
Stress management when faced with different thesis projects and when mentoring a PhD student

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Recommended minimum time required: 0.5 hours



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Introduction

1. Anxiety and stress

According to the WHO (1986), 'Health' is defined as:

"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Health is a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living".

Often both terms are confused and are used interchangeably, but they are essentially different.

Anxiety is a defence mechanism that is felt so you can adapt to what has happened to you. When you experience a situation that you perceive to be a threat, you respond to it in an adaptive manner.

Usually, anxiety conceals a connection with your emotions i.e. something "interrupts" your life and removes you from "normality", so as you are not accustomed to recognising your emotions or being able to express them, you offload with anxiety.

Every one of us feels anxiety in a unique way and it works in accordance with how you develop and adapt to an incident that has happened, and depends on your emotional maturity, among other things.

By having a certain degree of anxiety, this motivates you and makes you stay alert. A problem arises when the level of anxiety increases and reaches a point where it blocks you. Some people are used to living with it.

Stress is produced by a high degree of anxiety. It is the body's response that increases when you have already tolerated a certain amount of time under pressure which is also intense and is caused quite often (frequency). It is a protection response.

There are two types of stress:

- **Eustress:** this is good stress that corresponds with the mobilisation required to finalise something.
- **Distress:** this is bad stress and it is owed to psychophysiological over-activation in a way that can be harmful.

In times of stress, you can feel on a physical level (among other symptoms):

- An increase in adrenaline.
- Tachycardia or bradycardia can be caused.
- Hands and feet feel cold/sweaty.

- More rapid breathing.
- It causes muscle tension.
- Intestinal tone is decreased.
- It reduces immune system function.
- The stomach is closed off or you eat impulsively.

As a consequence:

- Health deteriorates.
- It reduces your ability to concentrate and tackle things.
- It reduces productivity.

Reflection

Identify your personal stress indicators on a physical level. What do you do to get better when you feel like that?

2. Sources of stress when faced with thesis work and PhD students

All of those factors that relate to the work, the process and the handling of a PhD student can cause stress.

Sometimes, as we have seen in the module about beliefs, if you consider that you magnify a situation, in a way that you interpret it in accordance with your mind map, you distance yourself from reality and find it hard to find a potential solution.

Within the possible sources of stress, the following can be taken as examples: not planning meetings well, arriving late, poor time management, badly written work, deadlines, communication difficulties, lack of fact-finding or resources, work is never finished, interruptions, excessive noise in the working environment, managing times of “crisis” for the PhD student, unclear issues.

Reflection

What are your sources of stress? Which are immediate sources i.e. time-dependant? Which are repeated? How do you handle them? Does it work? Could you find other ways of coping?

3. The personal traffic light

Draw a traffic light on a piece of paper. It involves associating each one of the traffic light colours with different moments which are:

Red: this is when you can't take any more, you feel blocked and stressed. What has got you to this point? What are you feeling and thinking?

Before reaching red, your body, mind or your behaviour has been giving you signals that "you weren't feeling good", where you needed to change something or stop.

Yellow: it identifies some things, situations or signals that your body provides you with (for example, I can't sleep, I've got tachycardia, etc.) and it involves a degree of anxiety that may vary from moderate to intense. From this point: what are you thinking about? What are you doing? How do you feel?

Before reaching yellow, there must be a turning point from "I'm feeling ok" to being in the yellow zone.

Green: This means a "standard" situation. Identify if you do anything to anticipate a state of anxiety.

4. Coping strategies when facing each work process

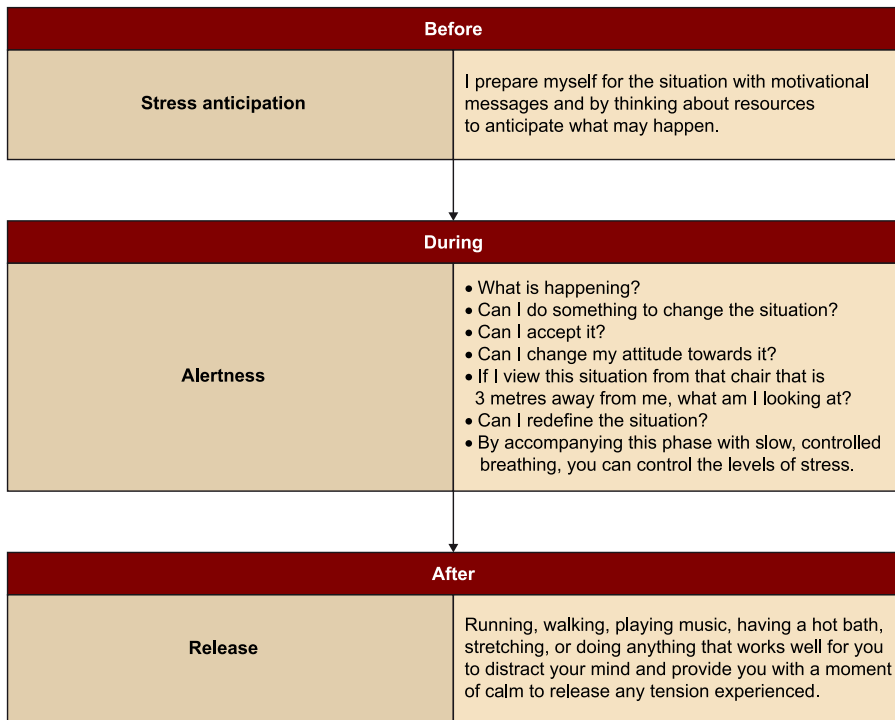
Following on from what has been stated in the previous point, whether they are real or imaginary, sources of stress make way for a response to stress.

