



OVERCOMING YOUR **WORKPLACE** **STRESS**

A CBT-based Self-help Guide

MARTIN R. BAMBER



Overcoming Your Workplace Stress

Occupational stress affects millions of people every year and is not only costly to the individual – in terms of their mental and physical health – but also results in major costs for organizations due to workplace absence and loss of productivity. This cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) based self-help guide will equip the user with the necessary tools and techniques to manage work related stress more effectively.

Divided into three parts, this book will help you to:

- understand occupational stress
- learn about a range of methods to reduce stress levels
- develop your own self-help plan.

Overcoming Your Workplace Stress is written in a straightforward, easy-to-follow style, allowing the reader to develop the necessary skills to become their own therapist.

Martin R. Bamber is a consultant clinical psychologist, Professional Head of Psychological Therapies for North Yorkshire and York NHS Primary Care Trust and Director of MRB Clinical Psychology Services Ltd, a private practice based in York, UK. He is also author of *CBT for Occupational Stress in Health Professionals* (Routledge).

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This book is dedicated to my sister Jackie, who tragically lost a four year battle against cancer on 13 September 2010. You were a wonderful sister, Jackie, and you are missed so much by us all. May you rest in peace. It is also dedicated to my mother Barbara and her partner Gordon, who devoted much of their time to caring for Jackie during her illness.

Also to my brother Paul and my other sister Shirley, who have always shown their love and support for me over the years, and good old 'Uncle Peter', who has been an admirable role model for me throughout my formative years and provided the illustrations in [Chapter 6](#) of this book.

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Preface

Over recent years we have all become exposed to the chill winds of a global economy. As the global banking crisis and the recent credit crunch have shown us, economies around the world are interdependent upon one another more than ever before. When one collapses, others tend to follow. Yet at the same time they are in competition with one another for their market share and are being faced with the constant drive to reduce inefficiencies and become more competitive in the marketplace. As well as the economic pressures, work organizations all around the world are being subjected to other pressures resulting from a sharp escalation of change, rapid technological advancement and the need to meet ever increasing customer expectations of cheap and high quality products. In order to survive in such a harsh and competitive economic environment, there has inevitably been an unrelenting pressure on employees to produce 'more for less'. One of the main consequences of this unrelenting pressure for individual employees is 'occupational stress'.

It is well documented that occupational stress has become a problem of pandemic proportions, costing world economies many billions of pounds each year through lost production due to sickness absence, retirement through ill health, litigation and poor work performance, and it is on the increase. It is estimated that staff account for between 50 and 80 per cent of organizational costs and if it is not addressed, occupational stress can have a devastating negative impact on profits. There are of course those cynics who argue that the solution to this problem is simple and that if you do not like your job or you are finding it too stressful, you should simply find alternative employment. After all, no job is worth suffering ill health for. However, for many employees, it is not that straightforward and there may be numerous reasons why they cannot just leave. For example, they may have invested many years' training to do the job, or may not be trained to do any other kind of work. They may be a victim of what is

known as the ‘golden handcuffs’ dilemma, where the individual may hate the job but be trapped by it because they are unable to afford a drop in salary. Alternatively, in an employment market where jobs are scarce, or where unemployment is high, there may not be any suitable alternative employment to go to. The individual may also be tied to a particular geographical area through personal and family commitments and be unable to move around the country to find work. Thus, for many people, leaving the job is considered to be the last resort when all else has failed.

There is a growing acknowledgement among many employers that addressing occupational stress makes sense not only for humanitarian reasons but also on sound economic grounds. Despite this, access to workplace occupational health services and employee assistance programmes for many employees suffering from work related stress is patchy and inadequate, or non-existent. The harsh reality is that many employees are either left to fend for themselves or placed on unacceptably long waiting lists to receive help. The need to learn ‘self-help’ strategies for managing work related stress has never been more important than at the present time.

