

Workplace Stress Management Coaching



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Rational-emotive and cognitive-behavioral (RE-CB) methods for coaching workplace stress have been described in the literature since the early 1970s when Albert Ellis penned *Executive Leadership: A Rational Approach* (Ellis, 1972). Here's an excerpt from what Ellis wrote about how rational emotive behaviour therapy could be applied to help people without mental health disorders work more efficiently using their reason and rational thinking:

I esteem efficiency. In fact, that has probably always been, and still is, my main goal as a therapist and as a developer of one of the leading psychotherapeutic theories. I think it is incredibly inefficient for human beings to give themselves needless pain by making themselves anxious, depressed, guilty or hostile; and I spend a great deal of my life fighting this kind of inefficiency.... I enjoy showing a man (and woman) how he can get along much better with his partner, boss, or employee just as much as I enjoy showing him how he can improve his sex-love relationship... Out of this work, which I have done with scores of executives in personal counselling sessions, have merged a good many general ideas and principles. These can be applied by virtually any organized leader, even (and maybe especially) when he has no serious emotional difficulties but merely wants to conduct his work and get along with his associates more effectively...

In 1987, the audio series *Mind Over Myth: Managing Difficult Situations in the Workplace* was released by the corporate services division of the Institute for Rational Emotive Therapy under the branding, *Rational Effectiveness Training Systems*. This training program was designed to help coach people who experienced non-clinical barriers to work success and wellbeing to manage difficult situations in the workplace, by teaching them the ABCs of emotional self-management. In 1997, Ellis and his colleagues published *Stress Counselling: A Rational Emotive Behavior Approach* with a chapter devoted to that how REBT methods can be applied to help individuals manage occupational stress. And for the past decade, articles and

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chapters have illustrated ways in which RE-CB methods can be applied in coaching to help people manage workplace stress (e.g., Gyllensten & Palmer, 2012). Over this time, research has supported the proposition that cognitive-behavioral coaching reduces work stress (e.g., Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005), increases resilience and goal attainment (e.g., Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009).

RE-CB coaching provides coachees with an awareness of the role of their stress-creating beliefs (irrational, rigid, extreme, not factual) and stress-managing beliefs (rational, flexible, non-extreme, evidence-based) as well as ways to restructure those beliefs that are creating excessive stress. Coach-coachee collaborative discussions on rational beliefs (e.g., self-acceptance, other-acceptance and high frustration tolerance) help strengthen a coachee's adaptive view of themselves, others and their world of work including the meanings they attribute to potentially stressful events. RE-CB coaches may help the client acquire/improve their coping skills (e.g., time management, assertion, mindfulness) and healthy lifestyle behaviors (e.g., exercise, diet). Additionally, RE-CB coachees can use problem-solving methods in order to enable coachees to develop action plans for modifying stress-creating situations/external stressors.

The first part of this chapter will present a case study that illustrates the RE-CB coaching process in action. I think doing so first up rather than leaving the case study until the end, is a good advance organizer making the remainder of the chapter more meaningful.

The second part of this chapter will review important background knowledge for those coachees wishing to apply or extend RE-CBC coaching to workplace stress management including:

- What is stress?
- Workplace stress
- The transactional model of stress
- Resilience: The psychological strength for managing stress in the workplace
- The neuroscience of RE-CB stress management coaching

The third part contains essential information that RE-CB coaches share with coachees at various points of the coaching process with specific reference to the role of thinking in workplace stress including:

- Emotional stress reactions
- 'Things are neither good nor bad but thinking makes them so'—Shakespeare
- Catastrophizing
- The battle between irrational and rational beliefs

The final part of the chapter will review RE-CB coaching stress management methods including a 4-step RE-CB coaching for reducing workplace stress:

- Step 1. Take stock of work stressors
- Step 2. Plan for taking control of emotional stress
- Step 3. Plan for taking action to modify situation/work stressors
- Step 4. Evaluation

My experience as a RE-CB coach focussed on work stress is varied. Over the years, I have taught stress management workshops to professional groups as a form of workplace stress prevention. As well, in my role as a sport psychologist to one of an Australian Rules Football teams, I worked as a mental skills coach with individual athletes who were experiencing both performance issues as well as extreme stress. I have many years of experience coaching individual teachers and school principals who experience high levels of work stress. Additionally, I have used the RE-CB framework and methods to coach individuals and small groups of executives, managers and employees, some of whom were experiencing severe work-related stress.

Case Study

I coached Helen, a school librarian, who approached me because of stress she was experiencing which was getting so great she didn't feel like coming to school on Mondays and was considering retiring from the profession.

Coaching Session 1

In gathering information from Helen, I used the transactional model of work stress (see part 2 of this chapter) to guide my questioning. Initially, I asked Helen whether she could pinpoint any challenges, demands, and threats. She readily identified one particular grade 9 class who at 9.40 am when they appeared at the library door she experienced high stress. A shortened coach-coachee conversation is reproduced.

Michael: Can you say what aspect of their presence was most stressful?

Helen: Most classes of students enter the library are a little noisy but when I appear and hold my finger to my lips, they quiet down. There is one boy, George, a very big boy, much taller than me who refuses to pay any attention to me. He simply goes where he wants to go, talks in a loud voice, and when I am teaching laughs and interrupts. That's when I get really stressed.

Michael: Tell me about your stress.

Helen: Well, I get very tense, I can feel my temples pounding, I flush and feel light headed, like I might faint.

Michael: How do you usually feel at these times?

Helen: Very worried and inadequate—and I am feeling very tired on Mondays when I should be my peppiest.

Michael: I can imagine how that must feel—bad. How does that effect your behavior, what you say to the class and to George?

Helen: I feel like I want to get the hell out of there. Sometimes I yell at George to pay attention but my voice sounds very weak—at other times, I guess I just ignore him or send him out. His friends sometimes laugh at me.

Michael: Wow, must seem like a very bad dream. You are under a lot of stress. You said you have physical symptoms of stress, increased heart rate, tension and tiredness. Emotionally, you say you get very anxious and down—and you have described your behavior that swings from passive to aggressive.

Helen: What can I do?

