About your brain

Your brain is an amazing organ:
- Most complex mechanism in the universe
- Uses more energy than any other organ
  1/5 of all energy consumed
- Produces more heat than any other organ
- Growing at rate of 150,000 nerve cells per generation (currently 1,500mls)

How we perceive the world

We respond to the world via our A’s, B’s & C’s. These are known as our Affects (feelings), Behaviours & Cognitions (thoughts). In other words in each situation we:
1. Have a thought (Cognition)
2. Have a feeling (Affect)
3. Physically respond (heart rate, breathing etc)
4. Behaviorally respond

Our internal processor

Our A’s, B’s & C’s are our internal processor. They are influenced by our genetics, our life experiences, our family values, our personality and previous medical conditions. This explains why we all respond differently. There may be 100 people in a room who all experience the same event, yet there will be 100 different responses based on that event. This explains why, when some of us are “stressed” to the eyeballs, others seem barely awake only to “stress” out at something we perceive to be relatively minor later on. We are definitely all different!

We think in pictures

We think in pictures. There are many examples of how this works. Your mind can’t tell the difference between what you imagine and reality. Dreaming is a good example. Scary pictures that you have imagined in your mind produce powerful physical reactions including racing heart rates or talking in your sleep.

Thoughts ——————— Pictures ——————— Response

Negative thinking

Picture yourself standing at a golf tee looking down the fairway. You take a new ball from its box and place it on the tee. You pick up the club and look down the fairway at the green. You look at the ball, shiny and new, and you look at the fairway. You notice how close the lake is to the fairway. You look at the lake and then look at your ball. Where is the ball going? Yep, in the lake.

The body orients itself towards pictures in our head. We can’t picture the “not”, only the lake. We cannot “not” think about something. The only way to to avoid having negative thoughts is to create an alternative positive picture. This helps explain why life seems easier and we feel happier when our thinking is positive, because we are orienting ourselves towards positive goals. It also helps explain why negative thinking increases the chances of unhappiness and negative things happening in our lives.
What is Stress?
We all use the term. We all feel it, we all see it, but what is it? Stress has been defined as:

"...a state of disharmony caused by intrinsic or extrinsic adverse forces (which) is counteracted by an intricate repertoire of physiologic and behavioral responses that aim to re-establish the challenged body equilibrium."

Kyrou et al., Ann NY Acad Sci 2006;1083:77-110

What the? At first glance this makes no sense. Until we look a little deeper. What they are actually saying is that stress is something that disrupts our daily balance (physically, emotionally & in our thoughts). It could be caused by our own thoughts or via external factors. Our body aims to regain balance via the flight or fight response, also known as our stress response. An easier way to define stress could be:

"...a physical, emotional & cognitive (thoughts) response to strain (overload)"

Not all stress is bad?
A common misconception is that all stress is bad and is to be avoided. But think about it, a little stress helps us perform, forces us to adapt and develop new skills. It’s when the overload becomes too much that we experience the consequences.

The key to stress is to identify your red line and work towards staying under it. You don’t want to avoid your red line to the point of going below your black line (boredom). Just enough so that if you do go into the red zone, you can adapt. In other words we are happiest when in a state of “flow”.

If we find ourselves above our redline we have two options:
1. Reduce the overload (the thing that stresses us)
2. Increase our ability to cope with the overload

How do you know if you’re over your red line?
When we experience stress, it’s because we feel threatened. This can affect us in our thoughts, our feelings and behaviours. Stress also causes us to physically respond, otherwise known as the fight or flight response.

Many years ago, if we were threatened in some way we would need to defend ourselves or escape. So the body prepares itself via multiple physical responses including an increased production of stress hormones, increased heart rate, breathing rate, sweating, just to name a few.

The problem is, these days the things that threaten us are different, don’t require fight or flight and often don’t go away!
Mind Matters! Stress, worry &
our desire to control

The outcome of Stress: Anxiety

When stress sets in so to can anxiety. The most common feeling with anxiety is worry, fear and concern. If the anxiety isn’t attended to, depression can set in. But it’s important to remember depression can occur without stress or anxiety. Depression can be described as a loss of hope and interest. A feeling of down that is hard, sometimes impossible to shake.

Our desire to control (& the 3 C’s)

Why do some people experience stress when others appear to be relatively calm, despite them both experiencing the same situation?

Whether a person experiences stress will depend on the three C’s:

1. Control
2. Commitment
3. Challenge

In other words, does the person feel in control (or out), is the person committed (or uncommitted), and do they perceive it as a challenge (or threat).

E.g., what would happen if another GFC where to hit and stocks plunged. A stoke broker would experience strain as they are committed (it’s their job), they have no control over the market, and few would see it as a challenge. That’s unless the broker is ready to retire or has insider knowledge!