While many generic texts have been published over the years on ‘managing stress’, there have been relatively few specifically relating to ‘managing occupational stress’. Unfortunately, of the literature that has focused on managing stress at work, much of it has consisted of rather simplistic explanations and overly standardized treatment interventions, which have largely ignored the conceptualization of stress as an interaction between the individual and their environment. They fail to acknowledge employees as complex human beings with emotions and motivations, who bring with them to the workplace their own history, past experiences, beliefs and attitudes, and idiosyncratic ways of coping and behaving. All of these personal factors interact with the work environment and play a crucial part in the development of occupational stress. Interventions aimed at tackling occupational stress need to be able to address this.

Another criticism of much of the self-help literature on this topic is that it tends to be written in a rather chatty or superficial style, which could be easily construed as a little patronizing to those who are suffering from occupational stress. Books are often written by life coaches who seem to promote the ideal that you can ‘become whoever you want to be’ and the ‘sky is the limit’. This can be quite demotivating for someone suffering from stress who simply wants to be able to feel in control enough to manage a day’s work. At the other extreme there are academic textbooks written by professionals for professionals, and there appears to be nothing

currently in the literature that fills the middle ground. That is, a more serious, evidence-based self-help manual for clients but which is not an academic textbook. Also while some books can be found which deal with specific aspects of managing stress in the workplace (e.g., time management or assertiveness at work), there does not appear to be any text which provides an overall approach to occupational stress management. This book aims to fill these gaps in the literature by providing a comprehensive coverage of a range of interventions to manage occupational stress based upon the clinically proven evidence-based techniques of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Finally, this book is intended to be more than just a text that people read. It is intended to encourage individuals to take an analytical problem solving approach to the work stress they are experiencing and offers practical steps to tackle it. It is a self-help manual providing step-by-step advice, suggestions, case examples and practical tools and techniques for managing stress in the workplace. It is intended to help you not only to understand the causes and consequences of occupational stress but also to develop a detailed and comprehensive self-help programme. As far as I am aware, there are currently no other up-to-date comprehensive self-help texts available on this topic, which incorporate such a systematic and evidence-based approach to this problem.

This book is aimed at individuals who do not have a sophisticated knowledge or understanding of the subject of psychology. It is written in a simple and easy to read, user friendly and jargon free style, which is readily understandable to the interested lay person. It is deliberately free of the clutter of references throughout the text, as would typically be found in an academic text. The book will also be of interest to those who treat clients suffering from occupational stress, such as counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists working in both mainstream mental health services and occupational health services. It could also be of use to those who care for people suffering from occupational stress, such as family and friends and those who have to manage its consequences in the workplace such as personnel managers and human resources workers.

The book is presented in three parts. Part I ([Chapters 1 and 2](#)) aims to promote your understanding of the concept of stress and outlines the main individual and environmental causes of stress. The consequences of occupational stress for the individual, the organization and the nation are also presented. Stress is conceptualized as being the result of an interaction between the individual and their environment. The central importance of the appraisal or meaning of an event or situation to the individual in the causation of stress is emphasized and an overview of

the emotional and physiological changes triggered in the stress reaction is also presented.

Researchers in the field of occupational stress have developed a taxonomy of interventions. Three levels of interventions for managing work related stress more effectively have been identified, known as primary, secondary and tertiary level interventions. Primary level interventions aim to change the sources of stress in the work environment itself. It is acknowledged, however, that sometimes it is not possible to change the work environment either because it is uneconomical for the employer to do this, or because there are aspects of the job itself that are inherently stressful. Where this is the case and the sources of stress cannot be readily removed, secondary level interventions are considered to be more appropriate. Secondary level interventions aim to teach the employee a range of coping skills or strategies to help buffer them against an inherently stressful environment and to assist them to develop the confidence to look after themselves more effectively in situations that would in actual fact be stressful to anyone. Tertiary level interventions are aimed at more severe levels of clinical distress which are impacting on the individual's capacity to be productive in the work setting, or even to remain at work, and where secondary level interventions are assessed as being unlikely to be effective on their own. These involve more formal psychological therapy to assist the individual to return to their previous normal levels of productivity.

