

# The one day stress resolution



A workshop by David Brown,  
Psychologist, Australia

If your house is on fire and you're upset, don't go to a psychologist, call the fire brigade instead!

So today you'll learn how to be a

fireman.

I've put out quite a few of these fires, and the flowchart later in this handout is my attempt to describe some of these stress interviews that I have done. People who have used this flowchart to conduct interviews have told me that:

- It makes the interview quicker.
- It stops people from drifting off the point.
- Listing problems and solutions is helpful.
- Using **the Pocket Stress Reliever**<sup>1</sup> takes away the burden of being an "advisor". Instead you can sit with the person as an equal while you discuss the ideas presented in the brochure.

If you do your job well, you help to turn the person's experience from that of a passive complainant to that of an active participant.

## **Three aspects of stress – emotional fatigue, fear and avoidance, and bad feelings**

You can invent your own theory of stress, but I find the little diagram on the right to be quite helpful. I redraw it sometimes, so don't treat it as final!

The Pocket Stress Reliever talks about the diagram's owl and unhappy man – it calls them "being emotionally tired" and "having bad feelings" respectively; and the Pocket Fear Eliminator talks about the lion tamer's problems.

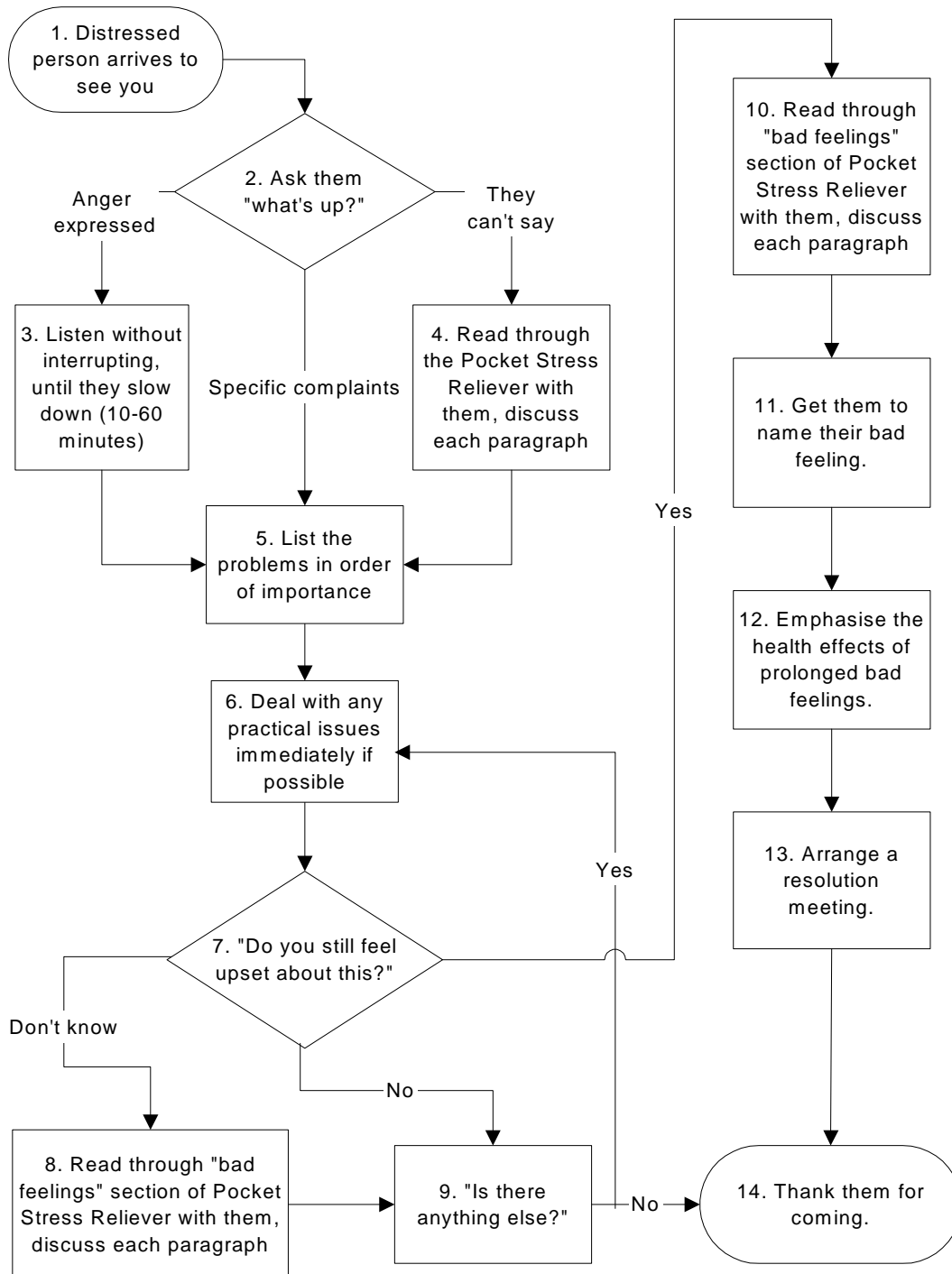
I haven't done formal research, but in my experience people who complain about stress are likely to be in the "Frustration, bad feelings, lost values" group. I think that there is also a huge but unreported problem in the "Sustained attention" (emotionally



