

Lorelei Matzau



free

in 12 weeks

PREFACE

Let us not beat around the bush: Stress is here to stay. Over the past ten years, there has been an explosive increase in the number of people who have had to pull the plug and take months of sick leave due to stress. There is so much stress in our lives today that we have to find a way to live with it in a way that does not make us ill.

As a psychologist, I have met and experienced stress in many forms, and I have seen people come out on the other side enough times that I know it can be done.

This book is a guide for anyone who is suffering from stress but also for professionals who work with people afflicted by stress. The book aims to take the drama out of the condition and to debunk the many myths about stress that only make things worse. Today, the myths about stress may in fact be doing more harm than the condition in itself by stigmatising people who show a natural response to an unhealthy situation.

First, we need to separate facts from myths, so that you can know what is well-founded and documented and what advice you should ignore. This book offers an introduction to stress – what stress does to your body and your brain, and how it affects the way you think and act. A prerequisite for changing the impact of stress is that you understand the nature of the condition. Well-meaning friends, family members and co-workers often act as if they are experts on stress and have lots of advice to offer – quite unlike the response you would see if you told them, for example, that you had cataracts. And since stress makes you particularly vulnerable and exposed, you need to shield yourself from the well-intended advice and prejudiced responses that will only make you more confused. Comments like ‘No wonder, you’re such a perfectionist!’, ‘You never could say no’ and ‘Just relax!’ never actually helped anyone.

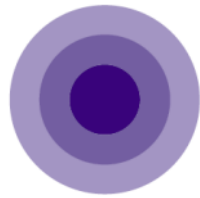
Stress does not need to be that serious or lead to a full-blown breakdown. Even if you do have to take some sick leave, it is relatively easy to emerge from a stress breakdown stronger than before. The key to recovery just does not lie in the many quick-fix solutions that you read about in lifestyle magazines or hear about from your co-workers.

As you will see in this book, stress is the result of excessive pressure over a prolonged period, perhaps even coming from multiple sources. Stress conditions do not develop overnight, and consequently it also takes time to recover from stress. After a severe stress reaction, it will take you about twelve weeks to regain your balance on every level.

Everybody can recover from even the most severe stress condition. But the better you are at calming down your body and mind, the faster you can recover. Most people are keen to end their sick leave as quickly as possible. But as you will see, trying to rush the process only slows it down. In other words, the harder you step on the accelerator, the slower you go.

The book has a self-help section with specific advice on how to recover from stress. Should you see a therapist or a stress coach? What should you tell your supervisor? What do you say to the helpful co-workers? And what about your friends? Your partner? And the kids? What is the best way for you to help your body and your mind escape the clutches of stress? How do you achieve a stress-free life at home and at work? In other words: What do you need to do to create the sense of calm that you need to be stress-free in twelve weeks – and remain stress-free the rest of your life?

Lorelei Matzau
Copenhagen, 2014



Outside the circle:
You don't have stress at all

The outer zone:
You don't have stress – yet

The middle zone:
You do have stress

The inner zone:
Stress breakdown

HOW TO USE 'STRESS-FREE IN 12 WEEKS

You are probably reading this book because you have stress – or someone close to you does. The first challenge is to understand that stress and self-awareness do not go together. Why that is, will be explained in the first chapters of the book. Indeed, one of the reasons why so many people have stress breakdowns is that the last person to become aware of it is usually the one who has stress. Therefore, it is essential to determine whether you are in fact stressed – or whether something else is going on. And if you are stressed, it is important to determine how affected your nervous system is, and how long the conditions has been affecting you. The answers to these questions will help guide you in the right direction – towards regaining your balance, well-being and energy.

Chapter One: Stress can affect anyone

The first chapter tells you what stress is – and what it is not. Here, the myths are debunked, and you will realise that stress is not about what you may have thought it was about. You learn how you can spot stress in your own life and others', and in extension of this insight you will be able to assess your stress level as described in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two: Check your stress level

This chapter introduces the concept of the stress staircase and the four levels of stress that I operate with in diagnosing stress. The first two levels – outside the circle and the outer zone – do not lead to a stress diagnosis, but because stress builds and escalates over time, the outer zone (early stress) is a good place to act to prevent stress, even though the stress level in the outer zone is far from harmful. The middle and inner zones (stress and breakdown), however, are levels that will lead to a stress diagnosis and may require sick leave. When you have read Chapter Two you will know your own stress level, and you will have identified the sources of your stress. Chapter Two contains tools to help you identify these factors.

