



How to beat stress

Autogenic Therapy - Helping you to help yourself

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Me And My Stress

How many of you remember the much loved Sergeant Phil Esterhaus from the 80s cult US cop show Hill Street Blues and his daily warning at roll call, "Let's be careful out there"?

Looking at the latest figures his catch phrase is even more appropriate for everybody today as we face an even more insidious enemy than the criminals around the Hill Street precinct – namely stress.



Over two-thirds of patients treated by doctors in the UK are suffering from stress-related symptoms, which can include:

- Anxiety / panic attacks
- Sleep problems
- Fatigue / low energy
- Poor concentration
- Migraine / headaches
- Irritable bowel syndrome

Most people feel stress every day and in small doses it can help you cope with life's daily problems in a positive way.

When stress builds up, becomes unrelenting or even overwhelming it can start to affect your physical and emotional health and well-being, and this is when action needs to be taken.

Work-induced stress is a significant problem in the UK, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimates that in 2009 and 2010 9.8 million working days were lost through work-related stress.

For each person experiencing work-related stress, an estimated 22.6 days of work was lost – that is equal to 0.42 days per worker.

Mind, the mental health charity, reports that stress in the workplace is thought to be the second biggest occupational health problem in the UK after back pain.

Stress, depression or anxiety-related sick days are three times more likely to be taken by women than men. Analysis by Legal & General shows that women made 74% of stress-related absences. Maybe this is because women feel more able to accept that they might have a problem whilst men might try to soldier on?

In a recent survey 77% of small business owners reported suffering ailments in the workplace, including a lack of energy (31%), anxious thoughts (31%), headaches (26%) and back pain (26%).

A combination of long hours and working harder to service new businesses could be what has driven 45% of small business owners to say they feel more stressed now than they did a year ago.



Last year, close to 7 million prescriptions were issued by the NHS for anti-anxiety drugs. As economic woes have worsened, and job and mortgage worries become rife, the numbers being treated in hospital for such disorders have soared – with more than 17,000 outpatients' appointments last year, four times as many as in 2007.

Stress can affect anybody at any time – workers, carers, parents the unemployed and children alike as we struggle to cope with the seemingly overwhelming problems that life throws up everyday.

So how did stress affect me?

For many years I had run my own successful marketing and sponsorship consultancy and had thrived on and taken great satisfaction from the relentless pressure of gaining and keeping clients, doing good work on their behalf and keeping my head above water.

Suddenly, a few short years ago everything changed and I started to develop an ever-increasing range of worrying symptoms:

I couldn't sleep well and kept waking up in the middle of the night turning problems around in my head. I became grumpy, snappy and much quicker to lose my temper with those around me and, far more worryingly, I stopped looking forward to going to work and started looking for excuses not to do so.

I wasn't sure what to do and tried to get through what I felt was just a difficult phase but the more I worried, the worse I felt and it became a vicious circle.

Clearly I needed to get some help but it took me a few weeks to get my head around things and accept the fact as I felt that this was my own problem and that I could sort it out on my own.

I didn't tell anyone until I woke up early one morning and had a full-blown panic attack, which terrified me as I thought I was having a heart attack – the cat was well and truly out of the bag!

My wife was wonderfully supportive and I felt a massive relief that I had finally shared my problem with somebody.

I knew that I needed to do something and started to read up about stress in the workplace and found out how common it was.

Accepting that I had a problem with stress and its unpleasant associated medical side effects was the easy part.

Knowing what to do about it was far more difficult and I thrashed around for several weeks in a state of confusion without any real understanding of how best to combat my problem.

Without diminishing how bad I felt, I understood that I was really a member of the "worried well" brigade rather than someone with deep-set psychological or mental health issues.

All I succeeded in doing was making myself feel worse but eventually a friend of my wife told me that she had suffered in a similar way to me and had greatly benefited from a course of **Autogenic Therapy (AT)** and she recommended her therapist to me.

I was totally bemused as I had never heard of AT and didn't have a clue what it was or what it entailed.

Once I had done a bit of due diligence, in other words, Googled the words "Autogenic Therapy" and then had a good look at the **British Autogenic Society** website, I thought that I might as well give it a try, particularly as my wife offered to pay for the course – obviously she was desperate that I tried to sort myself out given how difficult and unbearable I was becoming to live with!



