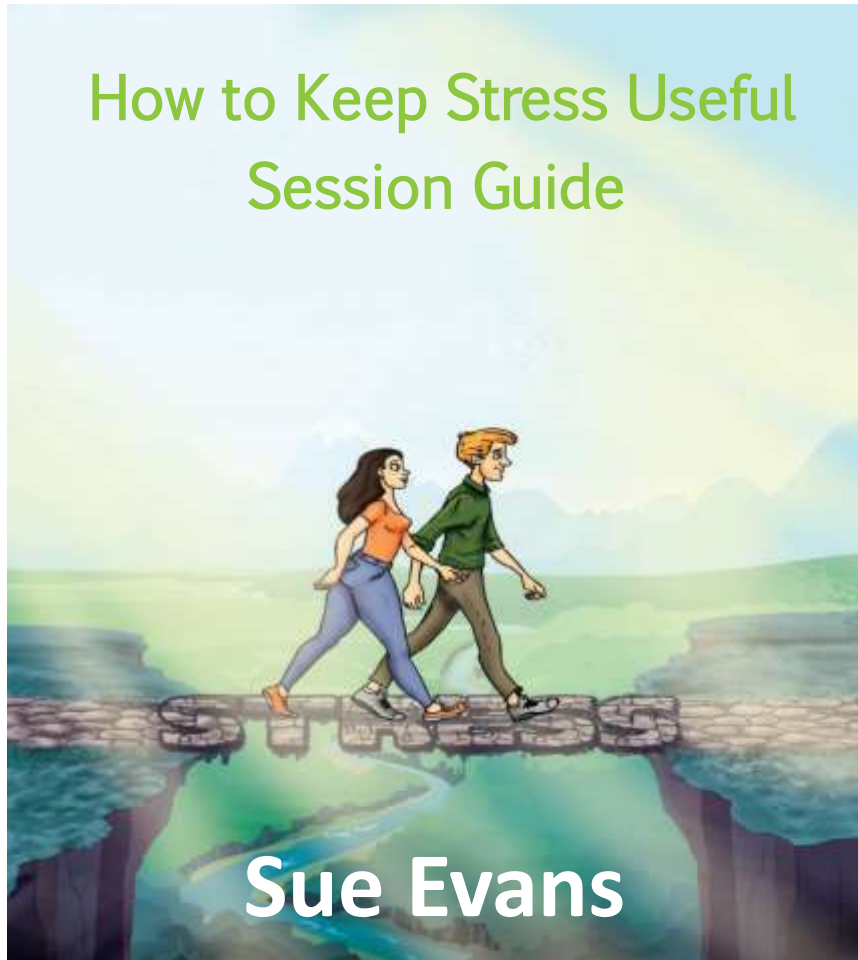


How to Keep Stress Useful Session Guide



Sue Evans

You know those days which get off to a bad start and never seem to recover? Perhaps the frustration of a dodgy internet connection, or your kids taking an age to get ready for school. And when you finally get to log in, you're greeted by that overflowing Inbox, making your heart sink before you've even got started. It's draining.

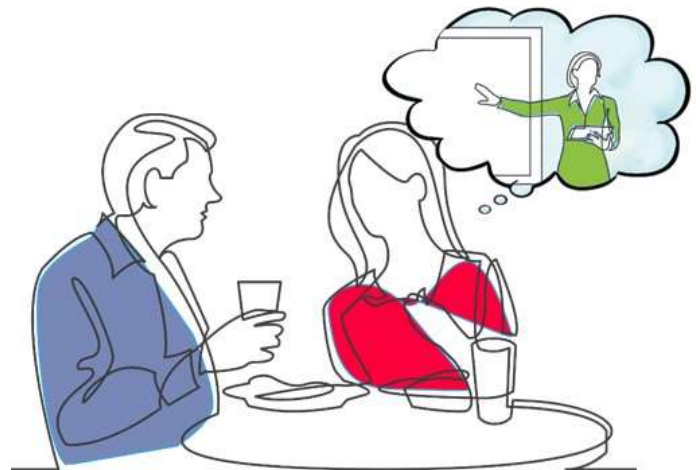
Those little frustrations and interruptions, or the daunting To-Do list, can easily have you on the back foot. How many of the people you work with are having one of those days? How many mistakes might get made, rumbling disagreements start, or opportunities get missed because they're preoccupied with day to day worries and frustrations?

The more stresses you're experiencing, the more likely they are to build up, so that things you'd normally take in your stride become a big deal. This Guide and the skills it links to, are designed to turn that back around, giving you more of the days when you've a spring in your step, and energy for whatever lies ahead. Because stress is something we all face every day, and not all stress is bad....

Useful's not how most people describe stress. So let's begin by exploring a couple of examples.

