

1.



How to Manage Stress

What is it?

John Miller

Fit and healthy online

It seems to afford a kind of pleasure to this generation to look on itself as the victim of high pressure. We hear much on all sides of the hurry of time, of the pace that kills and of the disturbing and demoralizing effects of modern industrialism and commercialization.

... Yet the feeling that life for most involves a large measure of struggle and output of nervous energy is not peculiar to our time. Each generation looks back with longing on the calmer life of its predecessors ... after all, however, the truth may be that we are inclined to attribute to nervous wear and tear and to an overwhelming multitude of sense impressions, ills that actually are due to other causes. Modern life is a pretty complex affair and it is not easy to analyze it into the factors that tend to modify human existence.

... The root of the matter is that neither modern life nor the urban life is to be blamed indiscriminately for what is popularly denominated nervous strain. If certain factors at present little studied and poorly understood are tending to increase disease of a nervous type, they may be individual more commonly than has been supposed.

AMJ 5 August, 1905

The '**How to Manage Stress**' series of four ebooks covers the following topics:

- Stress, what is it?
- Stress, where does it come from?
- Stress, what does it do to you?
- Stress, how to get ahead of it?

This is the first book in the series.

How to Manage Stress – Part 1: Stress, What is It?

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You can't wake those who are pretending to be asleep
Chris Roylance

1.1

STRESS SITE MAP

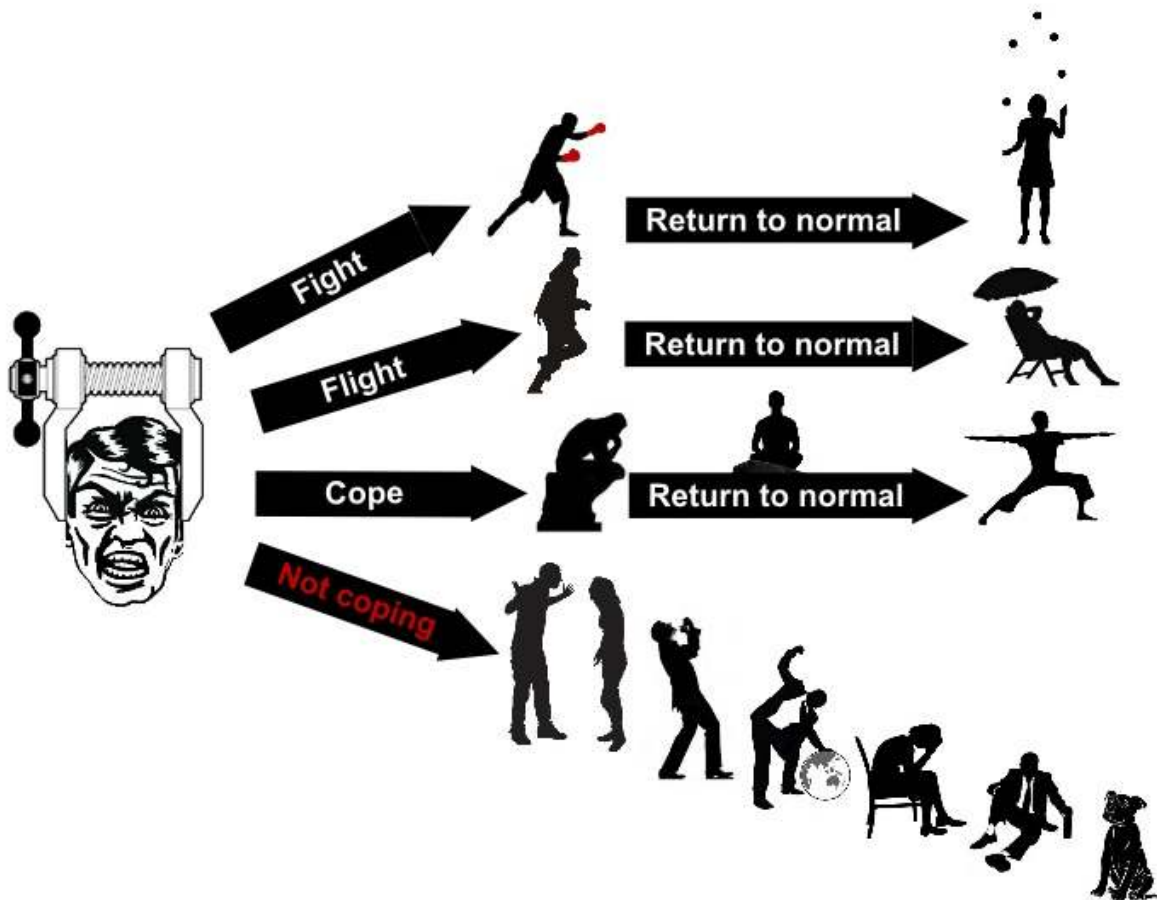
The human body is designed to cope with stress.

