

A councillor's workbook on stress management and personal resilience



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You do not need to complete this workbook in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about your own approach and how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent. In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about the issues which might lead to stressful situations and to provide you with suitable methods for recognising and dealing with them.

Some of the content of the workbook may be of most use to more newly elected councillors, but nonetheless if you have been a councillor for some time, the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of some of the key skills, approaches and tactics that will help you when undertaking your role.

Introduction

Increasingly councils are having to make difficult decisions about which services it provides to its communities. Against a background of changing priorities, as well as the search for new and collaborative ways of working for both front line and back office services, these decisions will require difficult choices in many cases. As someone elected to serve your local community these decisions are bound to be divisive and stressful, especially when it comes to explaining these decisions to, and dealing with the impact of those choices on their own communities. Undue stress is not helpful to effective decision-making, performance or leadership.

This workbook is aimed at helping councillors to understand the signs of stress and to develop strategies to deal with it, as well as building up their own personal resilience in the role.

Having completed the workbook, councillors will be better able to:

- recognise stress in themselves and others
- take action to reduce stress and build their personal resilience
- make decisions affecting their communities
- handle difficult situations within their communities
- provide effective leadership.

The Local Government Association has an e-learning module on this topic which can be found at: https://lms.learningnexus.co.uk/ivy_lms/idxlms.htm



Guidance – this is used to indicate research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Case studies – these are ‘pen pictures’ of approaches used by other people or organisations.



Hints and tips – these represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information and support, outside the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches.

What is stress?

Stress is something that affects us all, to varying degrees. It can be an overlooked and gradual build-up of the many pressures we experience in work, at home and in everyday life. But it is not all bad. Feeling stressed on occasions is a healthy natural response.

Prolonged stress, however, is a different matter. Most people are able to cope with the big issues in life and can find them exciting. But for some these issues may be too demanding or – when combined with other day to day pressures – can become overwhelming, resulting in stress.

Stress is a state of mind or an illness. If understood, spotted and dealt with, it does not need to be problematical. But if it is not recognised and becomes either excessive and/or prolonged, it can lead to mental and physical illness.

If you are able to recognise the signs of pressure and stress and deal with these proactively, you will be able to manage stress more effectively by harnessing the energy that comes from feeling stressed and make it work for you in constructive rather than negative ways.



Guidance Stress – a definition

‘The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them.’

Health and Safety Executive

Pressure – what is it?

Pressure comes from an accumulation of demands which can be either physical or psychological:

Physical demands – which take their toll on our bodies, eg playing sports, illness or going on a long-haul flight.

Psychological demands – which can lead to feelings of psychological burden, eg increased workload, redundancy, and general demands on your time.

When the pressures increase beyond our ability to cope, we begin to feel pressurised.

There are a number of effective ways of dealing with pressure proactively to enable you to manage stress more effectively and by harnessing the energy that comes from feeling stressed, to make it work for you in constructive ways.

The difference between pressure and stress

In your various roles as councillor you will experience all kinds of pressures.

These may come as a result of your busy lifestyle and the need to balance the competing demands of your home, work and political life. The pressures may be to do with the role itself, eg taking on a new committee or portfolio responsibility you have little experience of. Maybe the pressure is coming from other people – your colleagues, the media, a vocal pressure group or an irate resident. It could also be that the real pressure is coming from a combination

of factors that leaves you unable to cope with the things you feel are most important – the ‘rabbit in the headlights’ syndrome. All of these pressures can have a negative impact on your ability to cope and to operate to the best of your ability. In effect, this is what creates the stress you feel. While you will always encounter many different kinds of pressure, there is only one real source of stress – you. Stress is your individual response to pressure. That is why it affects all of us in different ways and to different degrees.



Challenge 1 – the pressures you face

Think about the pressures you face as a councillor. How would you typically respond in the following situations?

(a) You attend a public meeting and get ‘ambushed’ by a group of people determined to shout down everything you say. You come away with a confusing mixture of emotions:

(b) You have planned out your day to ensure that all of your meetings and communications (telephone calls etc) can be dealt with in good time. A close colleague asks for your help on a personal matter – you know this will scupper your carefully planned schedule:

(c) You are about to go into an important meeting and need the remaining five minutes to prepare. You realise that you’ve left some of your essential notes at home:

Look again at what you have written. Then ask yourself the following questions: What has really provoked your response? Where, therefore, is the real source of stress coming from?

Balancing demands and pressures with skills and knowledge

A person experiences stress when they perceive that the demands of their work or life are greater than their ability to cope. Coping means balancing the demands and pressures placed on you (ie the 'job' requirements) with your skills and knowledge (ie your capabilities). For example, in a workplace if you give a member of your team a tight deadline on a project they feel they have neither the skills nor ability to do well, they may begin to feel undue pressure which could result in work related stress. If you consider your role as a councillor to be a job in the sense of the word above you can see why if the demands of the role are greater than your ability to cope with them this can lead to undue stress.

