



The 10-Point Stress Audit



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What excessive stress looks like and what you can do about it.

“To be totally without stress is to be dead.” – Hans Selye

A certain amount of stress is needed for us to function effectively. Stress is very much a part of the human condition. We all face disappointments, setbacks, losses and pain. But to live a rich and meaningful life, we must learn to deal in a constructive way with life's challenges.

Stress evolved as our body's reaction to harmful and threatening situations. Perceived dangers subject us to a rush of hormones and brain chemicals that trigger a “fight or flight” response – a feature that undoubtedly helped our ancestors react to physical threats such as sabre-toothed tigers. Nowadays, while positive stress can help keep us focused and alert, negative stress takes over when we face continuous challenges without reprieve.

Manifestations of stress vary enormously among individuals. For instance, adolescents, new parents, working parents, single parents and the newly retired all face stressors that are related to life transitions. Certain occupations (i.e. C-suite, education, health and social care, public administration and defence) tend to involve a high burden of stress.

The stress audit below can help you evaluate the extent to which stress is affecting you, both physiologically and psychologically. If the majority of your responses are affirmative, it is highly advisable to take some form of action to prevent stress from negatively affecting your body and mind.

The stress audit

Consider your life today and answer the following questions:

1. Do you feel that your life is out of control and that you have too many things on your plate?
2. Do you often feel confused, anxious, irritable, fatigued or physically debilitated?
3. Are you having increased interpersonal conflicts (e.g. with your spouse, children, other family members, friends or colleagues)?
4. Do you feel that negative thoughts and feelings are affecting how you function at home or at work?
5. Is your work or home life no longer giving you any pleasure?
6. Do you feel overwhelmed by the demands of emails, messaging tools and **social media**?
7. Do you feel that your life has become a never-ending treadmill?
8. Are you prone to serious pangs of guilt every time you try to relax?
9. Have you recently experienced a life-altering event such as a change of marital status, new work responsibilities, job loss, retirement, financial difficulties, injury, illness or death in the family?
10. When you are stressed out, do you feel that you have nobody to talk to?

If you have answered “yes” to most of these questions, stress might have started to build up. If you feel close to your breaking point, it’s high time to take action.

Do keep in mind that your ability to make changes in your life depends not only on your intrapsychic state but also on your social context. Stressors can take the form of unrealistic pressures you are putting on yourself, or they can arise from family or work demands. The first step is to identify your sources of stress, so you can avoid them if possible. Second, you should recognise that stress depends at least in part on your *perception* – the demons inside that may have been troubling you.

Common stress symptoms

Sometimes we are so used to living with stress, that we don't know how to identify it. If the stress audit has given you mixed results, the following lists can help you pinpoint some of the most common signs of excessive stress.

Emotional changes:

- Mood swings, irritability, flashes of anger
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Sadness, lack of interest in life (including the loss of sexual desire)
- Anxiety, constant worry, guilt, nervousness

Physical changes:

- Low energy, constant fatigue
- Frequent headaches, pain or muscle tension
- Digestive troubles
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Insomnia, nightmares

Cognitive or behavioural changes:

- Difficulty concentrating, racing thoughts
- Forgetfulness, disorganisation
- Procrastination, difficulty in making decisions
- Increased smoking, alcohol or drug use

Healthy ways to cope with stress

Once you acknowledge the presence and sources of stress in your life, your next challenge is to find effective strategies for coping with them. Here are a few suggestions that may help you better handle stress.

Mitigating stressors:

- Engage in regular exercise
- Consider meditation or other relaxation techniques
- Create structured timeouts
- Learn how to positively reframe difficult situations
- Practice forgiveness

Adding joy to your life:

- Cultivate a supportive network of loved ones, family members and friends
- Learn to enjoy music, crafts or other creative activities
- Figure out what puts you in a state of “flow” and make time for it
- Focus on activities that fit your values and interests
- Engage in altruistic activities and practice gratitude

If this seems overwhelming, consider getting psychological help from a psychotherapist or coach. Most importantly, don’t bottle things up.

To a certain extent, feeling less stressed out is a choice as well as an attitudinal challenge. At any given moment, it is up to you to decide whether you will look at a situation with optimism or pessimism, with anger or with patience and understanding.

If you believe that your life has **purpose and meaning**; if you feel engaged in your daily activities; if you contribute to the wellbeing of others; if you feel capable in your daily activities; and if you are optimistic about the future; most likely you will feel better. For most people, however, the best buffer against stress is a supportive network of family and friends. Lastly, let’s remember what Hermann Hesse wrote in his classic novel *Siddhartha*, “Within you, there is a stillness and a sanctuary to which you can retreat at any time and be yourself.”

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Professor Kets de Vries's most recent books are: [You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges](#); [Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organisation Lives Happily Ever After](#); and [Riding the Leadership Rollercoaster: An Observer's Guide](#). A new book will appear this year: **Down the Rabbit Hole of Leadership: Leadership Pathology of Everyday Life.**

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