It's programmed at a subconscious level to automatically respond with chemical changes that initiate the fight and flight reflexes.

The human mind is also designed to cope with stress. Every action begins with a thought.

So when we're under stress we can make choices, to think, to act or succumb.

The aim of the How to Manage Stress series of ebooks is to get a better handle on what stress is, what it does to you, where it comes from and what you can do to keep ahead of it.



Stress is the inability to tell the difference between what is happening and what you think is happening.
Victor Davich

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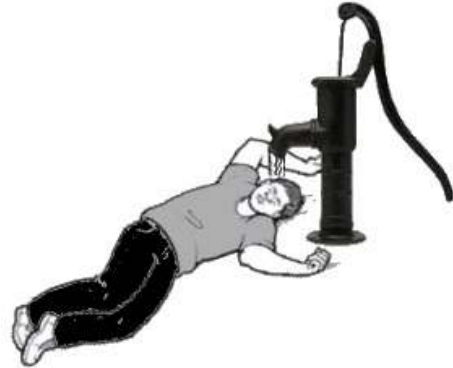
INTRODUCTION

'Stress' is hard concept to define. In fact it's like defining the wind, which we tend to do by describing the feeling we have when we experience it.

We find it easier to characterize stress by its symptoms rather than what it actually is or what causes it. This is what makes it difficult for the medical industry to deal with it. It's not caused by a lack of Zoloft.

We use all sorts of language to express how we feel when we're stressed, including cliché, metaphor and simile.

For instance, as I write, I'm 'under the pump' trying to finish this book. Am I stressed? Yes. If someone were to phone me I might be brusque and say to them, 'I can't talk to you now I'm busy. I'm 'flat out like a lizard drinking'. I'll call you back later.'



Right now I feel, 'over stretched', which, as I point out shortly gets to the heart of what stress is.

There are a vast number of stress clichés. Thank goodness though that whilst I'm 'flat strap' I haven't yet reached the point where 'I'm climbing up the wall'.



Where I come from, if you were 'over-stretched you'd say, 'I'm up to my neck in alligators', the implication being that you were stressed, not just because alligators were 'snapping at your heels', but because you knew that you didn't have time to fix the underlying cause of your stress, which was the need to drain the swamp. Right now, 'I'm swamped with work.'



Actually, although I'm feeling stressed, I'm enjoying what I'm doing. I'm hoping that in a couple of hours the pressure will be gone. I'll have got through the swamp and come out the other side.

Of course, if you had the view that there was no way of getting out of the swamp, that there was no 'light at the end of the tunnel', then you'd be really stressed. Being resigned to the fact that living in a swamp and floundering around in the dark was your lot in life would suck all vitality out of you.



No wonder you'd be stressed.

But is this stress I'm under right now bad for me? Is it going to drive me to the point where I have 'steam coming out my ears'? Nope, far from it. I'm not getting angry.



I know that in a couple of hours I'll be feeling the satisfaction that comes with achievement.