Stress can also result from having too few demands, as people will become bored, feel undervalued and lack recognition. If they feel they have little or no say over the work they do or how they do it, this may cause them stress.

Factors in stress

Stress affects people in different ways and what one person finds stressful can be normal to another. With each new situation a person will decide what the challenge is and whether they have the resources to cope. If they decide they don't have the resources, they will begin to feel stressed. How they appraise the situation will depend on various factors, including:

- their background and culture
- their skills and experience
- their personality
- their personal circumstances
- their individual characteristics
- their health status
- their ethnicity, gender, age or disability
- other demands both in and outside of the role.

When pressure leads to stress

If the physical and psychological demands on us become excessive or prolonged, this can affect our ability to cope and may lead to feelings of anxiety. What has happened is that the pressure has produced some feelings of stress. At this point, the positive pressure that might ordinarily motivate or enhance our effectiveness becomes negative, with the result that we no longer operate at our best. The stress we feel can produce a wide range of signs and symptoms that can be physical, mental, emotional or behavioural. These responses will vary from person to person and from pressure to pressure.

It can be difficult to know when you are suffering from stress as many of these signs and symptoms may not present themselves immediately. Similarly, they may only increase in intensity over time. Some feelings of stress can also become habitual.

In other words, our perceptions, attitudes and beliefs can sustain the pressure, which then becomes a way of life. What is particularly destructive is when these symptoms of stress become prolonged over time.



Guidance

Physical responses	Can include: tiredness, headaches, 'butterflies' in the stomach, indigestion and nausea, neck ache, heartburn, allergies, skin problems, shallow breathing, blurred vision, aching muscles or palpitations
Mental responses	Can mean you may: be more indecisive, find it hard to concentrate, become forgetful, have feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem
Emotional responses	Can mean you are likely to: get irritable or angry, be fearful, feel numb, get embarrassed, be hypersensitive, get tearful, or feel drained and listless
Behavioural responses	Can mean you may: find it hard to sleep, change your eating habits, focus too much on work, smoke or drink more, avoid friends and family or experience sexual problems



Challenge 2 – assessing your vulnerability to stress

Try this simple test to discover your vulnerability to stress. Mark yourself on the scale for each of the 20 statements:

1	Once I've started something, I must finish it	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I don't mind leaving something temporarily unfinished
2	I often interrupt in the middle of a conversation	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I am a good listener, I let people finish speaking
3	I'm always on the go	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I consider that I am fairly easy going
4	I feel I am usually the responsible one	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I feel limited responsibility
5	I don't mind taking work home or working weekends	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I don't feel you should take work too seriously
6	I'm never late for appointments	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I don't get worked up over appointments
7	I frequently set deadlines	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I don't bother about setting deadlines
8	I pay attention to detail	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I don't worry over small details
9	I'm highly competitive	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I'm not at all competitive
10	I'm a very animated speaker	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I'm calm and deliberate in speech
11	I'm always in a hurry	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I never rush things, even when pressurised
12	I like exact information, eg how much, at what time	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I don't worry about the precise figures
13	I hate having to wait	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I don't mind having to wait
14	I want swift promotion	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I'm very satisfied in my work
15	I'm always juggling more than one thing at a time	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I take things one at a time
16	Work is my main interest	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I enjoy many interests
17	I need recognition for what I do	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I'm not interested in what others think
18	I generally eat, drink and walk quickly	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I take my time doing things
19	I don't discuss feelings	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I can express my feelings well
20	I push hard	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	I'm easy going

Having arrived at a mark for each statement, add up your score. Then turn to Appendix 2 to consider what your score may mean in terms of your vulnerability to stress.

Recognising your stress limits

Everyone has their own stress threshold – the amount of pressure they can generally handle. And operating at the optimum level of this threshold can be exciting, challenging, stretching and fun. As the pressure increases you become more alert, invigorated and ready for action. Think about the stimulation and satisfaction you get from taking on a new and difficult role as a councillor – overcoming the personal frustrations, worries, demands and time pressures – and delivering positive results for your local community.

However, there is a point where stress becomes distress and the pressures you face can push you beyond this threshold. At that point, you will no longer be effective and will not be operating at your optimum performance.

All that happens is that you have to work harder to deliver what is required and that in itself adds to the stress. It may also begin to affect your health.