Michael: Before discussing how to manage stress, I would like to ask you: ‘How would you prefer to feel and behave at 9.40 am next Monday when George and his class enter the library?’

Helen: I would like to feel calmer and more confident. I would like to have a plan to settle George down without raising my voice or tossing him out of class.

Michael: OK. These will be the goals of our coaching sessions. Let’s see if we can come up with a plan that achieves these goals. OK?

In this first coaching session, I made a point to discover Helen’s strengths as a librarian as well as talents, hobbies and interests outside of her work. With some coaxing, I was able to establish that Helen loved to sing in the choir, had two great kids, volunteered on weekends on various community projects and, not surprisingly, was a spelling champion when she was in third grade. This information I used when it came time to challenge her negative view of herself that was making her feel so inadequate.

I also asked about aspects of her lifestyle including what she did for fun and recreation, any exercise routine and her diet. I indicated that a good life style can help make people stronger and less tired in dealing with constant and unrelenting demands such as excessive time-workload pressures and dealing constantly with people who display difficult behaviour like George. I summarized the Selye three-stages of physiological stress (see part 2 of this chapter) and suggested that her tiredness might derive from her inability to turn her arousal system off in order to re-charge. This she agreed with and thought that it would be a good idea to wake up 30 min earlier to walk, to eat breakfast every school day and to reach out to more friends in order socialize and have fun.

Coaching Session 2

Helen indicated she had followed through on making improvements to her recreation, diet and exercise and, yes, she didn’t feel so exhausted. However, George was still creating havoc in her class and she was still feeling very anxious and down. I introduced the idea of having a resilient mindset, provided Helen with a definition (see definition appearing later in chapter) and indicated that in this session we could be explore some stress-managing ways to think as well as some coping skills for lowering her emotional stress and strengthening her resilience. At the end of the

session, Helen would select some aspects of resilience to put into practice before coaching session 3.

Michael: One of the things that plays a big role in how much stress people experience when faced with a stressful event is their thinking. Shakespeare wrote that “Things are neither good nor bad but thinking makes them so.” I’d like to hear what you are thinking when George enters the library and you start to feel worried and inadequate.

Helen: I think ‘There he goes again and if I can’t get him to stop everyone will see I’m hopeless. This is horrible.’

Michael: Ever think: “I can’t cope with this, I can’t stand it?”

Helen: Yes, a lot lately.

Michael: The type of thinking people have when extremely stressed is often not all that sensible or true; they can take things personally, blow things out of proportion and under-estimate their ability to cope. Let’s look at this way of thinking you have, ‘I’m hopeless,’ when you’ve had a bad day with George. If a friend of yours had this thought that she was hopeless because she wasn’t managing a difficult student’s behavior, would you agree with her thinking, would it be sensible or true?

Helen: Not, I guess not. I see, she’s feeling worse about herself and more stressed because she has been putting herself down forgetting about her good points.

Michael: Exactly! Last week you shared many of your good points with me that you said you were proud of and made you, you. Given that we all have our fallibilities or imperfections as well as strengths we are proud of, does it make sense to judge your overall value based on aspects of your behavior at work that may not be optimal?

Helen: I guess not, it would be better to think ‘I accept who I am and will not judge my overall worth based on how well I do at work –or what others think of me.’

I also employed Socratic questioning and the Catastrophe Scale (see part 3 of chapter) so that Helen could consider whether George’s behavior was really the worst thing in the world that could happen, or merely bad (she agreed “Bad, but things could be a lot worse”). I also asked Helen to consider what the phrase ‘I can’t stand it’ means (e.g., I cannot live with it, it will kill me) and to search for evidence in her past for whether or not she has coped with things far more unpleasant than confronting George (she found lots of evidence). She agreed to employ the following three examples of stress-managing self-talk to use in anticipation of, during and after an encounter with George: ‘I accept myself no matter what,’ ‘This is bad but could be much worse,’ and ‘I can stand this.’

In this session, we also discussed coping skills Helen could call on to strengthen her resilience and emotional regulation including finding social support and relaxation. She agreed to practice mindfulness as something she could do to refocus her attention away from George and on to other more important things. She agreed to apply her takeaways before our next session.

Coaching Session 3

At the beginning of the session, Helen appeared calmer in discussing her week at school, her interaction with George, with tension no longer being etched in her forehead. She indicated that she had written the three stress-managing phrases on a slip of paper, lodged them under her pillow and practiced them before getting out of bed in the morning. She said she was continuing to improve her life style and practiced mindfulness four times during the week, which she was getting the hang of.

This coaching session was devoted to coming up with a plan of action to try to solve the problem of George's uncooperative and disrespectful behaviour. Helen had until this point completed *Step 1. Taking Stock* and *Step 2. Taking Control*. It was now on to *Step 3. Taking Action*.

Michael: Now that you are less stressed about George's stressful behaviour, it's time to do some problem solving to see what can be done to modify George's behavior. Let's see if you can come up with some different courses of action, weigh up their consequences, likelihood of success and pick one.

Helen: I could contact his parents for support. I could provide him with some competing activity to engage in as he comes in, such as distribute materials for the class. I guess I could ask the PE teacher to have a chat and maybe prohibit his attendance at after-school sporting events like training. Maybe I could design a project involving library resources that George knows a lot about and involve him as a leader. Weighing up the pros and cons of each possibility, I think I'll go with designing a project around his interests.

Michael: Great. Let's keep in mind the following four behavioural strengths—ways of carrying out the plan that can maximize the success of the plan: confidence, persistence, organization and getting along. Which will be useful for you to apply in this case?

Helen: I need to try this with confidence- trust that with persistence it will succeed. Obviously, getting myself organized in finding out more about George's interests and planning an interesting project is important. And I'll need my getting along strength so I speak calmly and positively to him concerning this project.

Helen put together a plan of action based on her reflection of what might work best for George to solve the problem. Discussing the behavioural strengths needed to maximize the effectiveness of the plan is part of the educational role I assume in part of the RE-CB coaching process.

