

# THE WELLBEING GUIDE TO STRESS & BURNOUT



**PERSEPHONE**  
WELLBEING COACHING

# Wellbeing...

## ‘The state of being comfortable, healthy or happy’

OXFORD DICTIONARY

This wellbeing guide to stress & burnout is designed to be an introduction to the causes of stress and some of the methods we can use to help us to work towards achieving a state of personal wellbeing. It has been written after several years of personal research and practice of stress reduction techniques on myself.

I know the all the stages of stress intimately. I also know that there is a huge amount that we can all do to help ourselves and that, with practice, gentle persistence and patience the changes we can make to improve our wellbeing can really work and transform our lives.



## What is harmful stress?

Our bodies are designed to cope with occasional stress, and relatively short periods of pressure, and the resultant stress response can be beneficial and motivate us to get things done. However, in today's western society we can come under constant sources of stress, whether that is through work, family life, the expectations we put on ourselves, money worries, being stuck in a car jam etc, and it is this constant and prolonged stress which can build up and cause serious consequences for our health.

The fact is that our bodies and brains do a poor job of distinguishing between life threatening events and day-to-day stressful situations so stress can build up without us being fully aware that it is doing so.<sup>(1)</sup>

The chronic effects of stress can cause unnecessary wear and tear on both our bodies and nervous systems, eroding our mental and physical health. Stress is implicated in a whole host of ailments including heart disease, stroke, depression and anxiety, respiratory diseases, high blood pressure, asthma flare ups and diabetes.<sup>(1)</sup>

# UNDERSTANDING THE STAGES OF STRESS

...and how they can lead to  
burnout and exhaustion

To really understand whether stress is affecting us, and how we can help ourselves, a good starting point is understanding the stages of stress outlined by Hans Selye, a medical doctor and researcher working in the 1940s/50s.

Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) theory of the stages of stress, is rooted in comprehensive research and is still relevant today. He concluded that the stages outlined in this guide are a typical response to stress.<sup>(2)</sup>

The three stages of the stress response (GAS) are as follows:

## 1. Alarm reaction stage

The alarm reaction stage refers to the initial symptoms our bodies experience when we are under stress. You may be familiar with the "fight-or-flight" response, which is a physiological response to stress. This natural reaction prepares us to either flee or protect ourselves in dangerous situations. Our heart rate increases, our adrenal glands release cortisol (a stress hormone), and we receive a boost of adrenaline, which increases energy. This fight-or-flight response occurs in the alarm reaction stage.

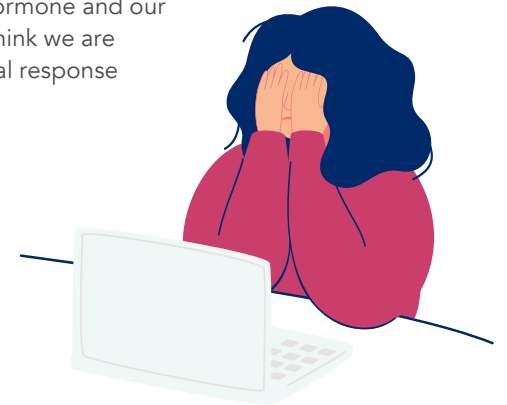
After the initial shock of a stressful event and having a fight-or-flight response, the body begins to repair itself. It releases a lower amount of cortisol, and our heart rate and blood pressure begin to normalise. Although our bodies enter this recovery phase, they remain on high alert for a while. If we overcome stress, and the situation is no longer an issue, our body continues to repair itself until our hormone levels, heart rate, and blood pressure reach a pre-stress state.

## 2. Resistance stage

Some stressful situations, however, continue for extended periods of time. If we don't resolve the stress and our bodies remains on high alert, we eventually adapt and learn how to live with a higher stress level. In this stage, the body goes through changes that we are unaware of in an attempt to cope with stress. Our bodies continue to secrete the stress hormone and our blood pressure remains elevated. We may think we are managing stress well, but our body's physical response tells a different story.