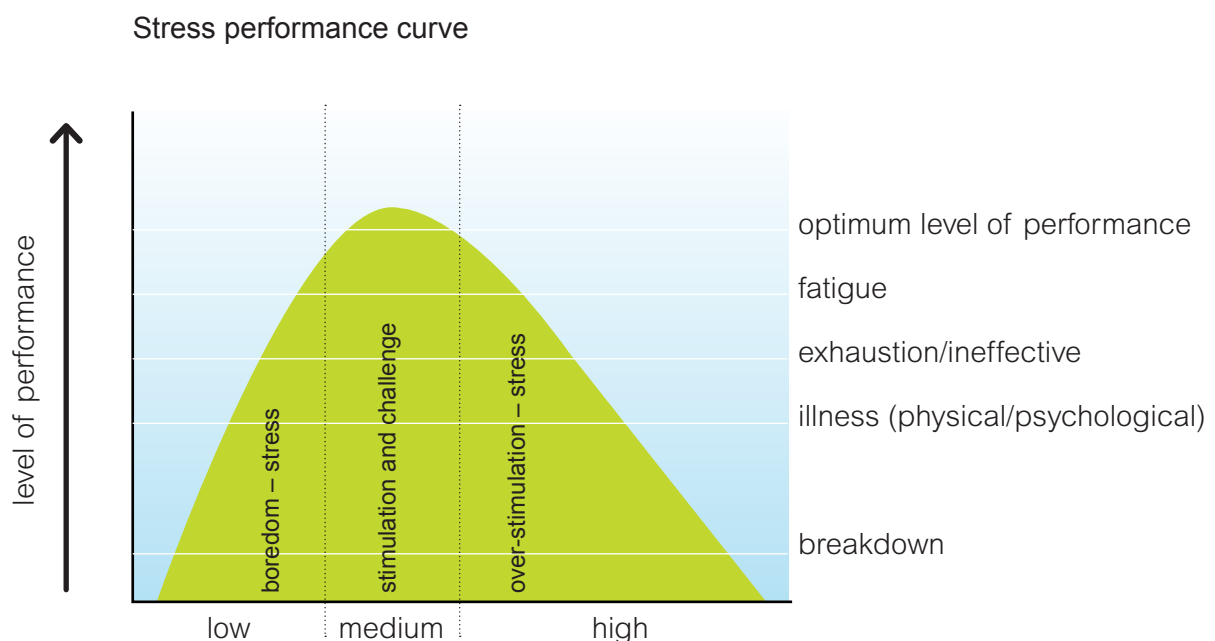


Guidance

The Yerkes–Dodson law is an empirical relationship between stimulus and performance, originally developed by psychologists Robert M. Yerkes and John Dillingham Dodson in 1908. The law dictates that performance increases with physiological or mental arousal, but only up to a point. When levels of stimulus become too high, performance decreases. The process is often illustrated graphically as a bell-shaped curve which increases and then decreases with higher levels of stimulus.

Knowing your stress threshold

Adapted from Yerkes-Dodson 1908



How stress can impact on you as a councillor

Your response to pressure and stress will depend to a large extent on your perception of what is happening to you and the degree of control you believe you have. Imagine how you would feel if your colleagues asked you to take on a position of significant responsibility (eg to become committee chairman or to head up a new partnership body). In reacting to the physical and psychological impact of this, your reaction might be to push any doubts, fears and anxieties you have to one side – recognising this to be a great opportunity. Equally, your anxieties about the potential pitfalls and personal demands of such a position may overwhelm you, leaving you unsure or even hostile to the challenge on offer. But why is this?

Our perception and interpretation of events affects how we respond to them, and the way we see the world is determined by a complex mixture of factors, eg personality, values, assertiveness, experience, beliefs, confidence and self-esteem. If we are generally confident and positive about how we view life, we are likely to see most pressures as within our control. However, if we suffer from a lack of confidence and low self-esteem, this may lead us to view the pressure as insurmountable and beyond our control, alongside a general feeling of helplessness. The anxiety this produces can lead to stress.



Guidance

The physiological response to stress

Our physiological response to stress is largely pre-set, determined by our primitive, animalistic reaction to physical threats. This is often referred to as the 'fight or flight' response.

Faced with a perceived challenge, the brain sends specific hormones around the body to prepare us for action. Our heart rate increases and our blood pressure rises. The muscles in the body also tense – ready for action – and our breathing quickens to enable more oxygen to be taken up. Only when the threat has passed does the body begin to relax. Some of the pressures of the councillor role can also trigger this response, the anxiety of speaking in public, the pressure of meeting a deadline or the reaction to a verbal challenge.

However, if the pressure is ongoing the stress hormones may continue to keep the body in a high state of arousal – at a constant and excessive level of stress – which can have a detrimental impact on long-term health, leading to skin conditions, coronary heart disease, strokes, ulcers and even cancer.



Guidance **Our response to challenges**

“Long-term anxiety and tension have a huge effect on the body, increasing levels of the stress hormone cortisol (linked with problems such as high blood pressure and making you more likely to put on weight), sapping your energy and diverting resources away from the immune system and digestion”.