Coaching Sessions 4 and 5

These last two coaching sessions were spaced 2 and 3 weeks after each other. During these sessions (*Step 4. Evaluation*), Helen described her successes in applying her new resilient mindset to lessen her stress and solve the problem. Helen reported a

great improvement in each area and although she sometimes became flustered and emotionally stressed around George, overall as a result of continuous self-reflection, modifying her self-talk, continuing to practice coping skills and seeing the success of her action plan to involve George in more positive ways in a library project, Helen deemed the coaching sessions a great success.

Workplace Stress

To understand what workplace stress is, it is important to start with a key concept discovered by the founding father in the area of stress inquiry and research, Hans Selye (1956, 1974). Selye, a world-renowned biological scientist, made the point that stress is not something, which can be avoided and, moreover, is not something you would wish to avoid. In the face of both positive and negative demands and threats, our bodies experiences an increase in physiological activity (which Selye refers to as ‘stress’) which provides the fuel to our physical and intellectual machinery to enable us to deal with the many and varied demands we encounter on a daily basis. However, when the outside demands reach extremely high levels of intensity—which can vary along a continuum from over-stimulation to complete boredom—stress can become distress and damage to our physiological system can occur.

Simply stated, Selye has shown that stress can either be life sustaining, beneficial and enjoyable (‘positive stress’) or detrimental and life destroying (‘negative stress’ or ‘distress’). The goal of stress management coaching is not trying to do away with stress altogether. Stress is the way we react and adapt to demands and threats encountered.

In this simple definition, demands refer to those many and varied activities, which we are required to perform on a daily basis, while threats refer to the actions of others which can harm us either physically, physiologically or, more commonly, psychologically. Our stress level can also be influenced by our psychological strengths, including our attitudes towards ourself, other people, the organization we work for, our coping skill repertoire (e.g., assertiveness, time management) and our lifestyle (e.g., exercise, diet, recreation) and life style (exercise, recreation, diet).

Our physiological and psychological stress reactions, which result from the combined interaction between inside and outside worlds, determine in the short run whether our behavioral reactions successfully manage the outside stressors or whether we mismanage the outside stressor through self-defeating behaviors such as avoidance or aggression. Adaptive behavior will neutralize, modify or remove the demand or threat, thereby reducing the stress, while un-adaptive behavior prolongs and often intensifies the stress. Over the long haul, our typical physiological and psychological reaction to demands and threats will determine our state of physical and mental health including—in extreme cases—burnout and breakdown.

Stress Reactions: Physiological, Psychological and Behavioral

Over the years, researchers have studied how demands and threats in the environment, which call for a response or adaptation, result in both physiological and psychological reactions. We have learned that physiological and psychological processes work together in reacting to demands and threats in the outside world.

Let's first examine how the body reacts to stressors.

Physiological Stress Reactions: Three-Stage Adaptation Syndrome

The sympathetic nervous system, that part of your autonomic nervous system responsible for arousing ourselves initially for 'flight' or 'fight'. There are also the endocrine glands, which help support the arousal efforts of your sympathetic nervous system and which carry out the important function of supplying you with the energy needed for action. The main endocrine glands involved in your physiological stress reactions are the adrenal glands, located near your kidneys.

Selye has identified a three-stage physiological response system to threats and demands, which he termed the 'general adaptation syndrome' (GAS). It is called a general syndrome because his research has shown that our body responds in a similar way to all demands and threats regardless of the specific identity of the stressor. Our body 'turns on' when our brain interprets a situation as threatening regardless of whether you are faced with a wild animal, not achieving a performance target or being spoken to disrespectfully by your immediate superior.

Indeed, even in the face of pleasant stimulation, when we feel excited and curious, our body reacts in precisely the same way as it does when faced with noxious stimuli. The three stages reveal when we are most vulnerable to stress-related physical symptoms and problems.

During the alarm reaction (stage 1), the hypothalamus, that portion of our brain responsible both for much of our emotion and motivation, as well as for activating our central nervous system and endocrine system, receives a signal from our brain's cortex that a situation is physically demanding or psychologically threatening. Our sympathetic nervous system reacts rapidly to the threat or demand by sharpening the alertness of our body to 'flight' or 'fight' in the form of changes to our senses (hearing, vision), heart rate, respiratory and digestive systems and increased muscle tension. In order to maintain our body's alertness and preparedness, our sympathetic nervous system also directly stimulates your adrenal medulla, the interior part of the adrenal gland, which produces adrenaline, a hormone responsible for mobilizing extra energy in the form of glucose. Adrenaline provides us with a burst of energy but this response tends to be rather short-lived. The other part of the adrenal gland involved in the stress response is the adrenal cortex located on the exterior part of your adrenal gland. The adrenal cortex is also activated by our hypothalamus but through a different route. The hypothalamus activates the pituitary gland, located within the deep recesses of our brain, which sends many hormones throughout our

body. For example, the pituitary gland stimulates the thyroid gland, which raises our level of metabolic functioning at times of stress. The pituitary also produces a hormone called ACTH (adrenocorticotrophic hormone), which in turn stimulates the adrenal cortex to produce a wide range of chemicals.

Selye believed that ACTH was the most important hormone for studying our physiological stress reaction. The adrenal cortex produces cortisol or cortisone, which helps our body in the short term to ward off pain and the invasion of foreign substances. (In the long term, elevated cortisone levels reduce your body's resistance to cancer, infection and illness.) Mineral corticoids also produced by the adrenal cortex influences the mineral balance of your body and, in particular, converting food into energy.

If we have been unable to neutralize or remove the outside stressor, the general adaptation syndrome will advance to resistance (stage 2). During this phase, the alarm bells of the initial stage have ceased ringing and our body runs at a higher rate, in an effort to cope with the stressor. In particular, our endocrine system supplies increased minerals and chemical hormones needed to maintain the extra energy and effort. Until fairly recently we dealt with (or they dealt with us) outside stressors relatively quickly. We did not spend a great deal of time in the resistance stage and we generally resolved the outside stressor.

When we are able to successfully deal with the outside stress, our physiological systems begin shutting down as our body returns to a previous level of rest and equilibrium. Our parasympathetic nervous system takes over from the sympathetic system and helps restore your organs and yourself to a relatively stress-free state.