Chapter Three: A how-to guide for the outer zone

If your self-assessment puts you in the outer zone you do not have stress (yet), only a slightly elevated level of stress hormones in your body, ideally only temporarily. Chapter Three offers advice and recommendations to help you balance your life and get back outside the circle which is where we all thrive and perform optimally.

Chapter Four: A how-to guide for the middle zone

If you find yourself in the middle zone, you do have stress, and you need to take an immediate time-out. You will have multiple stress symptoms and be able to identify specific stress reactions. In addition, you will have an elevated level of stress hormones in your body, and you are probably very tired but unable to sleep well enough or long enough to recuperate fully. Chapter Four offers help, recommendations and advice to help you regain your balance and energy and calmly guide you back to the outer zone.

Chapter Five: A how-to guide for the inner zone

This is the central zone, and you have had a stress breakdown. That is a fact. And ... you need to take sick leave. A stress breakdown is not harmful but a natural response, and the only cure is peace and quiet, rest and sleep. Chapter Five offers recommendations for the duration of your sick leave and what you need to do to use your sick leave to recover fully and regain your balance. The following chapters give you a week-by-week schedule to follow.

Chapter Six: A how-to guide for your sick leave: week 0-1

Advice and recommendations for what questions to bring up with your doctor and what to say to your supervisor, your family and your co-workers when you take your sick leave.

Chapter Seven: Just stay in bed: week 2-8

Kind and specific advice about how to practice letting go and begin doing something new: relaxing and finding peace. Week 2-8 form a critical stage, and the chapter offers specific advice.

Chapter Eight: Now you begin to let go: week 9-12

This chapter offers recommendations and advice about how to get back in touch with your body and soul during your sick leave and how you may begin to look to the future.

Chapter Nine: Back in biz! Week 13 and on

Help for the critical stage that occurs when you return to work after a prolonged sick leave. Learn how to avoid falling back into the stress trap.

Chapter Ten: Oops, I did it again!

Even though you are fully recovered now and experience well-being and balance in your life, stress will always come and go. Chapter Ten gives you knowledge, advice and guidance on how to balance your future life in a simple and natural way to make life a dance and an exploration of potentials – rather than a constant battle with stress.

CHAPTER 1

STRESS CAN AFFECT ANYONE – NOT JUST YOU!

'Why me?' you might ask, when stress has overwhelmed you. Why did it hit you and not your co-worker or your supervisor?

That is a natural question to ask for an open-minded and reflective person. The answer is that it might as well have affected someone else. Stress is a basic human defence mechanism, and in a sense, stress reactions are part of the mind's natural self defence or immune system.

When the brain is overloaded, it responds by adopting a defensive stance, shutting down to protect itself. Initially, the brain – that is, the nervous system – attempts to handle the many inputs, problems and stressors, but eventually – when the problems and the massive information flow simply continue – the brain begins to shut down. That is why we experience memory failure and concentration problems, and in a sense, both these features are assets rather than deficits.

Many think that stress only affects a certain personality type, that there is 'something in their psychological makeup' that makes some people more susceptible to stress. This 'something' is often described as low self-esteem, perfectionism or being a control freak. Thus, countless magazines will tell you that perfectionists are especially susceptible to stress. This assumption stems from a 50-year-old personality theory that categorises people into A and B types and posits that the A types are the ones most likely to have stress.

And even if it may appear that way when we encounter someone who has had a stress breakdown, there is no evidence for this assumption today. Recent research has rejected the myth that stress is about personality types. In his book *Stress och Sjukdom* (Stress and disease), Alexander Perski of Karolinska Institutet in Sweden underscores that stress is rarely about individual, personal factors and instead stems directly from prolonged exposure to pressure. Stress is due to overload and can affect anyone. This means that you are not a STRESS TYPE, because there is no such thing. Your supervisor or your co-worker, your friend or your partner is equally susceptible. Let us therefore, once and for all, put an end to the myth that stress is a sign of a weak mental constitution or a particular personality type. If that were the case, and stress were associated with certain personality types or mentalities, why were previous generations not afflicted with stress?

