

Lesson 2

Know Your Triggers

Introduction

Knowing what triggers your stress can be extremely illuminating, as it helps you pinpoint where you need to focus your stress-busting solutions.

Whether it involves reasons concerning your work, home, or social life, your stress can hamper your achievement and productivity in the workplace, so understanding it by exploring it in detail will be invaluable.

Learning how to channel your inner detective through an easy approach that helps you look at your thoughts, feelings and behaviours will help you wise up to your stress triggers.

Science

Strong emotions such as anxiety, depression, guilt, fear, and rage can emerge from long-term stress. They can contribute to chronic health problems such as hypertension and heart disease, relationship problems, and psychological problems. One way of managing emotions is by understanding how they arise.

Experts use an ABC approach from Cognitive Behaviour Therapy to help people identify their sources of stress, and advise on how to overcome it. It's a framework that demonstrates how beliefs about a particular event affects how you react to it, and this determines how you feel mentally as well as physiologically.

The A stands for Activating Event, or what happened that led to the negative thought, emotion, and physical symptoms.

B is for your beliefs, or your negative thoughts about the situation.

C relates to the Consequences – so how you reacted and how you felt.

Value

Piecing your thoughts, feelings and actions together about stressful situations allows you to capture exactly what needs to be changed, let go of, or managed.

Pausing, thinking, reflecting and problem-solving using the ABC approach is a productive way of reducing your stress.

Exercise video

Capturing our thoughts, feelings and reactions to stressful situations is key when it comes to doing something about it.

When we get the hang of it, it's quite easy.

Think of it as the ABC to less stress and a healthier way of being.

A is the situation that brings about our negative feeling – it might be having to deal with a phone call when we're already late setting off somewhere.

B is the thought that runs through our mind – burdening us with negative self-talk, 'I can't do this... people think I'm incompetent.'

C is about our emotions and physical sensations – fear, anxiety, sweating, shakiness.

Let's demonstrate this for you.

- A: I'm working hard on producing a report and the deadline is 5pm today.
I overhear someone saying that I'll never get it finished. It's an impossible task.
- B: I hear myself repeating the words, 'I'll never get it finished...' and I add 'I'm useless, I never accomplish important things on time. What's the point of carrying on with it? I have to do it to prove a point.'
- C: I feel stressed, embarrassed, fearful, and shaky.
I work as hard and as fast as I can.
I grab a packet of crisps from the vending machine and work through lunch and break.
I'm shaky, tired, I lack energy, and I can't concentrate very well.

So let's pick out the triggers using this example.

A and B right?

The situation leads to my negative automatic thoughts and this is my trigger for stress.

I feel unpleasant emotions and physical sensations. I react to the pressure by eating unhealthily and not taking a rest break that is likely to re-energise me and help me better focus on the task.

What might I do instead?

Pause and reflect by asking the following questions of A and B, or the situation and my negative thoughts:

Is it something to get stressed about?

Can I speak to the boss and discuss moving the deadline?

Can someone else help to write part of the report?

Am I really useless? Are there times when I do deliver reports on time? Can I show my boss and colleagues how productive I can be in some other way? Can I be a role model and lead the way in being more productive through engaging in healthier habits?

Wrap

So now you're more clued up on your triggers, you'll be eager to seize those unhelpful thoughts and clear some head space. You'll then be in a favourable position to achieve your goals. Everyone feels stressed from time to time, so we're in this together.

CTA

Over the next week, have a go at reflecting on any situations you encounter that cause you to feel stressed. Next time, we'll tell you about the single most important thing you can do to achieve more and stress less.