We're going to take into account different considerations:

1) You need to follow some steps to deal with a situation that you interpret as stressful:

- Be aware of what is really happening and the way in which you are responding to it. Stop to reflect on it.
- Write down on a piece of paper "how" you are talking, what beliefs are behind it, if any cognitive distortion has occurred and what emotion accompanies it.
- There are stressful factors that you cannot change because they don't depend on you, but you can either accept them or change your attitude towards them.
- You can apply techniques (for example, the previous modules' viewpoints and what is suggested in this one).

2) You can use them at different times when a source of stress appears.



5. Mindfulness and other coping techniques

There are many varied tools and techniques. It involves trying all those that we find to see which help us more as not all work well for everybody (every one of us is unique and incomparable).

1) Breathing

By breathing well, this acts as the basis for lowering anxiety levels and reducing tension at the time. Over the course of many years and experiences, we have lost contact with our breathing and we must recover it.

How to breathe (full breathing): Place a hand over your chest and the other over your abdomen and check which hand is moving as you breathe. If it is just your uppermost hand that moves, you may have a blocked diaphragm which doesn't allow the air to reach all of your body, which could cause more tension. The hand that is touching your chest should not be moving when you breathe. This means that when you take in air, your abdomen becomes inflated (the naval area) and when you release it, it deflates. By counting, check how much time you intake air. If you are counting to 4, for example, take in air by inflating your abdomen while counting to 4, hold your breath for 1 second and then release the air while also counting to 4.

Exercise

Do 10 breaths and see if anything has changed. How do you feel?

How to relax yourself in a supervision meeting: With practice, it will become something automatic so that in a few seconds, you can do it and see results.

1. Breathe by taking a full breath in.
2. Carry on breathing in a conscious way, and when you breathe in air, tense your foot and when you exhale, relax it. Nobody will be able to see you doing this exercise.
3. You can do the same but with your hands.
4. Repeat this process various times.

2) Stretches

When tension builds up, there are usually areas of the body which are affected more: neck, shoulders, back, jaw and hands. You can stretch anywhere. It needs to be done in a relaxed and careful manner.

How to stretch and release the neck: Using your nose, you can write the numbers from 0 to 10, in a slow and exaggerated way, a couple of times a day.

3) Mindfulness techniques

Mindfulness is meditation that holds a person's full attention, and is a thousand-year-old technique that Jon Kabat-Zinn popularised in the 1970s and 80s, by working on a technique that combines oriental teaching with Western science and by clinically applying it in his Stress Reduction Clinic.

Mindfulness is a state of accepted consciousness and observation of an experience, without passing any judgement, which allows you to live in the present moment. It is a way of fostering personal development.

Mindfulness is different to relaxation, even though it occurs as a result. Mindfulness is not solely about relaxing as it goes further, given that the difference lies in the *intention*.

To practise Mindfulness, eight conditions are asked (Stahl, Goldstein, 2010):

1. Beginner's mind: as if you were seeing something for the first time.
2. Not judging: not labelling thoughts, emotions, feelings.
3. Accepting things.
4. Not forcing things: not rejecting change, not escaping from where you are.
5. Equanimity: it helps you to understand change.
6. Relinquishing: things are as they are.
7. Trust.
8. Patience.

The exercise with these qualities allows you to use your energy towards development.

We're going to do a simple meditation exercise. It can be done with chocolate, grapes or olives. In this exercise suggested by Williams and Penman (2013, pp. 63-64), it uses chocolate. Buy a chocolate bar that you don't know, or you have either never tried or not tasted in a while. The authors suggest:

- “Open the packaging. Inhale the aroma. Let it envelop you.
- Break off a piece of chocolate and look at it. Let your eyes take in every millimetre, every part of it.
- Place it in your mouth. If possible, hold onto it with your tongue and allow it to melt, while paying attention to every impulse you have to chew it. Chocolate has more than three hundred different flavours. See if you can make out any.
- If you notice that your mind has drifted, observe where it has wandered to and bring it back to the present moment.
- When the chocolate has completely melted, swallow it in a really slow, conscious way. Allow it to slide down your throat.
- Repeat with another piece.”

Reflection

How did you feel after this experience?

Exercises

Mindfulness exercises:

- EXERCISE 1
- EXERCISE 2

4) Sleep hygiene

Sometimes we find it hard to sleep because we are either thinking about things that have happened or are anticipating things that may happen.

To return to your sleeping pattern, there are certain things that can help:

- Not drinking anything containing theine or caffeine or cola after 3 pm.
- It is best to do sport in the morning as your body and mind are energised. If you do sport in the afternoon or evening, it can make it harder to sleep.
- After eating at night, don't use computers or tablets as they wake you up.
- Doing some sort of ritual before going to bed helps to prepare your body for sleeping.
- If you can't sleep, get out of bed and go somewhere else. Only go back to bed if you feel tired.
- Reduce your intake of drinks so you don't get up in the night.
- Having a hot shower or bath relaxes the muscles and induces sleep.

