



Adapting to uncertainty and change

Uncertainty is the only certainty there is

John Allen Paulos

Learning Outcomes

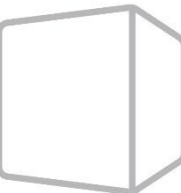
To understand the impact of uncertainty and change and the link to stress.

To look at the process of change and reactions to the change process

To understand the signs of stress

To take away practical tools for managing uncertainty and our stress reactions

To set ourselves 1 - 2 Development Objectives



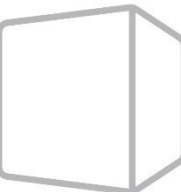
Some thoughts on uncertainty

When faced with direct threats, human beings instinctively have fight, flight or freeze reactions. The problem with uncertainty is our minds and our bodies don't know which response to take.

The fight or flight response improves mental functioning, but only in specific ways. Our attention tends to narrow but our senses are heightened. Certain aspects of memory improve, but creativity is inhibited. Most situations in modern life require superior planning and problem solving rather than the heightened alertness needed for fight or flight. If it's possible to conclude early on that the best response will involve calm thought and action then we should try to stay calm and recognise that and do our best, given what we know, to create a plan. This is the opposite to the fight or flight state

The human brain is well prepared to predict the future. This is based on our previous experiences and learning. This ability helps us to deal with possible negative outcomes or to avoid them, and to maximize the chances of a positive outcome.

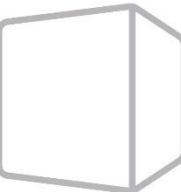
However, for the brain to be able to process information well, a critical level of certainty seems to be necessary. Therefore, uncertainty about the future tends to make it more challenging for us to cope with negative events. It can also make it difficult to take steps to avoid these situations.



How uncertainty can drive psychological stress

Uncertainty may cause:

- Us to make falsely high judgements about the impact and the odds of the threat occurring, because of one-sided assessments of the situation. This may lead to scary/unlikely predictions.
- Increased alertness to the threat to an abnormally high level so that a wide range of stimuli is interpreted as indicating danger.
- Avoidance of the threat, in terms of behaviour and by mental processing such as worrying rather than acting. Worrying can carry a type of reward with it. If the threats that are anticipated and prepared for by worrying don't actually happen, this may create a psychological link between the worrying and the threat being staved off. This may, in turn, lead to reinforcement of the worrying behaviour.
- Us to ignore even reliable cues in the environment which indicate that the level of threat is actually extremely low. We need to focus on actual facts and data.
- Higher levels of jitteriness regarding a situation that is dreaded. We may even startle at cues that actually indicate safety. This may indicate the loss of an objective assessment of the situation and increased anticipation of a negative situation.



Risk

Finance / Economics

Risk = a combination of the expected magnitude of the loss or gain and the variability of that expected outcome.

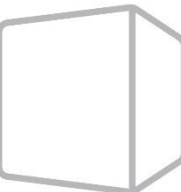
Human Perception of Risk

Two important components influence our perception.