Signs of the resistance stage include:

- irritability
- frustration
- poor concentration



### 3. Exhaustion stage

If the resistance stage continues for too long of a period without pauses to offset the effects of stress, this can lead to the exhaustion stage.

Struggling with stress for long periods can drain our physical, emotional, and mental resources to the point where our bodies no longer have the strength to fight stress.

We may give up or feel your situation is hopeless. Signs of exhaustion include:

- fatigue
- burnout
- depression
- anxiety
- decreased stress tolerance

The physical effects of this stage also weaken our immune system and put us at risk for stress-related illnesses.

It is really important that we tackle stress at the resistance stage, or earlier, to help prevent us moving into the exhaustion stage.



## What can we do to prevent harmful stress?

One of my favourite models, to help us back to wellbeing, is the model of resilience from the Bounce Back Project in the US<sup>(3)</sup>. If we look into each area, of the model, we can use it as a map to help with understanding, soothing and managing our stress response. I will take each of the areas in turn.



# 1. SELF-AWARENESS

How well do you really know yourself? Are you living in a way that is true to you or are you really living in line with others, and/or western society's expectations? It was a real lightbulb moment for me, when I engaged my first personal coach, many years ago, to learn that if I worked in an environment that clashed with my personal values then it would be a really stressful experience. At this stage, even though I thought of myself as a values-led person, I had never actually spent any time thinking about what my top personal values were and ensuring that I was being true to them in all aspects of my life.

It is also important that we understand our character strengths and use these in the world to create happiness for ourselves and others ...



The other thing to be really aware of, is that our stress response can due to experiences in the past. If we grew up in an unsupportive environment, or have had other bad, or traumatic, experiences along the way we can be triggered by things in our current environment and a stress response can be generated which is actually linked to our past experiences (there is a whole heap of neuroscience to support this).

Questions to ask yourself to help in this area include:

- What are my top 5 personal values and how do I make choices based on them (even if it makes me unpopular)?
- What are my character strengths and how do I ensure that they are really expressed in my life?
- What work do I need to do to understand my emotional response to things and whether they are linked to the past?



## 2. SELF-CARE

Self-care is absolutely crucial to maintaining our wellbeing. In our western society, self-care can often be seen as selfish or as an additional task that we simply don't have time for; the news for you is that self-care is essential and, as the saying goes, 'we cannot pour from an empty cup'. Unfortunately, people who burnout (i.e move to the exhaustion stage of the GAS stress model above) generally learn this lesson the hard way.

In the Buddhist compassion exercises, which are now becoming popular in the West, self-compassion is built in as cornerstone of the philosophy; it recognises that we cannot thrive in the world, and do good, if we are not kind to ourselves first and foremost.



