STRESS AND PRESSURE:



Knowing the Difference

From Reacting to Responding

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Stress and Pressure: From Reacting to Responding

Using this Workbook

Pressure is part of life.
In the professional workplace, many pressure points are predictable: deadlines, funding decisions, interview dates, reports, the next paper.

Stress is different. Stress is what happens when pressure outstrips your sense of being able to cope.

This lesson shows you what's driving that reaction and gives you a tool for deciding what to do once you've noticed it.

These are my reflections

.....

on ___ /___ /_____

What Is Stress?

The Health and Safety Executive defines stress:

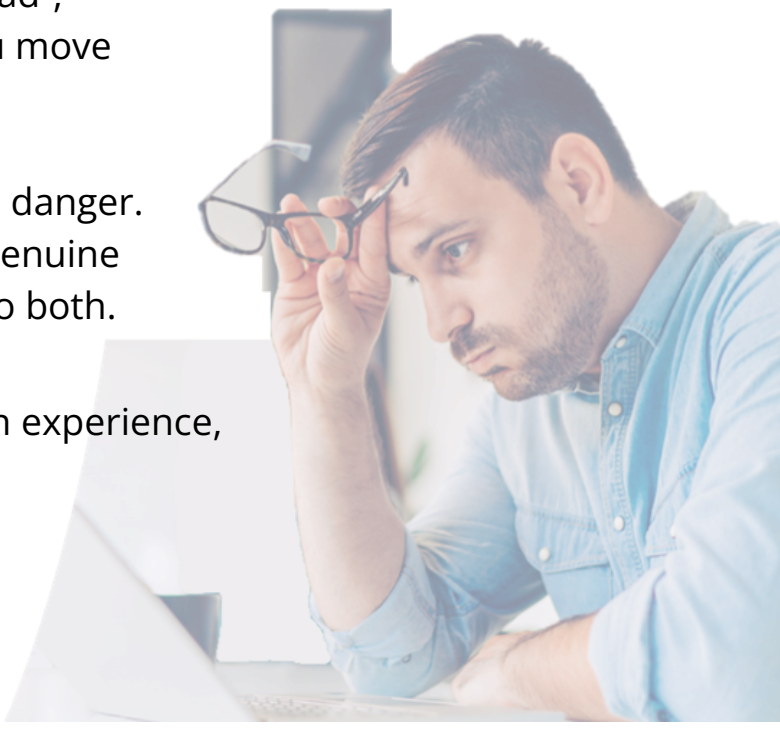
> Stress is the reaction people have to excessive pressure or other demands placed on them.
> It arises when they worry they cannot cope.

Stress is not rare. In the UK, stress, depression and anxiety account for around half of all work-related ill-health cases, and the rates have been rising for years. In surveys, a majority of academics report needing to work very intensively, often or always.

Many researchers work well beyond contracted hours, unsettled by insecurity, role creep and role ambiguity as much as by workload itself.

Underneath that stress reaction is straightforward biology.

When our brain perceives a potential threat, stress hormones circulate through our bloodstream. Stress isn't "just in your head", it's felt in every cell of your body and you move toward fight, flight or freeze.



This evolved to move you out of physical danger. Your body doesn't always distinguish a genuine threat from a difficult email — it reacts to both.

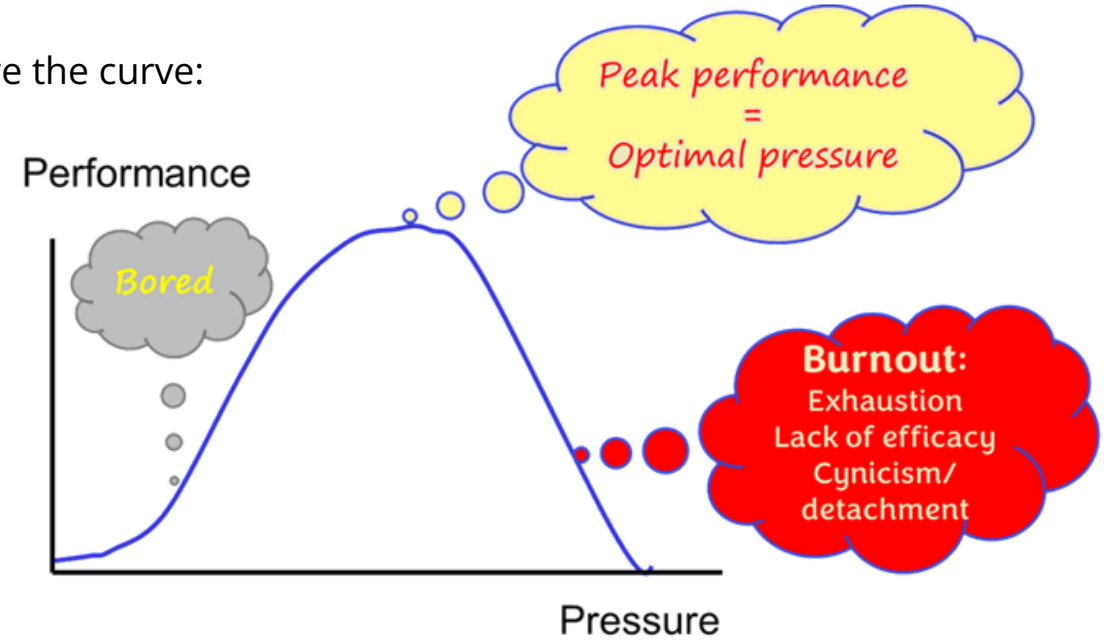
If you recognise some of this in your own experience, you are not the exception.
You are part of the pattern.