Last night, Martin had a row with his wife – his regular overtime's dried up, leaving their finances uncomfortably stretched. Even though it's not his fault, he feels guilty about earning less than usual. But when his wife brought it up, he got defensive and it all blew up. He hardly slept, and he and his wife still weren't speaking this morning. He knows that she's every right to, but he's still feeling attacked by her bringing it up. He's trying not to think about it, but his guilt and indignation are fighting it out in the background. How do you think Martin would be to work with today?

Anna's stressed too. Today's the day she's delivering a really big pitch to a potential new client, and there's a lot riding on it. She and her team have been working on it for weeks – researching the client, brainstorming, doing their sums, and putting together something which could be really good for both businesses. Anna's feeling nervous and excited all at the same time. She's well prepared and super-focused, and she's really proud to be presenting her team's work.



Both of them are experiencing stress, but it's showing up very differently. For Martin, it's getting in the way. For Anna, it's helping her to deliver a knock-out presentation.

But what if Martin was able to turn his disruptive stress into something more useful? Imagine that a few months ago, he discovered the FAST Pathways resources which we're starting to explore. He'd known for a long time that getting defensive leads to rows, making him feel even worse, so that was the first thing he wanted to change. By exploring a few of the skills, he's learned to stop that old defensive habit reaction, to stay focused on the actual issue at hand.

It still wasn't an easy conversation with his wife – it's an uncomfortable situation, which at the moment, neither of them can see a way fully out of. But they agreed on a few reductions to their outgoings, to weather it until his work picks back up again. Instead of driving them apart, talking it through made their relationship feel stronger. So although the problem still keeps popping into Martin's mind, there's no guilt or indignation, the stab of the worry's less sharp than before, and there's a bit of warm-and-fuzzy about how they're there for each other. How much better would Martin be to work with after that conversation?

Stress is a given. With so many places for it to come from, there's no getting rid of it, but not all stress is bad. What difference would it make to you, to your colleagues, to your organisation, to be able to convert more of those stresses to useful? Dive on in, and let's find out.

How Stress Affects Performance

Your mental wellbeing's about so much more than avoiding mental ill-health. It's your state of mind, and how you show up day to day. And there are so many ways that can affect performance, long before it escalates to someone going off sick.

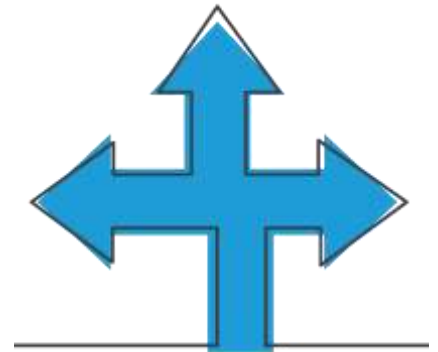


Mental Wellbeing = Resources \geq Load

Maintaining mental wellbeing means ensuring that the total load we're experiencing (our worries, frustrations, challenges, anxiety, fears, upsets....) doesn't exceed our resources for dealing with it. Exceeding our resources is uncomfortable. And the longer it persists, the greater the risk of developing mental ill-health. But let's take a look at some of its other effects.

Poor Quality of decisions

Stepping back and objectively evaluating options takes a lot of resources. If we're already feeling stretched, we're much more likely to put off important decisions, or go with whatever's simplest or most familiar, just to get it off our plate. So experiencing stress and its raised alert state can hugely impact the quality of both our day to day and longer term decisions.



More frequent mistakes

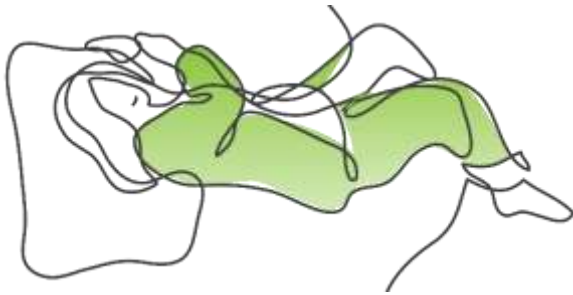
The brain's conscious capacity is limited – we can hold only around 7 pieces of information consciously active at the same time. So using up any of that capacity, for example by worrying, reduces the amount available for focusing on the task in hand. Particularly for tasks requiring clear focus and concentration, this distraction increases errors and mistakes.

Reduced creativity and problem-solving

Fight-flight-freeze, the body's response to high stress, shuts down the more creative parts of the thinking - often leaving us unable to spot solutions which would be clear to the more relaxed mind. I've supported so many people who were convinced that there was nothing they could do about the situation causing the stress. But with a few straightforward skills to take the system off high-alert, creative insights and solutions emerge.



Reduced sleep quality



Sleep is one of the body's most effective ways of replenishing those mental resources. But when we're feeling worried or overwhelmed (and we most need it to be working well), sleep's often the first thing to suffer. It's a vicious cycle – poor quality sleep leaves us less able to deal with the issues and challenges, raising the system to high alert, and further impacting sleep.

