

Tense and relax

All of us transit life with varying degrees of stress—some on the short run and some seeming almost permanent. It's impossible to avoid. Innumerable stressors from a wide range of sources, internal or external, demand our attention in varying ways. Stress is a person's response to actual or imagined threatening conditions.

Some of these stressors could be considered environmental, like problems at work, some are social, like problems at home, some are psychosocial, like loss of identity or declining employability due to job loss, some are personal, like shyness—a complicated collection of thoughts, anxieties and behavior described by Philip Zimbardo as “all the forces within each of us as well as the pressures from society that combine to isolate us from one another.”



Stress seems to require us to make some kind of adjustment to our behavior. If you perceive (i.e. give meaning to) danger, you're going to engage your flight or fight response automatically. If you're frustrated, seemingly unable to achieve a desired goal, you're probably going to turn on your anger and attack the barrier, thus, increasing the problem.

If you're filled with anxiety, you are manufacturing stress. Anxiety, a generalized, non-specific fear, often relates to feelings of an impending, but unidentified threat.

Researchers have identified two different types of stress: eustress, a pleasant, even motivational stress, and distress, an unpleasant stress that is destructive to health. Some personality types are prone to have stress, and some thrive on it.

Burnout occurs when levels of stress combine with exhaustion to “deplete physical and mental resources characterized by a loss of motivation, enthusiasm, energy and interest along with a significantly lower level of performance.

Being a Salvation Army officer is fraught with burnout potential. The officer has so many different roles, some even conflict with others. Everyone seems to want your full attention and you require yourself to be perfect in all circumstances. Your week is full of demands, and if you don't meet them

you feel tremendous guilt. Stress has a lot to do with perception of role failure, role ambiguity, conflicting roles, and little direct feedback. The complexity of the job of Salvation Army corps officer leads to quantitative overload.

So how does one handle this silent enemy?

Start with stress inoculation. Develop certain knowledge and skills that allow you to cope with stress as effectively as possible.

First, recognize the source of the stress. Does it start in you or is it external to you?

Next, tell your body to relax. Don't laugh. If you know how, you'll relax your body easily, probably because you've practiced it.

Here's how.

Learn the Jacobson method of progressive relaxation. Look it up. It has to do with learning the difference between how a muscle feels when it's tense and when it's relaxed. You start with deep breathing—three big ones let out slowly. Tense a single muscle, say your fist, for 3-5 seconds; then relax for 10-15 seconds. When you relax, you'll feel the blood coursing back into that area. Repeat the same tense and relax method. Work your way through every muscle in the body from your toes to your scalp, including the shoulders, arms and hands, the jaw and mouth, and the forehead, especially.

When you have mastered that much, you identify the four major areas of the body: (1) legs and feet; (2) back, shoulders and buttocks; (3) arms and hands; (4) face and head. Go through each separate muscle of each sub-section while learning to recognize tension daily for at least a week.

Soon you will be able to relax whatever muscle holds the tension.

Identify your thought patterns that lead to stressful responses, and when they appear, breathe deep. Assertion is good. Aggression is not. Know the difference. Practice the strategies that work for you.