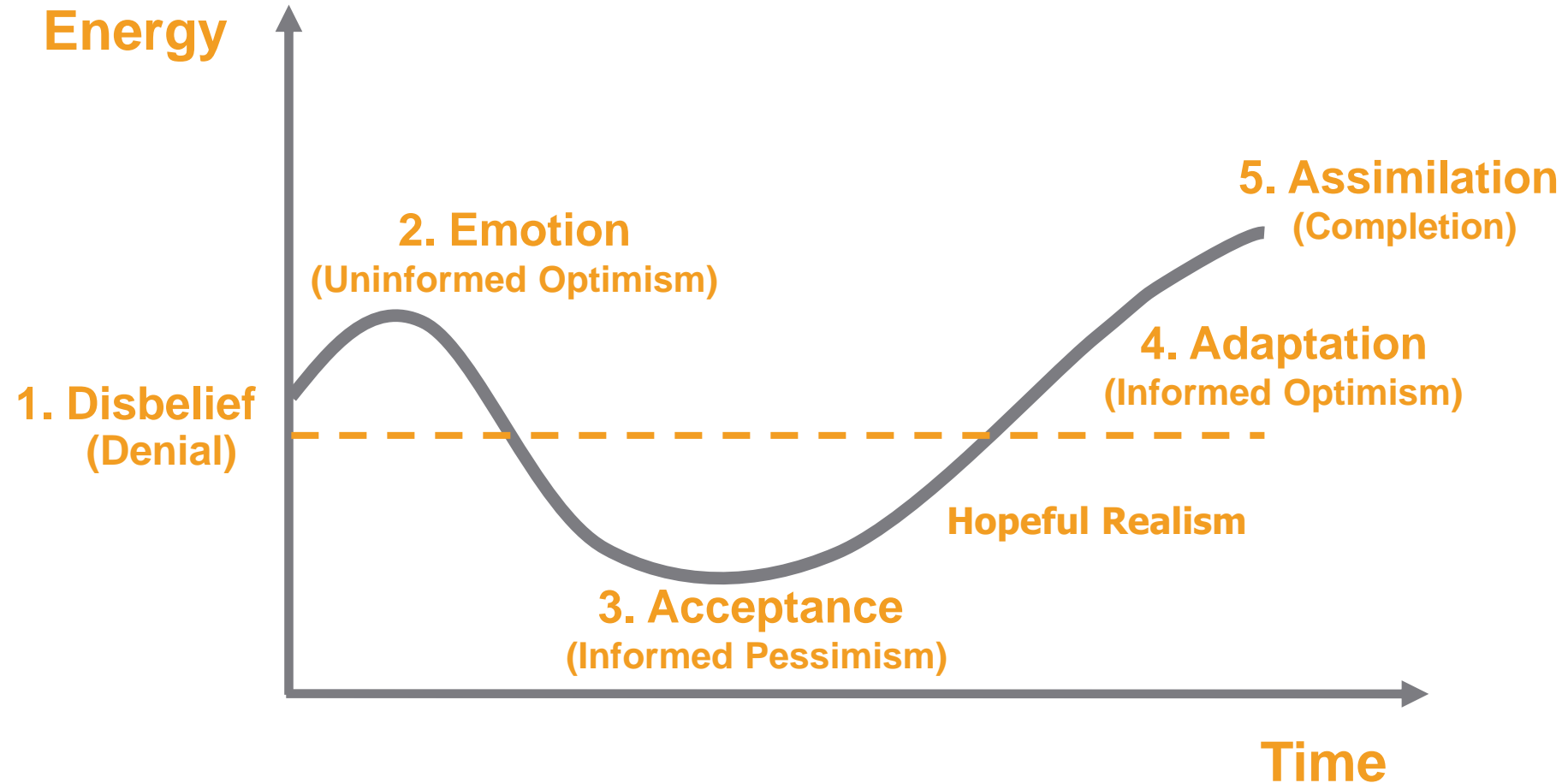
1. The fear factor: how much we dread potential outcomes
2. The control factor: the extent to which we feel we are in control of events.

When risks combine both dread and lack of control, they are perceived as very great.

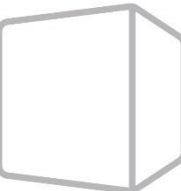
e.g. It's common to fear an accident more as a car passenger than as a driver, even when we acknowledge the other driver to be the more competent...



Change-Adaptation Process



(This model is based on the work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross (1969) which looked at the process people go through following bereavement. In the same way, when people are faced with major life changes, it is completely normal to go through this process. People will go through this at different rates; some will find it more challenging than others. We need to think how to help ourselves progress through uncertainty and change. We also need to think how we can help others to make progress through change processes.

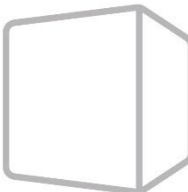


Change-Adaptation Process: Explanation

As a general rule, people don't like change; what people really dislike is the uncertainty that change can create.

1. The initial feeling is often disbelief. People may deny or try to ignore the change.
2. Then people may expend energy/keep busy/increase work rate as a way of suppressing their feelings.
3. As it becomes clear that the change is actually happening, reality gradually sets in. With this acceptance, comes feelings of uncertainty and doubt. This typically leads to a reduction in energy.
In major periods of change, this period is typically that between announcement and implementation of plans/strategies. As the uncertainty drags on, people tend to become passively accepting. This is the lowest ebb of the process.
4. As change progresses and people understand the situation better/receive training/support, they start to feel more positive about the future and adapt to the new situation.
5. The final stage is Assimilation where people have become used to the new situation.