I really had no idea what to expect from Autogenic Therapy and the entire AT experience and was surprised when, before we started, I was sent a very detailed form to fill in by the therapist that asked for a lot of detail regarding my life, childhood, operations, illnesses, family situation and my current issues.

It took me a while to fill it in properly and also gave me quite a bit of food for thought about my life and how I lived it.

When we met to go through the form the therapist explained that filling in the form was the first part of the self-examination process and that it was also important for him to know about my medical history in case I was contra-indicated for AT.

Thankfully I passed the test and was accepted!

It was explained that we would meet for nine weekly sessions each lasting about an hour and I would be asked to practice the AT mental Exercises that I learned in the weekly sessions at home, ideally three times per day.

What came through straight away was how calm the atmosphere was and how easy everything felt.

My therapist explained about stress and how it can work in a positive manner and how it can also overwhelm you and that Autogenic Therapy could help switch off the body's "fight and flight" response and turn on the body's "relaxation response".

Could it really be as easy as that?

Well yes it could. Each week I learned a fresh mental exercise that I would practice for about ten minutes every day in a neutral, balanced and symmetrical position – generally flat on my back in bed, or even on the bus, and slowly things started to happen.

I just felt calmer and more serene and my problems didn't seem so insurmountable. I also started to sleep better. I just felt more in control of my life

again.

Interestingly enough, I was also shown how to offload emotions that had got stuck inside me and was able to get rid of lots of repressed feelings of anger and anxiety. This I felt was one of the most beneficial parts of the entire course.

I was given a brief tick-box test before we started which measured my levels of anxiety and depression and I was pleased and relieved to learn that by the end of the course they had significantly diminished.

I didn't really need this confirmation as I already knew that I had got over the hump and was now far better equipped to deal with the stresses of everyday life and was further boosted by the fact that AT had provided me with a toolkit that I continue to use for no more than ten minutes everyday to ensure that I continue to cope.

If any of the above touches a cord or if you want to find out more about the benefits of Autogenic Therapy, how it works and how you can take a course, or even a discounted introductory session, then please read on or visit my website at www.howtobeatstress.co.uk or call me on **07812 057 753**.

What is stress?

Stress affects us all. You may notice symptoms of stress during busy times at work, when managing your finances or when coping with a challenging relationship.



Stress is everywhere. While a little stress is OK and some stress is actually beneficial, too much stress can wear you down and make you sick, both mentally and physically.

The first step to controlling stress is to recognise the symptoms of stress, but this may be harder than you think. Most of us are so used to being stressed, we often don't know we are stressed until we are at our breaking point.

Stress is the body's reaction to harmful situations - whether they're real or perceived. When you feel threatened, a chemical reaction occurs in your body that allows you to act in a way to prevent injury. This reaction is known as "Fight-or-Flight," or the stress response. During the stress response, your heart begins to race, breathing quickens, muscles tighten and blood pressure rises. You are ready to act. It is how you protect yourself.

Well, imagine being in this state of high alert all the time. Whenever we are stressed, that is in essence what the body is doing. It can wreak havoc on our systems and lead to conditions such as high blood pressure, anxiety, tension, irritability, pain and headaches.

Stress means different things to different people. What causes stress in one person may be of little concern to another. Some people are better able to handle

stress than others. And, not all stress is bad. In small doses, stress can help you accomplish tasks and prevent you from getting hurt.

Our bodies are designed to handle small doses of stress, but we are not equipped to handle long-term, chronic stress without ill consequences

What are the symptoms of stress?

Stress can affect all aspects of your life, including your emotions, behaviour, thinking ability and physical health. No part of the body is immune, but, because people handle stress differently, symptoms of stress can vary.



Symptoms can be vague and may be the same as those caused by medical conditions. It is therefore important to discuss them with your doctor. You may experience any of the following symptoms of stress.