There are several explanations for that. One explanation has to do with terminology, because of course our ancestors too were worried, nervous and anxious, and they could be busy and tired, but they were not constantly bombarded with information and countless complex stress factors the way we are today, in a modern society where everyone is online all the time. Our grandparents did not live surrounded by technology in the form of computers, TV, smartphones and cameras. Today, we all interact with lots of technological devices on a daily basis that we basically do not comprehend. In the past, life had a more tangible and manageable character. Your grandmother did not have stress, even when she was busy, in part because she was busy in a society where technology was not moving faster than man.

Stress is a response to a situation where the body and mind have come out of balance in a rapidly changing world.

In the Western world, in fact, stress is well on the way to being just as serious a health problem as obesity – and the number of people affected by stress is growing rapidly. Through out the modern Western world, thus stress is viewed as one of the biggest challenges, and WHO has predicted that stress will be the leading global health risk in 2020. Recent studies show that half of all adults in the UK feel stressed on a daily basis, and that 59% of British adults say their life is more stressful than it was five years ago. Severe stress involves characteristic stress symptoms such as irregular heartbeat, anxiety, sleep problems, irritability, anxiety and fatigue.

The free market forces have proved unsustainable. But rather than understanding how the complex factors in modern life create increasing pressure, we often view stress as the result of a fragile personality, which is popularly described as based on perfectionism paired with low self-esteem: a flawed personality that needs fixing and development. This approach creates more harm than good and is one of the reasons why stress levels continue to rise in the general population. We need new, effective solutions.

It is important not to view ourselves as consisting of separate parts, such as a family part and a work part. We are whole persons; we bring emotions, tensions and fatigue from work back to our families – and we can only take so much pressure before we crack. Unfortunately, we only discover what our limits are when we find that we cannot take anymore. Sometimes, a misplaced comment or a restructuring at work can be the thing that makes our house of cards come tumbling down, or it can be the assignment of new, unfamiliar work tasks.

Although stress is an overwhelming condition that you would prefer to avoid, as would anyone, it does not make you 'damaged goods'. Everyone can recover from even severe stress without ever suffering a relapse. That requires, however, that you do things differently and make good, healthy choices.

The following exercises can help you make these changes and make good personal choices.

Exercise

First, write down your five most self-blaming assumptions.

It is my own fault that I have stress because:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Now write down why that is not true:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Five facts that will help you move forward.

- Ten percent of the population have already had severe stress – I am one out of many.
- I will recover, even though I am suffering from anxiety and depression at the moment.
- I am fortunate (!) that my body and my mind put on the brakes before I get severely ill.
- Anyone can develop stress (it is only a matter of pressure).
- Stress is a natural reaction to excessive pressure.

Everyday stressors:

- E-mails
- Text messages
- Phone calls
- Traffic
- Noise
- Messages
- Rush hour
- Picking up the children before a certain time
- Interruptions
- TV
- Chatting in the corridor
- Deadlines

Breaks are important for the brain. However, when we fill up our breaks with e-mails, text messages and other distractions such as TV and radio, checking our e-mail during lunch or checking our voice mail messages during the coffee break at a seminar, we miss out on these important mental breaks. You may feel that you are relaxing as you quickly check our inbox, but your brain is put to work – and what is worse: It is prevented from registering how you feel. In that sense, these distractions keep us ticking away and keep us from noticing how tired and stressed we may actually be.

Interruptions are extremely stressful. If you are interrupted in the middle of a task it takes 20-30 minutes before your brain has regained the same degree of focus as before. For many, a typical working day consists of an endless number of interruptions, and unfortunately, efficiency is rarely high in companies where people feel stressed. On the contrary.

Why it's not your fault

No one develops stress on purpose.

Nevertheless, many people who suffer from stress feel personally responsible for their 'failure' to cope. In many cases, the people around them in fact confirm their sense that they are to blame for their own stress. 'You've always been such a perfectionist,' 'You do have to have things your own way,' and 'You are no good at saying "no"!'

But stress is a result of overload, and it does not happen because you are stupid or because you are pre-disposed to it, but simply because you were the one doing the work. In other words, your stress did not develop out of the blue: You developed stress because you were going all in. Instead of receiving praise and a generous bonus for your effort, you wind up on sick leave – perhaps even with the added message that it is, in a sense, your own fault.