Exhaustion (stage 3) occurs when we have been unable to deal with the stressors in our world and we do not have the energy to put into resisting any longer. It is during stage 3 that we are most vulnerable to stress-related physical and mental illnesses. While our body's chemical-hormonal and central nervous system response to an outside stressor is seen as being very necessary and useful, the prolonged 'turn on' of our arousal system without it being able to restore itself is when damage occurs. In a nutshell, our communication system is telling us that we are still in danger, but our arousal and energy-producing physiological system is on empty. And worse still, we have a much reduced immunity system. Our bodily organs are at risk of injury due, in part, to elevated cortisone levels, and we are extremely vulnerable to the invasion of noxious foreign substances which bring with them illness and disease. At worst, if we do not respond to our body's signals, which suggest that we are physiologically spent, physical (and nervous) breakdown may be imminent. At best, we will begin to manifest a variety of physical and psychological stress-related symptoms. The following somatic symptoms are commonly found in people with high levels of stress: abdominal pain, difficulty in breathing, eczema, hives, tinnitus, occupational injuries, bowel difficulties, and tearfulness. Several illness and chronic conditions also have been related to stress, including high blood pressure, kidney or bladder trouble, arthritis, lung or breathing problems, gall bladder disorders, cardiovascular disorders, insomnia, gastritis, stomach ulcers, anemia, asthma and colitis.

Psychological Stress Reactions (Cognitive, Emotional)

‘Psychological stress’ most commonly refers emotional reactions to the outside stressors; in particular, feelings of anxiety (and panic), anger and rage), and depression. Included within emotional reactions are feelings of apathy and alienation, feeling out of control, emotional exhaustion, and lack of self-confidence, excessive guilt and moodiness. ‘Psychological stress reactions’ may also include disturbances in our ability to think clearly. We may lose concentration easily, fail to remember important details, be mentally confused and indecisive, and lose our capacity to solve problems easily.

Human beings have a tendency—especially when confronted with stressors which threaten their ego as well as excessively demanding—to engage in irrational thinking. They are apt to magnify events out of proportion, selectively focus on the negative aspects of the situation, make predictions and draw conclusions in the absence of hard or contradictory evidence, and irrationally evaluate the significance of certain stressful events in ways that create more intense and negative emotional reactions than the situation warrants.

Behavioral Stress Reactions

When confronted with stressors, people typically react with one of two behaviors: ‘direct action’ and ‘inactive’ methods. Direct action methods involve them doing something actively to modify the stressors or in dealing with their own emotional stress reaction. An example of direct action methods would be using coping skills (e.g., assertion) to modify the stressor. Direct action methods for managing emotional stress reactions include seeking support, relaxation, mindfulness, and exercise.

Inactive methods signifies doing very little to take control of the situation or emotional reactions. Commonly, a person might simply ignore the situation and resort to alcohol or food to combat bad feelings. Research pointing to direct action as the method which can minimize the effects of the stressor as well as helping us maintain good physical and mental health (e.g., Landon-Fox & Cooper, 2011).

The Tsunami of Workplace Stress

Work-related stress can be defined as the negative reaction that occurs when demands at work exceed an individual’s ability to cope. It can be caused by different external demands and challenges including but not limited to having to accomplish very difficult tasks, time-workload pressure, difficult relationships, change, poor performance reviews and ‘unproductive’ organizational practices.

Numerous studies show that job stress is far and away the major source of stress for American adults and that it has escalated progressively over the past few decades (American Institute of Stress, 2017).

Everyone who has ever held a job has, at some point, felt the pressure of work-related stress. Any job can have stressful elements, even if you love what you do. In the short-term, you may experience pressure to meet a deadline or to fulfil a challenging obligation. But when work stress becomes chronic, it can be overwhelming—and harmful to both physical and emotional health. Unfortunately such long-term stress is all too common. In 2012, 65% of Americans cited work as a top source of stress, according to the American Psychological Association's (APA) annual Stress in America Survey (2017). Only 37% of Americans surveyed said they were doing an excellent or very good job managing stress.

A 2013 survey by APA's Center for Organizational Excellence (<http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2013/03/employee-needs.aspx>) also found that job-related stress is a serious issue. More than one-third of working Americans reported experiencing chronic work stress and just 36% said their organizations provide sufficient resources to help them manage that stress.

In Great Britain, the incidence of work stress is plateauing at very high levels. The latest estimates from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) show (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress/stress.pdf?pdf=stress>):

- The total number of cases of work related stress, depression or anxiety in 2015/16 was 488,000 cases, a prevalence rate of 1510 per 100,000 workers.
- The number of new cases was 224,000, an incidence rate of 690 per 100,000 workers. The estimated number and rate have remained broadly flat for more than a decade.
- The total number of working days lost due to this condition in 2015/16 was 11.7 million days. This equated to an average of 23.9 days lost per case. Working days lost per worker showed a generally downward trend up to around 2009/10, since then the rate has been broadly flat.
- In 2015/16 stress accounted for 37% of all work related ill health cases and 45% of all working days lost due to ill health.
- Stress is more prevalent in public service industries, such as education; health and social care; and public administration and defence.
- By occupation, jobs that are common across public service industries (such as healthcare workers; teaching professionals; business, media and public service professionals) show higher levels of stress as compared to all jobs.
- The main work factors cited by respondents as causing work related stress, depression or anxiety (LFS) were workload pressures, including tight deadlines and too much responsibility and a lack of managerial support

In Australia, stress in the workplace is a growing concern for employees and employers (<http://www.medibank.com.au/client/documents/pdfs/the-cost-of-workplace-stress.pdf>). Figures show that while compensation claims made by Australian employees fell significantly between 1996 and 2004, the number of stress related claims almost doubled. In Australia, data shows that mentally healthy workplaces are important to employees. Across all industries and locations, employees do not consider their workplace as mentally healthy as they would like it to be. This research shows that employees and leaders agree on the importance of mentally

healthy workplaces (91% employees, 89% leaders). However, employees do not necessarily believe their leaders place as much importance on mental health as they do (56% of employees believe their most senior leaders consider mental health in the workplace important). Across all states/territories and industry sectors, there is a significant gap between the importance employees place on a mentally healthy workplace ('importance'), and how mentally healthy they believe their workplace actually is ('performance'). (<https://www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/bl1270-report---tns-the-state-of-mental-health-in-australian-workplaces-hr.pdf?sfvrsn=8>).

