because there isn’t much balance in their lives.

Now have a go at filling out your own stress cycle.
3. Active vs. Passive Coping

As Karen, the psychologist, explained, when thinking about managing your stress, it is helpful to distinguish between active and passive coping.

Passive coping typically involves just waiting and hoping that a situation will improve or go away or simply wallowing. This approach may include refusing to face the problem, hiding away from it, or pretending that the stressful situation isn’t important when it is. Passive coping can involve destructive behaviours such as drinking too much alcohol, abusing drugs, or comfort eating. For many people, passive coping entails a lot of worrying about the problem without actually doing anything to solve the problem.

In contrast, Active coping is all about proactively doing something to:
- Directly solve your problem
- Get extra help, or
- Support yourself through the difficult time

This is the type of coping approach that seems to work best. This style helps people to feel more in control and is more likely to lead to problems being managed effectively. It’s important to note here that active coping isn’t only about trying to solve a problem. Although that’s probably the ideal outcome, there are many stressors that can’t be solved. For example, it’s stressful when a loved one dies, when a relationship breaks down, or when we lose a job. Everyone goes through “rough patches” and sometimes there’s nothing we can actually do to change the situation. You can, however, learn how to better manage feelings about the situation by changing your thoughts and behaviours. There will be more on this in future lessons but to begin with, the best place to start is to ensure that you have the resources to meet your demands.

4. Your Demands and Resources

When your demands outweigh your resources, you can feel stressed, pressured and overwhelmed. When your demands and resources are in balance, you are likely to feel much more in control and thus, be able to cope with the stressors in your life.
The first step is identifying your **demands (i.e., your sources of stress)**. Sue’s sources of stress are her father’s frailness, her mother-in-law’s dementia, her large workload and hassles at work, her son’s difficulty studying, and the housework.

### What are your demands (sources of stress) in the following areas?

Feel free to leave some areas blank.

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<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Demands</th>
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<tr>
<td>Work:</td>
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<td>Health:</td>
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The next step is identifying your **resources**. These can include any thing in your life that help you to manage your stress. Sue’s resources include her supportive family and friends, her income and savings, time, good health, as well as her skills such as her aptitude at work, her organisational ability, and her caring attitude towards others.

### What are some of your resources?

It can be helpful to think about the following areas:

Supportive relationships (e.g., spending time with friends and talking to people you feel understand and encourage you): ____________________________
Physical resources and supports (activities that promote health and wellbeing; e.g., exercise, healthy diet, getting enough sleep, and avoiding drugs and alcohol): __________

_____________________________________________________________________________

Personal skills (e.g., sense of humour, organisational skills, resourcefulness, intelligence, caring nature, meditation practice, hardworking, fun-loving): ______________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

Other resources (e.g., time, money, transport; Do you have some extra hours in your day or some spare cash that might be helpful in boosting your coping?): ______________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

Tips: If you are having trouble thinking of your resources, think about what others would say your strengths are and what resources you have called upon previously when you were stressed.

Let’s have a think about how you can decrease your demands and/or mobilise and enhance your resources.

Ways to decrease demands

☐ Delegate tasks to colleagues, family, partners, friends.

☐ Outsourcing! If you can afford it, get professionals to take over (e.g., accountants, carers, cleaners, baby sitters).

☐ Postpone less important tasks.

☐ Learn to say no (see section in lesson 2 on assertiveness).

☐ Prioritise tasks and put your effort into the most important ones, whilst postponing less important tasks.

☐ Where possible, halve the size of your daily to-do list.

☐ If you don’t already have a daily to-do list, start one! This will help you to see what you really need to get done and what can be postponed.

☐ Reduce your perfectionism. With many tasks, it’s better to just get it done than to agonise over doing it perfectly!

☐ E.g., if you’re having people over for dinner, keep it simple rather than planning something extravagant. Or, if you need to buy a gift, get a gift voucher rather than spending 3 hours looking for the perfect gift.

☐ Try to stick to set work hours most days of the week. (You may want to gradually reduce your hours; e.g., from 8am-7pm → 8am-6:30pm → 8am-6pm, etc.)