What would you think if a woman went to see her doctor because she had a lump in her breast and was told that it was her own fault that she had developed cancer, because she is a 'cancer type'?! Right? Nevertheless, that attitude is widely encountered by many people with stress.

In other words, you are no more to blame for your stress than you are for catching a cold if your immune system is temporarily impaired, or for having sore muscles from going out for a run after being inactive for some time. Stress is a natural reaction to a degree of pressure that overtaxes your brain and your emotions – and words like 'fault' and 'type' have no place in the treatment of stress.

Many competent, talented people have had stress breakdowns before you. The crucial point is not whether you are overwhelmed by stress once in your life. The crucial point is to make sure it does not happen again.

'As a psychologist I have been contacted many times in recent years by journalists with a great idea for an article. They would like to write about which personality types develop stress. Therefore, they ask me, in my capacity as a psychologist, to describe the "typical" victim of stress. My usual reply is that there is no such thing. We all develop stress. Who does and who does not is strictly a matter of the degree of overload.'

– LORELEI MATZAU

The art is to learn from your present stress condition to avoid stress in the future

Many people suffer from stress without knowing it. Stress symptoms come in so many guises and forms that they can be hard to interpret for a layperson. (In many cases, the people around the affected person see it more clearly and may even point it out to the person.)

It is natural to miss signs that you do not, at first glance, understand the meaning of – or which you may misinterpret without giving it much thought. Many busy people react to a sense of anxiety by springing into action, because we naturally assume that we will regain our sense of calm by solving all our problems. Therefore you may not even have been aware that the sensations in your body were signs of stress. Recurring headaches, reduced sex drive, frequent colds etc. may be some of the signs that you will recognise, after reading this book, as indications that your body and your mind are under too much pressure.

Symptoms of stress – including some that you are not familiar with

Nature has equipped us with an intricate signal system. Stress signals that manifest themselves in our body, our mind and our behaviour are like physical and mental alarm bells, warning us of high tension and hazardous conditions ahead. The signals fall into three distinct categories: physical, behavioural and emotional, and knowing your own typical stress signals will help you read your own inner compass and live your life accordingly: avoiding decisions that undermine your body and your mind. In other words: life without stress.

Typical physical signals include:

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Elevated blood pressure
- Irregular heart beat and rapid pulse
- Shaking hands
- Pressure and pain in the chest region
- Shortness of breath
- Body tension
- Restlessness and a buzzing feeling in the body
- Sleep problems
- Tension around the solar plexus
- Stomach aches and digestive problems (diarrhoea, constipation)
- Reduced sex drive
- Recurring infections
- Flare-up or worsening of chronic conditions

Prolonged stress compromises the immune system, and therefore recurring infections in the form of flus or colds may be a sign that your system is under too much pressure. Chronic conditions such as migraine, allergies and asthma may also flare up again and again. If you suddenly have an inner ear infection or back pain in combination with some of the other symptoms listed below, you may be headed for overload. Worsening of a chronic condition may be a sign of stress and an indication that you need to hit the brake to avoid a stress breakdown.

The physical stress signals are temporary. Your body reacts naturally and instantly to the thoughts and feelings that buzz around in your mind when you are exposed to high levels of stress in your everyday life. However, the body also responds quickly to the opposite situation – when your mind settles down again. In that sense, we should appreciate the signals the body sends us to warn us that we are under too much pressure. This gives you a chance to pause before things get out of hand and develop into more stress.

Typical behavioural signals include:

- Overeating
- Skipping meals
- Increased use of alcohol and medication
- Mood swings
- Irritability
- Impulsivity
- Restlessness
- Reduced sense of humour
- Tendency towards isolation
- Unstable work performance
- Increased tendency towards errors and sloppiness
- More frequent conflicts
- More sick days

The most characteristic behavioural feature for someone who is developing stress is a short fuse and social isolation. The person gets worked up over minor issues that are not normally a problem and also has less inclination and energy to spend time with others. In the workplace, this often leads to more frequent conflicts, both in the workplace and at home, as mood swings, irritability and touchiness make an explosive mix in a hectic working day.