Improved sleep is often one of the first effects of the FAST Pathways skills.

Increased resistance to change

When we feel stretched, we're naturally more resistant to anything which could use up our inner resources and stretch us further. And uncertainty and change are stretching... Taking the system off high alert reduces the natural desire to protect those scarce inner resources, improving flexibility and the willingness to embrace change, and to take on new responsibilities with confidence

Increased conflict

The ability to listen openly, think objectively and see situations from different perspectives are also resource-hungry. So the more our resources are already stretched, the more we're likely to become protective of our own views and wants, potentially increasing conflict in both working and personal relationships. The average UK employee spends 1.8 hours a week dealing with conflict – that hit to capacity is equivalent to needing an extra person for every 20 people you employ....



By increasing the inner resources, the FAST Pathways skills have a proven track record of improvements in every one of these areas.

What Every Stress has in Common

Stress is complicated. It can take many different forms, because 'stress' is really an umbrella term for lots of different experiences. It's one little word which we use to describe anything from a traffic jam to a messy divorce. You might be frustrated – something isn't working the way you want. It could be big, like missing out a big promotion or business growth opportunity; or smaller, like choosing the one queue that ends up not moving. And there you are, churning it over and over in your mind and feeling hard done by.

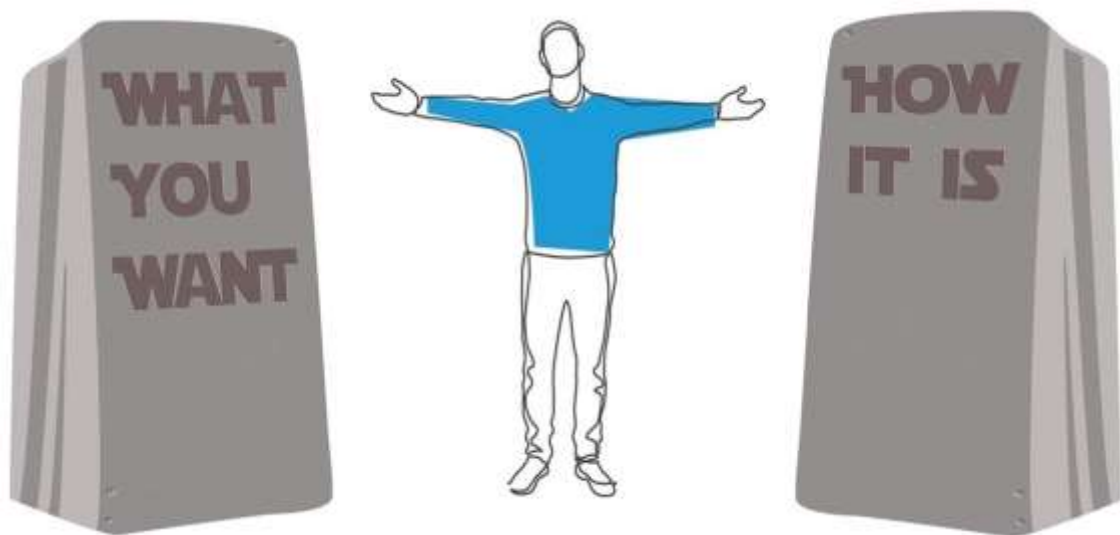
You could be anxious, worrying about something that you know you've got to face, but wish you didn't. When you think of it, your stomach lurches and your muscles tense. You keep trying to put it out of your mind, or reassure yourself that it'll be fine, but it's still there. That heightened alert, taking up your energy and attention.

You could be feeling upset – something's not gone the way you wanted, and you keep playing it over and over in your mind. The hurtful comment, the loss of something important to you. You know there's nothing you can do now to change what's happened, but that replay carries on, and it's draining.

Though each has different causes, and we experience each in different ways, every stress has something in common.

There's a gap

Between what you want, and how it is



Stretching across a gap can be uncomfortable. That discomfort gets your attention, to make you take action to reduce or resolve the gap. Anna and her team have a gap – they want that new client – and that gap's kept them focussed on pulling together a fantastic presentation.

The more gaps you're stretching across, or the bigger individual gaps are, the more uncomfortable it's likely to get. There'll be thousands of these gaps, between what you want and how it is. Countless things which aren't as you'd like, but only some of them stress you. Now of course, those are the ones that you notice, because that stress is unpleasant.



What's different between those gaps and the ones which don't bother you?

Imagine you're catching up on the news. There's a story in the headlines which grabs your attention, gets you fired up – perhaps the latest political development, which isn't being handled as you'd like. You might kick it around in your mind, pointing out what's wrong with it and what should be done instead. You might discuss it with friends or colleagues, exchanging opinions and ideas. But the chances are, it doesn't keep you up at night.