Even though 'I feel like I'm in a pressure cooker', the pressure I'm under is personally-generated.



The good news about stress being personally-generated is that it can be personally ungenerated.

I know what I need to do. All I need to do is 'just do it'.

I'm thinking that if I 'put my head down', stay focused and 'plough on', it won't take long to finish what I'm doing and the pressure will come off.



Thinking about it I've got 'too much on my plate'. Maybe I've 'bitten off more than I could chew'?

(On the question of 'biting off more than you can chew', the wisdom literature says, 'bite off more than you can chew, and then chew like hell.' I think that might be where I'm at.)

I'm lucky, the deadline I'm working to has been imposed by myself. Imagine if the stress was imposed by someone else, demanding that I have it on their desk by 4 o'clock, or abusing me because I didn't finish it yesterday?

What if at the same time as I'm finishing the book I'm running late for a meeting and trying to find time to arrange an appointment with the dentist - knowing it's going to cost me 'an arm and a leg' and my credit card is maxed out?

Then there are the promises I've made to mow the lawns, take the rubbish to the dump and hang a blind in the kitchen.

On top of all that I've got several half finished proposals that I have to complete, articles to write, newsletters to send off and websites that need tweaking.

I feel like 'I've got a big weight hanging over me'.



I've been 'busting my boiler' for weeks. 'I haven't had time to scratch myself.' 'I've nearly reached the end of my tether.'

I'm waking up at 5am knowing that if I don't get up and get on with my work I'll be wasting an hour and a half tossing and turning, thinking about all the things I have to do.

And that's before I tell you about the big things that are worrying me.

I want to stop but I can't. That would only make things worse.

I'm definitely committed to finishing this book in the next couple of hours. I can see the 'finishing line'.

Thinking that I can 'see the tape' has lowered my stress level. I can see the 'light at the end of the tunnel'. I'm getting close.

Actually this spurt of busy-ness is part of a plan to 'clear the decks' because in three weeks we're going on holidays.



Self talk

'So John, Put your head down and stay focused. In a couple of hours you'll be finished. Then you can go for a run and let off a bit of steam.' After that you can get stuck into the proposals. When they're finished you can start on the articles. By the end of the week proposals and articles will be flying all over the internet.'

'One the weekend you can mow the lawns, take the rubbish to the dump, hang a blind in the kitchen and go to the pictures.'



Anyway

It's easier to describe stress in terms of what's happening to us and how we feel, than establishing one definition that fits all.

It's not until I went through the thesaurus that I realized what a broad concept it is,

pressure ...,

force ...,

strain ...,

tension.



But which every way you look at it, both Shakespeare and Epictetus 'hit the nail on the head' when they said, 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so' and 'People are not disturbed by things, but by the view they take of them.'

1.3

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY



In 1936, endocrinologist Hans Selye defined two types of stress that affect human beings, calling the good stress '**eustress**' and the bad stress, '**distress**'.

We experience **eustress** when we're working towards a goal, creating a masterpiece, stretching ourselves into the future, facing a challenge we are up to meeting. We're alert, energized, switched on and resourceful. There is flow, and the satisfaction that comes with achievement.

But when we exceed our 'elastic limit', eustress turns to **distress**, leaving us feeling fatigued, tense, anxious, burnt out, overwhelmed and sleepless. Flow is replaced by struggle.

The tipping point between eustress and distress is different for each of us.

Most people, when talking about stress usually mean 'distress', forgetting that little was ever achieved without 'eustress'.

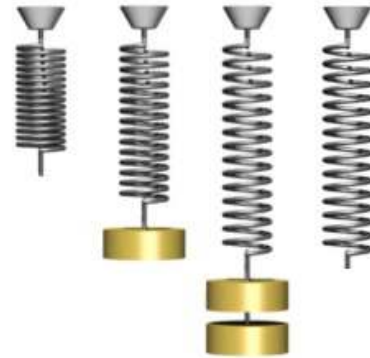
In keeping with convention, in the **How to Manage Stress** series of ebooks, most of the time the word 'stress' is used will be in the context of 'distress'.