Typical emotional stress signals include:

- Feelings of guilt and inadequacy
- Anxiety
- Nervousness
- Vulnerability to criticism
- Thin skin
- Aggression
- Frustration
- Restlessness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling powerless
- Depression
- Fatigue

I was able to tick all the stress symptom boxes

Name: Cathie Miller

Age: 45 years

Job: Management consultant

Marital status: Mother of two, bonus mother of three in a new relationship with Tom

My stress manifested itself in ... lots of classic physical stress indicators, which gradually increased in number. Eventually, I was able to tick all the 'stress symptom boxes': Shallow breathing, heart palpitations, sleep problems, racing thoughts and dizziness. The dizziness made me see my doctor, who diagnosed a virus affecting my balance system, 'vestibular neuritis', and told me to stay home from work. That suited me perfectly. If he had said stress, I would have had to reconsider my pace and my working life, and I was not ready for that. His (mis-) diagnosis initially saved my personal pride. But soon after came the behavioural signs, with performance anxiety and feelings of inadequacy and despondency, and in the

end I was prone to crying. Still, I kept making it to work every day, until a co-worker went straight for the sore spot and said, 'Cathie, you don't seem to be doing that great.'

My biggest challenge ... was to acknowledge that I was stressed and the sense of shame that it involved. That this was something I couldn't talk or work my way out of, and that I suddenly had these dark thoughts. That was hard, because I wasn't the sort of person to break down.

The low point ... The embarrassment and the shame were overwhelming. I hated having to take sick leave, and I reached rock bottom about a month into it. The low point was obvious when we went on a skiing holiday where I had some interpersonal conflicts and reacted in a way I would never normally react. I have always had a virtually unlimited capacity for accommodation, and suddenly I was speaking up instead of biting my tongue. In a way, that was a good sign, but the way I did it was horrible. Tom, who had been so supportive of me all the way, was fed up and withdrew from me. That scared me no end. I was afraid of losing what was most important in my life: Tom and our beautiful children. So, in a way, the fear did me a favour.

The turning point ... followed just after I hit rock bottom. I briefly thought that maybe it would be easier to just let go. That was scary, absolutely terrifying. When my therapist said that we had probably come as far as we would with therapy alone, I took the step and agreed to take medication. I really did not like the idea, but it gave me enough of a boost that I was able to begin to deal with my behaviour. Once I let go, the tide began to turn.

The high point ... It was a high point when I began to take myself seriously. I went back to work part-time and very gradually increased the number of hours. I'm glad that I didn't try to 'erase' my stress period by going back to work full-time as the super woman who just grits her teeth and thinks that she can do anything. Since the turning point there have been several high points. Every time I have the courage to stand up for myself and do what I find exciting and turn down the things that are stressful, I am happy.

I wish I had known ... what this hectic working and family life does to us. I wish I hadn't resisted that insight. And I wish I had known that medication can mean many different things; it can't stand alone without therapy – but it actually does help.

My best advice ... Take good care of yourself, you're the only one of your kind. Stay in touch with yourself, and make sure to balance the things that are stressful with the things that make you happy. Never ignore the body's basic needs, they are so essential! Remember to get enough sleep, rest, enjoyable exercise, walks, daylight and proper food. Don't be afraid to admit that you have stress – the sooner you do that, the sooner you'll begin to get better!

A person who is suffering from stress typically feels powerless, overwhelmed and inadequate. He or she will focus much more on how to manage work assignments, and how the co-workers or the supervisor is going to cope, than on paying attention to his or her own condition. Stress is often accompanied by a profound sense of guilt and self-blame.

Generally, the physical tensions and aches and pains are triggered by the thoughts and feelings underlying the stress; the physical condition is almost always a consequence of the psychological state. Working with both aspects leads to the necessary release that promotes recovery.

What is going on inside you?

But why is stress so hard to handle? Why do we not simply pause and calm down when our life becomes too hectic? Maybe it has something to do with perfectionism after all?

The answer to that question has more to do with our biology than with our individual psychological makeup. The biological mechanisms surrounding stress have been explored in some depth in recent years, and today we can measure stress in the body by recording the levels of certain hormones in the bloodstream. It is possible to measure stress, for example by asking a person to perform certain mental tasks or by exposing him or her to stressful noises. These experiences can be measured in our bloodstream, and imaging technology makes it possible to identify which brain centres are activated. Stress can therefore be understood as the changes that occur in our body and in our brain when we are put under pressure by internal factors – feelings and thoughts – or by factors in the outside environment. These physiological changes are caused by the release of stress hormones and neurotransmitters when we are under pressure.