It can be of some small comfort for coachees to learn the full extent of work stress and that they are certainly not alone in experiencing the deleterious effects of excessive work stress.

Transactional Model of Work Stress

It is useful for a coach using RE-CB methods to have a framework to understand work stress. The transactional model for workplace stress is one such framework I have developed and used over the years because it is consistent with both the literature on the causes and effects of workplace stress as well as a rational-emotive, cognitive-behavioral conception. The framework can be shared with coachees during the stress management coaching process (Fig. 1).

The transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) emphasizes that while stress is a response to external demands and threats (external world), it is not a direct result but rather is influenced by people's perception of and attitudes towards the stressor and their own coping skill resources for overcoming it—sometimes referred to as psychological factors (internal world).

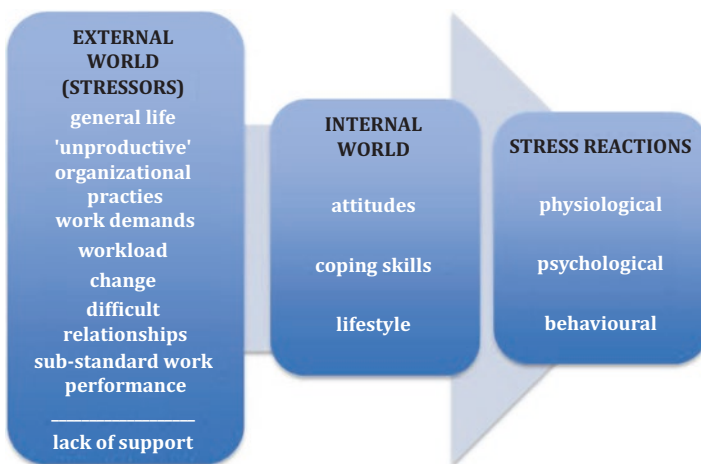


Fig. 1 Transactional model of work stress

Sources of external stressors that go hand-in-hand with work-related stress include:

- Low salaries.
- Excessive workloads.
- Few opportunities for growth or advancement.
- Work that isn't engaging or challenging.
- Lack of social support.
- Not having enough control over job-related decisions.
- Conflicting demands or unclear performance expectations.
- <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/work-stress.aspx>

Gyllensten and Palmer (2012) divided work stressors into six categories: (a) demands (e.g., workload), (b) control (employee has over work), (c) support (received from management and colleagues), (d) relationships (how conflict is handled), f. role (covers role conflicts and poorly defined roles) and g. change (how it is communicated and dealt with in organization).

The list of external stressors that appear in the transactional model summarize many of the common workplace stressors and includes *general life stress* as a potential contributor to workplace stress (see Bernard, 2016a, 2016b).

When coaching, this model can help coaches to determine which aspects of their workplace stress are most problematic: external world, internal world and stress reactions. Goals can be formulated around coachee perceptions and appraisals.

Resilience: Psychological Strength for Managing Stress

In recent years, as a stress management coach and when offering stress management classes, I identify *resilience* as the internal strength people require to manage stressful work conditions. I define resilience for those I coach and teach as follows:

Resilience means...when faced with challenging situations including change as well as when confronted with difficult situations and people, (1) being aware of your negative emotions (anxiety, anger, down) including your degree of upset, (2) being able to prevent yourself from getting extremely upset, (3) when you get extremely upset, being able to control your behaviour so that you do not behave aggressive or withdraw from others at inappropriate times, and (4) when you are very upset, knowing how to think and what to do to calm down within a reasonable period of time, and (5) bouncing back to work and being with others. By helping you maintain control of your negative emotions, resilience helps you to think, feel and behave in positive ways in order to overcome difficulty and move on.

Furthermore, I explain that resilience as a personal strength involves use of reason, flexible and objective thinking/self-talk and a variety of coping skills that help people to regulate the intensity of their emotional response to adverse events. Resilient thinking (e.g. not blowing things out of proportion, switching from negative thought to positive thoughts, not taking the situation personally) focuses on ways to stay calm, calm down and be in control of emotions when faced with adversity. Coping skills (e.g. assertion, time management, relaxation, finding someone to talk to) can

also help people to stay calm as well as eliminate the adversity (e.g. oppositional student, someone asking you to join another committee). And changes in lifestyle (exercise, rest, diet) can contribute to resilience. Resilience also involves problem solving using the personal capabilities of confidence, persistence, organisation and getting along to take positive actions when confronted with challenging and difficult situations and people.

Resilience Self-Survey

I find it can be useful to use the following survey I developed to enhance a coach's self-awareness of the extent they have developed the strength of resilience—the tool needed for self-management of stress.

INSTRUCTIONS: Please indicate how often in demanding and challenging situations and when working with difficult people you behave in the following ways at work.

		Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always
1.	I am aware of my feelings when I am confronted with a tough situation, (significant criticism, my sub-standard performance, incompetent or unfair behaviour of others).	1	2	3	4
2.	I can be very intolerant and judgmental of someone who does the wrong thing including not doing things the way they should be done.	4	3	2	1
3.	I stay calm when I am faced with extremely challenging work with tough deadlines, when interacting with difficult people, or having to make sudden, unexpected adjustments to meet changing priorities.	1	2	3	4
4.	I tend to blow things out of proportion.	4	3	2	1
5.	When I notice that my emotional level is too high, I am able to make adjustments so that I become calmer and in control.	1	2	3	4
6.	I find myself thinking, "I can't stand this situation or person's behaviour."	4	3	2	1
7.	I take charge of my life style (exercise, diet, relaxation) to ensure I am as healthy, strong and positive as I can be.	1	2	3	4
8.	I am someone who takes things very personally.	4	3	2	1
9.	When I get extremely stressed, I bounce back quickly.	1	2	3	4
10.	I use one or more coping skills to stay calm (breathing – muscle relaxation, assertion, sense of humour, distraction, mindfulness, gratitude, find someone to talk to).	1	2	3	4
	Total Score				

My Resilience is:

under-developed	moderately developed	developed	well-developed	gold standard
10–17	18–23	24–29	30–35	36–40

The Neuroscience of RE-CB Stress Management Coaching

The prefrontal cortex of the brain is far and away the single most important structure of the brain for supporting resilience; it is considered by some neuropsychologists to be an ‘evolutionary masterpiece’ (e.g., Siegel, 2007) (Fig. 2).