**Liz Tucker, Wellbeing Consultant
and Stress Expert**

If this negative reaction to stress persists and goes unchecked, it can lead to all sorts of personal problems, some of which could have a knock-on impact on your role as a councillor:

- **An inability to concentrate or to decide on priorities** – on a personal level this may mean that you struggle to deal with your general workload and the balance between your council tasks and home life. It is also likely to affect the ability to manage your time effectively and to cope with deadlines. In a broader sense, it could also be damaging given the difficult decisions that councillors are likely to face in the current political and financial climate, eg spending priorities, budget cuts and efficiency improvements. You must be fully equipped and confident to make and support these difficult decisions.
- **Feelings of insularity, inadequacy, depression or anger** – all of this is likely to have a huge impact on your ability to cope with change and to deal effectively with people and conflict. It could also be detrimental to your broad community leadership role, where local people look to you to listen and actively respond to their concerns. If you are perceived as unapproachable or withdrawn, you risk losing their belief and support. This may also affect your longer-term election prospects.

- **Changes in behaviour** – you may struggle to manage yourself and to deal with some of the personal impacts, erratic sleeping patterns, lack of energy, temptation to eat/drink more etc. Any changes in the level of your commitment, activity or performance could be viewed negatively by your councillor colleagues, officers or constituents. Your key role is to get things done and to make a difference, and your personal energy, enthusiasm and focus are crucial to this.

In later sections of this workbook, we will outline the main strategies for dealing with stress and ways that you can improve your personal resilience to deal with pressure and anxiety. Before we do this, let's consider some of the sources of stress that you may encounter.

Identifying the sources of stress

In improving your ability to identify and handle stress, it is vitally important that you understand exactly what causes stress for you – what psychologists and doctors often refer to as ‘stressors’. These can be problems or difficulties which affect us immediately or factors which build up over time to cause excessive stress. On a personal level, these stressors might include the death of someone close to you, changes in your health or wellbeing, divorce, family arguments, or money worries. Equally they might be related to the daily hassles of life, eg traffic jams, time pressures, car troubles or the achievement of a reasonable work/life balance.

The stressors that you face in one part of your life will generally spill over and begin to affect others aspects of what you do, eg your role as a councillor may require you to travel more, work at weekends, take on more responsibility or attend regular evening meetings. All of this can have a negative effect on your home life – something which is supposed to be a ‘buffer’ against the stressful events of your political and community leadership role. In the same way, difficult or longstanding domestic problems may begin to have a negative impact on your ability to perform as a councillor.

While it is difficult to control stressors, it is important to take a holistic approach to them and your general wellbeing, recognising that effective stress management in one part of your life is likely to reap rewards elsewhere. In some cases, this may be possible by minimising, avoiding or eliminating a stressor completely. Some examples might include:

- Cutting out some of the time-consuming and difficult car journeys into your council office by working from home more and making better use of technology.
- Identifying that a difficult and time-consuming

community leadership role might be better dealt with by delegating tasks to others or co-opting other councillors to assist.

- Recognising when you have taken on too much and being prepared to discuss the situation with your colleagues. This may allow you to step back from certain roles and tasks, reducing the pressures you face, and enabling you to be generally more effective

Beyond this, handling the stressors you face will require you to adopt a sensible strategy for either managing the stress or coping with any stressful situation.



Case study The leaky bucket

Anxiety UK often uses the analogy of a ‘leaky bucket’ to describe how every day, seemingly simple stresses can add up, leading to us feeling overwhelmed and anxious. If we keep adding stressors to the bucket (even tiny ones like the school run or commuting to work), over time it fills up until one day it overflows. This can be a good way of looking at anxiety as it explains why sometimes it can seem to come out of the blue with no significant trigger.

However, what has happened is that the trigger was just a very small stressor that tipped us over the edge and allowed our bucket to overflow.

What we need is a leaky bucket with lots of holes in to reduce our overall stress levels. Each one of these holes could be something positive that you do to manage your anxiety, such as yoga, exercise, reading, listening to music or spending time with friends or family.

www.anxietyuk.org.uk



Hints and tips Some stressors you may face as a councillor

The tensions between your ward needs and wider party/council interests.

Wanting to get things done while recognising the need for process, protocol and consultation.

Having a personal view but needing to act in the public interest for the good of all.

Being too accessible and willing to assist, leaving yourself little time for other important commitments.

Wanting to be political but feeling held back by the need to act ethically and with integrity.



Challenge 3 – reflecting on your sources of stress

Think about the nature of your role as an elected councillor and identify an example of each of the following stressors below. Then consider what impact each has had on you personally and the ways that you have sought to cope:

(a) Pressures of time

Personal impact	Your ways of coping

(b) Workload demands

Personal impact	Your ways of coping

(c) Organisational change

Personal impact	Your ways of coping

(d) Dealing with people

Personal impact	Your ways of coping

(e) Dealing with conflict

Personal impact	Your ways of coping

Strategies for dealing with stress

We have already said that in some cases it may be possible to minimise, avoid or eliminate a particular source of stress. However, in your day to day role as a councillor, this may not always be feasible or desirable. Many of the pressures you face are part and parcel of the role itself and it is unlikely that you will be able to pick and choose just the bits that suit you or that give you an easy life.

In broad terms, there are two strategies for dealing with stress, both of which are distinct, but which can be brought to bear on the same issue. The first involves distraction, while the second requires you to achieve some form of resolution.



