

Coaching worked for Radio 4's 'Ruth', but is personal coaching for stress the right approach for everyone?

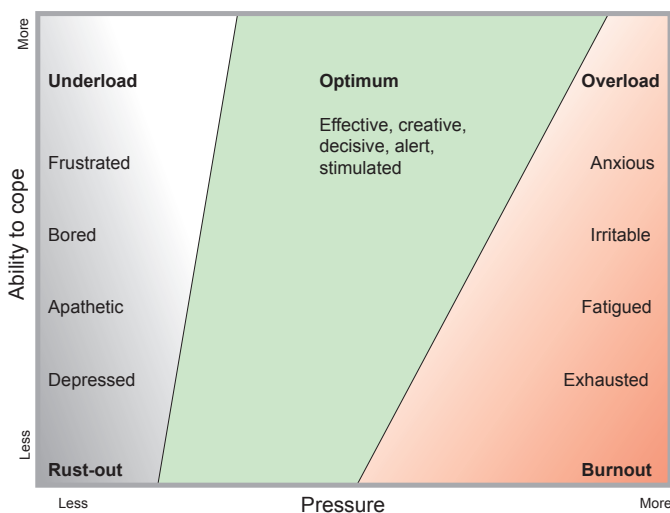
By Pauline Willis

Sorting out exercise and diet, learning about techniques from a CD, yoga and even singing are all wonderful ways to reduce stress. However, how do you get started? What do you do first? Should you get a CD? Sing? Go to a Yoga class? Or perhaps all three?

Many people approach stress by throwing themselves into one or more of the activities the media or other well-meaning people in their lives tell them should help. The problem with this, is that if you don't understand the sources of your stress you can end up putting yourself under more pressure by just taking on more 'activities' and avoiding the real problems. Pick the wrong approach and you could make things worse, feel de-motivated and get caught in a vicious self-reinforcing stress spiral.

Pressure is a natural and necessary part of living. The right amount of pressure actually leads to better performance at work as well as a fuller and more rewarding personal life. Stress happens when you don't have enough pressure or when you have too much.

The relationship of pressure to the ability to cope (adapted from Palmer & Strickland, 1996)



So if pressure is a natural part of life how do you know if you are stressed and should do anything to manage your stress levels?

The answer to this question is not simple. Everyone needs to manage the pressures and other demands that are made of them. If there is a significant impact on your personal well-being and/or work performance then it is probably time to look closely at what you can do to improve your personal stress management strategy.

Why coaching?

The power of coaching in managing stress and performance at work is that a good coach will assist you to identify the underlying cause or causes of 'stress' and then support you to meet specific personal objectives. The coach may do this directly by assisting you to adopt new strategies and 'techniques' or they may simply 'facilitate' you to achieve success in making whatever life changes you have decided to make.

Coaching provides an integrated 'just-in-time' solution so you have exactly the right kind of tools you need to deal with your pressures when you need them. The coach will also make sure that you are able to develop the skills to facilitate your own development so you do not become dependent on the coach.

Coaching is not, however, for the faint hearted as Ruth discovered; you need to be ready to understand yourself and have the courage to take responsibility for change. Ruth faced this challenge and her programme has been successful because she has accepted personal responsibility for her own development and worked hard to achieve her goals. Ruth has undertaken psychometric assessments, learned breathing and meditation techniques, developed skills in assertiveness and negotiation, faced some difficult issues in her life, re-connected with appropriate supports in her community, enrolled in an Open University course, changed jobs and bought a house, as well as de-stressing and developing confidence through singing.

Coaching is definitely a powerful intervention, but you personally may not need it because in spite of what the marketing engines of the burgeoning coaching and mentoring industry will tell you, it is simply not true that 'everyone needs a coach or mentor'. At the end of the day it all depends on how well you understand yourself and how well equipped you are to manage your own issues.

When used appropriately, coaching is also a cost-effective solution for managing stress in the workplace. However, even when it is provided as part of an internal programme, it is not 'cheap'. Often organisations will only invest precious financial resources in the people who are the 'bright stars'. After all you want your stars to glow as brightly as possible without 'burning out'.

When companies do have coaches available as a development option for people other than the 'high potentials' these programmes can be under-used because many rely on self-selection and people are still not really sure what 'coaching' is or how they can benefit from it.

For people who have a lifetime of bad coping habits and have already tried a range of self-help approaches, then support from a coach is likely to be beneficial. If you feel you could benefit from coaching and also work for one of the '95 %' of UK companies surveyed recently by the CIPD that claim to use coaching as a development option, it may be worth talking to your HR officers to find out if you eligible. Bear in mind that 'coaching' is also sometimes called 'mentoring' or even 'coach-mentoring', as there is currently no accepted definition of either term that clearly delineates the one from the other. Assistance from within your organisation could be available under any of these names.

How much does it cost to contract a coach privately?

It is possible to contract a coach privately and some coaches will charge 'self-funding' clients less than they would if the organisation is paying the bill. As a rough guide, the International Stress Management Association say that you can pay as little as £50 to as much as £150 per hour for a stress coach with an average programme consisting of 6-8 two hour sessions. Coaches who work with executives and 'high potentials' will charge a lot more and you can expect to pay them from £150 – 300+ per hour.

Detailed information about and how to contract a coach is provided on the Coaching & Mentoring Network's website if you are seriously thinking about employing a coach. This covers the kind of questions to ask regarding what kind of qualifications and professional service you can expect from a coach.

What if the issues are serious and/or the organisational environment highly complex?

If you are in any doubt get a professional, objective assessment of your current sources of stress and personal development needs. Ideally, this should be from someone who is qualified to conduct assessments of psychological wellbeing, understands stress issues in working environments and who can also assist you in putting together a realistic personal development plan.