☐ Avoid drinking and drug use.
Ways to increase resources

- Regular exercise is really important in managing stress. Schedule it in to make sure that you do it!
- Start a new exercise class.
- Organise a walk with a friend.
- Get enough sleep (e.g., commit to going to bed by 10pm each night).
- Practice controlled breathing (see info below)
- Practice relaxation techniques (e.g., meditation, yoga, massage, progressive muscle relaxation). *Some of these mindfulness exercises are freely available online through the Mindful Way Through Anxiety website.
- Get extra help (see section 6 in this handout).
- Plan pleasant events:
  - It’s important to have things in your life that you enjoy doing.
  - These can be activities like going out for your favourite meal, or ordering in for a night of relaxation. You could go to the movies or read a book. You could call up a friend or go for a bike ride. It’s important to note that activities don’t have to be expensive; they just have to be enjoyable.
  - Although people who are stressed typically feel as though they don’t even have enough time to do the things they need to, let alone extra social activities, an important aspect of managing your stress is doing things that boost your mood and having things to look forward to. So, don’t feel guilty about taking some time out! It’s important for your mental and physical health.
  - “Recharging” by doing these types of activities is actually likely to make you more effective at managing your work or other commitments, such as caring for others.
  - For more information, see the positive events extra resource.
- Take a “holiday” for a day – Plan one day (or a half-day) where you do only fun things for yourself and don’t worry about everything else going on in your life.

Positives Hunt

When people are stressed, they typically focus on the negative aspects of their life and discount the positives. It can be really helpful to try to shift this attentional bias towards noticing positive aspects of one’s life. These can be things that you are grateful for (e.g., the ability to walk, a good friend, a close family member, a place to live) as well as little positive things that happen in your day (e.g., someone standing up on the bus to give you a seat, a funny joke a colleague made, a smile from the person who made your coffee).

Here are some examples of positives you might notice if you are looking out for them:

- Seeing something beautiful, like a sunset or a flower
- Eating or drinking something tasty
- Having a positive interaction with someone
Receiving a compliment
Displaying a nice quality, such as kindness or patience
Having someone display a nice quality towards you
Accomplishing something
Making a plan for something in the future

→ Fill out your Positives Hunt Worksheet on the following page each day. You may wish to photocopy it before you fill it in for the first time so that you can use it for the next few weeks.

The goal is to focus your mind on searching for positives - something it does not naturally do when you are feeling stressed.

**Positives Hunt Worksheet**

**Instructions:** Each day, aim to write down at least one positive experience, big or small, that happened to you that day. These might include enjoyable events, times you accomplished something or displayed a valuable quality, positive interactions with others, and small moments of pleasure throughout the day.

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5. Controlled Breathing

As well as engaging in regular exercise, another way of controlling your physical symptoms of stress is to regularly use controlled breathing. Controlled breathing can be useful to reduce the symptoms caused by the fight-or-flight response. The aim is that once you get good at being able to do controlled breathing you can use it at times during the day when you notice you are starting to feel stressed.

It is important to practise, practise and practise the controlled breathing task – and then practise some more!

**STEP 1:** A normal resting breathing rate is 10 – 12 breaths per minute. What is yours now? Use a watch with a second hand (or timer) and count the number of breaths you take over one minute. Write it here:

____________ breaths per minute

**STEP 2:** Sit comfortably in a chair. Use a watch with a second hand to time yourself. Breathe in and out gently through your nose. Rest your hands on your tummy to check that you are using your stomach muscles (and therefore, your diaphragm) to drive your breathing rather than your upper chest. Only the hand on your abdomen should rise; not the one on your chest.

**STEP 3:** Now, do the following exercise:

- Breathe in for 3 seconds
- Breathe out for 3 seconds

As you breathe out, relax your body (some people find it helpful to say the word ‘relax’ to themself).

Do this for 3 minutes and notice the difference in your tension or anxiety.

Try counting your breathing rate for one minute before and after the exercise. Does the rate drop afterwards?

Write it here: ___________ breaths per minute (after the exercise)
**SUMMARY:** The controlled breathing exercise can be done at different times throughout the day. At first you may need to find a quiet, relaxing place. With practice, it becomes easier and you can use it whenever and wherever you need to.