<sup>1</sup> Handed out at the workshop – a brochure explaining stress. Available for purchase.

tired) group. And there are just a few in the middle group (which includes “Post traumatic stress disorder”). In this workshop we’ll spend most of our time on the “Bad feelings” group.

**Flowcharts are guidelines, not rules!** The following flowchart doesn’t neatly



describe all of my stress interviews, but it provides you with a starting point. Depart from it as much as you need to – but keep notes so I can improve the chart!

Each shape in the flowchart is numbered, and there is a corresponding numbered explanation in the pages that follow. Example: For more information about the first point, “1. Distressed person arrives to see you”, read paragraph numbered 1.

**1.** Imagine that you are a factory or office worker. You’re “stressed” (whatever that means to you). You knock on the door of the nurse, safety officer, or personnel officer.

How do they respond? Are they too soft, too hard, or just right?

**Too soft:** Unfortunately, many health and safety professionals are very sympathetic. If you are worried, the last thing you need is sympathy; you need someone who is positive and practical.

However if the interviewer needs to be liked, or if they want to “get you on side”, they might agree with statements like “management doesn’t care”. Now you feel on side with the interviewer but off side with the employer!

Worse, you may return again and again to make the same complaint, because getting sympathy is more rewarding than having to work, and soon you become a “professional complainer”. There are no complaining people, only complaining relationships. Practitioners need to guard against creating them.

**Too hard:** If the interviewer appears cold, or tries to get you to “see the bright side of things” without allowing you to ventilate your feelings at all, or suggests that your problem lies in your marriage, you may either crumble in a heap, or feel aggressive towards them.

This doesn’t help you, in fact it makes you more tense and will only increase your distress, but you may feel more alive being angry. This is how “professional stress sufferers” are made; the person whose experience is denied seeks validation of their problem rather than relief from it.

**Just right:** The good interviewer reduces the person’s anxiety with their positive, confident approach. There is no need to spend time getting the person on side; if the practical side of the interview is done in a positive way, that will take care of the social aspects.

That’s the social side. There’s also something very important about the position that the interviewer takes. I now believe that the psychologist must represent reality, even though the company pays the bill. To put it another way, accountability is to truth and not to the client. I think this is perhaps the “old fashioned” definition of a profession.

Putting you back in the interviewer’s seat, your first step is to find out what the person thinks about their problem. Remember that it looks entirely different from the other person’s point of view – so don’t jump to conclusions, just listen! So move on to **2:**

**2.** Start by asking “What’s up?” (Don’t ask, “Why are you stressed” – make the question normal and simple.)

If they express anger, go to **3**.

If they just can't say what's wrong with them, go to **4**.

If they tell you clearly what's wrong, go to **5**.

**3.** If the person is angry or upset, listen without interrupting – remember that **NOBODY** likes being interrupted. After a while they'll be calm enough for you to move on to **5**.