The hormones in question are adrenalin, noradrenalin and cortisol, also known as the body's stress hormones, and serotonin, often referred to in the popular literature as nature's happiness hormone. These hormones interact, so that when the level of stress hormones goes up, the level of the happiness hormone goes down – a clever interaction as long as the balance is intact but extremely unpleasant for someone afflicted by stress. In simplified terms, as our stress levels go up, our well-being and happiness go down.

Stress activates a part of the nervous system called the sympathetic nervous system (it would seem more appropriate to call it the unsympathetic system...). This system produces stress hormones to enable us to rise to the challenges we face. The sympathetic nervous system originated as a fight-or-flight system, and in our distant past, this response secured the survival of our cavemen ancestors when they faced imminent threats, for example in connection with hunting or natural disasters.

Although the human mind has evolved along with our technological and social development over the past 10,000 years, we still have the same basic physiology as primitive man. When we encounter a stress situation today, the same basic but very powerful fight-or-flight hormones are activated, exactly as they were when a caveman encountered a bear or a wolf. At the time of the cavemen, the activation of these hormones offered significant survival benefits, as they enhance our physical strength considerably.

In the modern world, however, attacking one's supervisor physically or fleeing from the boardroom during budget talks is ill-advised. We therefore stick to our poker face and maintain a professional demeanour, however strongly our emotions and hormones rage inside us. We suppress our physiological fight-or-flight impulses, and instead of finding release, the stress hormones are embedded in the body. That produces stress and may ultimately – in the case of chronic overload – lead to cardio-vascular diseases.

Blackout

When the stress hormones are activated, our ability to think and solve problems is diminished, and our memory is impaired. On the other hand, our physical strength is enhanced, which is useful in connection with physical threats, as mentioned above, but in the rational world of the office landscape and society at large, the activation of fight-or-flight hormones have a negative effect. They reflect a natural impulse that is impossible to follow, which is why the stress reaction of 'blackout' is so common. Our body receives signals that we are exposed to an imminent physical threat, but we are restricted to a mental response, so the pent-up physical energy becomes a sort of overload that blocks our capacity for rational thinking. In this way, stress can produce a vicious circle.

Even if you are not facing physical threats in the office, the piles on your desk and the incoming e-mails (especially the ones you have not had time to reply to, or which relate to a conflict issue) have a similar effect to a threatening predator. They trigger the same activation of the sympathetic nervous system.

When you are stressed you may feel the urge to scream, shout and freak out – and if you did, your stress levels would undoubtedly drop immediately. That is, after all, the reason why the body is releasing hormones into your system: to produce and enable a reaction.

Blackout describes a reaction that most people are familiar with in connection with exam anxiety or other sorts of performance anxiety, and this breakdown in rational thinking is a completely natural phenomenon, which occurs when we experience stress, pressure or crises. People who have been under pressure for a long time and who have developed a severe level of stress have an abnormally high level of stress hormones in their physical system and are therefore living in a constant state of readiness and vigilance. Eruptions of stress hormones flood the physical and mental system with every additional mental task, our capacity for clear, rational thinking and problem-solving is muddled and blocked, and our memory shuts down.

‘There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re just stressed!’

One of the unpleasant consequences of stress is that we lose of our sense of perspective exactly when we need it most. Small tasks or issues seem completely unmanageable. Moreover, this lack of proportions makes us lose sight of the most important things in life.

This makes us miss out on lots of good experiences at the same time as we struggle with feelings of guilt and inadequacy. A classic example is that you feel guilty for leaving work early (although you have in fact been working over-time), and at the same time we feel that we are neglecting our family (although you come home as early as you can). As a result, many are plagued by constant guilt over not taking better care of themselves and others – not being there for their loved ones, because they were so busy trying to meet impossible deadlines or living up to management’s expectations.

Feelings of inadequacy are a common aspect of the stress syndrome. Stress activates the full emotional register, but feelings of inadequacy, unhappiness, exhaustion, anger and irritability do not constitute your personality, and they are not necessarily accurate. They are also not a sign of incompetence or proof that you are a bad parent or a useless wife – they are part of a stress reaction.