The truth that sets men free is the truth most men don't want to hear.
Herbert Agar

1.4 WHAT PHYSICS HAS TO SAY ABOUT STRESS

When analyzing what stress is, a lead can be taken from the world of physics. Isaac Newton might have said, 'A body in good health stays in good health unless acted upon by a force,' a force generated by yourself or external sources.

Robert Hooke's theory of elasticity provides us with another appropriate reference point. According to Hooke's Law, elasticity is, '... the property of a material that allows it to resume its original size and shape after having been compressed or stretched by an external force – that is, unless it's stretched beyond its elastic limit.'



A spring stretched beyond its elastic limit does not return to its normal shape.

Stress is the mental condition where you feel stretched close to your elastic limit. You'll hear people say, 'I've reached my breaking point.' Go past the breaking point and they'll say, 'I've snapped.'

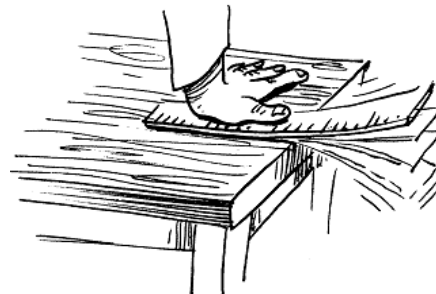
Physical objects have different capacities to deal with 'the stretch'. We call this resilience. Some snap quicker than others. Some things and some people are more resilient than others, having the capacity to take considerably more pressure before the elastic limit is reached.

Steel beams are exceptionally strong but when they exceed their elastic limit they become **twisted and bent** in such a way that it would be useless trying to get them back into original shape again.



Snap, crackle and pop!

The ruler on the desk is in every schoolboy's armory of distraction. It's remarkably flexible. Only rarely does it **snap**.



If you've ever tried breaking rocks you'll know they are quite resilient, the hammer bounces off them. However, if the pressure is great enough they'll **crack**.



Balloons are particularly resilient, but only to a point. Stretched beyond the elastic limit of the rubber, they explode -with a **pop**.



Generally speaking, humans are more resilient than springs, steel beams, rocks, and balloons. In fact, they're more like trees. They tend to bend with the wind and ride out the storm more often than they get 'blown over'.



We expect to encounter and put up with the normal, 'stress of life'.

We're constantly making decisions about what we should and shouldn't do.

Most of the time the stress is minimal. In fact, life is a series of oscillations, but once we are stretched beyond our own personal elastic limit, the stress can become intense to the point where it is unbearable.

Normally, physical objects become permanently deformed when they exceed their elastic limit. This is not so with humans, except on the rarest of occasions. It's often the case that after a bout of stress, people find themselves stretched for the better. They learn from the experience. They change, assume a new 'shape'.

All good ideas arrive by chance.
Max Ernst

1.5 THE PEAK PERFORMANCE CURVE

Before we go much further we have to talk about the peak performance zone and the circle of life.

You're more likely to be stressed if you are under-stimulated or over-stimulated.

Theodore Roosevelt said, 'Nothing worth having was ever achieved without effort.'

Peak performance requires effort, but if you're over-working you'll set yourself up for stress.

A high proportion of people are stressed because the things that are within their power to change are not changing.



What I've found is that players who just never give up, who will continue to fight. Whilst they may not get the victory that they're looking for in the particular contest they're involved in, the procedures they've gone through and the fighting spirit that they've demonstrated there, will contribute to success down the track. And it becomes a habit, and winning starts to become a habit, and winning habits become a habit.

I think you learn your most potent lessons through sometimes devastating losses.

Noel Blundell, Sport Psychologist

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THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

When life is going well, chances are you're in the peak performance zone. There is flow not struggle. There is an optimal level of stimulation. It's the zone of either no stress or eustress.