While you're thinking about it, it engages your emotions; and when you choose to stop, it goes away. A gap is a problem only while it has your attention.

The Three Types of Stress



Problem Stress

These are the stresses which you probably notice most, because they're unpleasant. They're the gaps which matter to you, which keep on getting your attention, and around which the discomfort persists.

An individual stress might not be disruptive enough on its own to become a problem, but the more of them you're facing, the more stretched your resources can become, making it the more likely that your overall stress levels will start to become uncomfortable.



Neutral Stress

Something isn't as you'd want it, but like the news headline, the discomfort of that gap doesn't persist. You're able to stop thinking about it, and when you do, the discomfort goes away.



Useful Stress

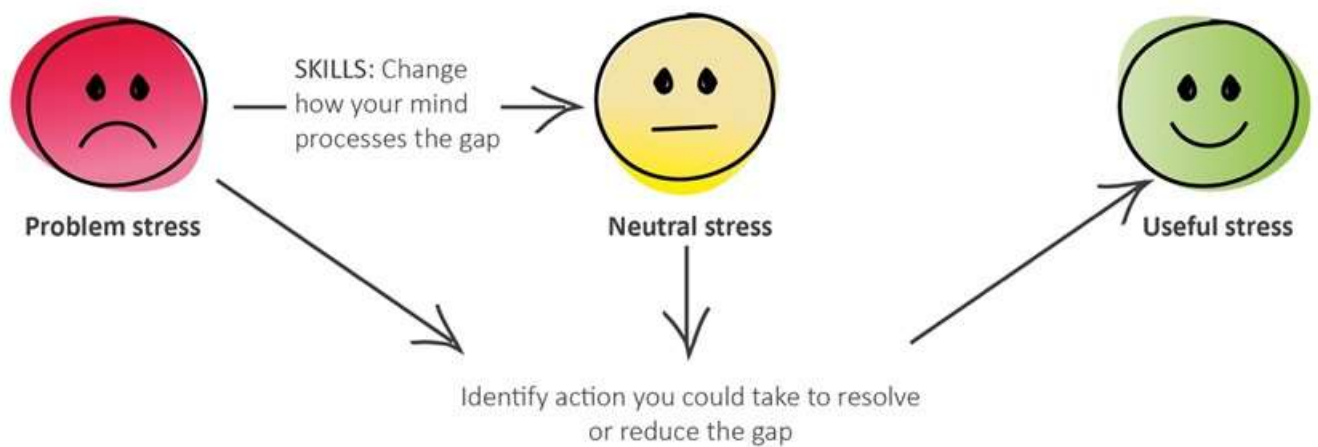
That gap between what you want and how it is, isn't always bad. The discomfort it creates can be hugely energising, as you work towards closing it. History is packed with people who've made it their life's mission to close a gap, enriching all our lives. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Edison, Nelson Mandela....

Your gap might not be about world politics or a scientific breakthrough. It could be as simple as an important presentation or challenging conversation. The gap's discomfort makes you pay attention, keeps you focused, helps you prioritise, and makes you much more likely to get the outcome you want.

Useful stress feels different from problem stress in two important ways: It feels focused rather than fearful, and it gives you energy instead of draining it away.

Some are gaps which you've chosen to experience, some you're thrown into. These useful stresses are the challenges you rise to, and relationships you strengthen by sharing the loads with (and of) the people who matter to you. These are the stresses which bring out your very best, and that's what FAST Pathways is designed to support.

How the three types of stress are related



The Stress Converter Process

You probably run this simple process thousands of times every day – it's so automatic that you barely notice it. You encounter a gap, and take action to resolve that gap's discomfort. The stab of worry about missing an important appointment gets you to set a reminder on your phone. The sinking feeling as you open your overflowing Inbox gets you to clear some of the backlog. That's the whole purpose of the discomfort, to get you to take action. And most of the time it works brilliantly. Until it gets stuck, and then it starts to get uncomfortable. That's when you need something more than auto-pilot to rely on.

Rather than leaving it to your auto-pilot, being more aware of this process can make a big difference. Have you ever felt like something's had you on the ropes? Perhaps you were asked to meet an unreasonable deadline, or you'd been given a piece of unfair feedback. It's easy to feel like there's no action you could take to make that stress useful, but there's almost always something – if not to completely resolve the gap, then to reduce it.

Identifying any potential action, even if you're not willing to actually take it, can still feel better than thinking nothing's possible. You're making an empowered choice to invest your resources elsewhere, to prioritise, rather than just reacting to situations as they happen.

That process, running away in the background, helps to maintain our mental wellbeing – making sure that those problem stresses don't build up.

Let's walk through an example of that stress converter process in action....

