



**NHS Newcastle and North Tyneside  
Community Health**

# Stress Control

## Week 2

# **PART C: CONTROLLING YOUR ACTIONS**

There are four new skills in this section.

- Problem solving
- Face the fear
- Giving up 'Safety Behaviours'
- 20 ways to cope

You will also see how the skills in the other handouts are now brought into force.

## Problem solving

This is a good skill to help you deal with any problem in your life.

⇒ You take on problems one at a time.

⇒ You break each problem into seven 'bite-size' steps.

⇒ As you pick up this idea, you gain a greater sense of control in your life.

**You start by saying clearly what the problem is.**

*'The dampness in the back room is getting worse'*

*'My son has no time for me now'*

These are both good as you have clearly said what the problem is.

*'This house gets me down'*

*'I'm a bad-tempered so-and-so'*

These are less helpful, as they do not clearly say what the problem is. Let us use the second problem to go through the seven steps.

Sam wants to work on the problem he has with his ten-year-old son, John. He starts at:

***Step 1: What is the problem?***

'My son has no time for me now'

***Step 2: What do I think will happen if I don't solve this problem?***

Sam wrote 'It will be the same as me and my dad. I used to think he was the greatest. I ended up hating him. He was never there to help me when things were bad. I could not share the good times with him either. I believed he thought I was no use. I can't let that happen with my son'

### ***Step 3: Brainstorm***

You try to come up with as many solutions as you can. This is a way to stretch your mind so it does not matter how good or bad they are. The more you think of, the better the chances of finding a good one. So, Sam sits down and writes these down:

#### **Options:**

1. I was the same with my old man at his age. Just leave him. He will come round.
2. I'll buy him a TV for his room.
3. I'm so wrapped up in my problems, I've not spent any time with him for ages. We used to do a lot in the past. I could change this.
4. We all eat in front of the telly. We could all sit around the table again and talk.
5. The wife says I'm like a bear with a sore head. I just shout at him all the time. No wonder he steers clear of me. I could try and sort this out.
6. I'll ask the wife if she has any ideas; the lad talks to her.

#### **Step 4: Choose the best option**

Sam has to write out the pros and cons for all the options. Then he works out if the option will work.

<b>Option</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Will it work?</b>
1. Just leave him. He will come round.	I still talk to my dad now.	I still resent my dad for not trying harder with me. I swore when John was born that I would not be like that with him.	No. Ditch it.
2. Buy him a telly.	He wants a telly in his room.	You can't buy love	No. Ditch it.
3. I could spend more time with him.	He loves fishing. We could head up the river on Saturdays. I could pick him up from the cubs on Tuesdays. I could just ask him how his day was - I don't even do that.	It sounds good but will I do it? If this worked, it would help both of us. If I felt him come round to me, I would feel less of a failure.	Yes. Don't aim too high though. Take it one step at a time.
4. Eat our tea at the table.	We could all talk. We are like ships in the night just now. It would help keep the family strong.	None. This is good.	Yes. I know the wife wants to do this.
5. Stop shouting all the time.	This would be great.	I try not to but I can't stop it. So I have to work at it. Use the stuff on controlling my thoughts. Try to relax more. Work out why I get angry and tackle that.	Maybe. Don't aim too high though.
6. Ask my wife.	She has just about given up on me as I don't try with John. This would show her I am trying. She might know some good ways to help me with him.	None. This is good.	Yes. I think she will help me all the way if she feels I am trying.



### ***Step 5: Work out a plan***

Sam started with Option 6. He used what his wife told him to help plan Option 3.

“The wife asked the son if he fancied fishing. He was dead keen and said he missed going with his dad. That gave me the courage to do it. I’ll speak to him after our tea tonight. We will get the rods out to check them. I will meet him from school on Friday and go to the tackle shop for bait. We can pack up the gear as well. The two of us will do all of this together”.

“My mate will pick us up first thing. I’ve told him what I am trying to do and he knows I will find this stressful. But he is good at keeping me calm. He will bring his son and he gets on well with my boy. We will be quiet when we fish so that is less pressure on me. I will not expect it to be perfect but we will do it again the next Saturday I am off if he wants to. I will do the CD to relax in the morning. I will not drink the night before”.