Hints and tips The strategy of distraction

The principal aim here is to enable you to cope with the pressures or stressors that you face, while accepting that you cannot necessarily remove or resolve them. In simple terms, it's the equivalent of receiving a shock and then taking a deep breath and counting to 10. By doing so, it gives you the chance to:

- remove yourself from the immediate source of stress
- step back, gaining some breathing space and regaining your composure
- reflect on the situation without taking an immediate or reactive stance
- think about the practical steps that can be taken to make life more tolerable in the situation you face.



Guidance

“The components of anxiety, stress, fear and anger do not exist independently of you in the world. They simply do not exist in the physical world, even though we talk about them as if they do”.

Wayne Dyer, American Psychologist



Hints and tips Some distraction exercises

The following exercises can be used to help you unwind.

Breathe deep – breathe in to the count of four and hold for two counts. Then exhale to the count of four. Try this whenever you feel stressed.

Stretch – stand up, stretch and smile. Visualise the stress flooding from your back, legs and shoulders and pouring out of your fingertips and toes. For greater relief learn a few yoga positions.

Take a walk – forego a tea or coffee break and take a brisk walk instead. It's physically beneficial and will enable you to refocus.

The strategy of resolution

Rather than simply coping, the principle aim here is to manage the situation to achieve some form of resolution. This can give you more control and choice about how you respond and enable you to tackle the pressures of time, workload and change, while better managing people, conflict and your own personal needs.



Hints and tips

Much of this is about stress relief, ie. giving your body and mind some time away from the source of stress to enable you to develop greater personal resilience. Some examples might include:

- getting a good night's rest
- reading or listening to music
- exercising or taking part in a fun event
- sharing your problems with a friend or seeking professional help
- taking a warm bath or getting a massage.

Alongside this, ensure that you continue to:

- remain positive in your thinking and don't constantly blame yourself - some things really are out of your control and some clouds really do have a silver lining
- be assertive, and prepared to say, 'No', 'I can't' or 'Yes, but I'll do it later'
- avoid some of the harmful, short-term, panaceas for stress, eg smoking, drinking, drugs and comfort eating.



Some examples of stress management

Managing time	Distinguish between urgent tasks (unplanned demands) and important tasks (those that give you the best return for the investment of your time). Plan uninterrupted time, eg tell people you are unavailable, find a quiet space to work, divert your phone and don't read e-mails as they come in. Focus on the key tasks and set realistic deadlines (which you can stick to). Say no to unreasonable demands, interruptions and 'urgent' requests.
Managing workload	Plan ahead, to better manage 'peaks' and 'troughs'. Prioritise - focus on the things that will have the greatest impact. Break the workload down into manageable tasks. Remember the adage: 'How do you eat an elephant?' Answer – 'Small chunks'. Forget perfection – aim to get the essentials done first. Delegate more and co-opt some support.
Managing change	Be prepared – keep up to speed with what is happening, read around the subject and ask lots of questions before the change occurs. Don't dwell on the negative – focus on solutions to perceived problems and try to see things from other people's perspective. Challenge during the planning and preparation phase, not during implementation – it's too late then, so go with the flow. Encourage people to take time out in situations of deadlock to enable them to regroup, better focused on what needs to be done and thinking about the future, rather than the past (sometimes called 'refocusing').
Managing people and conflict	Avoid aggressive (fight) and submissive (flight) behaviour which will add to your stress. Aim for 'win/win' agreements wherever possible, so that everyone gets part of what they want. Explore options together, through collaboration and discussion. Be open to the idea that a 'third way' may exist. Listen first and talk second – understanding where people are coming from before attempting to negotiate with them. Be empathetic – show you understand people's situation, needs and feelings. Maintain your assertiveness, while avoiding unnecessary displays of emotion (weakness or aggression). Keep people and problems separate, ie recognise that in many cases people are not just 'being difficult' – real and valid differences can lie behind conflicting positions.
Managing yourself	Don't be afraid to talk to others and seek advice. 'Work shadowing' can be great for seeing how someone else copes and a coach or mentor can help you to keep things in perspective. Avoid approaches which simply put you under more pressure, eg striving for perfection, trying to please people all the time, saying yes to all requests for help and never switching off. Improve your fitness and general outlook - eat better, drink more water, find time for relaxation and do more exercise. Keep positive and develop more personal resilience.

The benefits of stress management

It should be clear from the earlier sections of this workbook that some control or management of stress – and the pressures that give rise to it – can have considerable benefits for all of us as individuals. This can include:

- a greater sense of wellbeing and better physical and psychological health
- higher self-esteem and greater feelings of control in dealing with difficulties, threats and challenges
- increased confidence in handling difficult behaviour in others and situations of conflict
- an ability to manage colleagues and friends more effectively
- increased work performance, communication and effectiveness the enjoyment of a more balanced lifestyle.