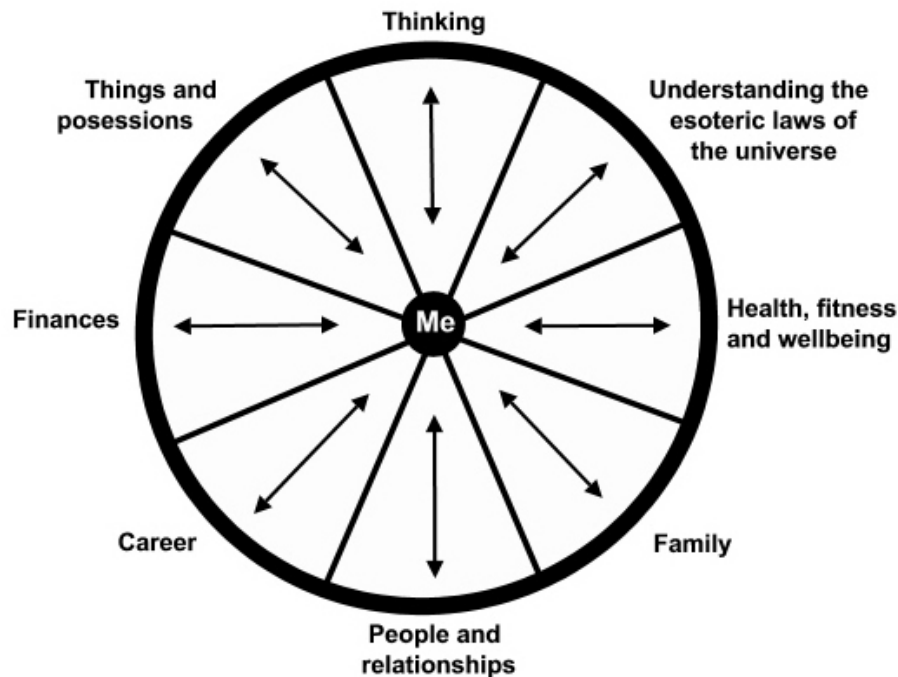
There are two high stress areas on either side of the peak performance zone, one where people are generally under-stimulated, the other where people are over-stimulated. If you're under-stimulated you'll rust out. If you're over-stimulated you'll wear out.

Life is complicated, there are many things to deal with at the same time.

The **wheel of life** represents some of the key areas of our lives that we need to focus up on. Let any one of them slide and you'll experience stress.

You can get stressed about any one area.

When a number of areas are not going well, the stress can be overwhelming.



Imagination is more important than knowledge, for while knowledge points to all there is, imagination points to all there will be.

Albert Einstein

1.7

OSCILLATION

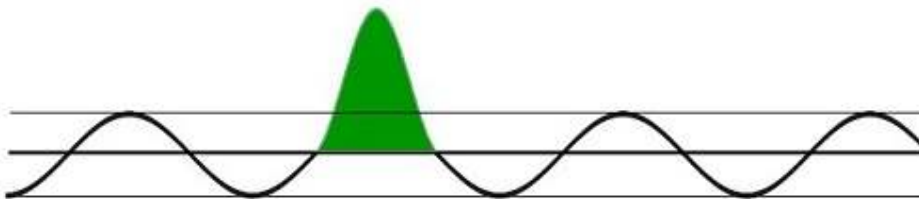
Life has a normal ebb and flow of oscillations. 'Normal' is not without its ups and downs. It's filled with challenge, disappointment, elation, sadness, regret ...

1. Life with normal periods of manageable, stressful oscillations – good and bad.

If you look at a particular area of your life you'll be aware of ups and downs, but they're ups and downs that are pretty much normal and don't cause much stress.