The executive functions carried out by the prefrontal cortex area helps us to:

- Set vision and future goals
- Focus attention
- Monitor aspects of your work performance
- Solve problems
- Be creative
- Maintain a positive self-image
- Generate positive emotions

The prefrontal cortex is also in charge of regulating our negative emotions and behaviours when faced with challenging work situations and difficult people. We call this function, *resilience*. Now, to strengthen a resilient mindset, the prefrontal



Fig. 2 The pre-frontal cortex

cortex needs to be stimulated. By helping coachees to become more self-aware of their resilience (rational vs. irrational thinking; how to modify stress-creating beliefs; coping skills) and developing a plan for strengthening elements of resilience, it appears from research with clinical populations cited in the next paragraph that the pre-frontal cortex and other parts of the brain involved in emotional arousal and regulation are being activated.

Neuroscience has developed several methods (e.g., neuro-imaging techniques) to analyze cognitive function and increase the understanding of mental functioning. As a result, we now know that cognitive-behavioral interventions modify the neural circuits involved in the regulation of negative emotions (Porto et al., 2009). Researchers have found that in people prone to anxiety, brain volume and activity in the amygdala decrease as a result of cognitive-behavior therapy (Boraxbekk, 2016). Researchers have found changes in pre-frontal cortex activity in depressed individuals as a result of cognitive-behavior therapy (Goldapple, Segal & Garson, 2004).

A question that has no immediate research-based answer for RE-CB coachees is the type of communication such as Socratic questioning, goal setting, challenging and changing rigid thinking that produces a significant and sustainable change in brain structures and circuitry responsible for emotional regulation.

The following stress-related information is introduced to coachees at various stages of the RE-CB coaching process.

Stress and Its Management: The ‘Big’ Picture

Emotional Stress Reactions

We have learned that there are three main negative, emotional stress reactions that all people experience at various times when they are faced with adverse events at work: anger, anxiety and feeling down (emotional vocabulary). It is quite normal and healthy to experience these negative emotions as they often can help motivate you to eliminate the adversity.

We have also learned that the same emotion can vary in intensity from strong to weak as illustrated by the Emotional Thermometer. For example, if your direct report (senior leader) is unfairly critical of you, you may experience various degrees of anger from mild annoyance (temperature rating of 1 or 2) to extreme rage (temperature rating of 9 or 10). It is when your emotions become extreme that your behaviour often becomes erratic and self-defeating as when we act aggressively or withdraw (Fig. 3).

A goal for coachees to set for themselves when they are faced with negative, adverse events at work is to not become extremely upset but rather, using the Emotional Thermometer as a guide, to stay calm—within the middle range of emotional upset (temperature rating between 4 and 7).

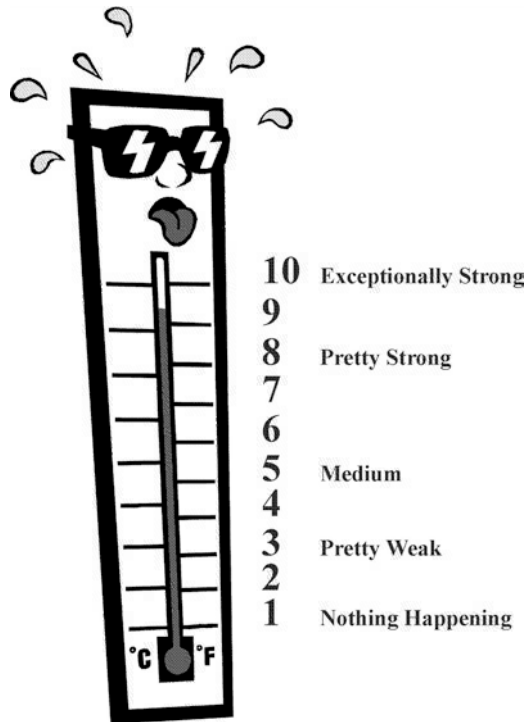


Fig. 3 The emotional thermometer

“Things Are Neither Good nor Bad but Thinking Makes Them So.”—Shakespeare

We now understand that the greatest influence over the extent to which you are emotionally calm and in control when faced with adverse situations is your thinking rather than the situation itself. Take, for example, an employee whose manager is highly critical and non-supportive. You can see from the accompanying diagrams that one large factor that determines how stressed the employee becomes is the way s/he thinks about the manager’s behavior (Table 1).

Catastrophizing

Over the past few decades, I have written about an aspect of our thinking that contributes a great deal to work stress and poor resilience. This tendency is referred to by Albert Ellis as *catastrophizing*. Simply stated, catastrophizing means the tendency to blow the badness of events out of proportion.

What we have learned is that when people become extremely emotionally stressed, they do so because they are most likely thinking to themselves that what has happened or is about to happen is not only bad, but is the worst thing that could

Table 1 Examples of different emotional reactions to the same adverse work situation: Thinking makes it so

Happening → Thinking → Feeling → Behavior				
Anger				
Manager provides little support and criticizes employee	Employee A	My manager should be fair and supportive. This is awful and terrible. I can't stand it. My manager is a real _____.	Extreme anger out of control	Negative attitude passive-aggressive
	Employee B	I prefer my manager to fair and supportive. I can deal with it she's not. I don't like this behavior. My manager is fallible and is making a mistake.	Annoyed in control	Talks respectfully
Down				
Manager provides little support and criticizes employee	Employee A	I should have been successful. Others will judge me badly. This is awful. I can't stand it. I am hopeless.	Extremely down	Lack of engagement, withdrawal
	Employee B	I prefer to be successful and have my work approved of by others. When I am not, it's bad, but not the end of the world. I can cope. I'll try to figure out if there is anything I can do.	Disappointed	Constructive action

happen. We use particular words and phrases, which are semantically imprecise when, we catastrophize such as: “This is terrible.” “This is horrible.” “This is really the worst thing.” We use these words and phrases not only when referring to events that are catastrophic such as war, terrorism, natural disasters but to events that are bad but not catastrophic such as when we make mistakes, fail or when people are thinking critically of what we have done or said.