Examples of how stress management can benefit councillors

Greater sense of wellbeing/better health

Ability to recognise the signs and symptoms of stress in oneself and others. Less time away from council business because of illness, enabling better attendance at committees etc. Better resilience in coping with long hours, late working, unexpected demands and workload pressures. Ability to concentrate and focus on a wide range of potentially complex situations.

Higher self-esteem and feelings of control

Improved ability to cope with the pressures of public office and political challenge. Better decision making and prioritisation. Confidence in managing a balanced workload and responding to new challenges and opportunities. Greater confidence in public speaking.

Increased confidence in handling difficult behaviour

Better situation handling, eg chairing meetings, managing public meetings, dealing with the media etc. Ability to broker deals, manage partnerships and handle a range of personalities. Confidence in acting as a community champion and representing a broad diversity of community views. Ability to handle issues of conflict within the community.

An ability to manage others more effectively

Aptitude in asserting one's own views and opinions and influencing others. Greater flexibility in team working. Confidence in demonstrating leadership and gravitas.

Increased performance, communication and effectiveness

Ability to deliver results and get things done as promised. Improved standing and reputation inside and outside of the council. Ability to handle a balanced portfolio of work.

A more balanced lifestyle

Good role-model to others who may struggle with work/life balance. Broad experience of life generally which can be brought to bear on council matters. Greater fulfilment in serving as an elected councillor alongside the other demands of life.



Challenge 4 – stress management: challenging your day-to-day routines

Read the case study below. Then consider the personal impact of the way that Councillor Jackson manages his time:

a) What unnecessary pressures is he creating for himself that could lead to stress?

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b) What ideas do you have for improving the way that he manages his daily routines?

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Councillor Jackson is a portfolio holder for community safety and has been a councillor for 12 years. He complains bitterly about the demands on his time, the number of meetings he attends and the amount of paperwork he receives. This is a typical day:

06.30

Get up, shower and dress. Having overslept, miss opportunity to take dog for walk. Listen to radio while having breakfast and forget first meeting is at 9.00am.

09.15

Late for meeting with corporate director to discuss new strategy for sustainable communities and partnership working. All a bit boring – find myself switching off at times.

10.40

Head off after meeting to judge local poster campaign at Chillingworth Primary School. Have to run the half mile to the school to get there on time (only 10 minutes late!)

11.15

Arrive back at Town Hall. Log on to computer in Councillors' Room and start to read e-mails. Interrupted by mobile phone call from portfolio holder for finance - agree to pop over to discuss budget report. Discuss forthcoming Mayor's banquet.

12.30

Grab sandwich in canteen. Sit down to eat while reading through contents of post tray in the councillor's room. Interrupted by phone call and put remainder of post tray in brief case to read later. Chat to the councillor support officer about the TV soaps I've missed.

13.05

Return to Councillors' Room and half-eaten sandwich (which goes in bin). Log on again to read e-mails. Try to respond to one, but system administrator says I'm over my file size limit and need to delete some saved mail. Spend 10 minutes doing so before giving up.

13.30

Meeting with Leader to discuss latest performance indicators. Not good news. Realise I should have read papers more thoroughly before telling him everything was fine.

14.00

Afternoon course on 'public speaking' which I forgot I'd agreed to attend.

16.36

Course ends. Five 'urgent' messages on mobile. Too late to respond to these.

17.14

Arrive home late, having said to wife I'd be back mid-afternoon. Tea on table is cold.

18.00

Meeting of local residents' association. Heated exchange with group who complain about my lack of progress in getting some agreed play equipment installed. 'Too busy', I say.

20.17

Meeting ends. Head off to pub with next door neighbour for swift pint (or two).

21.45

Get back home later than planned. Try to access emails from home but realise there are problems again with the server. Think about reading contents of briefcase but decide not to. Opt instead for early night.

Improving your personal resilience

The ability to identify and then deal effectively with stress is a key characteristic of resilient people. Highly resilient people not only have high tolerance levels of stress, but also understand how to deal effectively with the causes and symptoms of stress when circumstances become difficult for them.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from tough times, or even to triumph in the face of adversity; to display tenacity, but not at the expense of reason. Resilient people know that they sometimes experience failure – but they see it not as something to dwell on, but as an opportunity to move forward, accepting that failure is a part of life.

Managing your time effectively

There never seems to be enough time, especially for councillors who work and have family commitments. We are all liable to misuse time in many ways and the cumulative effect of these time-consuming activities can significantly impact on our ability to get things done, which can lead to stress. In simple terms, the way we use time should reflect our priorities.

Many factors will conspire to deprive you of time, eg junk mail, ineffective meetings, unnecessary phone calls, travel and interruptions. We sometimes refer to these as ‘time wasters’. Screening out as many of these as possible is a good first step in improving your time management. However, many of the pressures we face in the use of time are the result of our personalities or because we lose sight of our priorities.