Sarah's been with her business for 15 years, and she's worked her way up to managing a team of 20 people. It's quite a demanding role, which she loves. She's happily married with 2 teenage kids - family's very important to her. Sarah's Dad died a few years ago, and her Mum's health isn't what it was. She's had a few falls, and Sarah's worried about her. As an only child, Sarah feels a lot of responsibility for her Mum's wellbeing.

She's started to do her shopping, and pops in to see her a couple of times a week – which on top of the work she often brings home, and running between all the kids' evening activities, isn't easy to fit in. There's a new project at work which isn't going smoothly, and she's starting to feel the strain.

She's started waking up in the middle of the night, catastrophising – sometimes it's about her Mum, sometimes work. Stuff that in daylight would be no big deal, but in the night it feels huge. And once her brain launches into those worst cases scenarios, she's lucky to get back to sleep. She's noticed herself getting snappy, and there have been a few rows that wouldn't normally happen. And she's just not staying on top of her work like normal – it's starting to build up, and that's stressing her out too.

So those couple of extra loads are stretching her resources, and it's getting uncomfortable. It feels like she's having to put more and more in, just to stop things slipping back. And even that's not working.

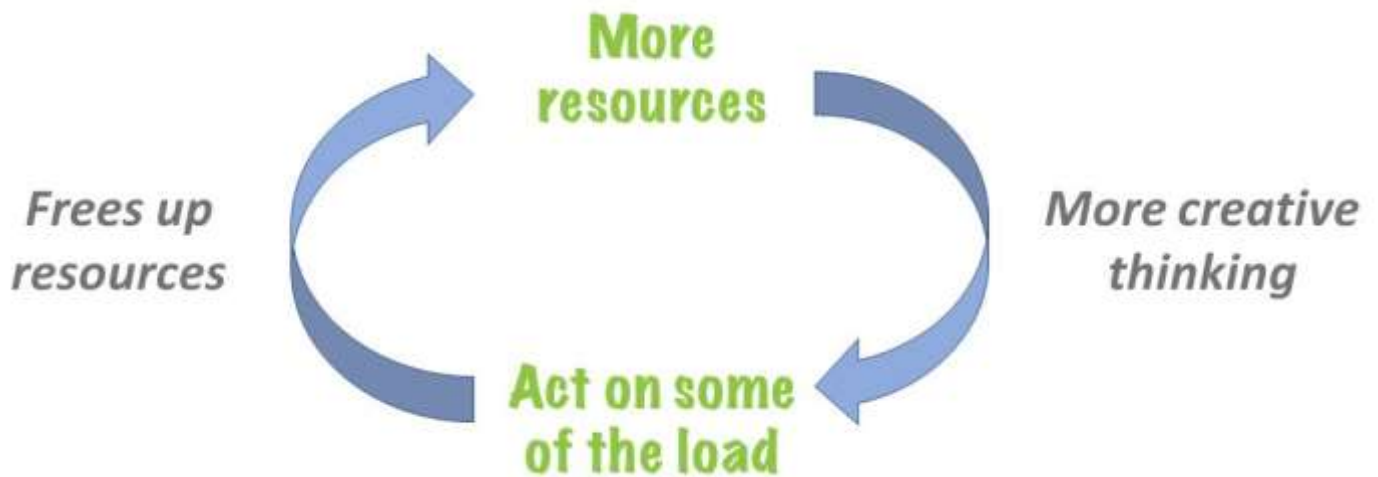
She can't change the loads themselves – the project has to be delivered, and there's no magic wand to stop her Mum from ageing. So getting back her own wellbeing balance means getting more resources.

Sarah's biggest issue was those nagging worries that keep invading her thinking (especially at night) – putting her system on high alert about stuff that might not even happen, and leaving her feeling drained. So that's where she started.