Consider the Emotional Thermometer. As indicated, it can be used to measure the intensity of how strongly someone feels. Now, when something happens to us that we perceive to be bad such as making a mistake or being rejected, it is normal to feel in the middle of the Emotional Thermometer. We might feel somewhat or medium down, or worried or angry. However, when we catastrophize, that is, blow

the event out of proportion, our emotional temperature moves way up the thermometer and we feel very down, panicked or furious.

An important key to staying relatively calm or being in the middle of the Emotional Thermometer when faced with something that is bad but not awful, terrible and catastrophic is keeping the badness of the event in perspective. Again, our thinking at these times will sound something like: “While this is bad. It’s not that bad. It could be a lot worse.”

The Catastrophe Scale can help you to help coachees to not blow bad things out of proportion and of the importance of keeping things in perspective. The Catastrophe scale, which I developed for use with for all people including children and young people presents to a scale for measuring how bad things are. Extremely high ratings (90–100), which can be considered as catastrophes, the “worst” things in the world, are represented by an erupting volcano, a meteor hits the earth, being eaten by a shark and being physically assaulted. Things that are “very bad” include a very serious car accident, being arrested and thrown in jail. Things that are “bad” include being at the dentist, your computer crashes, falling off your bike and receiving a bad mark in school. Finally, things that fall into the “a bit bad” include being stung by a little mosquito, having a pimple, your ice cream falls on the ground or a dog eats your hotdog. Where you place an event on the Catastrophe Scale determines how strong your emotions are on the Emotional Thermometer (Fig. 4).

Battle Between Rational (Stress-Managing) and Irrational Beliefs (Stress-Creating)

We now know that all humans are all born with two opposing ways of thinking—ways of interpreting and evaluating experiences including themselves and others; (1) Rational (reason, flexible, evidence-based), and (2) Irrational (rigid, not logical, not evidence-based). The degree to which we become emotionally stressed when adverse events happen is governed largely by whether we are viewing and interpreting the event through a rational, stress-managing or irrational, stress-creating lens. The accompanying survey will provide a coachee information as to whether s/he holds any of the major irrational beliefs that lead to poor resilience and high stress. Keep in mind that all of us to greater or lesser extents harbor irrational beliefs. Fortunately, by helping a coachee become aware of those beliefs s/he holds, s/he has an opportunity to replace them.

The *Check-up from your Neck-up Survey* can be completed by coachees to aid self-awareness of six major stress-creating beliefs that research indicates are associated with stress (e.g., Bernard, 2016a, 2016b).

The impact of the different beliefs on emotional stress reactions when faced with adversity is represented below and can be shared with coachees:

- **Self-Downing**—prone to feeling down and inadequate.
- **Need for Approval**—prone to social anxiety.

HOWBADZZAT?

It's not as bad
as you think it is!

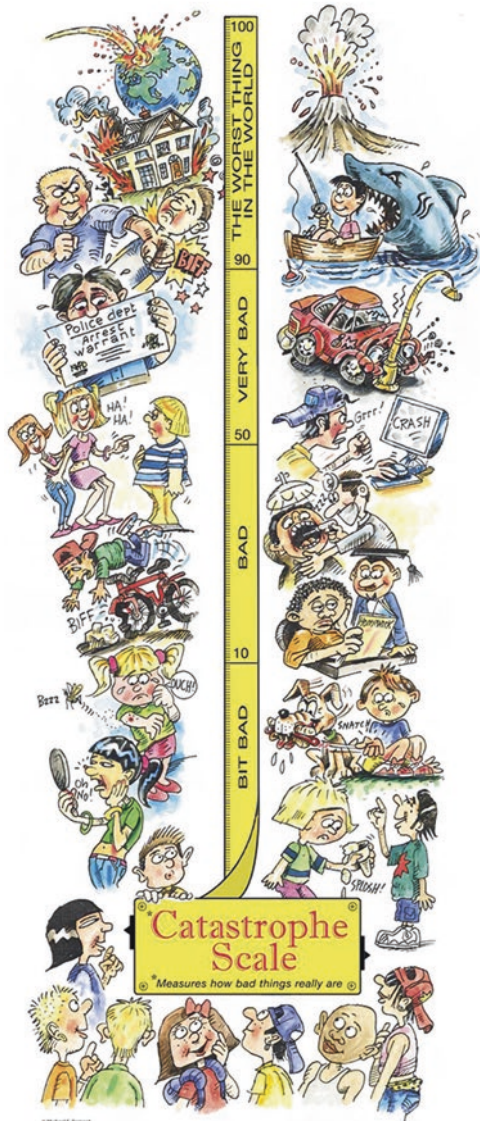


Fig. 4 The Catastrophe Scale

- **Need for Achievement (Perfectionism)**—prone to performance anxiety.
- **I Can’t Do It!**—prone to getting down and feeling helpless and hopeless.
- **I Can’t Be Bothered**—prone to anger when faced with being required to do unpleasant tasks; you may tend to procrastinate in these areas.
- **Intolerance of Others**—prone to anger with people you perceive as doing the wrong thing.

Your Check Up from the Neck Up Survey

Instructions: Place a check mark in the box that indicates which type of thinking is most characteristic of you when faced with adversity at work.