### ***Step 6: Put it into action***

Do it

### ***Step 7: Review***

Did it work?

If it did not, why not?

What did you learn?

Can you improve it to make it work?

What is the next problem you can tackle?

It rained all day and they caught nothing but his son told Sam he loved it and asked if they could come again. It is now a regular trip. Sam still shouts a lot in the house but at least he often talks freely and plays with his son. He feels, for the first time in a long time, that he is closer to being the dad he wants to be. This helps his self-esteem. His wife sees him trying and she is coming round to him again. He still uses Problem Solving to keep on top of things.

Please practise using ‘Controlling your Actions’ forms at the end of this handout.

## **Face the fear**

Many people avoid facing threats as a way of coping. While this may work in the short term, it makes stress worse in the long term. This uses the same 7-Step approach as Problem Solving.

### **‘Reality testing’**

If you avoid facing the things that cause you stress, you never find out what would have happened. If you avoid, you never find out if you could have coped. So your stress stays in place.

If you face your fear you can test the reality of your fear. If the thing you fear does not happen or if you cope better than you think, your stress can start to die out. Even if the thing you fear does happen, is it as bad as you thought? The chances are that it will not be. So this section looks at how to face your fear.

### ***Step 1: What is the problem to face?***

Work out your list of the things you need to confront. Look back at the things you wrote in the ‘What is stress?’ handout.

### ***Step 2: What do I think will happen when I face my fear?***

Use the ‘Safety Behaviour’ information you will gather in this handout. Try to predict what will happen. Use the ‘Controlling Your Thoughts’ skills that are introduced in the handbook for Week 3. (Asking yourself ‘What is the worst thing that can happen?’ is very good for this). Once you have faced the fear, see how good this prediction was.

### ***Step 3: Brainstorm / come up with ideas***

### ***Step 4: Choose the best option***

### ***Step 5: Work out a plan***

Use relaxation and develop some control over your thoughts.

### ***Step 6: Put it into action*** - Do it

### ***Step 7: Review***

Did it work? If not, why not? If it did work, you can now face other fears.

## Getting rid of Safety Behaviours

Safety behaviours aim to prevent the thing you fear from happening. On the face of it this seems like a good idea as they could protect you from threat.

### **Here are some common things people do under stress:**

***In a panic attack:*** some people may lean against something to stop themselves from fainting.

***When worrying:*** some people may try to focus their mind on certain thoughts or images to stop their mind spiralling out of control.

***Agoraphobia:*** some people may walk through the shops with their eyes to the ground to prevent meeting someone they know.

***Jealousy:*** some people may make sure their partner phones them when they get in from a night out with the girls/boys.

Safety Behaviours are common in **anxiety**. You put these in place to lower the sense of threat. So you may:

- ⇒ work out in great detail what you are going to say before you make a phone call (as you fear making a fool of yourself)
- ⇒ carry a bottle of water with you to keep you cool and reduce dryness in your mouth
- ⇒ hide your face with your hair to conceal blushing
- ⇒ pretend to be writing notes in a meeting to avoid having to talk
- ⇒ avoid eye contact
- ⇒ have a range of excuses ready for having a red face - 'it's so hot in here', 'I'm not well' (as you fear others will notice and think badly of you)
- ⇒ only go out with someone you trust

Just as when you avoid, these behaviours may help in the short term. In the long term, however they may make things worse. Why is this? Stress, as we have seen, makes you feel under threat. It makes you feel you can't control things as well as you want to. You feel you need something to protect you from the threats that, by now, feel very real to you. Therefore you can develop a range of safety behaviours to reduce this perceived threat.