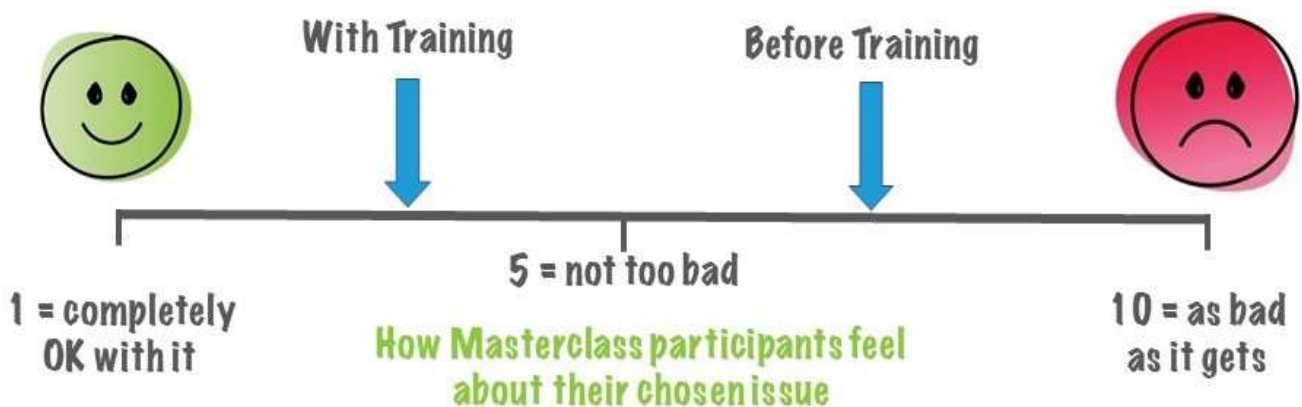


She chose just 3 skills, like those we'll explore together, to stop her mind from running away with her. And within a few days, she was back to sleeping through the night. That extra bit of head space gave her chance to step back and think more clearly about her workload – she put a couple of things on hold and handed a couple more to her team, giving her more time to deal with the project – and she got on top of the issue which had been threatening to spiral out of control.

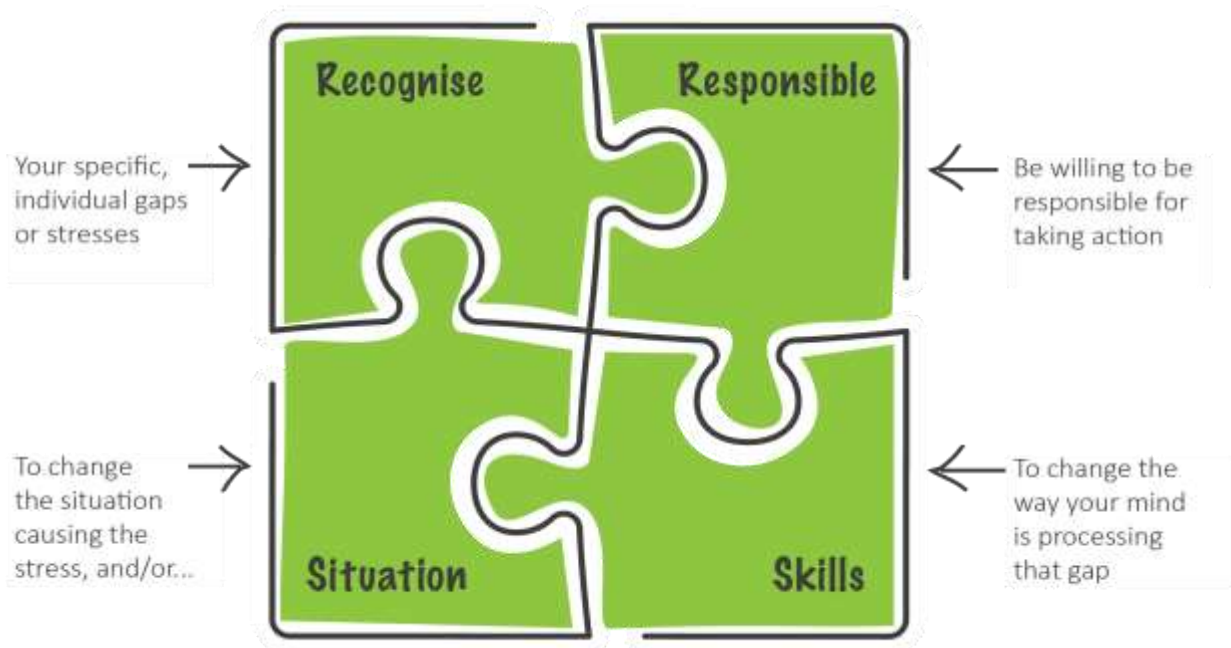
It's a common virtuous cycle: More resources takes the system off high alert and frees up the creative thinking, which finds ways to address some of the load, freeing up more of the resources, and so on....



With less than half an hour's training, Sarah's brain-autopilot has started to do things the way she wants them. She's back in the driving seat, dealing with what's going on. And those skills last – so the next time the load starts to build, she'll already have more resources for dealing with it, without it becoming disruptive.



Stress Success – a Straightforward Framework



Why 'Responsible' Matters so Much

The world's complicated, so we've evolved efficiency habits to stop our brains from overloading. These habits run outside our conscious awareness, so we often don't even notice. Here's one of them.

It was charmingly illustrated by a teacher... Imagine you're sitting in her class, and she's given each student a piece of paper with three words on it. She says each word is an anagram of another – that she'll ask you to look at them one at a time, and put up your hand when you have the anagram word.

Your first word is **WHIRL**. You're looking at it, trying to figure out what other word you can make with all those letters. Hands are going up all around you.



Before you have it, she asks you to go on to the second word... **SLAPSTICK**... Same thing – you're trying to figure it out, and hands are going up all around. How would you be feeling?

The third word is **CINERAMA**. Do you see the anagram?