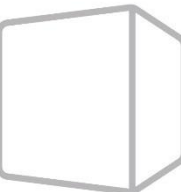
This process is far from trivial. One of the major problems is that the pace of change can be so rapid that people may be setting off on a change before they've reached Assimilation on a previous change curve. Some people may find it difficult to move /get stuck on Stage 3. These people may feel apathetic/ disillusioned. There may also be a significant difference where people are on the curve. For example, by the time of a major announcement, senior managers may have worked through the implications and may have developed detailed plans. They may have already begun to adapt, whereas those for whom the news is new, may not even have begun to accept the new situation as a reality.



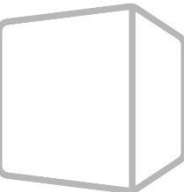
How can we manage uncertainty?

Managing uncertainty as best you can will reduce stress levels.

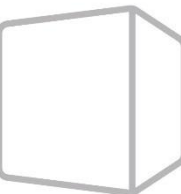
1. Recognise and acknowledge that you are uncertain. Check the evidence and try to be objective and quantitatively precise about the chances of alternative things happening. Clarify that you are more certain about some things than others.
2. Put bounds on uncertainty if you can. What range of possibilities is credible? What's the absolute worst that can happen realistically?
3. Ask yourself: "Do I need to act?", "Is now the right time?". You can decide other aspects of your response later. Run through the possible reasons for needing to make an effort and consider if the effort is mental or physical, now or later, intense or sustained?
4. In preparation for situations likely to throw up stressful challenges it may help to anticipate them and consider in advance whether an immediate, intense, physical effort would be needed.
5. Manage the extreme downside risks The next thing to do is to cut down the perceived risk of a very bad outcome in the challenging situation e.g. the case of a difficult conversation, consider all the possible negative outcomes. Now consider the actual likelihood of a really bad reaction, and consider the most likely reaction. Think about the approach you can take to reduce or eliminate the risk of the worst reactions and get this clear in your mind. Make a plan.



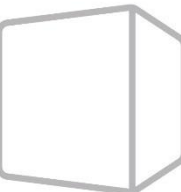
Level of Difficulty to Change



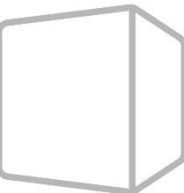
Although there are recognised stages in the change process, different people respond differently to change



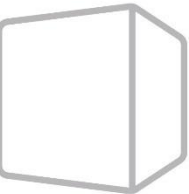
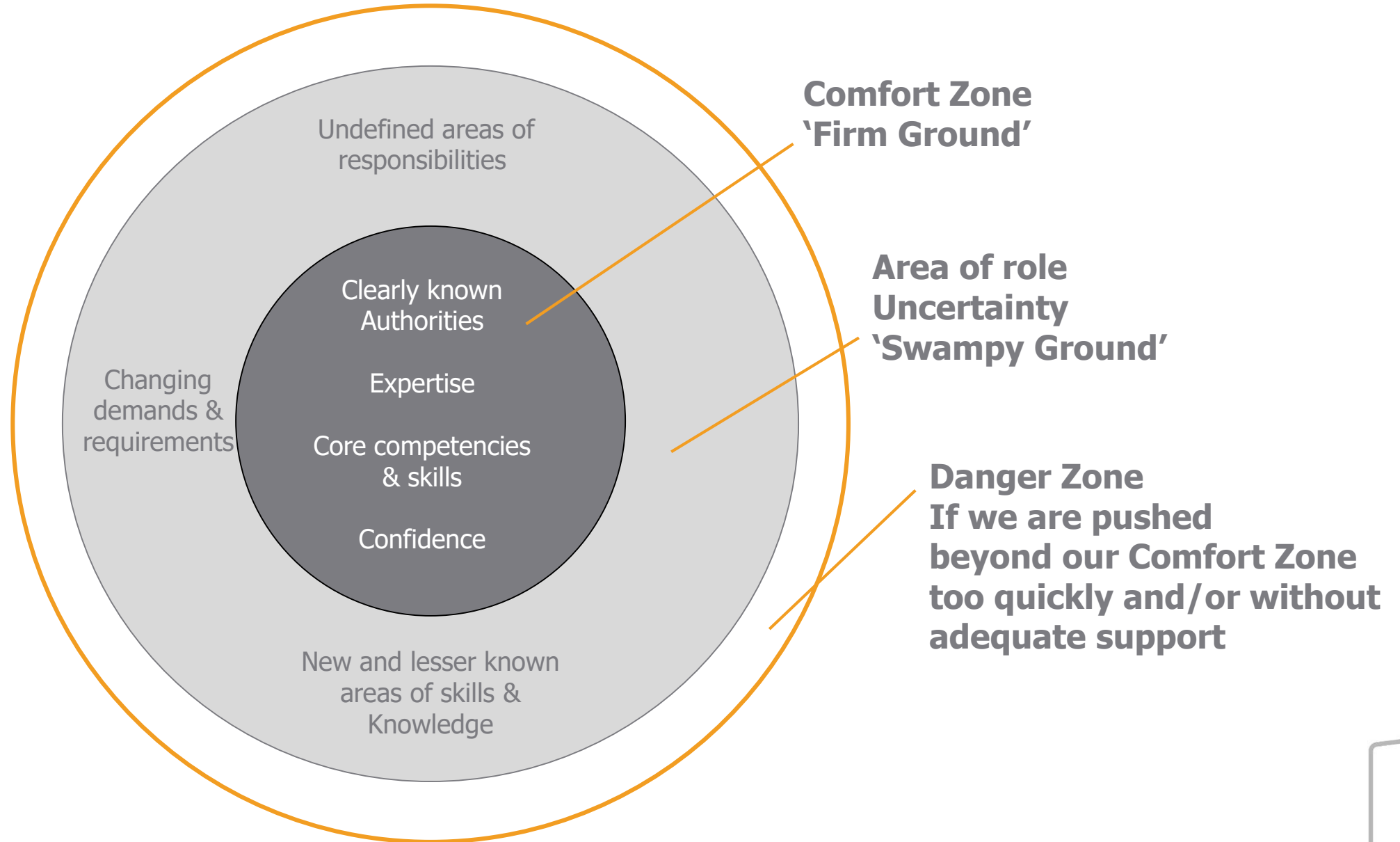
At an individual level, our response to change is affected by many factors...