Emotional symptoms of stress include:

- Becoming easily agitated, frustrated and moody
- Feeling overwhelmed, like you are losing control or need to take control
- Having difficulty relaxing and quieting your mind
- Feeling bad about yourself (low self-esteem), lonely, worthless and depressed
- Avoiding others

Physical symptoms of stress include:

- Low energy
- Headaches
- Upset stomach, including diarrhoea, constipation and nausea
- Aches, pains, and tense muscles
- Chest pain and rapid heartbeat
- Insomnia
- Frequent colds and infections
- Loss of sexual desire and/or ability
- Nervousness and shaking, ringing in the ear
- Cold or sweaty hands and feet
- Excess sweating
- Dry mouth and difficulty swallowing
- Clenched jaw and grinding teeth

Cognitive symptoms of stress include:

- Constant worrying
- Racing thoughts
- Forgetfulness and disorganisation
- Inability to focus
- Poor judgement
- Being pessimistic or seeing only the negative side

Behavioural symptoms of stress include:

- Changes in appetite - either not eating or eating too much
- Procrastinating and avoiding responsibilities
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs or cigarettes
- Exhibiting more nervous behaviour, such as nail biting, fidgeting and pacing

What are the consequences of long-term stress?

A little stress every now and then is not something to be concerned about. Ongoing, chronic stress, however, can cause or exacerbate many serious health problems, including:

- Mental Health problems, such as depression, anxiety and personality disorders
- Cardiovascular disease, including heart disease and high blood pressure
- Obesity and other eating disorders
- Menstrual problems
- Sexual dysfunction
- Headaches and migraines
- Skin and hair problems, such as acne, psoriasis, eczema
- Gastrointestinal problems, such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Cardiovascular disease, including heart disease, high blood pressure
- Obesity and other eating disorders
- Menstrual problems
- Sexual dysfunction
- Skin and hair problems, such as acne, psoriasis, eczema

Tips for reducing stress

People can learn to manage stress and lead happier, healthier lives. Here are some basic tips to help you keep stress at bay.

- Keep a positive attitude
- Accept that there are events that you cannot control
- Be assertive instead of aggressive
- Learn and practise relaxation techniques
- Exercise regularly. Your body can fight stress better when it is fit
- Eat healthy, well-balanced meals
- Learn to manage your time more effectively
- Set limits appropriately and learn when to say no
- Make time for hobbies and interests
- Get enough rest and sleep
- Don't rely on alcohol, drugs or compulsive behaviour to reduce stress
- Seek out social support
- Spend enough time with those you love
- Write it all down
- One thing at a time
- Ask – don't guess
- Try to keep things in proportion
- Get things ready for the morning before you go to bed
- Take plenty of breaks during the day
- Know where everything should be kept
- Set your watch 15 minutes early

Coping mechanisms

Most people don't have a plan for coping with stress. Fortunately there are techniques such as **Autogenic Therapy** that you can use to help deal with stress.

What is Autogenic Therapy?

Autogenic Therapy (AT) is a short-term, very intense therapeutic process, which retrains the mind-body system to readjust itself from bad unconscious habits.

For example, a trauma of any kind, at any time in someone's life, can provoke the autonomic nervous system's stress response, and if this is constantly repeated because the person's lifestyle interferes with natural healing, then the outcome is imbalance (stress symptoms) or chronic ill-health.

AT is a powerful and proven deep relaxation and stress-reducing technique that empowers **you** to reduce your own stress and anxiety levels easily, quickly and safely.

"Autogenic" means "generated from within" and the technique mobilizes our innate systems for healing and recuperation.

AT consists of a series of simple, easily learned mental exercises akin to meditation, which link mind and body together in association with deep relaxation.

These exercises allow the mind to calm itself by switching off the body's stress responses.

Once learned, AT is a useful life-skill, providing you with a toolbox and the inner resources to maintain healthy balance and deal with stress in body and mind.

Whenever you feel stressed you can release your physical and mental tensions and dip into the exquisite calm of your own oasis of peace.

The stress response is so subtle, that AT's subtlety often gets missed.

No special clothing or equipment is required and the mental exercises can be practiced almost anywhere – at home, in the office, in bed, on the train.

How does AT work?

AT works by helping you achieve a meditative state in which you can learn to control your body's response to suggestion. From there, you can begin to take control of your life back from the ravages of stress.