Most people don't – or at least, the people who were given those first two words. They're actually not anagrams at all. The hands-up half of the class began with different words. They had **BAT** and **LEMON**, which easily arrange to **TAB** and **MELON**. Having started on those words, most people have no problem at all rearranging **CINERAMA** to **AMERICAN**.

Even amongst students, who are meant to be used to rising to a challenge and persevering through adversity, it takes only 2 failed attempts for the brain to switch off to even trying. For the habit called Learned Helplessness to kick in. They didn't deliberately choose to give up, not to see the third word. But they missed it all the same. Scary....

That's why the stress converter process is so powerful. The more gaps you're experiencing that you can't do anything about, the more you'll stop spotting the ones that you could do something about. But by being willing to be responsible, and taking action to close or reduce a gap, any gap (even if it's not the biggest or most disruptive), you keep your brain out of Learned Helplessness, keeping your noticing open to all those other gap-reducing opportunities. It's a powerful shift.

Skills to Change Your Thinking

Skills is another word which we don't often associate with stress and how we're thinking or feeling. It's often seen as more innate and hard-wired, or as having more to do with the situation we're facing than with us. If you had someone in your team who was really awesome at a particular task, you'd want to work out how they were doing it and teach that to the rest of the team, so they got really good at it too. And that doesn't have to be just for skills like getting a sale, or the IT to behave.

That's how the skills I share originated. Two pioneering thinkers got curious about how some people can handle massive stress without it de-railing them, or get over fears and trauma all by themselves. People whose thinking was really working for them. They set about finding out how it was done, so that we can learn it too.... And bit by bit, they uncovered those skills which no one had ever thought to look for before.

Because skills are part of our thinking. Skills to tackle challenges, weather the tougher times, and get over stuff. Skills that we all have, and that with a little guidance, we can all get even better at. That's what FAST Pathways is designed to support.

Sometimes a gap's so uncomfortable that thinking about it kicks off your fight-flight-freeze response. That negative emotion narrows your focus, switching off your more creative thinking and reducing your problem-solving ability. Your logical thinking and your emotions head into battle with each other. When that happens, you're much more likely to fixate on a specific course of action which might be outside your control, or try to ignore it in the hope that it'll go away. And so you get stuck, and it's really unpleasant....

Changing the way your mind's processing a gap can reduce its discomfort, so you're able to think more clearly. Sometimes that's enough to evict that gap from your attention and feel better about it, making it a neutral stress. Sometimes that clearer thinking opens up ways to reduce or resolve the gap which you hadn't previously thought of.



Let's look at another example of the stress converter in action: Lewis left school at 16, and spent years taking evening classes to get qualified for management. He works long hours, and if something comes up which needs him, he'll happily cancel his plans to stick with it 'til its sorted. He has a small team who respect him and work well together, and he wants to keep on progressing in the organisation. There was just one problem – presentations.

He doesn't have to give them often, but when he did, it used to take over. A simple 15 minute update to his team could take him days to prepare, running through it again and again, putting in every last scrap of his energy in the hope that it would somehow lessen the discomfort (it didn't). Lewis' logical thinking was fighting a losing battle. He had to work even longer hours to make up the extra time, and he'd be lucky to get more than 3 hours sleep a night. When it was finally over, it could take up to a week to fully recover and catch back up on everything he'd parked.

Your organisation's probably got a few Lewis-es too. Maybe it's that important conversation with a challenging individual, maybe it's something from outside work kicking off that fight-flight-freeze. How much valuable time gets swallowed up, trying to manage that discomfort? How many mistakes get made, or opportunities missed, while they're locked into wrestling with it?

Lewis' gap was clear – his near-panic at presenting, but the action he was taking in his lengthy preparations wasn't having any effect on the discomfort. So he dived into neutralising it. He noticed that when he thought about presenting, the voice in his mind started sounding either incredibly critical and judgmental, or panicky – neither of which was helping. So he spent a little time re-training that voice to sound different. With that voice sounding objective and assured, he felt the dread dissolve, as his logical thinking slid back into the driving seat.

Then instead of his imagination running riot with everything which could possibly go wrong, he learned to harness it very specifically, designing his desired outcome and how to get there - a method popular in top-level sports. He doesn't go into presentations feeling flat calm, any more than a sprinter would walk into the Olympic stadium feeling completely calm. He's now able to channel the pressure into preparing effectively and staying focused.



A few days later he found himself presenting to around 20 people, completely off the cuff – it was only after that he realised what he'd done. And it felt amazing!! With a couple more successes under his belt, he now looks forward to sharing his team's work as widely as possible. Presenting's no longer a barrier to his career progression, and with that stress-embracing mindset, how much more do you think Lewis is able to offer his organisation?