Part II of this book ([Chapters 3 to 10](#)) outlines a range of primary, secondary and tertiary level interventions for tackling occupational stress. In [Chapter 3](#) a number of primary level interventions aimed at providing a healthy working environment are introduced. In [Chapters 4 to 9](#) a range of secondary level interventions are presented. These include developing a healthy lifestyle, effective time management, assertiveness, interpersonal skills, relaxation training and cognitive coping skills aimed at changing the way that an individual relates to their environment. In [Chapter 10](#) a number of tertiary level interventions aimed at helping the individual overcome the symptoms associated with stress syndromes are discussed.

In Part III of this book, the tools and techniques required to 'become your own therapist' are outlined in [Chapter 11](#), and a step-by-step guide to enable you to develop your own self-help plan to overcome occupational stress is also provided. Finally, [Chapter 12](#) is a summary of the main learning points from the book and outlines the main conclusions reached. Information on self-help resources and further reading on specific problem areas is provided in the Appendix.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who has either indirectly or directly made a contribution to the writing of this book. This includes work colleagues past and present with whom I have shared my ideas, and also my patients, who have been the source of much of the clinical material contained in this book. I would also like to thank the publishers for giving me the opportunity to write this book and in particular the editorial team for their support and guidance through to its completion.

Understanding occupational stress

Occupational stress and its consequences

In order that people may be happy in their work, these three things are needed: They must be fit for it. They must not do too much of it. And they must have a sense of success in it.

(John Ruskin 1819–1900)

Normal stress

When reading the literature about stress it would be easy to conclude that it has universally negative consequences and that it is something that needs to be eradicated from all areas of our lives. However, it is important to emphasize from the outset of this book that not all stress is bad for us. A certain degree of stress is a natural, normal and unavoidable part of everyday life. For example, most of us can relate to the stress we have experienced when we have been about to take an exam, do our driving test, or give a presentation to managers or colleagues at work. This is known as positive stress, because it motivates us to do well and can actually enhance our performance on the task in hand. With positive stress the individual is motivated to meet the challenge and ultimately experiences a sense of achievement at having successfully mastered it (as acknowledged in the quote by John Ruskin above). This normal type of stress does not have any lasting consequences and if successfully managed, it can result in an increased sense of competence, fulfilment and wellbeing. There is an evolutionary explanation for this kind of stress in that our ancestors' reactions to perceived threats and dangers had survival value. For example, in primitive society, hunter-gatherers would on occasions risk their lives in the hunt for food or to defend their community. In doing so, they would experience dangers which would have triggered the body's stress response. This in turn would have