**4.** If the person doesn't know what's the matter with them, they will need a structure., and the Pocket Stress Reliever provides an easy, non-threatening way to discuss things. Give them a copy, and open one yourself. Read through it paragraph by paragraph, asking them "What do you think of that?" Keep in mind that the Pocket Stress Reliever might be right or wrong – it's just giving a view that you are discussing with your colleague. It's an equal, status-free relationship.

**5.** Write down a list of things that need attention. Perhaps these are simple things that are within the person's control, for example "Take a holiday now!"

Whatever they are, write them down, then number them in order of importance (1 being the most important).

If the person wants something impossible to be done, write it down anyway. Just say "Let's write that down now, and we can talk more about it in a minute."

**6.** Deal with any practical issues immediately. For instance, if the person thinks that their holiday pay isn't right and they are angry about that, get right on the phone and find out!

Don't sit there "counselling" someone when you could be fixing a real problem. At a minimum, write something down clearly on a clean sheet of paper so that it can be followed up as soon as the meeting is finished.

If the person has asked for impossible things, circle those things on the list and ask them how important those things are. If they still put a high priority on them, say "we can't do these things exactly, so let's try and find another way to get what you need." But if they tell you that those impossible things aren't all that important, say "we won't cross them out yet, but it sounds like these other things are more important to you."

**7.** Is the person still upset? That usually means, is their status bruised, and if so, how badly? Because once you've dealt with practical issues, bruised status is likely to be the main problem.

- Not upset at all – go to **9**.
- Mildly upset or doesn't know – go to **8** (for education about status).

- Very upset and bruised – go to **10**, using the Pocket Stress Reliever’s section on “Bad feelings” to help.

**8.** Read through the “bad feelings” section of the Pocket Stress Reliever, if you haven’t done that already. Treat this as an educational session for you both, to learn about the effect that bad feelings have on your health.

**9.** Ask “Is there anything else?” If there’s nothing else, go to **14** - you’ve finished! This person had a practical problem, and you helped them solve it. Feel good!

**10.** You’ve arrived at this number because the person is upset, and you need a structure so that you can work through it. The “bad feelings” section of the Pocket Stress Reliever is a good way to do this. For instance you might say –

- “I think that we all react when someone puts us down. There’s something in the Pocket Stress Reliever that might be relevant...”

**11.** Naming the bad feeling is an essential part of the process. In the story of Rumpelstiltskin, the evil dwarf was finally vanquished when his real name was called out; and exorcism is similar. Such myths and symbolic practices remind us that to vanquish bad feelings, we must call them by their real names, and face them directly, even if it hurts.

Being passed over for promotion is not stressful, but it is disappointing and embarrassing. Those are natural feelings, which blow over in a day or three. But if we cannot accept the decision, if we take it as a personal slight, we may become resentful or hostile towards the selection committee or towards the person who got the job we wanted. If we keep on thinking about it, we will continue to feel upset. If the doctor then gives us time off work for “stress”, we sit at home with nothing to distract us from going over the incident again and again in our minds.

If only we said to ourselves “I cannot get over this disappointment”, we would quickly say, “Yes I can!” But when we say, “I cannot recover from stress”, because we do not know what stress is, we do not have an answer. We have disempowered ourselves.

So the first step is to find the right name for our feeling. Here are the real names for some common feelings (demons) at work:

- **I’m disappointed** – that I didn’t get that promotion.
- **I’m frustrated** – I can’t finish this task because the phone keeps ringing.
- **I feel hostile, I resent him** – Joe puts me down, I want to say something but dare not, so I have bad feelings towards him.
- **I’m bored** – my job is not worth doing, or it does not use my talents.
- **I’m over-tired** – I should have gone home an hour ago!

It is not easy to admit that our feelings of “stress” have these unglamorous names - but that admission is vital if we are to regain control over our life.

These are not the only feelings that you might have, so try to get exactly the right name for yours. (See *The Pocket Stress Reliever* for more details.)