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Stress and Pressure: the performance curve

Picture the curve:



Performance rises as pressure increases, up to a point.

- Too little pressure and you're bored, under-stretched, coasting.
- Too much and you tip into burnout: exhaustion, a sense of reduced efficacy and a creeping cynicism or detachment from the work.

Peak performance sits at the point of optimal pressure — it's not the absence of pressure, but the right amount of it.

Of course, that "sweet spot" will be different for different people and will change when other circumstances in our life change, Do you tend to enjoy external pressure, the rush of working to a deadline - or not?

- What pressures are you experiencing?
- When do they slip over to becoming stressors?
- Can you recognise the point where you move past your own peak?

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The Gap Between React and Respond

Our stress response is a very natural way of trying to stay alive.



In our 21st century lives,
the threats we encounter rarely involve physical danger.

They involve traffic, emails, deadlines, workload, the news, our finances.

The alarm goes off automatically.
What you do next doesn't have to be an automatic reaction.

Fortunately, we do have some capacity to recognise the difference between a real threat and something that only feels threatening but won't actually harm us.

That recognition is a skill, and skills can be learned.
There is a gap, however brief, between the automatic reaction and your next move, and that gap is where choice lives.

Your body reacts. You get to respond.

Noticing the gap starts with recognising your own signs that the reaction has already started: a tightening in the body, tension in your muscles, a spike of irritability, the urge to avoid your inbox altogether.

These aren't weaknesses. They're your signal that this is the moment to choose a response rather than let the reaction run.

What's one sign that reliably tells you you've moved from calm into a stress-induced reaction?

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Your response: Choose, Influence, Accept

Once you've noticed the gap, this is what you do with it.
Not every source of pressure deserves the same response.

Depending on the situation, evaluate your options:

- Choose — decide or change what's genuinely yours to decide.
- Influence — shape what you can, even without the final say.
- Accept — adapt to what you need to, at least for now.

What can you choose?
Sometimes making a decision, even a difficult or unpopular one, actually eases the stress and allows you to move forward.

Choosing doesn't mean you control the outcome.
You decide your next move, rather than reacting or doing nothing.
Fixating on what you can't change actively increases stress.

Before you can make a decision, you may need one more thing: more information about the situation, or more confidence to act on what you already know.

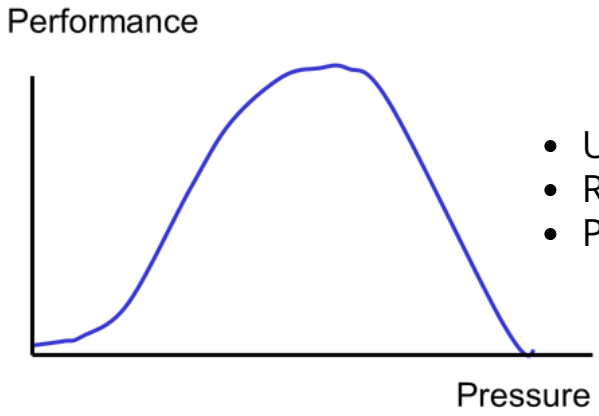
What can you influence?
Sometimes the decision isn't yours to make but can you negotiate timelines, resource investment or availability, can you re-negotiate the scope of a project. You might think it's not worth it but genuinely, you don't know until you ask.

What do you need to accept?
When there are no options, sometimes we need to accept an outcome and learn to move on. Fixating on the unfairness or what you can't control doesn't just fail to help, it actively increases stress.

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Where Are You Right Now?

Thinking about the performance curve from earlier,
and honestly, without judging the answer:



- Underloaded and coasting
- Right in your zone
- Past your peak and heading toward burnout

Which one is closest to where you are today?

Reflections

Pick one current source of pressure. Something real, not hypothetical.
Assess your options in this situation:

Choose — what can I decide or change outright?
Influence — what can I shape, even partially?
Accept — what do I need to let go of, for now?

What's one action you're actually willing to try this week?

What's the smallest version of it you could realistically do?

An honest read of where you stand before you get hijacked by stress is an important win. *Then* you can decide what to do about it.

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WANT MORE?



Knowing yourself, your pressures, stressors and how your body reacts is the first step.

Understanding the difference between stress and pressure, recognising your own early warning signs, is the foundational skill for managing pressure effectively.

Noticing the gap between react and respond is a skill that gets faster and easier with practice, not through willpower alone.

The rest of this module builds on this.

I hope this content has been useful.

If you know you need more, do reach out to me. I'd love to hear from you.

You can always explore the other resources on my website.

MargaretCollins.com/

Resources

Let me know how you get on!

Margaret

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