The problem is that safety behaviours then feed the sense of threat. They do this by keeping your confidence low. This happens because they tell you that you **need** to protect yourself, that the threat is real. They seem to be the last line of defence. However, if you had not used the safety behaviours what would have happened?:

*Would you have fainted if you had not leant against something?*

- you don't know

*Would you have gone mad if you had not controlled your thoughts?*

- you don't know

*What would have happened if you had met someone you know?*

- you don't know

*Would you have messed up the phone call if you had not prepared?*

- you don't know

This is much the same as '**reality testing**'. You must see the thing through to the end to see how you would cope. So if you don't lean against something and then don't faint, you will feel more in control as the sense of threat will reduce. (This will then help you control thoughts more easily).

You can get rid of your safety behaviours in 5 steps. As before, this is based on Problem Solving. Practise using the 'Getting rid of Safety Behaviours' forms at the back of this handout.

### ***Step 1: What are your safety behaviours? What 'props' do you use?***

You should write down all the things you do, or think, to try to stop something bad happening to you. Some people have ready-made excuses to use if they do not cope. Some have a drink before going outside.

You should also think of anything you use to help ('props'), e.g. some people keep a diazepam tablet in their pocket all the time, while some wear heavy jumpers to hide sweat marks.

### ***Step 2: Decide how much they help or hinder you***

Think of this in both the short term and the long term

### ***Step 3: Predict what would happen if you got rid of the safety behaviour***

Run the scene right to the end. If you did not use the safety behaviours, what would happen? ("What is the worst thing that would happen?" is very good for this). Have there been times when you did not use them? What happened?

### ***Step 4: Work out a plan***

Do it

Pick the safety behaviour you want to get rid of first. As in 'Problem Solving', work out your plan to do this. To help you cope, use Relaxation and the 'Controlling your Thoughts' skills.

Reduce your use of safety behaviours gradually. You don't have to stop using them in one go.

### ***Step 5: Review?***

How did it go? Was it better or worse than you predicted? Why was this? Do you need to change your plan for the next time?

Keep going until you have got rid of as many of the safety behaviours as you can.

## 20 Ways to cope

Read through all these ideas and pick up the ones that best meet your need.

### **1) Problem solve rather than worry**

Don't bottle up your feelings. They will grow and grow inside you until they erupt. This will weaken your sense of control. So if there are problems at, e.g. work, make sure that you deal with them on the spot. Use **Problem Solving** to deal with them.

### **2) Strong, confiding relationships**

Stress often makes us harder to live with. This can weaken relationships. But we know that strong relationships can help fight stress. So if you have a weak relationship, think about how it might be improved.

### **3) Slow down**

Don't do things at 100 miles an hour. Eat, walk and drive more slowly. If you don't get as much done as you would like then it is no big deal. There is always another day. If you often have to rush around then maybe you are trying to fit in too much?

### **4) Divide problems up**

If you face a huge problem and can see no way to cope with it, see if you can divide it up into 'bite sized' bits. Then tackle the bits one at a time. Problem Solving is very good for this.

### **5) Musts and shoulds**

"I **must** see my mother today"; "I **should** offer to run the football team this year". Work out what is reasonable for you to achieve and be happy with this - "If I get through all the things I want to at home, I'll take a run down to my mothers. If not, I'll see her through the week"; "I don't get a chance to relax as it is so it's daft to take on more pressure - someone else can take a turn"

### **6) Coping with ruts**

If you feel your life is in a rut just now - same old routine day in and day out - then think about making some small changes. Plan your weekends and perhaps do something different, go for a drive, visit friends, go for a long walk, take up a new hobby. Look for challenges. If you can afford it, plan the odd weekend away as a change of scenery can help.

### **7) One thing at a time**

Think of someone at work cradling a phone between his shoulder and ear. With one hand he is writing a letter and with the other, searching through some papers. At the same time, he is trying to grab a quick snack. He is

overloading his system. If you are making a phone call, make only the call and nothing else. The message is don't keep too many balls in the air at the one time.

### **8) Look and sound relaxed**

Other people will pick up how you are feeling by seeing your 'body language'. So try to look relaxed, e.g. don't sit on the edge of your seat, slow down your speech, relax your shoulders, don't fidget. Ask those close to you how you act when you are tense so that you know what changes to make. You will feel better if you know that, on the outside at least, you are looking calm. Use *relaxation* to help.