**12.** Talk about the detrimental health effects of prolonged bad feelings. Don't do this by preaching at the person –that's the same thing as “talking down” to them. - instead, read through the “Bad feelings” section of the *Pocket Stress Reliever* with them and ask “What do you think of that?”. Or tell of your own experience – perhaps you get sick when you've been angry all the previous day. You might need to show them thought stopping at this point (discussed later in these notes).

**13.** If the person still has bad feelings about the workplace at this stage of the interview, you can't expect to “counsel” those feelings away, so you need to arrange a resolution meeting.

See “The stress resolution meeting” later in these notes for details.

If you're an outside counsellor, don't reach any conclusions about what “really” happened, just make notes about what the person believes happened. You will often be astonished at how different, and how equally convincing, are the views of employer and employee! All that you know for sure is that this person is upset and feels that they have been badly treated.

**14.** If you get to this number, you've finished. Thank them for coming, shake their hand, smile and show them out. Make notes if you are required to, take any action that's still required, then close the book.

## Thought stopping

Most people who are off work with a stress claim need to learn how to stop their thoughts. A few days without negative thoughts will leave them feeling emotionally much stronger, and more able to face the workplace again. There are several steps to thought stopping (sometimes you need to go around the loop a few times):

1. Talk until you understand what they are thinking and feeling, and how much of their day is occupied by those thoughts and feelings.
2. Help the person to develop a different attitude to their problem. For instance: agree with them that what happened may have been very unjust. Then put it in perspective: “The early bird is most unfair to the worm!” Perhaps their boss was rude to them, but are they going to waste their whole life thinking about it? Worrying does not hurt the boss, it only hurts the worrier. Very few people realise that thinking a negative thought is the cause of the negative feeling, and has a direct harmful physical effect on their body. You must explain this clearly to them without making it sound as if you think they are responsible for their own distress. That's hard to achieve.

3. Get them to think deliberately about the unfairness, so they can experience the negative emotional reaction that follows.
4. Then get them to stop.

A very effective method for interrupting the thought is to put a rubber band around your wrist, and every time you catch yourself thinking the same old thought, give it a little pull and release. The short, sharp snap does not hurt, but it definitely stops the thought!

Train them to interrupt their thoughts like this; practice it with them until you are sure they can do it. Convince them to apply the technique hundreds of times a day. Give them a scorecard if you are not sure they will do it, on which they record every negative thought with a tick, and arrange to meet them again later that same day to review their card. From *The Pocket Stress Reliever*:

*Keep a scorecard of how many times each day you catch yourself thinking those self-destructive thoughts. If you apply thought stopping every time, you will find that within about four days the thoughts no longer trouble you."*

## **Lost values – problem, or opportunity?**

Some people who write about stress talk about “the moment that things changed for the worse”. For instance the psychologist Lazarus defines stress as the feeling that you aren’t coping. Even if you were coping a few minutes before, if you’re not now, then that’s stress.

Perhaps you (stressed person) now think...

- It’s too much.
- Nobody could be expected to put up with this.
- I just can’t forgive them...

From what I was just saying about thought stopping, you might think that rational emotive therapy or thought stopping or some other cognitive behaviour therapy would help.

Perhaps it might, but some people just can’t get past what has happened.

Why? Are they refusing the treatment, are they just being stubborn?

There’s another possibility.

They aren’t necessarily thinking irrational thoughts. Perhaps they realise, quite deeply and clearly, that the situation is wrong for them.

It’s as if a new pattern has formed out of the chaos of their lives.

Those of you who have read about systems will recognise this as a “change of state”. If you have an interest in Gestalt therapy, you will recognise it as the emergence of a new pattern. Students of catastrophe theory will recognise a discontinuity. Chaos theory includes the idea of sudden and sometimes irreversible change.

Same idea, said in many different ways. Change can be sudden and you can’t always go back.

For instance, take the word “disillusioned”. Many people use this word to describe how they feel.

Although people use this word in a bitter sense, being dis-illusioned is often a good thing – because you were, by your own admission, living a fantasy, and (with the exception of people with senile dementia) a fantasy world is not a good place to live.

