



Managing Stress Levels University Mental Health Day

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HSE's report, published in December 2021, found that stress, depression or anxiety is most prevalent in two main industries within the UK: education and human health and social work activities. Higher levels of mental health distress are expected within health and social work, aren't they?! In fact, this is something we were all acutely aware of during the worst of COVID-19 – the impact on the NHS. But awareness around the impact on mental health within Higher Education has long-gone under the radar.

However, from my work within Higher Education, I am very aware that the presence of stress and burnout has long been an issue, nicely exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and so are you. It may have been ducking and diving under our societal radar, but it's been very much at the forefront of the minds of those dealing with it.

Therefore, in aid of University Mental Health Day today, I wanted to share a model, designed by MHFA England, that we can use to monitor and manage our stress levels.

This model is wonderfully visual and simple and can be used by all. The idea behind this model is to bring awareness to our stress levels and the way we choose to respond. Naturally, what we cannot see – we cannot fix. Therefore, in order to take control of our mental health and manage our stress response – we have to first be aware of the factors causing the distress, and secondly focus upon what helpful coping strategies we have in place to support us.

This model won't fix the systemic problem causing workplace stress, and unfortunately it won't vanish away the stressors themselves, but it will definitely help us consider ways to identify our stress levels and then manage it more effectively.

For those who have completed their training as Mental Health First Aiders, you will be wonderfully familiar with this model... for those who haven't - I hereby introduce the wonderful Stress Container.

What is a stress container?



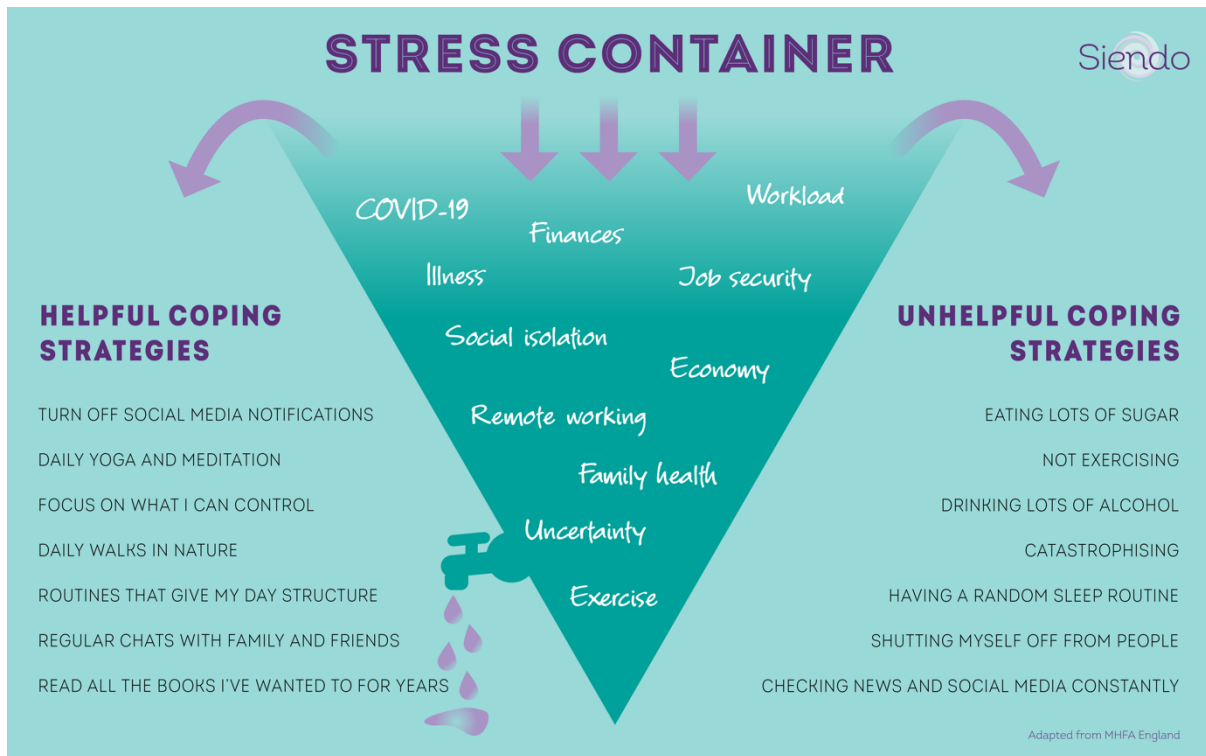
The stress container is as simple as it sounds – a container that holds your stress. We all have our own individual stress container; each container is a different size and it is filled with different stressors.