That partnership between taking action to change the situation causing the stress, and the skills to change the way you experience the gap, is immensely powerful. FAST Pathways has supported countless success like Lewis', as diverse as the people who've achieved them – explore a few of our favourites at

<https://www.fast-pathways.com/successes.html>

Avoiding Most People's Biggest Mistake



When you're trying to stop feeling bad about something, you'll probably try to change WHAT you're thinking, as logic tries to wrestle back control.... Trying to reassure yourself, to argue with the doubts and worries; or like Lewis used to, investing time and effort to try to force yourself past it. It's hard work, if it works at all.

But there's more to your thinking than just the WHAT

We can get very caught up in what we're thinking about (the content), and we notice how it makes us feel (the effects). But most people don't realise that in between the two, thinking also has a process, and its characteristics determine how those thoughts make you feel. So even without changing the situation itself, you can often change the way it makes you feel by tweaking the process. This has two key advantages

- It removes the reliance on having to change the situation itself (which isn't always possible) to resolve the discomfort.
- Ending the unpleasant fight-flight reaction, as well as feeling better, also re-enables your more creative thinking and problem-solving which shut down when you're under threat. So often, just by reducing that discomfort, new ways to address the situation become clear. And more gaps getting actioned can be good for business as well as your people...



That's how the FAST Pathways skills work - by re-training the not-on-purpose thinking, so breakthrough results are often experienced quickly, and last without ongoing effort or practice. Bypassing that common stumbling block of most approaches to managing stress – that need to change behaviours.

The most frequent outcomes include reduced anxiety, conflict and resistance to change; increased confidence, sleep quality and problem solving. A single session's sometimes all it's taken to stop someone from handing in their notice because of a difficult working relationship, or to get someone comfortably back to work after multiple mental health absences. If you haven't yet explored them, there's a sample of our typical outcomes at <https://www.fast-pathways.com/successes.html>

I'm often asked, when the skills are so powerful (and straightforward), why they're not more widely known. And honestly, I don't know. Perhaps it's because so far, many organisations are focusing on reducing the stigma of mental ill-health and better supporting those who are experiencing it. It's the equivalent of sending in our people to do heavy lifting with no manual handling training, and making sure there's excellent physio available for the resulting injuries. Prevention's just as important for mental health as it is for physical – and these skills can make a massive difference to both recovery and prevention.

Another reason might be that just under half of organisations experience day-to-day operational demands taking precedence over wellbeing activities (national CIPD Absence Management survey). There's no time to explore the 'nice to haves' - with customers demanding more for less in ever-shorter lead times, that conflict of priorities is common. Perhaps it's something which you've experienced too? It's frustrating, feeling like you have to choose, and it's often your most experienced or engaged people who bear the brunt. I hope that the stories I've shared have shown that these skills, and the mindset of useful stress, are about much more than wellbeing – they can also directly underpin better performance. With a single, integrated strategy and action plan, it is possible to have the best of both.

Experiencing the Skills

Explore the difference for yourself – access the resources for three of the most versatile skills at

<https://www.fast-pathways.com/useful-skills.html>



Sue Evans, FAST Pathways Creator and Lead Consultant



I spent the first half of my career delivering Operational Excellence and culture change for international organisations including Danone, Corning and Lloyds Banking Group. Highlights included leading a programme which more than doubled site productivity, and delivering £1.9M waste reduction in under 5 months. Leading these kind of changes, I experienced a fair amount of stress – and it wasn't always useful!

But it laid some solid foundations in understanding that we don't always do what's good for us, even when we recognise that what we're doing isn't working (like being told 'not to worry about it' when I presented a £1M, risk-free potential saving....). Changing mindsets and behaviours isn't easy. That's why trying to manage stress gives such patchy results, and why the skills I work with are such a powerful alternative.

Stress is a given in any organisation. Sometimes it gets in the way, and sometimes it can drive even better performance. I believe in every individual's right to a challenging and fulfilling working life, and in every organisation's right to reap the rewards of building and supporting a capable and motivated workforce. That might sound idealistic, but the right know-how can help to shape it. As a Professional Speaker and experienced facilitator, I understand the challenges of engaging your people to deliver sustainable results. The most popular ways of accessing my support include

- Straightforward training, both face-to-face and on-line, to improve both mental wellbeing and performance
- Speaking at events, from Conferences to Lunch-and-Learn sessions. Because the skills I share are fast-acting, delegates often start to notice differences right away
- Working one-to-one to deliver breakthrough results with individuals who
 - are experiencing Mental Health problems
 - have specific development needs
 - or are in high stress roles

I'm a Master Practitioner and Trainer of NLP (neuro-linguistic programming), and an Approved Havening® Practitioner, trained in each by the original creators. I have a Diploma in CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy), a combined Diploma in Hypnotherapy, Coaching and NLP; and Institute of Leadership and Management certification as a Mentor and Coach.

and if you're curious about how I delivered that £1M step-change anyway, drop me a line!