So, an important factor in coping with change successfully is to understand and accept our own style but also to understand how others may differ from us in their reactions and what we may need to do to help them to adapt...



Comfort Zones



Decision Making – Individuals

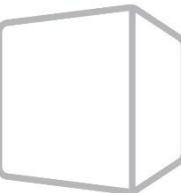
The greater the stress, the:

More likely we are to choose risky alternatives

Greater the tendency to make a premature choice of alternatives

Less likely we are to tolerate ambiguity

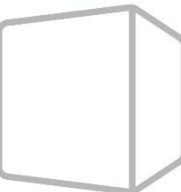
More the perception of threat is distorted / poor judgement often occurs



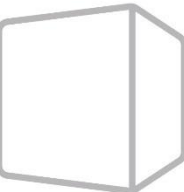
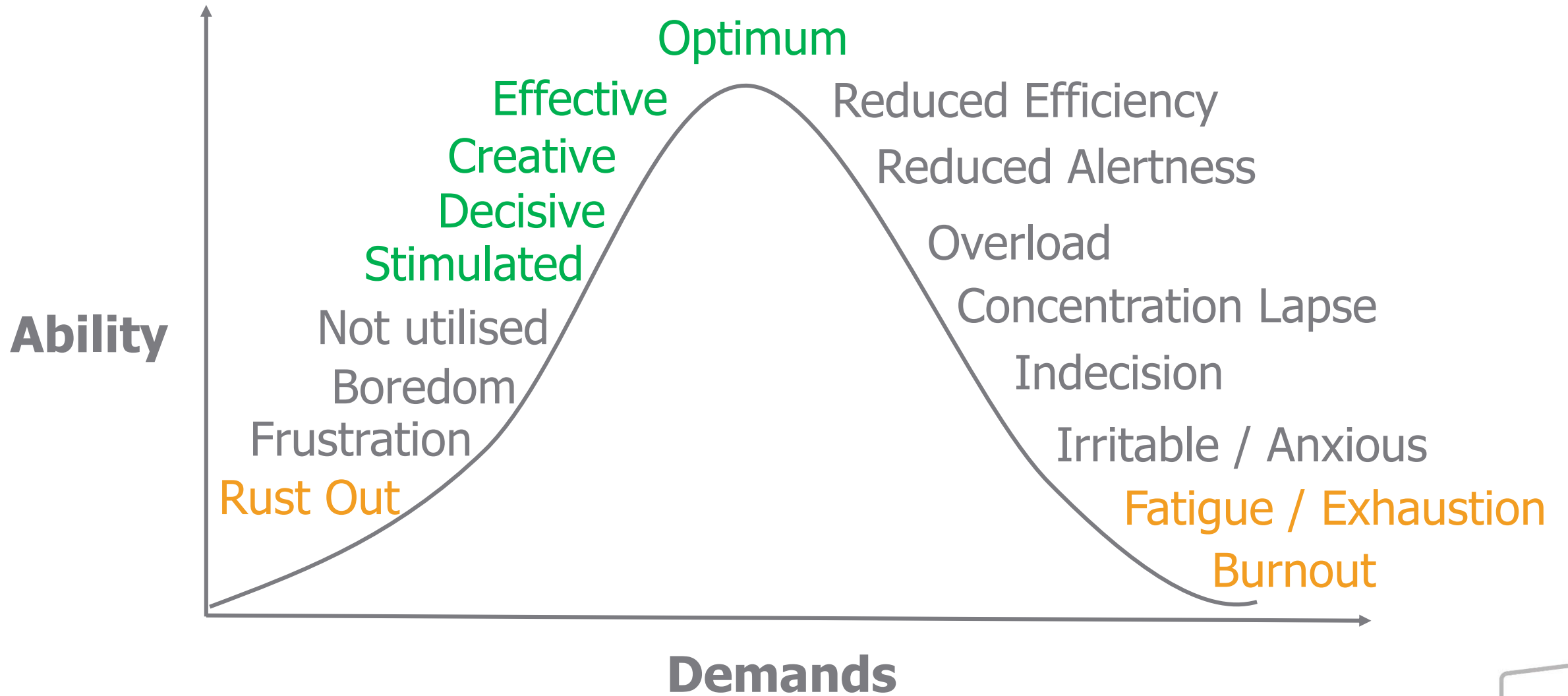


A state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances

Oxford English Dictionary



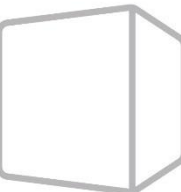
Coping with Stress



Signs of successful coping



- Taking responsibility
- Working well within rules and limits
- Tolerating frustration
- Adapting to change
- Being reliable and consistent
- Being self-directed
- Keeping your perspective and sense of humour



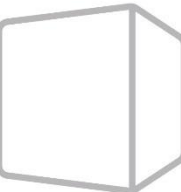
Manifestations of stress

Psychological

Emotional

Physical

Behavioural



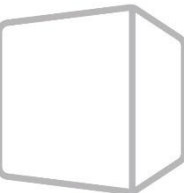
Signs of Stress in Individuals

A change in the way someone behaves may be a sign of stress, e.g:

- Taking more time off
- Arriving for work later
- Appearing more nervous
- Mood swings
- Withdrawing more from social contact
- Loss of motivation, commitment and confidence
- Increased emotional reactions – being more tearful, sensitive or aggressive



How might stress
manifest in people
with different
behavioural styles?



Dominance

D

direct
results-oriented
strong-willed
forceful

Influence

i

outgoing
enthusiastic
optimistic
lively

Steadiness

S

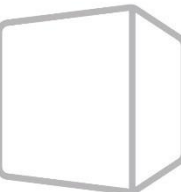
even-tempered
accommodating
patient
humble