**2. Life with periods of high eustress.**

This is the stress that fires people up. It's the stress for which they get early for and go to bed late. It's the stress they put up with when they train hard because they know that's the way to get better. It's the stress that drives them to study for exams, to start and then complete large projects. It's accompanied by energy, vitality, enthusiasm and passion. It's accompanied by flow. Along with completion comes joy, happiness and ecstasy.



When the peak stressful period is over you'll be a changed person. You'll experience the satisfaction of achievement. Things will be better. You'll be able to be at ease at a higher level.

A WONDERFUL IDEA

The doctor came down in his dressing gown as usual for breakfast but he hardly touched anything. I thought something was wrong, so I asked what was troubling him.

'Darling' he said, 'I have a wonderful idea' and after drinking his coffee, he went to the piano and started playing. Now and again he would stop, make a few notes and then repeat: 'I've got a wonderful idea, a marvelous idea.'

I said 'Then for goodness sake, tell me what it is, don't keep me in suspense.' He said, 'It's difficult, I still have to work it out.'

Albert continued playing on the piano and making notes for about half an hour, then went upstairs to his study, telling me that he did not wish to be disturbed, and remained there for two weeks. Each day I would send him up his meals and in the evening he would walk for a little exercise, then return to his work again.

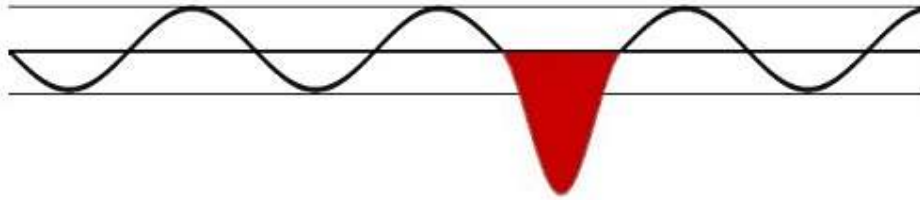
Eventually he came down from his study looking very pale. 'That's it' he said, wearily putting two sheets of paper on the table.

And that was his theory of relativity.

Elsa Einstein

3. Life with a period of high distress.

This is the stress that leads to frustration and anxiety, the stress that sucks all energy and vitality out of you.

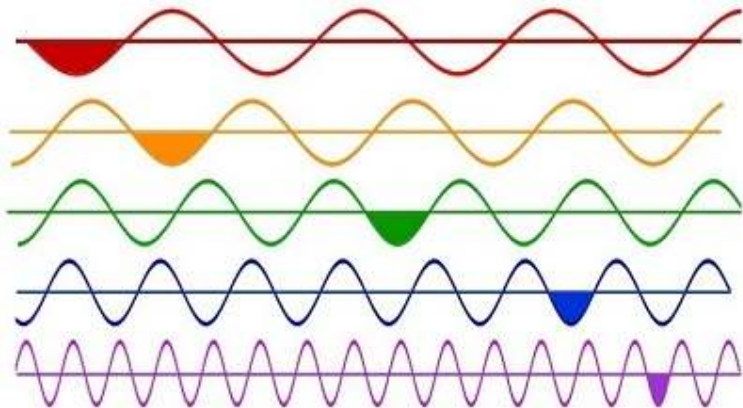


It's the stress characterized by struggle, not flow. The only good thing about it is that if *you* can work out what's causing the stress and develop an action plan to get yourself back on an even keel, when it's over you'll probably be a changed person – for the better. If you're resilient you'll cope.