In a nutshell, the technique works to reverse the stress response in the body.



AT uses the body itself to reduce the stress as by using affirmations spoken out loud, the body can be lulled into a more relaxed state just by suggestion.

The autonomic nervous system which regulates the fight or flight response is affected.

AT helps to create a balance between the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system and switch from a sympathetic-dominated state to a parasympathetic-dominated one.

By practicing simple relaxation and body awareness exercises you learn to switch off your body's "Fight-or-Flight" stress response and switch on its "Relaxation Response".

In essence AT is about simply letting go of striving for results and becoming the passive observer of the inner self.

In this state, the inherent self-regulatory mechanisms of the brain function naturally to allow re-balancing of the activities of the right and left-brain hemispheres.

This, in turn, supports the workings of the immune system, promotes healing processes and can bring about greater emotional balance and release of creativity.

The practice of these core exercises leads to a state of altered consciousness, the **Autogenic State** (which is not identical to hypnosis, self-hypnosis or sleep).

This deep relaxation accesses information from deeper levels to allow all kinds of brain-directed, self-regulatory processes of a normalising nature to spontaneously take place – promoting and supporting healthier mental and physical balance.

When practising AT you follow three basic principles:

1. Establishing mental contact with your body
2. Achieving a state of Passive Awareness and Acceptance
3. Repeating a sequence of six verbal formulae which help bring about relaxing feelings of:
 - a. Heaviness and warmth in the limbs
 - b. Calm and regular heartbeat
 - c. Self-regulation of breathing
 - d. Soothing abdominal warmth
 - e. Inducing a state of mental calm and a clear head

What are the benefits of AT?

- Looking at and dealing with negative and destructive emotions through Offloading
- Developing a more positive outlook on life
- Developing our abilities to become more attuned to ourselves and others
- Reduced anxiety
- Increased ability to relax
- Improved sleep
- Improved self-confidence

- A calm centre within yourself
- Better health and emotional balance
- Resilience in coping with stressful situations
- A sense of being in charge of your life
- Increased energy

How is it taught?

Following an initial personal assessment AT is taught individually or in small groups usually over 8-10 weeks.

During this time a series of mental exercises are practiced for a few minutes three times a day and a brief daily record of experiences is kept for progress to be monitored by the therapist.

Here are four exercises that could well help you combat your stress

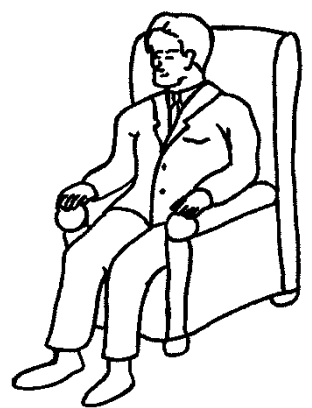
1. Introductory Exercise

This is a very short exercise which allows you to observe yourself from within. You will be searching for the part of yourself that observes and accepts things without judgement, preference or criticism.

- Sit exactly as you are (e.g. legs crossed, arms on table or whatever).
- Now close your eyes.
- Be aware of the sounds around you - notice them and let them be.
- Be aware of your body - which parts touch other parts; do you feel any tension? Do you feel aches and pains, muscular tension or your tummy rumbling?
- Now think about your breathing and follow what it does naturally: without effort or thought. Maintain awareness of the rest of your body.
- Can you feel your heart beating or a pulse anywhere?
- Ask yourself: 'How am I feeling? Am I comfortable doing this now? Am I at ease with myself or do I want to stop?'
- Allow any thoughts or feelings to surface, and acknowledge them as they are.
- When you're ready, have a stretch, take a deep breath and open your eyes.

2. Here is another simple and gentle exercise, called a Body Scan, that you can incorporate into your daily schedule or routine, to help calm you down and relax you.

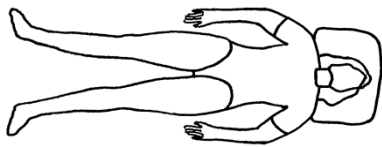
The Body Scan is used as a preparation to be used at the beginning of each session of Autogenic Therapy. Do not spend too long on it. One minute is quite enough. It is simply an acknowledgement that you are comfortable, supported and tension-free in your face and body.