Conscientiousness

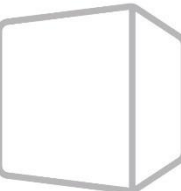
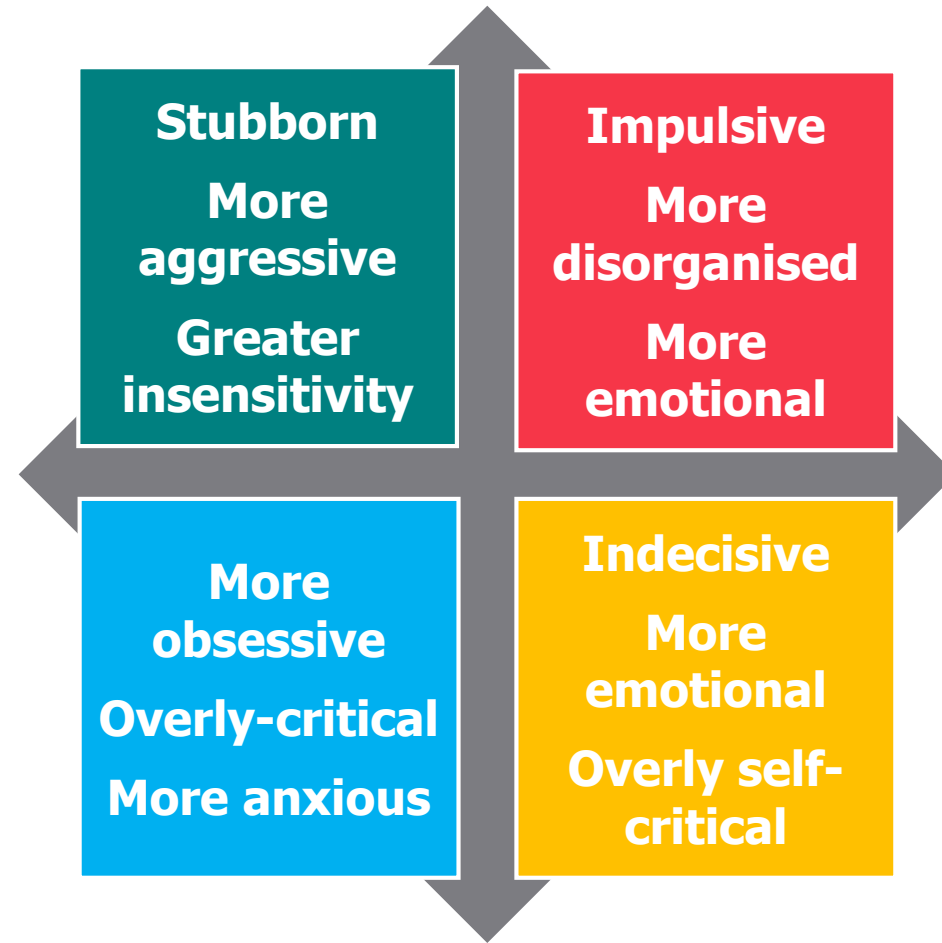
C

analytical
reserved
precise
systematic

Taken from the DiSc Model – a Psychometric tool which looks at behavioural/communication style



Possible signs of stress

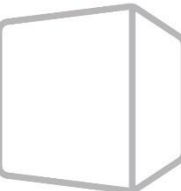


Teams under Stress

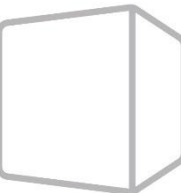
Signs that teams may be experiencing stress:



(Health and Safety Executive 2018)



Tools and techniques



Control/Influence/No Control or Influence

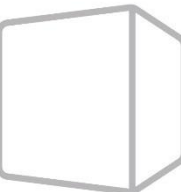
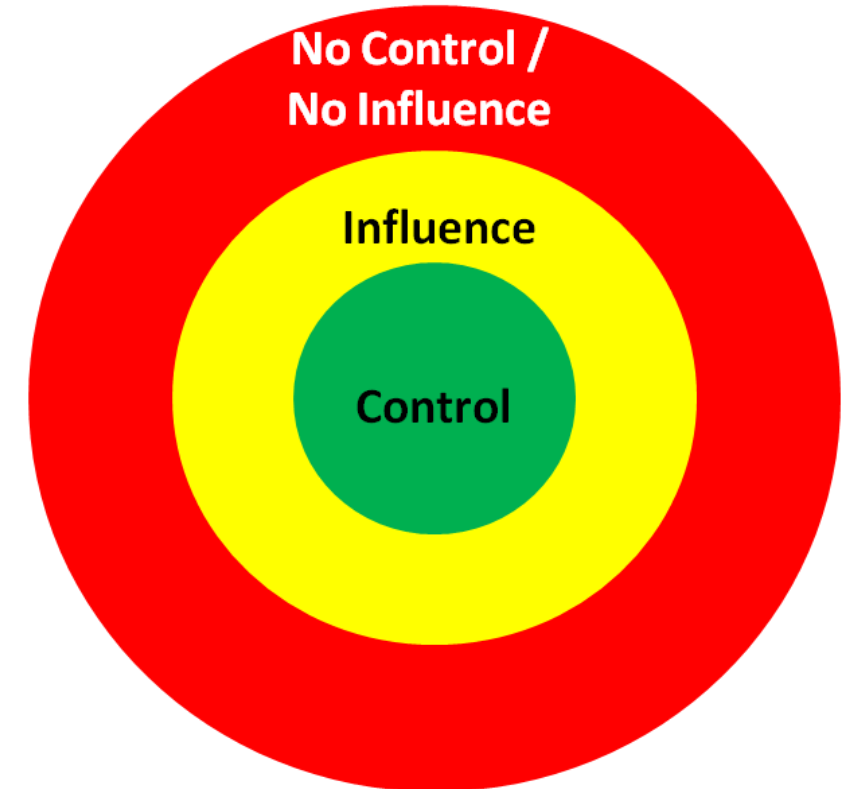
Focus on those things over which you have control:

