

Dealing With Situations that Stress You Out.

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

Many people find that there are particular situations that regularly stress them out. These are different for different people, and many people have their own special thing that stresses them. On the other hand there are many common ones, including: standing in supermarket queues, standing up and talking to an audience of people, putting children to bed, walking into a room full of people you mostly don't know, and so on. You name it, somebody will find it stressful. It just seems to be the way we are built.

Planning Ahead.

The emotional brain is a very powerful part of the total brain, and the rational brain sometimes has trouble controlling it. But the rational brain has one trump card, namely the ability to plan. And this is what saves the day and can really transform things for you. Let's look at some case examples.

Dave was very nervous about going to parties.

So, when a work-colleague invited him to a party in 10 days time, Dave was immediately nervous. Previously his main thought would have been 'how can I get out of it' but he knew this was a poor thing to do and sought help. The help resulted in him planning and he addressed the following:

1. The party was 'from 8pm' so Dave wasn't sure what time he ought to arrive. He decided talk to others who were going and find out what time they intended to arrive.
2. Dave wasn't even sure what sort of clothes other people would be wearing, so he was advised to find that out too.
3. Dave said that one thing that made him most nervous was arriving by himself. So he was asked to find someone else who was also going and see if they could go together - which he did successfully.



At the party.

So those three things made a major improvement for Dave, but he also knew that it would be difficult for him once he got to the party. He identified two situations in particular which he found difficult. These were:

- A. Finding someone to talk to.
- B. Feeling that once he found someone, he was inclined to 'stick to them'. Or at least that maybe they felt he was sticking to them.

With planning, he was able to adopt the following strategies:

For A he was to look around and go and talk to the first person he made eye contact with regardless of whether they're talking to anybody else or not. (Some people welcome an extra person into the group.)

For B he learned to concentrate on the conversation in hand and make it an enjoyable one, but also to try and sense if he or the other person wanted to move on. If so he learned the procedure, namely (a) pick your moment (this is normally when you are getting on particularly well, maybe after a burst of laughter) (b) say something like 'well, we'd better go and talk to other people as well', and (c) go and do exactly that, probably via getting a drink.

After the party.

This problem had been going on for Dave for years, and he had been getting no better at it because he was never learning any lessons from parties he went to, so Dave learned to do an extra piece of planning, after the party. How can you plan after the event? You plan for the next time it happens. So Dave learned to look at what had happened in the party realistically, make a note of his top learning point, and keep that safe ready to implement the next time he was asked to go to a party.

You can do the same.

This procedure was very successful for Dave and it turns out that it is a successful procedure for most people, once they have identified what it is that bothers them. So, for example, Elaine said that putting her two children to bed was a 'nightmare'. 'Each night it is terrible. It never gets any better' she said.

Elaine followed an exactly similar process to Dave. So she introduced a 'wind-down' routine prior to the children going to bed. She found out what the best wind down routine would be. Then she found out what the best procedure for actually putting her children (age 8 and 9) to bed was and stuck with this. Then, for the first few nights of doing this she went downstairs and made notes about what had worked well so that she could do it again.

There's a formula for it.

It turns out that this is a really powerful procedure, and it falls into three steps:

1. The 'build up' to the event you are worried about. It doesn't matter if it is standing in a supermarket queue or whatever; there is always a build up (what is the build up phase, in the supermarket example?)
2. During the event itself.
3. After the event.

Many people, when they are trying to tackle things that wind them up, simply try to 'get a grip'. That is a very difficult thing to do, and the radical new element in the approach we describe here is that you end up doing something different, at each stage. (What did Dave do different at each stage?)

And you then act as your own coach, instructing yourself what you should do for the best result. Importantly, acting as your own coach is easy, for the simple reason that the rational brain and the emotional brain are two separate components within the brain itself. So the rational brain finds it perfectly easy to give instructions about how to act and this in turn calms the emotional brain, so long as the actions are good ones.

Techniques Summary.



1. Get a piece of paper and - at the top of it - write down the situation that bothers you.
2. Work out what you should do in the lead up to the situation, and write it down. Get advice if necessary.
3. Work out what you should do during the actual situation, again getting advice if necessary, and write it down.
4. Review the situation afterwards and identify the 'do's and 'don'ts' from the situation.

Example:

Joe hated supermarket queues and got really anxious in them. This is what she wrote for her plan.

Supermarket queues.

In the build up I am going to concentrate on my shopping in the supermarket, and not think of the queue at all. Just concentrate on the shopping and make sure I do that right.

In the queue itself. I'm going to distract myself by looking at all the items around me, in detail. I'm

not going to look at other queues or even other people. I'm just going to examine, visually all the items I can see, one by one. Then when my turn comes I'm going to concentrate on putting my items on the conveyor, packing and paying for them.

I'll examine whether this worked. I'll give my anxiety a rating out of ten where ten is the worst I ever get. If I need a stronger distraction I might even take a book to read in the queue - one that's easy to concentrate on.

In Session Project.

Think of something that regularly stresses you out and work it through in exactly the way we have done here. Get others to help if necessary.

After Session Project.

Carry out the plan you have developed in the session, and see how it goes. If you didn't develop a full plan in the session, work on it after the session, and then carry it through. Be prepared to report back next time!