You can do this exercise at any time of the day or night but if you do it just before going to bed there is no need to close at the end - just allow yourself to drift off to a comfortable and relaxing sleep!

Sit down in a comfortable chair with a back that supports your body and allows your feet to rest comfortably on the floor. Allow the body to sit back in the chair with the head resting against the chair-back if high enough. If the chair has comfortable arms of the right height, use them to rest your own arms and hands.

If necessary, allow your head to remain in an upright 'neutral' position, or to be where it wants to be. This may mean the head falls forward. There should not be over extension of the neck, and as little as possible 'holding the head' in neck muscles. A modified version of this posture can be used in planes, buses and trains or as a car passenger.



You can also lie flat on your back, comfortably, with the head supported by a pillow or cushion, and, if necessary, a cushion under the knees. Legs should be straight out, slightly apart, with feet falling outwards and the ankles not touching one another. The head should be straight on the pillow, arms comfortably next to the body, palms down.

Once your position is adopted, and you feel balanced, symmetrical and comfortable, you are ready to start your Body Scan.

Before you do the exercise it might help if you read it to yourself a few times so that you feel comfortable with it. Make sure that you read at a slow and gentle pace and allow some time to elapse between the different parts of the exercise - this will enable you to concentrate fully on the sensations you are experiencing and completely let go.

Begin by sighing and letting go of any tension, and then close your eyes.

Be comfortable. Be accepting. Be unconcerned.

Begin by taking a moment to be aware of your surroundings and listen to the sounds around you, acknowledge them... and let them be.

Now focus your attention inwards and become your own passive observer, witnessing what is going on inside your body.

Take your attention to your toes, your feet and your legs, finding out how they feel now, without judgement or criticism, and the same all the way up your back and front and inside, noticing which areas feel calm and which feel tense, and accepting both states as being entirely all right.

Then along your fingers, hands and arms, across your shoulders and the back of your neck, then round the top of your head.

Loosen the muscles across your forehead, loosen the muscles around your eyes and cheeks, then loosen your jaw and let your tongue lie on the floor of the mouth.

And now let the mind become calm by following the natural rhythm of your breathing and remain passively aware of your body.

When you have finished you must end the exercise in three stages:

1. Clench the fists and flex the arms up sharply
2. Take a deep breath
3. Have a really good stretch and open the eyes

When you stand up please do so carefully and slowly.

How do you feel now? Do you feel any different?

You may like to develop your own brief body scan, using this as a model.

3. Loosening Up Exercise

If you are aware of bodily tension or have difficulty in sleeping this may be due to physical tension. This exercise (please get out of bed to do it!) can help.

Before and after the exercise you may like to stand quietly for a moment, eyes closed, feet apart, and become aware of how your body feels.

With your eyes open, begin moving in a loose, uncoordinated fashion, allowing yourself any gentle movements that you wish (e.g. shaking arms, legs and body).

Find your own way - what suits you. Do a sequence lasting from 10 to 30 seconds. Check again for tension and repeat the sequence a few times until you feel that you have released sufficient bodily tension.

It is possible to do this exercise almost anywhere; you can modify the more strenuous movements to suit your surroundings, by just loosely moving the arms, body and feet.

As you do this exercise, be aware of any bodily tension. Finish by taking a good breath and stretching

4. Anger Offloading Exercise

This is an exercise to off-load feelings of frustration, anger and excess feelings of rage and aggression.

Childhood conditioning (either through lack of permission to express anger, or through exposure to excessive anger) can result in a fear of one's own aggression and anger, and hence also of other peoples'. The result of this conditioning can be the suppression or denial of anger, even to the extent where one no longer feels anger when it is appropriate.

Guilt and anxiety can become associated with any expression of anger. Some people bottle up their rage for long periods and then 'blow up', frightening themselves and others. This reinforces the fear of anger and losing control.

When anger is suppressed it can lead to depression, periods of extreme exhaustion, and feelings of being unwell. The purpose is to remind you that anger is a normal, natural and necessary emotion, when your values, beliefs or boundaries are either under threat or not acknowledged, or have been violated.