Ask yourself, "What can I do to make this situation better/more manageable?"

Where you have no control:

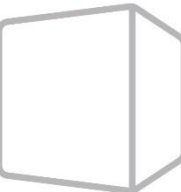
Ask yourself, "Can I influence someone who has more control/might be able to help?", "How will I do this?"

Finally, ask yourself, "How can I help myself to let go of those things over which I have no control or influence?", "How do I stop expending worry/energy on these?"



General coping strategies

- Be aware of what stresses you
- Try to view life as challenges, not obstacles to overcome
- Accept personal responsibility for your life without blaming others
- Find an absorbing hobby / interest
- Try not to dwell in the past
- Recognise what you can control and change/ Try not to sweat the small stuff
- Mix with people who exude positive energy and make you feel good – radiators vs drains...
- Do something kind for others



Use positive language

The language we use can, not only, affect how we feel but can have a positive or negative effect on others. Try using positive language...

Negative Language

I'm so anxious

It's a problem

Life's such a struggle

If only

How will I cope?

This is a nightmare

What a disaster

Why me?

This is so unfair

Positive Language

I'm concerned

It's a challenge

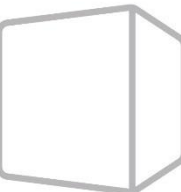
This is tough right now but will get better

Whatever happens, I can handle it..

I can learn from this

I'm not a failure if I don't make it... I'm a success for trying

This too shall pass...



Self Management Strategies

Physical

- Engage in enjoyable exercise
- Maintain a reasonable diet
- Try to get 7-8 hours sleep a night
- Avoid too much caffeine, alcohol or nicotine
- Take breaks away from your desk/work site

Social

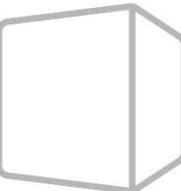
- Develop a support system
- Mix with people who make you feel good
- Do something kind for others
- Develop assertiveness skills

Psychological

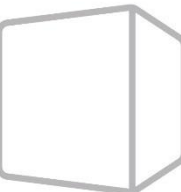
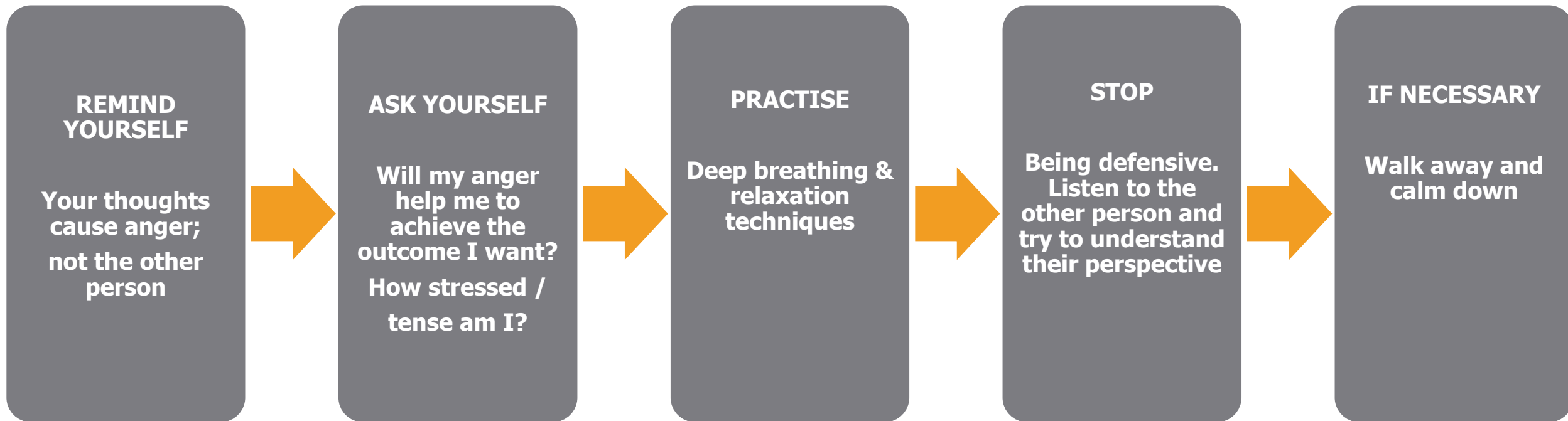
- Be aware of your stressors
- Try to view life as challenges; not obstacles to overcome
- Protect your personal space
- Try not to dwell in the past
- Don't sweat the small stuff
- Recognise what you can and can't change
- Talk to someone you trust