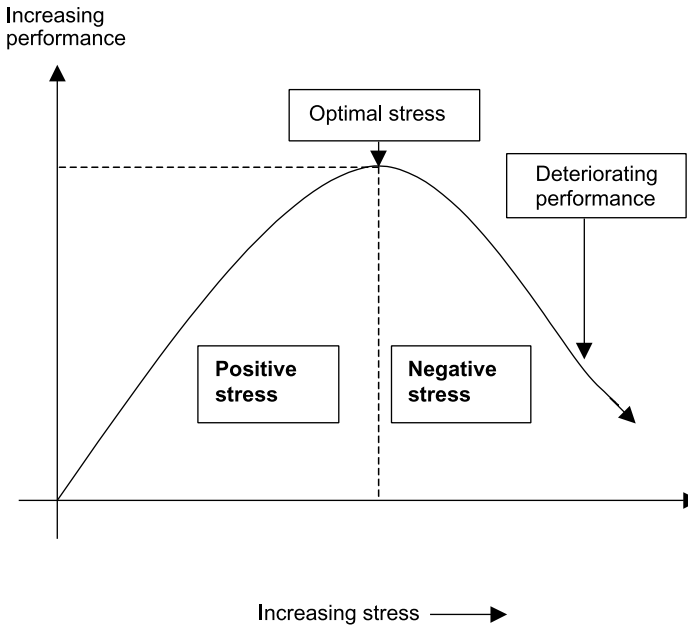


Figure 1.1 The stress–performance curve

prepared the individual for action, either to fight or to escape the threat. In modern societies and cultures, however, the stressors experienced are not usually life threatening in the way that they were for our ancestors, but they still trigger the stress response. The relationship between stress and performance is illustrated in [Figure 1.1](#).

It can be seen on the left hand side of the graph in [Figure 1.1](#) that low to moderate levels of stress actually serve to enhance performance until the optimal level is reached. However, once the level of stress exceeds the optimal level, there is a rather rapid and steep decline in performance and it is this that is described as negative stress.

The ‘fight or flight’ response

While it is not necessary for the purposes of this book to know the detailed anatomy of the brain, it is useful to know a little bit about the biological and chemical basis of what is known as the ‘fight or flight’ response to stress. Of particular relevance to discussion of the fight or flight response is the autonomic nervous system. This extends from the brain to most of

the important organs of the body and consists of two parts, called the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Also within the brain is a structure called the hypothalamus, which has two distinct segments that are linked to the autonomic nervous system (see [Figure 1.2](#)). One segment is concerned with bodily arousal and is linked to the sympathetic part and the other segment is concerned with the reduction of bodily arousal and is linked to the parasympathetic part of the autonomic nervous system. The hypothalamus thus forms the starting point of the two sections of the autonomic nervous system. The physical consequences of the activation of the two respective parts of the autonomic nervous system on the organs of the body are shown in [Figure 1.2](#).

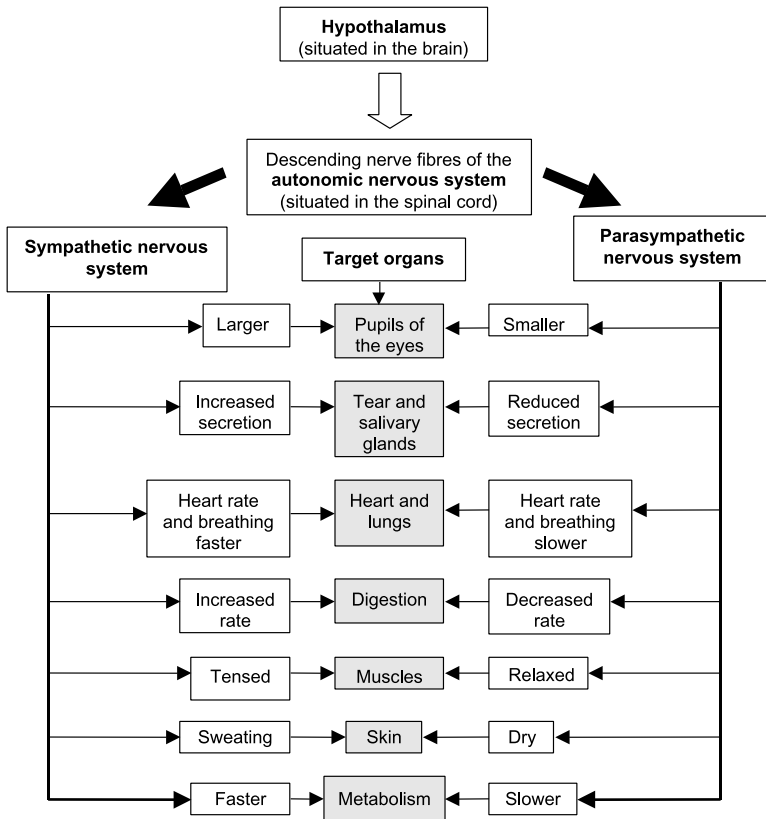


Figure 1.2 Diagrammatic representation of the structure and function of the autonomic nervous system