With that in mind, give yourself permission to express and experience anger.

Finally the exercise enables you to begin to off-load sufficient of your backlog of unexpressed anger, lessening bitterness and rage towards others, enabling you to begin to enjoy closer and more harmonious relationships.

Preparation

Take time to consider any feelings of anger around yourself, people and events in your life. Suppressed anger can also relate to those whom we have known in the past. It can still be necessary to release feelings relating to them. Identify people both in the present and past, about whom you have angry thoughts.

How to do it:

- 1 Choose a person or event on your list.
- 2 Put your angry thoughts into words. Don't hold back or censor anything.
- 3 Allow yourself to express your anger until you feel sufficiently emptied out.
- 4 The anger must be expressed **out loud**, not by silent thinking. The focus of your anger can shift between topics, quite spontaneously.

Modes of expression

There are a number of modes of expression which seem to be selected by the brain as a way of expressing anger out loud.

a) Repetition

A phrase comes to mind which is repeated over and over. If another phrase emerges it is then repeated in the same way. Learn to be open to whatever thoughts come into your mind.

b) Monologue

You can use a monologue addressed to the person concerned, expressing all the things that you have wanted to, without holding back. Say it over and over again. You could 'sit them down' on an empty chair.

c) Sounds and movement

Other sounds such as grunts, shouts etc may be part of your expression of anger. Movement is often part of the exercise, you may feel like hitting a pillow with a rolled magazine or walking around as you verbalise; or lying on your bed kicking your legs (having a tantrum). Use whatever feels supportive and appropriate to release your aggression and anger.

d) Writing

If it is difficult to find the right setting for out-loud work, try writing down all your angry thoughts e.g. in a letter/story / repetitive words and phrases / scribbles. Forget about punctuation and grammar - let it flow spontaneously. Read it back out loud. **Do not send the letter.** Tear it up or burn it.

All these methods can be used singly or in any combination which allows you to release your feelings. Do not be afraid to experiment: find the best way for you.

Intensity of expression

The intensity of anger expressed can range from fairly mild epithets to murderous rage. Choose whichever feels most appropriate. Go as far as you are able without distress. Do not endeavour to do too much to begin with, become familiar with the exercise and its structure: this will give you confidence.

Duration of session

Do as much as you can until you feel lighter. Allow yourself, from time to time, to observe where you are in your process, and continue as necessary. This exercise may need to be repeated in order for you to reap full benefit. Increased irritability, moodiness and onset of headaches could indicate the need for this.

Ensure Privacy

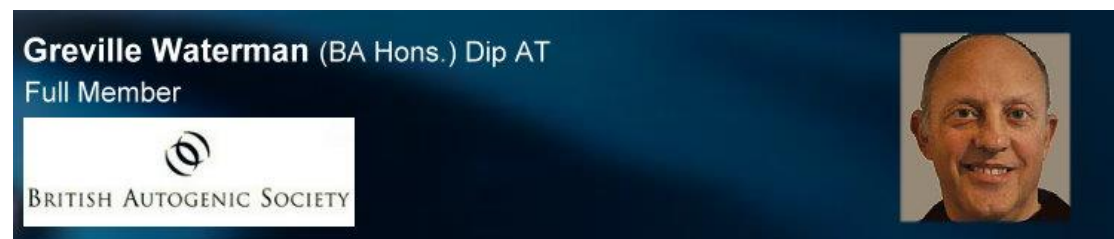
Try muffling it with a pillow, sit in the car in the garage etc. We can often blame a perceived lack of privacy for never giving this really useful exercise a try. **Don't let it stop you!**

If you would like to try **Autogenic Therapy** out for yourself I am offering an initial **Autogenic Therapy Relaxation and Pre-Course Assessment Session** for just **£20** which is a **60%** saving off the normal price of **£50**.



For more information on the special offer and further advice on **How To Beat Stress** – please contact **Greville Waterman** on **07812 057753** or by email at grevillewaterman@gmail.com or visit www.howtobeatstress.co.uk

Autogenic Therapy should only be learned from a therapist who has undergone training and is licensed by the British Autogenic Society (BAS).

For further information please visit www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk



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