### **9) Past experience**

If you are in a jam, ask yourself if you have been in a similar jam before. How did you deal with it? If what you did worked, try it again. If it didn't, learn from your mistakes.

### **10) Don't accept other peoples' targets**

Do people expect too much of you? If you feel they do, *confront* this. Have a quiet word and try to sort this out. If you can't agree, say 'NO'.

### **11) Eating**

Some people suggest that supplements of vitamins A, C and E help stress but this will not help unless your diet is lacking in these. Bear in mind that taking too many vitamins can be as bad as taking too few. It may be best to seek advice from a professional before taking supplements.

In the long term, try to eat more healthy foods - get away from fried and fatty food. Cut down on sugar and salt. Eat fewer sweets and cakes. Eat more fruit, vegetables and whole-wheat bread. Don't eat too much.

### **12) Smoking**

Some people find that smoking helps them to relax. However, smoking is obviously very harmful. It also floods the body with nicotine. This stimulates the body and may increase feelings of stress. Try to stop. Ask your GP for help.

### **13) Situations out of your control**

There are things in life that you can't change - maybe you are out of work, maybe a loved one is ill. If you accept that there are things you can't change, this may help you deal positively with the stress that remains.

#### **14) Build relaxation into your life**

No matter how busy you are, put aside some time each day just for you. Go out for a walk, phone a friend, do the garden, read a book, watch TV, listen to music.

#### **15) Prioritise**

If you do have a busy life, you must set up your priorities. Decide what has to be done and decide what can wait. Put these priorities in some order.

Number 1 has to be done first thing, number 2 by 12 o'clock.....number 10 has to be done by the end of the week. Keep revising your list.

#### **16) Do the worst thing first**

If you have a list of things to do, do the one you least want to do first. You can get it out of the way and the rest of the tasks will be easier to cope with. If you keep putting it off it will prey on your mind and may seem a lot worse than it really is. Tie this in with your priority list.

#### **17) Don't try to be superman or wonderwoman**

Do you try to do it all? Succeed at everything? Be the best? Why? Bear in mind that the house or your job will still be there long after you are gone. Stick to your good points and learn to live with your faults. Accept that you are not perfect. None of us are.

#### **18) Confide in others**

If there are people around whom you can trust, let them know how you feel. They may be able to see ways out of problems that you have not thought about. In any case, getting things off your chest can help. It may also help reduce the feelings of being alone that are so common in stress.

#### **19) Other people's shoes**

Imagine you have a problem. Imagine how you would react if a friend came to you with that same problem. What advice would you give them? Would that advice work for you?

#### **20) Keep up a routine**

Regular routines are a great way to manage stress. Try to go to bed and get up at a regular time. Include regular exercise, relaxation, hobbies and socialising in your routine.

This handout is available in large print on request. If you would like a copy, please call 0191 229 2941

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## Problem solving sheet 1

**Step 1: What is the problem?**

**Step 2: What do you think will happen?**

**Step 3: Brainstorm / come up with ideas**

**Step 4: Choose the best option**

**Step 5: Work out a plan**

**Step 6: Put it into action**

**Step 7: Review**

## Problem solving sheet 2

**Step 1: What is the problem?**

**Step 2: What do you think will happen?**

**Step 3: Brainstorm / come up with ideas**

**Step 4: Choose the best option**

**Step 5: Work out a plan**

**Step 6: Put it into action**

**Step 7: Review**

## Reducing safety behaviours sheet 1

**Step 1: What are your safety behaviours? What 'props' do you use?**

**Step 2: Decide how much they help or hinder you**

**Step 3: Predict what would happen if you got rid of the safety behaviour**

**Step 4: Work out a plan**

**Step 5: Review?**

## Reducing safety behaviours sheet 2

**Step 1: What are your safety behaviours? What 'props' do you use?**

**Step 2: Decide how much they help or hinder you**

**Step 3: Predict what would happen if you got rid of the safety behaviour**

**Step 4: Work out a plan**

**Step 5: Review?**