4. Managing a number of life areas at the one time

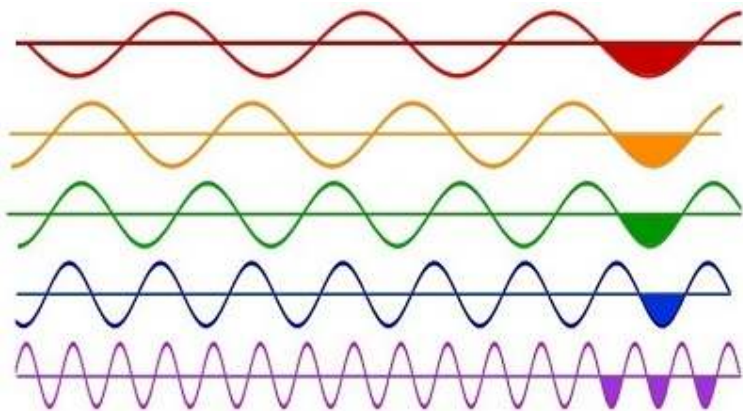
If you're resilient, and stress is coming from one area at a time, your stress graph may look like this, ups and downs with periods of manageable stress.

What are your current big stressors?



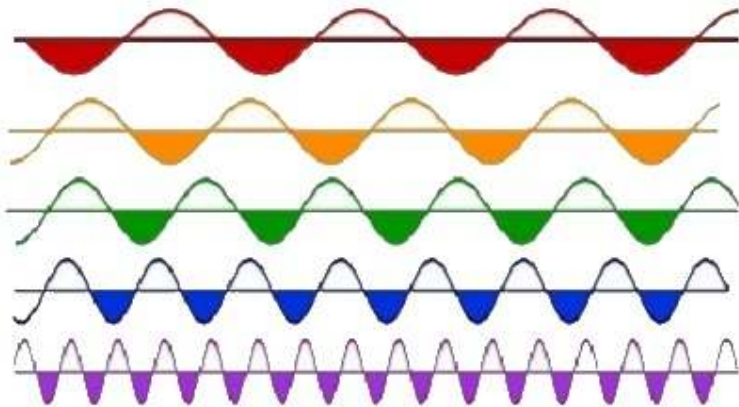
5. Big distress

A surefire way to subject yourself to very high levels of stress is to face pressure from multiple fronts – all at the same time. You won't be able to put up with this type of stress for very long. You have to deal with it at its cause.



6. Huge, massive and extreme distress

When stress bears down on multiple fronts for long periods of time you run the risk of falling into the black hole.

**Keep the plates spinning**

If you've ever been to a vaudeville show you may have come across an act where a performer has a number of plates spinning at the one time. Being able to keep all the plates spinning all of the time is a good metaphor for life.

When you look at your own life, which plate can you afford to let crash on the floor, your health, your family, your career, your finances ...? It's not a pretty sight when all the plates crash to the floor in quick succession.

Fortunately most humans can bounce back after a period of intense elastic-limit-exceeding stress.



1.8

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

If the signs of stress are emotional, there is a good chance you'll start feeling anxious, insecure, frustrated, irritable, sad, angry, miserable, powerless, insecure or just plain down in the dumps. These are, of course normal healthy emotions, albeit negative ones. But along with the time to be stressed, sad and grieving there is a time to heal, a time to mend and a time to be happy.

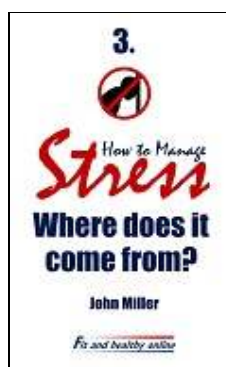
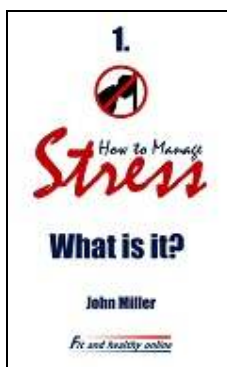
There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

- a time to be born and a time to die,
- a time to plant and a time to uproot,
- a time to kill and a time to heal,
- a time to tear down and a time to build,
- a time to weep and a time to laugh,
- a time to mourn and a time to dance,
- a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
- a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
- a time to search and a time to give up,
- a time to keep and a time to throw away,
- a time to tear and a time to mend,
- a time to be silent and a time to speak,
- a time to love and a time to hate,
- a time for war and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes - the philosopher circa 400 BC

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