If that doesn’t convince you, try this thought. Why should things go back to where they were? Can the baby go back into the womb? The butterfly return to the cocoon?

Crisis can be positive in the end, even if troubling on the way through.

First, the troubling stage. We had a rule of thumb at the rehabilitation centre at which I worked; it took about 18 months for a person to fully understand, after an accident that left them paralysed, that they would never walk again. They had to reach the end of their fantasy of “a cure just around the corner” or “willpower conquers all”. At that point we took extra care to guard against suicide attempts.

But once the person was through that crisis a quite different, and on the surface impossible, thing sometimes happened. The person would look around to ensure that nobody was watching, and then say to me

“I know that it sounds weird, but this accident is the best thing that ever happened to me. Before the accident I wasn’t really living. Now I can’t walk, but I’m more alive than I have ever been. If I had gone on the way I was, I would have wasted everything!”

Speak to anyone who spent enough time in rehabilitation and they’ll tell you the same impossible, unbelievable, but absolutely true story. Of people who found their values again. Who found meaning, more meaning than they had ever known before.

In the case of stress in the workplace, the transition might be a transition out of that job and into something different. If that’s what the person wants and asks for, you should try to help them (but be aware of the problem of “constructive dismissal”).

In other words, don’t have a fixed idea about the best outcome. Don’t always try to patch things up and make things “all right again”. Change is sometimes the best outcome!



## The stress resolution meeting

“Bad feelings” are the main problem that we see when working with stress. (The other two causes are important but not as visible.)

If a person feels that they have been insulted at work, you can't counsel them out of it, you have to resolve the status struggle by getting the parties to meet. Don't worry about how badly each party has behaved since the original incident – instead, **resolve the original problem.**

The best topic for the meeting is the original insulting event, that which started it all. Get as much information about the event as you can.

Accept, up front, that reconciliation doesn't always happen. And try anyway.

### ***Suggest that the parties bring a support person if they wish***

The parties should be asked to bring anyone they want for support - their union representative, a friend or relative, psychologist or doctor. But not a lawyer.

### ***Consider whether you need a “without prejudice” agreement.***

An apology goes a long way towards healing the hurt, but there is a risk in making an apology - you have to put trust in the other person. The Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, has consistently refused to apologise to the Australian Aboriginal nation just in case it backfires. Directly as a result, the pain of our black nation has gone on, and on, and on.

So when people ask “should I meet with the other person – they might use what I say against me”, my usual advice is “take the risk”.

If you're worried, you can ask a lawyer to draft an agreement that all parties sign, stating that the meeting is for the purpose of reconciliation, and that all parties agree not to use anything they learn in the meeting in any legal action.

### ***The aim is simply that each side understands the other.***

Just getting everyone to express their point of view, and having the other listen without arguing, seems to resolve most of the problem.

(Being listened to restores your status; listening to the other may reveal that their motives were not as bad as you thought.)

### ***Look after both parties!***

This is important. If the problem is a struggle between manager and worker, the manager is usually as aggrieved at the worker as the worker is at the manager.

The manager is usually mainly concerned about poor performance and about bad faith (i.e. “why did they put in a stress claim”); the stressed person is more usually concerned about the put-down.

You will have to stop the meeting, perhaps stop it often, and get people to take a break if it is becoming unconstructive or too argumentative.

The same thing applies if the problem is between co-workers. Each person thinks that they are right and the other person is wrong. So you can't take sides, you need to keep working towards a meeting. It can be very hard!

### ***Accept that psychological issues will arise, not just job issues.***

Shocking feelings of inferiority can emerge.

A childcare worker had missed a lot of school when young, and as a result she had dreadful spelling. She felt that she was being viewed as “stupid” by her supervisor. She became angry and upset.

We held a meeting with her supervisor and with the personnel manager. The worker presented her credentials and explained their strengths and weaknesses, including a frank admission that their spelling was not good, and a proposal as to how she would work around that.

She faced her demons. The stress immediately vanished and has not recurred.

### ***Performance issues***

If the person has gone on stress leave following counselling about their performance, you need to discuss that directly and constructively.