The Nicholson McBride personal resilience tool

According to psychologists Nicholson McBride, there are five elements that contribute to resilience and evidence that these skills, attitudes and behaviours can be refined, developed or even, in some cases, learnt from scratch:

optimism – seeing the glass half-full. It encourages people to feel positive about themselves, about other people, and the world’s general direction of travel

solution orientation – the ability to see and anticipate problems coming a long way off and to prepare accordingly

individual accountability – a strong sense of self-worth and self-regard which gives people a belief in their own abilities

openness and flexibility – the ability to tolerate, and even thrive on, ambiguous situations

managing stress and anxiety – the ability to identify and then deal effectively with stress.



“Time is the most democratic of resources – we all get the same amount. But it’s amazing what some people can do with their time compared to others...”

Anonymous



Hints and tips

Some ideas for improving time management:

- book personal time in your diary and specific slots for phone calls and emails
- always clarify the response date for papers that require a reply
- use spare time, while waiting or travelling, to catch up on reading
- establish clear 'no contact zones' – but let local people know when and where you can be contacted.

The impact of poor time management can have wide-ranging implications on your role as a councillor, all of which can increase the stress you may experience:

- little or no time for yourself and what is really important to you
- spreading yourself too thin and not being effective at anything
- not being prepared for meetings
- lacking influence with colleagues and other people
- a reputation for failing to deliver what you agreed and being late for meetings
- focusing on the minutiae rather than the important 'bigger picture'.

Resilient people develop their own tactics for screening out 'time wasters' and making best use of the time available (see text box for some ideas). This is often as much about managing their own time as it is in directing others to recognise when they can and cannot be contacted.

Operate outside your comfort zone

Dealing effectively with stress will occasionally require you to work and operate outside of the ways you normally feel comfortable – what we often refer to as our 'comfort zone', eg delivering a significant speech when you feel uncomfortable with public speaking or delivering some critical feedback to a colleague when it's difficult to be assertive.

The more you learn to operate outside of your comfort zone, the more you will build your confidence and resilience in dealing with difficult situations. If this transition really does prove to be difficult, consider what training or development activities could help you to gain more confidence. Speaking to other people about their tactics or 'work shadowing' a colleague might also be a useful approach to push you into trying new ways of working.

Be assertive

Assertiveness is about being confident and direct in dealing with people. It allows you to express your feelings, views and opinions clearly and firmly without hurting others.

A lack of assertiveness can be a major contributor to stressful situations. The ability to be assertive is essential to civic leadership, as it avoids the use of unmeasured and emotive communication that can distract people from the content of what you are saying. Individuals who fail to be assertive are likely to behave:

- aggressively – becoming over-directive
- passively – avoiding confrontation and failing to deal with conflict
- manipulatively – using inappropriate influence to force others to act.

Being assertive is a key building block of personal resilience and can enable you to be more effective in dealing with people in your role as a councillor.



The psychological advantages of assertiveness

Assertiveness can help to reduce some of the psychological pressures that lead to stress. For example:

- you can put limits on your own behaviour and that of others
- you can enjoy a realistic outlook on what is possible for you and what is not
- you are not adversely affected by rude or impolite people
- you are able to rejoice at your successes and accept your failings
- you can always be in control of your own behaviour and not be pushed into a rage or forced into submission.

Source: The Assertiveness Pocketbook, Max A Eggert, 1997

Remain positive

Like assertiveness, thinking positively can help to make you more effective and successful in your councillor role. Resilient people use positive thinking to deal proactively with the pressures and difficulties they face in life. Medical research suggests that this can have significant benefits in reducing some of the symptoms and outcomes of stress.

If you wish to think more positively in your councillor role, consider the following:

- push negative thoughts away as soon as they enter your mind
- try and avoid people who are negative and destructive
- think about known, proven facts only
- be objective and stay rational.
- focus on the positive, rather than dwelling on the negative
- use mental mantras, eg 'I will...', 'I am...', 'I can...' etc.

As well as thinking positively, you should get in the habit of acting positively. For most of your council tasks this will involve:

- planning – setting clear objectives and determining how to achieve them
- preparing – considering any possible obstacles
- communicating – selling your ideas persuasively by emphasising the positives rather than denying the negatives
- asserting yourself – being confident in your views, while maintaining good relationships.

Final summary

Stress management and personal resilience is essentially about the positive changes that you can make to better equip you to recognise and deal with the pressures of everyday life. Taking a proactive approach in the areas we have highlighted will enable you to be more effective in your councillor role. It should also help you to combat the debilitating effects of prolonged and excessive stress. But the initiative rests with you. If you're not serious about making positive changes the rewards could be short-lived.

It is also worth emphasising that as a councillor you have a key role to play in helping others within the organisation to deal effectively with the pressures of work.

Alongside your councillor colleagues, you can play a significant part in helping to create a culture within the council that recognises and assists officers in dealing effectively with workplace stress. Then you can all reap the rewards.

Some final thoughts

The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.

William James

American Philosopher and Psychologist

**God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.**

Reinhold Niebuhr

Theologian (1892-1971)

**For every ailment under the sun
There is a remedy or there is none.
If there be one, find it.
If there be none, never mind it.**

W.W. Bartley

Philosopher (1934-1990)



Where do you go from here?