The pituitary gland is a structure linked to the hypothalamus by a small stalk and connected to it by both nerves and blood vessels. It is the ‘master gland’ of the body and produces a number of hormones which control the activity of other glands elsewhere in the body. The most important of these glands in relation to stress are the adrenal glands, which are situated in the kidneys and assist the body to cope with stress by producing hormones. When the brain interprets a situation as being stressful, it triggers the pituitary gland to produce chemical messengers which instruct the kidneys to release stress hormones called epinephrine and norepinephrine into the bloodstream. These stress hormones are pumped around the body and result in the fight–flight response.

Harmful stress

Under conditions of successful coping, the parasympathetic nervous system is suppressed. However, if the individual is not successful in overcoming the threat and the stress reaction continues without successful resolution for a prolonged period of time, the individual moves into a chronic phase. Examples of such chronic stressors include things like being stuck in a bad marriage, living in noisy or overcrowded conditions, and career or work related problems. In the chronic phase the parasympathetic nervous system becomes overactivated, bodily systems are inhibited and there is decreased physiological arousal, as shown in [Figure 1.2](#). This is achieved through the release by the kidneys of a different stress hormone called cortisol (which is also associated with depression). If the stress continues, the individual eventually becomes physically exhausted and ultimately can become depressed.

The model of stress described here is thus a two stage one characterized by acute and chronic phases. If the individual experiences high levels of stress (acute stress) for a short period of time, it is unlikely to do any lasting harm, but if it continues over a prolonged period of time (chronic stress), it not only has detrimental effects on their performance but also can have harmful longer-term physical and mental consequences. Some of the harmful physical and mental consequences of chronic, long-term, unmitigated stress for both the individual and the organization are reported below.

The consequences of harmful stress on the individual

Prolonged moderate levels of stress can lead to physical ailments such as headaches, backache, poor sleep, increased heart rate, raised blood

pressure, dry mouth and throat, and indigestion. The individual may also experience a range of physical symptoms associated with anxiety, such as muscular pains, tremors, palpitations, diarrhoea, sweating, respiratory distress and feelings of dizziness. On an emotional level it can lead to feelings of anger and irritability, low mood and depression. Socially the individual may experience increased levels of marital and family conflicts, reflecting the stresses of the work situation that they take home with them. People under stress also tend to withdraw from supportive relationships; in the longer term this can lead to marital breakdown and social isolation. Mentally the individual may experience difficulties concentrating and remembering things, or may be prone to more negative thinking leading to increased feelings of self-blame and reduced feelings of self-confidence. Behavioural consequences of stress can include increased alcohol intake, increased smoking and drug use, overeating or loss of appetite, and less of an interest in sex. In the work context the individual may experience increased arguments and interpersonal conflicts, be less productive and more prone to accidents.

Prolonged high levels of unmitigated stress can lead to more serious physical health problems developing. For example, it has been found that digestive disorders and diabetes often follow prolonged high levels of stress. High and prolonged levels of stress can also compromise the effectiveness of the body's immune defences, making the immune system less effective. This allows diseases and infections which would normally be fought off by the immune system to take hold. Links have also been found between stress and coronary heart disease.

The consequences of harmful stress for the organization

'Occupational stress' is the term used to describe the stress experienced as a result of the job that one does. It is the common cold of the psychological world and has become a problem of pandemic proportions, affecting millions of people in every country across the world. This is due to the ever increasing pressures being placed on workplace organizations to adapt and change in order to become more efficient in the context of a highly competitive global economy. It is estimated that up to 40 per cent of all sickness absence from work is due to stress related symptoms, and this is costing employers and health insurance companies billions of pounds each year in lost productivity and health insurance claims. But the costs of occupational stress to employers are much broader than just those incurred through sickness absence. They include increased staff turnover, recruitment problems, low staff morale, decreased productivity, poor timekeeping,