<input type="checkbox"/> Self-Downing	When things go badly and I make mistakes or people are critical of me, I tend to put myself down and think of myself as a failure or a loser.
vs.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Accepting Myself	When things go badly and I make mistakes or people are critical of me, I accept myself and do not put myself down at these times.
<input type="checkbox"/> Need for Approval	I seem to be someone who is overly concerned with what others think of me, and I think it is terrible to be criticised or thought badly of.
vs.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Non-Approval Seeking	While I like to be approved of, I don’t need the approval of others.
<input type="checkbox"/> Need for Achievement (Perfectionism)	I seem to be someone who needs to be highly successful. It is horrible for me to make mistakes.
vs.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Responsible Risk Taking	While I like to be successful, I don’t need to be all the time. I try new things even though there is a high likelihood that I might not be successful at first.
<input type="checkbox"/> I Can’t Do It	I am a pessimist believing things will turn out for the worse.
vs.	
<input type="checkbox"/> I Can Do It	I generally believe I will be successful and things will turn out for the best.
<input type="checkbox"/> I Can’t Be Bothered	I really can’t stand it when I have too much work to do and not enough time to do it. Things shouldn’t be so hard and unpleasant.
vs.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Working Tough	While I prefer that things go comfortably and easily, I accept that in order to achieve pleasant results in the long term, I sometimes have to do unpleasant things in the short term.
<input type="checkbox"/> Intolerance of Others	People should always act fairly, considerately, and respectfully. I can’t stand it when they do not. People who act unfairly are “louses” who deserve to be punished.
or	
<input type="checkbox"/> Tolerance of Others	People are fallible and sometimes make mistakes. While I strongly prefer others to act fairly and considerately, I can stand it when they do not. I try hard not to condemn them for their actions.

Stress Management: RE-CB Coaching

In my role as a coach, I wear two hats. One, I provide support to enable coachees to identify specific work stressors and to formulate goals related to reductions in the symptoms of stress as well as improvements in aspects of their work performance that may be contributing to their stress. Two, when helping coachees become aware of and overcome stress reactions, I function as a psycho-educator sharing what I know about the important role a person's thinking plays in their stress and how by using cognitive re-structuring and coping skills, the coachee can lessen their stress.

Stress management coaching sessions are much shorter and focused in comparison with the typical number of sessions for individuals undergoing RE-CB therapy for mental health problems. In stress management coaching, it is quite common to address one or two work stressors being experienced by the coaches with the goal of developing attitudes and skills to manage those stressors. It is useful to keep in mind that it has been estimated that whereas 25% of coachees seeking coaching for stress-related issues suffer mental health issues, 75% do not (Neenan & Palmer, 2012). Coaches who are not psychologists as well as those who are need the expertise to identify coachees who are experiencing mental health issues concomitant with stress and make suitable recommendations and referral for management.

What follows is the RE-CB sequence of coaching for work stress that I engage in with individuals and groups. Coaching sessions are interspersed with coach-initiated informal presentations and discussion of:

- important background information on stress
- the role of thinking in feelings and behaviour
- a three-step action plan that individuals implement
- evaluation that focuses on the work stressors they find most problematic

Formally, there is a progression of steps (see below) that govern the stress coaching process. However, more often than not, the process is less formal that it appears below with the coachee being guided by the coachee's concerns, needs and goals (for illustration, see Case Study at the beginning of this chapter).

4-Step RE-CB Coaching for Reducing Workplace Stress

Step 1: Take Stock of Work Stressors

- (a) Coachee identifies several stressors at work that are leading to very strong stress reactions; selects one for the development of an initial action plan.
- (b) Coachee describes his/her stress reactions: emotional, cognitive, behavioural, physical
- (c) Coachee specifies goals for how s/he wants to: (1) feel, think and behave the next time s/he encounters work stressor, (2) Change the frequency and intensity of work stressor and (3) Improvements in work performance.

Step 2: Plan for Taking Control of Stress Reactions

- (a) Through Socratic questioning by coach, coachee becomes aware of stress-creating beliefs and self-talk, in collaboration challenges and changes those that are creating stress and describes the stress-managing beliefs and self-talk s/he will employ when next faced with work stressor (coachee may complete *Check-up from Neck-up Survey* to identify stress-creating beliefs; coachee may complete the *Resilience: Self-Survey*).
- (b) Coachee describes coping skills for staying calm/calming down before/during/after confrontation with specific work stressor
- (c) Coachee describes any life style changes that would help to lessen emotional stress
- (d) Coachee decides on actions s/he will action before the next coaching session aimed at modifying stress reactions including self-talk, coping skills and life style.

Step 3: Plan for Taking Action to Modify Work Stressor

- (a) Coach presents problem solving method/steps (e.g., problem definition, alternative solution generation, consequential thinking, action, evaluation) as well as behavioural strengths (confidence, persistence, organization, getting along) that could help coachee influence and eliminate the presenting stressor. As a result, the coachee decides on which actions (what to say; what to do) to reduce the intensity and frequency of the stressor.

Step 4: Evaluation

- (a) On a regular basis, coachee reflects on impact of emotional stress management (Step 2) as well as problem solving plan (Step 3) on goals of coaching session (Step 1).
- (b) Coachee modifies emotional stress management and problem solving plans until goals of coaching session have been achieved.
- (c) Coachee may complete the Check-up from the Neck-up Surveys to determine changes in their beliefs that create stress as well as the *Resilience: Self-Survey* to gain a sense of their progress in developing a general resilient mindset.

In order to strengthen a coachee's resilient mindset, the above steps are iteratively applied to different work stressors.

Conclusion

The style of RE-CB coaching combines collaboration of coach and coachee on problems and goals with coach directed discussion of insights discussed in this chapter on the ABCs of stress and its management. One of the greatest insights into stress RE-CB coaches can share with coachees is contained in the ABC model popularized by Albert Ellis; namely,

A = activating event (stressor)

B = beliefs (stress-creating/irrational self-talk vs. stress-managing/rational self-talk)

C = consequence (emotional, behavioral).

No matter how powerful the insights, the flow of coaching sessions needs to be directed and contextualized around coachee's issues, needs and goals. Coachee insights found in the rational-emotive and cognitive-behavioral perspective are revealed when a coachee displays a motivation to change and help answer the question of many coachees: 'How do I feel less stressed and get the problem to go away?'

It is important for RE-CB coaches to be accountable by ensuring that the goals for a client are front and center of every coaching session – and as much as possible defined concretely and are observable. The general goals of stress management coaching are:

1. reducing stress
2. eliminating the external stressors
3. improving work performance

These goals need to be spelled out behaviorally early on and the coach needs to check in with the coachee at the beginning of each session asking about coachee progress between coaching sessions.

There is little doubt that by strengthening coachees' capacity for reason brings about dramatic emotional and behavioural changes needed for the strengthening of resilience and the management of workplace stress.

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