Look back over the earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

a) What further action can you identify to improve your approach to stress management and personal resilience, ie. what things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

b) Have you identified any further gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify any further training or development that could help, eg further reading, courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

Appendix 1

Sources of further information and support

Publications

Beating the 24/7: How Business Leaders Achieve a Successful Work/Life Balance
Fletcher, Winston, John Wiley & Sons, 2002

Excelling Under Pressure: Increasing Your Energy for Leadership and Innovation in a World of Stress, Change and Unprecedented Opportunities
Cooper, Robert K., Strategy and Leadership, July/August 2001, Vol. 29 (4), p15

59 Minutes to a Calmer Life
McGee, Paul, Go M.A.D., 2001

Instant Stress Management
Clegg, Brian, Kogan Page, 2000

Leadership and Stress
Smith, M.; Cooper, C.,
Leadership and Organisation Development Journal, 1994, Vol. 15 (2) p3-7

Managing Pressure
Potter, J., Training Officer,
Vol. 31 (6) July/August 1995, p176-178

Managing Stress
Brewer, Kristine C., Gower, 1997

**More Time Less Stress:
How to Create Two Extra Hours Every Day**
James, Judi, Piatkus, 2002

More Time, Less Stress: The Definitive Guide to Successful Time Management
Scott, Martin, Century Business, 1999

Perfect Relaxation
Van Der Zeil, Elaine, Arrow Books, 1996

Positive Under Pressure
Vandenburg, Malcolm; Lindenfield, Gael,
Thorsons, 2000

Pressure Points
Midgley, S., People Management,
July 1997, Vol. 3 (14), p36-39

Real People, Real Stress
Persaud, Joy, Human Resources,
April 2000, p50-54

Recognising the Perceived Causes of Stress
Rees, Christopher; Redfern, David,
Industrial and Commercial Training, 2000,
Vol. 32 (4), p120-127

**Strategic Stress Management:
An Organisational Approach**
Sutherland, Valerie; Cooper, Cary L.,
Macmillan Business, 2000

**10-Minute Time and Stress Management:
How to Gain an Extra 10 Hours a Week**
Lewis, David, Piatkus, 1995

The Assertiveness Pocketbook
Eggert, Max A., Management Pocketbooks Ltd.,
1997

The Healthy Organisation
Newell, Susan, Routledge, 1995

The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook
Davis, Martha et al.,
New Harbinger Publications Inc., 2000

The Stress Factor: Another Item for the Change Management Agenda
McHugh, M., Journal of Organisational Change,
1997, Vol. 10 (4), p345-362

The Stress Pocketbook
Richards, Mary, Management Pocketbooks Ltd,
1998

LGA Councillors' Guide
www.local.gov.uk

Useful websites

The **Local Government Association** website has many pages discussing community leadership and a number of publications, a series of case studies, the Knowledge Hub, and development programmes for councillors and council officers.

For more information:

www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership

Anxiety UK is a national registered charity formed 30 years ago by a sufferer of agoraphobia for those affected by anxiety disorders.

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>

Health and Safety Executive

The stress management section of the Health and Safety Executive website, offering guidance to individuals and employers.

www.hse.gov.uk/stress

www.hse.gov.uk/stress/furtheradvice/wrs.htm

Website of the **International Stress Management Association**. This promotes sound knowledge and best practice in the prevention and reduction of human stress.

It sets professional standards for the benefit of individuals and organisations using the services of its councillors.

www.isma.org.uk

Various articles offering guidance on all aspects of stress

www.mindtools.com/smpage.html

A variety of stress management tools and resources

www.medicinenet.com/stress/article.htm

NHS information about stress and its management

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/understanding-stress.aspx

The **Resilience Quotient tool** referred to in the workbook is no longer available for free. However those organisations/individuals who would be interested in using the tool can find out more at more@nicholsonmcbride.com

Website of the **Stress Management Society**, a non-profit making organisation dedicated to helping people tackle stress. It provides an impartial view of the various management products and services available to help those suffering with stress.

www.stress.org.uk

Appendix 2

Scores from challenge 2

Assessing your vulnerability to stress

Score 80–140

You certainly have high expectations of yourself and set your sights high.

Consequently you put a lot of pressure on yourself. Consider those questions where you scored high. What can you do to reduce your score? For instance, if work is your main interest, consider those things that you would like to do if only you had more time. What could you do to change the pattern of your work to allow you more leisure time?

Score 60–79

Certain aspects of your lifestyle may need exploring. Look at those questions where you scored highly. What aspects of your life do they cover? Are they aspects of your life you would like to change? What strategies could you employ to reduce your score?

Score 20–59

You have a very relaxed approach to life and not a lot upsets you. Life is not too demanding and you feel able to cope with most things. Nonetheless, are there any scores which you would like to change that you are not happy with?

Source: Ashridge Management College



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