Spiritual

- Yoga or Mindfulness
- Meditation
- Make time for your faith/spirituality
- Be kind to yourself
- Forgive yourself



Managing anger/frustration: Remember, Ask, Practise...



STOP Model



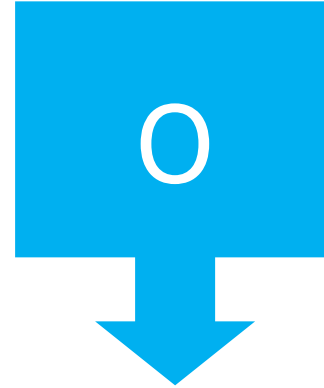
STOP

When I realise
I'm losing
control...



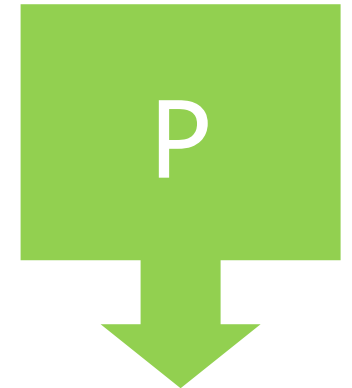
THINK

Am I behaving
rationally and in a
professional
manner?



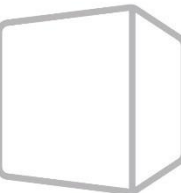
OBSERVE

Reflect on and
evaluate the
results I'm
obtaining



PAUSE

Re-direct towards
my goals or leave
the situation until I
recover my inner
balance



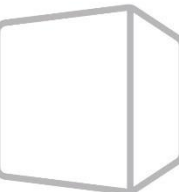
Interrupters for Emotional Reactions

Take a few deep breaths

Think about favourite / calming sounds, smells and images

Ask for a pause

Excuse yourself from the situation



Other suggestions for personal development

Personality tests/ Strengths assessments/360 Degree Feedback

Coaching/Mentoring

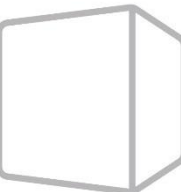
Self-reflection-Take time to reflect on your behaviour. How do you perceive yourself? How do others perceive you? What can you learn from observing your behaviour?

Keeping a Journal-Capturing our inner thoughts and feeling in a journal helps us to objectify them.

Change your personal narrative- Your life story is a fundamental component of your personality. "The stories we tell ourselves about our lives don't just shape our personalities—they are our personalities."
Dan McMasters

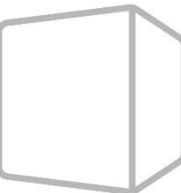
Observing others- We are all more alike than we are different. In observing other people, we can often learn a great deal about our behaviour.

"What irritates us in others teaches us about ourselves" Carl Jung



Key Messages

- Take care of yourself
- Find what works for you in terms of stress management
- Be aware of what's on offer e.g. Occupational Health, Counselling Services
- Limit your exposure to News/ Social Media coverage of stressful topics
- Spend time with “radiators, not drains” and try to be a radiator yourself
- Use the info in the HSE Toolkit <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress>



What are your personal next steps?

What will you work on?
How will you do this?
What are your first steps?
What help will you need?
How will you sustain the change?

Create 1 or 2 Development Objectives