The model suggests that the level of vulnerability a person carries is represented by the size of the container. For example, my container may be smaller than yours if I am more vulnerable due to certain life experiences or current circumstances. The smaller the container, the less stress that a person can handle before the container starts to overflow, known as emotional snapping.

As you will see in the image below, the stress container is filled with everyday stressors that are present within a person's life. As the stressors build, they start to fill up the container. Overtime, if not managed correctly, everyone's stress container will start to overflow, causing damage to the person's emotional and physical health. This is represented by the arrows flowing out from the container.

In order to prevent this overflow, a person must become very skilled at managing stress. A skill that is most definitely not taught to us at school. Managing stress is a very individual process and it is something that we learn overtime, as we experience what does and does not work for us.

To understand this in practice; think of a time where you felt seriously stressed and then someone said one little thing to you – and that was it – you snapped. Then, once things had calmed down, you found yourself thinking; ‘Jeez, why did I react like that?’... Well, that’s because your container was already too full. That one tiny little drop caused your container to overflow, and the rest was history.



So, how can we prevent emotional snapping?

At the side of this container, you will see a tap; when turned on, it allows the pressure to release. Keep in mind, the stressors themselves may still be present, but we’ve released the pressure felt around them. However, when the tap is turned off, or if the flow is blocked, the container will continue to fill.

That is where our stress management skills come in – our personal responsibility is to recognise how full our container is and then understand what helps us to turn the tap on, preventing any overflow.

Enter coping strategies...



Either side of the container you will see a list of helpful and unhelpful coping strategies.

Unhelpful coping strategies not only turn off the tap, but they can add to the stressors floating around within your container. For example, if one of our stressors is our weight, then eating loads of sugar and drinking excessive amounts of alcohol will not only block our tap, but it will add to the stress.

Helpful coping strategies, however, are those practices and behaviours that help us to effectively manage the situations that are causing the stress. Finding the right strategies involves a bit of trial and error, as we figure out what helps us to reduce our stress levels.

Note: Please keep in mind, the coping strategies provided in the image are just some illustrative examples; each of us have different ways of coping and – for our stress management plan to be successful – we must find our own suitable strategies.

What does your stress container look like?

Now it's your turn! Grab a pen and paper – it's time to draw your stress container. It can be triangle, it can be a big fat ol' bucket or it can even be a wine bottle – whatever works for you, it's your container.

Next, I want you to take a moment to think through what stressors are currently present within your life. I imagine you've probably already whispered to yourself: "my papers not big enough for that". Take some time to do this and note down the stressors that are floating around in your container at the moment.

Once you have done this, I want you to have a good think about what behaviours, practices or habits you have in your life and on which side of the container you would place them: 'helpful' or 'unhelpful' coping strategies. Remember, with some behaviours or habits, it can be a fine tipping point. For example, a glass of wine on Friday evening to unwind is very different to 2 bottles of wine to forget. Be honest with yourself while you do this – it is important to be able to pinpoint those behaviours that either help you to or prevent you from reducing your stress levels.

And lastly, once you have decorated your sheet with all your coping strategies, have a think about how you could make more time for those helpful ones that nourish your wellbeing, and where you could reduce those that are unhelpful. You could call this your – Stress Management Plan.



Remember: we do not have to conquer all of our unhelpful coping strategies at once. In fact, I highly recommend we don't try to remove them all straight away. Coping strategies, whether helpful or unhelpful are there to help us cope. If we are attempting to remove an unhelpful strategy, it is advisable that we have an alternative, tried and tested, helpful strategy in place already.

Baby Steps for Success

Lastly, please remember to be compassionate with yourself as you move through this process. Changing habits and behaviours can take some time, and you are far more likely to experience successful change if you take small but meaningful steps. Think: what is one thing can I do today that will help me to move towards those helpful habits.

Being proactive in taking care of your wellbeing is not only beneficial for your mental health, but it also supports your physical health. And, do you know what the beauty of positive change is – it also has a ripple effect within the lives around you. Positive change = more positive change, and **what is more motivational than that?**