It may well be that your organisational culture or some other features of the working environment are the main causes of your stress and that your situation is not going to improve significantly irrespective of how much you work on your personal issues. In this extreme case, you may be better off finding a more supportive working environment rather than over-investing in significant personal change.

'There are many stress busting techniques. It's important to discover the ones that work for you. Sometimes assistance is required and a professionally trained counsellor, coach or psychologist may be able to help you to find the right approach. However, ensure that they are members of recognised professional bodies.'

Professor Stephen Palmer City University, London

What next?

Ruth started her programme without really understanding what the BBC had in mind for her and like many people she had never heard of 'coaching'. After we had worked together for a few weeks, Ruth told me that when she had first contacted the BBC she had known for some time that she was not coping but had not known what to do about it. When the offer from the BBC came up, she said that she was at the point where she 'would have jumped into a bath of cold spaghetti if the BBC had told her to do it'.

If you have reached the point where you are feeling physically stressed, very low and vulnerable and do not know who to reach out to for support, then it can seem very attractive to find someone who will just 'tell you what to do' to make it better.

"This wasn't a 'do what I tell you and you'll be fine' intervention which is what I had perhaps hoped for – an instant and painless fix."

Ruth

Ruth has achieved a great deal since she started the coaching programme. In my opinion, her biggest achievement has been that she decided to do something about her stress levels and then followed through on a personal commitment to action.

If you are ready to do something about your stress many sources of help are available to you and it could be that the best place to start may be with an assessment of your needs by an appropriately qualified professional. If you are experiencing physical signs and symptoms of stress then the first port of call should be your GP who will also be able to advise you about the professional counselling and psychological services which are available in your local area.

Pauline Willis is a Business Psychologist with Lauriate Ltd, she is also a Director of The Coaching & Mentoring Network Ltd and an Executive Board Member of the European Mentoring & Coaching Council.

Books

Assertiveness at Work: a practical guide for handling awkward situations (2000)

Ken & Kate Back, published by McGraw Hill

Coach yourself: Make real change in your life (2001)

Anthony M Grant & Jane Greene, published by Pearson

Creating a Balance: Managing Stress (2003)

Palmer, Cooper & Thomas, published by British Library

Teach yourself to meditate (1998)

Eric Harrison published by Piatkus

Natural Highs: Increase your energy, sharpen your mind, improve your mood, relax and beat stress (2002)

Patrick Holford, published by Piatkus

CD's

How to Meditate

Eric Harrison's standard 7-week course at the Perth Meditation Centre in CD format, designed for people who are unable to attend meditation classes. The first CD contains the instructions for all the meditations. The second and third CDs contain eight long and short guided meditations. Total time, 3 hours 37 minutes. Published by The Perth Meditation Centre.

Under Pressure

Cary Coopers complete interactive stress management course. CD contains quiz's, factual information, video clips and fully interactive learning modules. Either individual or multi-user licenses are available. Published by Roberston Cooper Ltd

Personal assistance with finding a coach

The Coaching & Mentoring Network Ltd

The Coaching & Mentoring Network is the UK's leading source of information about coaching and mentoring with free links and resources to all aspects of the diverse coaching and mentoring professional community.

info@coachingnetwork.org.uk

0870 733 3313

Online directories for UK coaches and qualified psychologists, counsellors, psychotherapists.

Coaching & Mentoring Network

<http://www.coachingnetwork.org.uk/Questionnaire/asp/BusinessQuestionnairePage.Asp?cid=1>

Association of Business Psychologists

<http://www.theabp.org/AOESearch.asp>

British Psychological Society

<http://www.bps.org.uk/findpsychologist/psychoindex2.cfm>

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

http://www.bacp.co.uk/seeking_counsellor/seeking_counsellor_frameset.htm

Online directory of people who are qualified to use psychological tests

British Psychological Society

<http://www.psychtesting.org.uk>

Other useful stress links

Centre for Stress Management

Commercial website that contains some excellent 'free' feature articles on stress management including information on imagery and relaxation exercises

<http://www.managingstress.com/articles/default.htm>

Health and Safety Executive

Statutory responsibilities for employers along with information and guidance stress in the workplace can be reduced.

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/>

International Stress Management Association –

Life should be fun! Practical tips for managing stress from the International Stress Management Association

<http://www.isma.org.uk/life.htm>

Living with stress on BBCi - Health

Free information and advice on how to deal with stress

http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/mental/emotional_stress.shtml

Naturally High

Commercial website, that contains some excellent 'free' feature articles that cover nutritional approaches to coping with stress and feeling good from popular nutritionist Patrick Holford.

<http://www.naturallyhigh.co.uk>

Neurolink for health professionals

Free online course providing practical guidance on how to deal with occupational stress which is open to all employees of the NHS.

<http://www.neurolink.hmg.com/OSP/index.asp>

Neurolink for the general public

Beating worries that won't go away – a free booklet with tips and advice for people suffering from anxiety (also available in several languages).

http://www.neurolink.hmg.com/pdfs/dep_leaflet/Booklet.pdf

Perth Meditation Centre

Address for ordering Eric Harrison's latest Books & CD's.

www.perthmeditationcentre.com.au

Voice-to-Voice

A commercial website that outlines how singing can help people to develop personal confidence.

www.voicetovoice.com

Coaching & Mentoring Standards & Ethics

The European Mentoring and Coaching Council.

Council of coaching and mentoring professional bodies, organisations and individuals that exists to promote good practice and the expectation of good practice in mentoring and coaching across Europe

<http://www.emccouncil.org>