You can recognise stress-related feelings by the fact that they are almost always unpleasant and produce tension. So when you worry that you may have lost your capacity to put in a big work effort or think that you may have some mental flaw that makes you weaker than everyone else, think again. You don’t! You are completely normal. You are simply stressed. If you are experiencing a high level of stress in your life right now, you may wonder whether you will ever regain your sense of perspective. You will, as soon as your system has been allowed to settle down. You simply need to get the stress out of your system, then your sense of perspective will return, and you can begin to make the right choices. Then you can begin wonderful journey that a stress-free life can be.

Stress is a healthy response to an unhealthy situation.

Exercise

Am I under pressure?

Write down ten things that would ease your stress:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

What every woman needs to know about stress

Although stress affects both men and women, women often handle it differently. Women also tend to react to different stressors – naturally. Women are thus more likely to experience a higher degree of stress related to the difficult balance between work and family life.

Brain studies of men and women exposed to stress found a gender difference with regard to which parts of the brain were affected by stress hormones, and for how long. While male brains typically showed increased blood flow in the left frontal cortex, which activates the human fight-or-flight response, female brains typically showed increased activation of the limbic system, which is associated with emotional reactions. The study also found that the stress level remained high for longer in the female participants compared to the men.

In a stress situation, the body produces adrenalin and cortisol, which are released into the bloodstream. This increases the heart rate, the blood flow and the metabolism. These are important and helpful physical changes that enable us to react quickly and effectively under pressure. But even low levels of stress hormones in our brains and bodies affect us, especially if the pressure is constant, because the nervous system is activated all the time.

That is like having the lights on in your home 24 hours a day, even on bright sunny days. That is a waste of energy and money. But even worse: The constant activation also takes its toll on you and your body. The extra stress hormones constantly buzzing around in your system give you a feeling of constantly being 'on' or 'falling behind' and trigger feelings of being 'overwhelmed' and 'exhausted'. In physiological terms, the constant presence of stress hormones in your blood makes you more susceptible to disease, because the stress hormones impair your immune system.

Women are more susceptible to stress than men. That is not because we are weaker but perhaps because we often juggle more things at once and demand more of ourselves and our surroundings in emotional terms. Although most families today would claim that they share household responsibilities and chores, the responsibility for the children and for the day-to-day functioning of the family often rests on the woman's shoulders.

Why do women develop stress?

Stress is typically seen as a women's condition – previously, the explanation has been that women may simply have a poorer capacity for handling stress. There are other possible explanations, however. Here are seven candidates:

1) Men are actually just as stressed as women are. However, they do not figure as prominently in the statistics since men tend to avoid seeing health care professionals. And even if they do consult a professional, they tend to downplay their symptoms and avoid addressing emotional pain altogether. Almost four times as many men as women commit suicide because they do not receive professional help.

2) In many areas, women hold positions with a poor balance between responsibility and influence – meaning that the person has big responsibilities but little or no influence on the conditions of the job. That is a source of frustration and stress.

3) Women still do most of the work in the home even if the families where the woman is the main provider. They also do more unpaid volunteer work than men.

4) Women often work in jobs related to care and education. These are typically person-related jobs that require a high degree of empathy. Moreover, the jobs are in areas that often suffer severe budget cuts and which are subject to growing documentation requirements, i.e. added work at the computer.

5) *Women bear children, and the natural attachment to the child means that women are subject to a more acute sense of conflict between work and family life. Fortunately, nature protects women (and thus humanity) during pregnancy and nursing, as during this period the woman's stress threshold is extraordinarily high. Pregnancy, childbirth and nursing release hormones that make women less susceptible to stress. The problem is, however, that nursing stops at some point ...*

6) *Women work more hours. A good example that stress is about too much pressure and too high a workload – not about weakness – is that women in India were recently found to have the highest prevalence of stress in the world. 87 percent of Indian women feel 'very stressed'. They are new to a highly competitive labour market, and their husbands do not traditionally help out at home.*

7) *Stress may actually take a harder physiological toll on females than on males. Recent research, so far only in rats, suggest the presence of biochemical conditions that may make females more sensitive to corticotropin releasing factor, CRF, which is produced during stress and which determines how we handle stress. Scientists do not know whether the same applies to humans, but according to the researchers, it may add to the explanation about why, on a global level, twice as many women as men suffer from stress-related diseases.*