The more you practise this skill, the better you’ll get. However, it is important to remember that it **takes time to master this skill**, so don’t give up! We recommend that you practise this technique at least **2 times per day every day**.

### 6. Getting extra help

An essential aspect to managing stress is knowing when and how to access extra help. Where possible, try to delegate. For example, we saw how Sue organised to get Meals on Wheels for her father to take the pressure off that aspect of his care.

It is crucial to get extra help if you feel that your stress is leading to clinical anxiety or depression. Clinical depression involves ongoing low mood or lack of pleasure and interest in most of your daily activities. It persists for two or more weeks and is accompanied by other symptoms such as trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, and weight and appetite changes. A lot of people also have thoughts of suicide and hopelessness. Clinical anxiety involves frequent and excessive worry and feelings of anxiety that persist and interfere with your work or social life. Clinical anxiety may lead you to avoid situations, people, and everyday tasks, or make it quite difficult to do your normal activities.

Clinical anxiety and depression affect about 1 in 5 people, so they are very common. They are also very treatable. If you are concerned about depression or anxiety, see your GP to determine whether you require additional assistance. You may also wish to contact your local Community Health Centre – see White Pages (www.whitepages.com.au) to find the contact details of your local Community Health Centre. Lifeline is another useful resource for counselling and information. They can be contacted on 13 11 14.

In the case of a psychiatric emergency, contact 000 or present to the emergency department of your local hospital.

There are many agencies that can be helpful to contact in relation to getting extra help with specific stressors. Some of these are listed below.

**Help for carers and your health**

- Meals on Wheels - [www.mealsonwheels.org.au](http://www.mealsonwheels.org.au)
- Alzheimer’s Australia - [www.fightdementia.org.au](http://www.fightdementia.org.au)
Work difficulties

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP) as part of your workplace Human Resources services - www.eapaa.org.au

Financial stress

- Centrelink - www.centrelink.gov.au
- The Salvation Army - www.salvos.org.au

Parenting help

- Tresillian - www.tresillian.net
- Karitane - www.karitane.com.au
- Triple P - www.triplep.net
- The school counsellor at your child’s school

Drug and Alcohol

- Australian government website with links for each state - www.drugs.health.gov.au/internet/drugs/publishing.nsf/content/needhelp2

Legal stress


Relationship difficulties

- Relationships Australia - www.relationships.org.au
7. Summary

1. Stress is maintained not just by the situation, but also by your thoughts about the situation and your associated behaviours.
2. Coping with stress involves changing the situation where possible and when you can’t change the situation, changing your reaction and making time for self care including rest, relaxation and pleasant events.
3. Passive coping involves unhelpful behaviours like wishing the problem away, sleeping too much, and drinking heavily.
4. In contrast, active coping is proactively trying to do something about your situation and/or your reaction to it.
5. Active coping includes doing activities to look after yourself. Rest and relaxation are key to managing stress effectively. Delegating tasks to others where possible is also very important. In the next three lessons, you will learn several other active coping strategies to manage your stress.
6. There are many organisations that may be helpful to you in managing certain difficulties. Please take a look at the list of organisations provided and make time to contact them this week for assistance if you think this could be helpful to you.
7. Finally, if you are worried that your stress might have led to or be leading to clinical anxiety or depression, make an appointment with your GP. It’s essential that you access help sooner rather than later.

In this lesson, you:

- Identified your own model of stress
- Learned to distinguish between active and passive ways of coping
- Identified your demands and your resources to meet those demands
- Began to learn strategies to reduce your demands and increase your resources
- Were provided with information about how to access extra help if needed

Here are some other tips that we believe will help:

- In a day or two, please come back and re-read this summary and the slides from lesson 1. There is a lot of really important information here, and so it may take a couple of readings to let it all sink in.
- If you have not already done so, please make an appointment with your GP or family doctor to discuss your symptoms, and to rule out any physical cause.
- After about a week, when you have re-read lesson 1 and this summary, come back and do lesson 2.

Good luck!

The Team from This Way Up

www.thiswayup.org.au