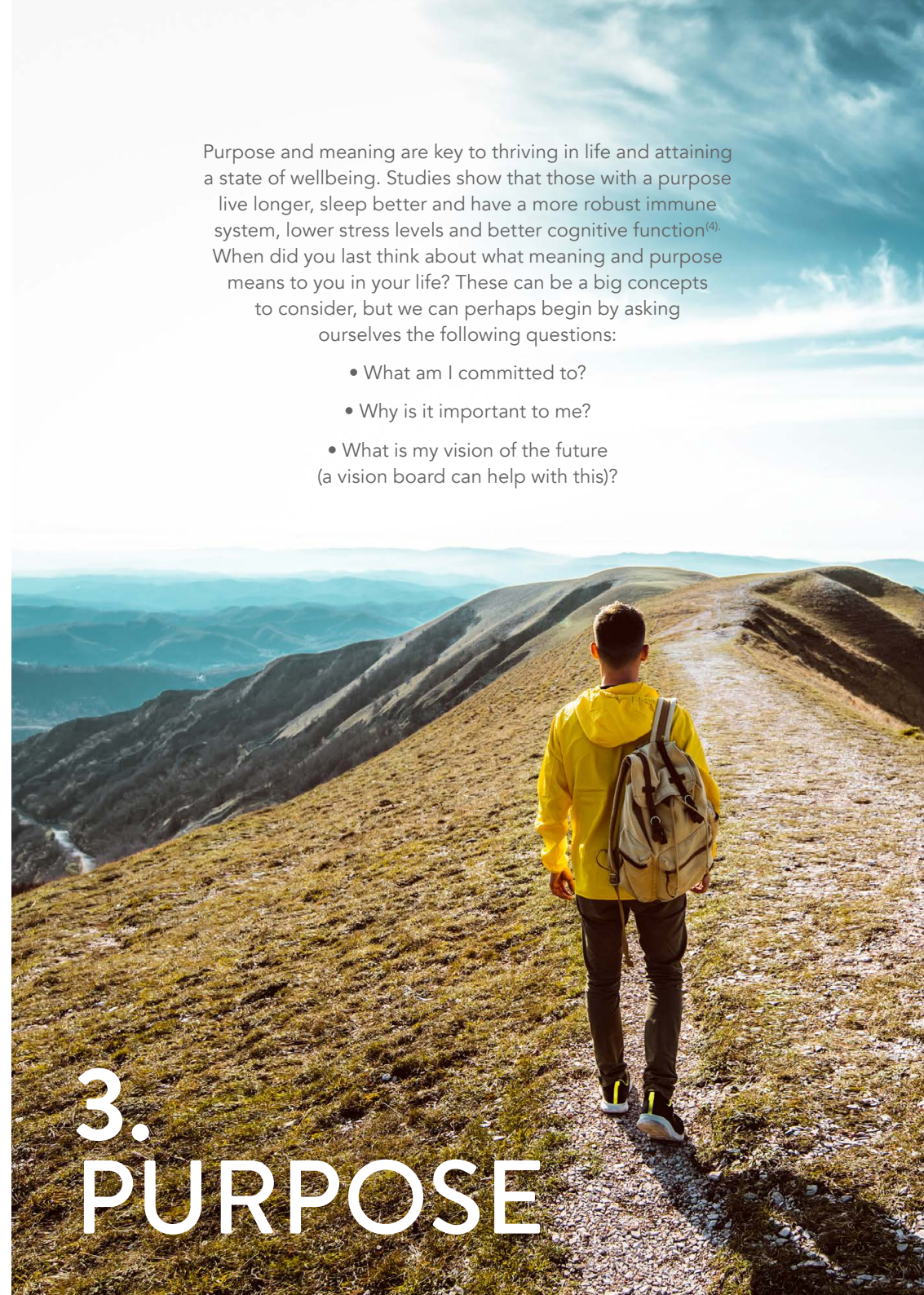
We also need to think about what we eat/ what supplements we take. In the excellent book, 'The De-Stress Effect' by Charlotte Watts, she explains that the brain is energy rich, demanding around 25-70 per cent of our fuel intake. When we are stressed, it takes up the higher end of this. This explains why our nutritional needs can change when we are stressed. She also explains that stress can limit the supply of the following nutrients to the brain: magnesium, zinc, iron, B vitamins and vitamin C.

Questions to ask yourself to help in this area include:

- What are the activities which lift or lessen stress, give me energy, nourish me?
- What are the activities which make stress, drain energy, reduce calm or stability?
- How can I build in more of the activities that nourish me into my daily and weekly routine?
- How is my diet (consider supplements here) supportive of my stress response?

Purpose and meaning are key to thriving in life and attaining a state of wellbeing. Studies show that those with a purpose live longer, sleep better and have a more robust immune system, lower stress levels and better cognitive function<sup>(4)</sup>. When did you last think about what meaning and purpose means to you in your life? These can be a big concepts to consider, but we can perhaps begin by asking ourselves the following questions:

- What am I committed to?
- Why is it important to me?
- What is my vision of the future (a vision board can help with this)?



## 3. PURPOSE

# 4. MINDFULNESS & RELAXATION

**Mindfulness:** Mindfulness has come to the West via ancient yogic and Buddhist practices, the benefits of which have been known for thousands of years and are now been recognised by western science.