Out of all three, control is the most important. When we feel out of control, strain and anxiety set in. When we perceive we are in control anxiety fades and stress reduces.

In other words the outcome of “stress” depends not on what happens to an individual, but upon how the individual reacts to the stress”.

Control what you can...

When it comes to stress management we need to ask 2 questions:

1. Can we identify the source of our stress?
2. Can we control that source of stress (stressor)?

If we can control the stressor then we do it. If we can’t, we need to improve our ability to deal with it.

Stress management is control & escape

Our response to stress is the flight or fight response. So we are designed to confront the threat or remove ourselves. In other words control or escape. Lets be clear though, we are talking about adaptive or positive control and escape, not putting our heads in the sand.

Control can include strategies to control the stressor (the thing that is causing the stress), the severity of the stressor and our response or reaction to the stressor. Escape includes ways to remove yourself from the cause of the stress for a period of time or from your response to the stress.

Positive forms of control & escape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Escape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>Holidays</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
<td>Job change</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive self talk</td>
<td>Meditation / relaxation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal setting</td>
<td>Exercise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Activity</td>
<td>Reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meditation / Relaxation</td>
<td>Family recreation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet</td>
<td>Hobbies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality sleep</td>
<td>Having a 3rd place</td>
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Mind Matters! Stress, worry & our desire to control

Self talk
We talk to ourselves all day, everyday. Remember, we have a thought, then the emotion followed by a behaviour. So our thoughts & self talk have a powerful effect on our feelings and whether they are positive or negative. In other words our self talk can hurt us or help us.

Unhelpful Thoughts into Helpful ones
Unhelpful thoughts happen without us realising, are negative and produce negative emotions. Every day we have unhelpful thoughts and they are normally followed by a positive one. The problem occurs when the majority of our thoughts become negative. Negative emotions can also help foster unhelpful thoughts.

Unhelpful thoughts can be broken down into the following categories:
- **Catastrophising**: Overestimating the chances of a disaster or serious negative outcomes. Expecting something unbearable to happen.
- **Black-and-white thinking**: Thinking in all or nothing, dichotomous terms.
- **Over-generalising**: Coming to a general conclusion based on a single event.
- **Personalising**: Taking responsibility for something that is not your fault.
- **Should & shouldn’t statements**: Sets up unrealistic expectations.
- **Negative focus (selective abstraction)**: Concentrating on negatives while ignoring the positives.

Turning your unhelpful thoughts into helpful ones takes practice. First you need to recognise them and when they occur. Then you must challenge them by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unhelpful</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m going to stuff it up</td>
<td>I’ve done it before I can do it again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s to hard</td>
<td>Its hard, but ill break it up into smaller tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I never do anything right</td>
<td>I do something’s well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I shouldn’t get angry</td>
<td>I understand why I got angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The clients unhappy, it’s my fault</td>
<td>I worked hard on the project, I can’t control the clients response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They said I worked well but I knew I was crappy</td>
<td>I did a good job and deserve the praise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Physical Activity
Physical activity is a vital part of any mental health program. In fact, being physically inactive is a primary risk factor for mental health problems. And physical activity is often one of the first vital strategies on the road to recovery for people who experience mental health problems. Vigorous exercise, early in the day can have a soothing effect on the part of the nervous system that initiates the flight or fight response. In other words it makes it harder for the physical effects of stress to take effect.

Relaxation & Meditation
Despite popular belief, meditation and relaxation isn’t about thinking about nothing. Remember you can’t not think about something. Meditation is about controlled thought. Focusing on positive or calming images means we aren’t thinking about things that worry or trouble us.

How does it work?
Relaxation techniques have the ability to decrease our levels of arousal or anxiety and reverse the stress response. By learning a relaxation technique, you create pleasant body sensations. Your tension, anxiety, stress and worry you may be experiencing eases and you gradually increase your sense of calmness and peace of mind. Many people say they only realized how tense they were after they learned relaxation techniques and how to relax.

Which type?
There are many different types, religious and non religious. They generally fall into the follow categories:
1. Deep breathing method (sedative effect of O₂)
2. Tense/relax method (actively relaxing muscles)
3. Autogenic method (using words to create calmness)
4. Guided imagery (using images to create calmness)

Guidelines to master the techniques
- Find somewhere quiet, where you will not be disturbed
- Make yourself comfortable, sitting or lying down
- Loosen tight clothing and uncross your arms and legs
- Dim the lights
- Follow the same routine when you prepare for each relaxation session
- Give it time. Like any skill, relaxation takes time. With practice, your body learns to associate key actions, such as taking a deep breath or clenching your fist, with a deep relaxation response. This learned response allows you to relax more deeply and more easily, in a variety of situations, as you use the technique day-by-day
- As your skills develop, you will be able to relax anywhere - in the car, in the shopping centre, or while waiting in a queue