That means finding and agreeing on solutions to each of the performance problems.

I dealt with a stressed manager was not adequately directing his staff. It turned out that he was trying to run disciplinary interviews by mobile phone while driving!

Apart from the obvious safety issues, he wasn't much good on the phone at the best of times, and with half his attention on the road he was truly awful at it.

We agreed that he would reserve disciplinary and directive discussions for face-to-face meetings, or if it simply had to be done by phone, he would stop the car in a safe place so he could concentrate fully on the conversation.

Each performance issue was dealt with like this. We kept going, kept listing problems and finding answers, until everyone had run out of problems.

He went back to work immediately and his performance was much better than before.

I have had a number of similar successes; in fact in many successful cases the resolution has occurred in a single day. (And some failures.)

Here's an easy case, in which all that was needed was to provide a friendly ear so that the person could clearly state their case:

***“Sue”, who wanted the company to sack another worker.***

I interviewed Sue concerning her workers' compensation claim for stress. Her husband was present during the interview.

**History:** Sue has worked in the payroll section for eight years. Her husband had been the payroll manager, but has moved to another section. Sue has recently been having a problem with a co-worker, “Jane”. Sue initially took time off work on sick leave, then went on holidays, and has now lodged a workers' compensation claim. Sue is presently seeing a psychologist as part of an Employee Assistance Program.

**Some of Sue's thoughts:**

- Hurt, bitter and disappointed that management is not fixing the problem. "Jane is getting away with so much..."
- Sue gets in early. Jane had agreed to get in at 9 am, but gets in later than that. If Sue worked the same hours as Jane, she wouldn't have to put her child into pre-school care.
- Jane sees herself as better qualified (and that hurts).
- When Jane makes an error and Sue points it out, Jane refuses to accept that she has made a mistake. They sometimes argue for as much as two hours about how something should be done.

**What I thought:** This is all just a power struggle between Sue and Jane.

When Sue's husband ran the payroll department, he insulated her from the power struggles that occur in every office. Now Sue often bypasses her present manager and speaks to her husband about payroll matters. She's trying to regain some control because she feels that she's losing the power struggle. And she is losing!

I asked her how often she thought about the problem. She said that she felt fine when she was on holidays, but if she does think about it she gets angry with herself for letting the situation develop that way.

I asked her what she saw as the solution. She said, "One of us has to go".

**Result of the interview:** Having expressed these feelings, Sue said that she had lodged the Worker's Compensation claim simply because she didn't know of any other way to make the company listen. She then said that she was prepared to return to work immediately. She did.

**Conclusion:** Sue did not lodge a workers' compensation claim because she was experiencing work-related stress, but because she felt unable to vanquish Jane in a

workplace power struggle, and she believed that lodging a workers' compensation claim would force management into taking her side against Jane.

Having made the workers' compensation claim, she didn't know how to retreat without losing face.

But once she had stated her views clearly, she felt able to return to work – which is what she wanted to do all along.

One of the problems with consulting work is that you don't always get to see the long-term result. So I can't tell you whether the story had a happy ending. But at least Sue went back to work feeling a bit more empowered.

*The point of the story is that most people want to work. Even if they are off work with a stress claim, most people want to go back. It's just that they don't know how to face the person who got the better of them. You can help by creating a "status free zone" in which they can meet.*

## **Summary of intervention with an individual**

- An extremely positive attitude by the interviewer;
- Active involvement of the operator in the investigation and solution;
- Immediate action to implement findings of the interview.

In almost every case, there are two types of action required.

- One relates to the workplace, looking at and resolving the sources of friction, disappointment or criticism;
- The other relates to the individual, helping them to deal more robustly with life and to find more satisfaction in what they are doing.

You might end up right at the limit of your comfort zone, talking about the meaning of life. There's no harm in that, just don't pretend that you know the answers!

## **Other interventions**

There are many people out there who can help you with tasks such as job redesign; team building exercises; working to reduce status hierarchies. Each is a large topic!

*If you would like David Brown to run a workshop for you, contact him through the feedback form on his website [www.pocket-stress.com](http://www.pocket-stress.com).*