Mindfulness has been shown to:<sup>(5)</sup>

- Improve cognitive ability
- Reduce stress, anxiety and depression symptoms
- Increase a sense of well-being
- Help with pain management
- Improve quality of life for those living with chronic conditions
- Improve brain health and slow brain aging

Just 10 minutes of practice a day has been shown to make a huge difference to our wellbeing.

**Relaxation:** The state of our minds and the state of our bodies are intimately linked. If our body is relaxed then our muscles are relaxed this helps to relax the mind. If the mind is anxious, then the body suffers too.

Relaxation is not so much a state as a process, a series of levels of increasing depth. It is a matter of letting go, instead of holding on; of not doing, rather than doing.

As we properly relax the whole body (as in through practices such as yogic relaxation) and breathe slowly and deeply, certain physiological changes occur:

- Less oxygen is consumed and less carbon dioxide is eliminated
- Muscle tension is reduced
- There is a decrease in the activity of the sympathetic nervous system and an increase in parasympathetic activity (which is connected with the rest and digest response in the body).

Even a few minutes of deep relaxation will reduce worry and fatigue more effectively than many hours of restless sleep.<sup>(5)</sup>

Breathwork, which also came from yogic practices, also has a hugely beneficial effect on our stress response and can be built into our everyday lives.

Questions to ask ourselves in this area include:

- Where can I go to learn to more about mindfulness and relaxation techniques?
- How can I build in 10 minutes of practice a day to help my wellbeing?
- Can I build in regular breathing exercises to sooth my stress response?

**Top tip:** for inspiration try the free app 'Insight Timer' it has an amazing collection of meditations, practices, relaxation techniques etc. from some of the best teachers in the world





# 5. RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are, for me, one of the most important elements of my life and I love that I know a lot of my neighbours, to have a chat to, as well as other people in my local area; it brings me so much joy. It is no accident that I live in a place where it is easy to get to know my neighbours, it is one of the main reasons I chose to live here. If relationships are not good, and we do not feel connected to others, this can be a significant source of stress and can impact on our wellbeing, but there are things we can do to change things for the better.

One way we can help to build good relationships is by setting a good example in the world and being kind and compassionate to others; again, Buddhism has a lot to teach us in this area. I am also currently reading Claudia Hammond's excellent book "The Keys to Kindness; How to be Kinder to Yourself, Others and the World" which covers, amongst other things, the scientific evidence behind kindness; acts of kindness are good for us and can help us to feel more connected in the world.

One of the things I cover a lot in my coaching, and I think is particularly important for our wellbeing, is understanding our personal boundaries. When we have healthy personal boundaries, we are empowered to make choices about the kinds of relationships we want to have with other people and how they impact on us.

Questions to ask ourselves, in this area, could include:

- What are my personal boundaries? Can I articulate them and write them down?
- Am I putting my healthy personal boundaries into practice in my daily life even when it is difficult or unpopular?
- How can I spend more time with (or seek out) people who are uplifting, positive and fill me with joy?
- What can I do to feel more connected with my local community?



## Conclusion and next steps

I hope this brief guide has provide you with some useful information about the causes of stress and an introduction into some of the steps we can take to improve and maintain our wellbeing. There are plenty of other models and useful information out there, but that would take a longer book to cover!

If you are interested in wellbeing coaching, to better understand and improve your response to stress please don't hesitate to contact me via my website at:

<https://persephone-wellbeing.com>

## References/Sources

- (1) Stress Management, Approaches for Preventing and Reducing Stress; A Harvard Medical School Special Health Report (2013)
- (2) GAS model based on material from: <https://www.healthline.com/health/general-adaptation-syndrome#stages>
- (3) Resilience model: <https://www.feelinggoodmn.org/what-we-do/bounce-back-project/>
- (4) Purpose and stress: <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/purpose-and-mental-health>
- (5) Benefits of mindfulness: <https://www.healthline.com/health/mind-body/what-is-mindfulness#benefits>
- (6) The New Book of Yoga, The Sivananda Yoga Centre



Janice is a Certified Wellbeing and Stress Management Coach. She provides transformative personal coaching for people who want to tackle stress or recover from burnout and want to make a positive change in their lives.

For more information go to:  
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