

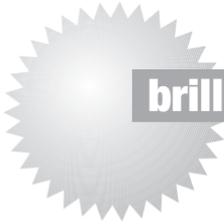
Mike Clayton

brilliant

**Stress
Management**

How to manage
stress in any
situation





brilliant

stress management

To Felicity, the happy woman



brilliant

stress management

How to manage stress in any situation

Mike Clayton

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About the author

Mike Clayton has been stressed all of his life. He has a classic Type A personality, which compels him to do more and more; so learning how to manage his stress has always been a priority – even if making the time to do it hasn't!

Mike started his career in academic research, before moving to management consultancy to find a more pressured environment. He found it. For 12 years, he served clients in the public, voluntary and commercial sectors, working with organisations like the Ministry of Defence, Transport for London, BAA, Vodafone and General Motors, on behalf of Deloitte.

For the last nine years, Mike has focused on training and speaking. This has given him the opportunity to research what he had already started to learn, and to develop his thinking on how to present it. For the last five years, 'It ain't the stress that does the damage' has been one of Mike's most popular talks.

Having spent the first 30 years of his life wondering how anyone could live anywhere but London, Mike now lives, with his family, in a small town in Hampshire, which is less stressful by far.

Acknowledgements

I have known stress in my time, but the single most valuable thing I learned was how to meditate, in 1989; and I cannot find any record of the names of the people who taught and supported me. If you are reading this, thank you.

I would like to acknowledge all that I learned from my Aikido teachers and colleagues, and particularly Senseis David Currie and Alan Mars of the British Ki Aikido Association, and Sensei Andy Shakeshaft of the Ki Federation of Great Britain.

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I would like to thank Abigail Pavitt for showing me the impact of one simple action: removing my watch; and Cryss Mennaceur for giving me the opportunity to develop my thinking about stress into a successful keynote presentation, which gave this book its structure and much of its material.

Finally, one woman is most important of all: thank you, Felicity, for teaching me about happiness.

Introduction

King Solomon was King of Israel three thousand years ago. He was famed for the wealth of his cities, the magnificence of his temples and, most of all, for the wisdom of his rule. Finding it was lonely ruling a vast kingdom, Solomon wanted some way to change his mood whenever he chose. He called to his court the finest craftsmen and wisest counsellors in the land.

Make me a ring and on it engrave an inscription. Put on it words that can change my mood, whatever it is; from sorrow to joy, or from joy to sorrow.

The counsellors wrestled with the task for many months and sought the wisest sages throughout the world, until finally they had the answer. They went to the craftsman who had struck the finest ring ever made and instructed him what to engrave. At last, they presented the ring to Solomon. On the ring was engraved:

This too shall pass.

What Solomon's advisors knew was this: whatever you are going through now, this too shall pass.

Stress quiz

How stressed are you now? You might like to complete this quick quiz to find out. Rate each of these 20 statements on a scale of

one to four, according to how often you feel this way, with: 0 for Never, 1 for Sometimes, 2 for Often, and 3 for Always.

- 1 I contain all my feelings until I want to explode.
- 2 I want everything now – particularly in shops.
- 3 I get angry and frustrated at little things.
- 4 Criticism and negative feedback really get to me.
- 5 I blame myself when things go badly.
- 6 Work and unwanted obligations take over my life.
- 7 I am too busy to enjoy my lunch breaks.
- 8 I don't make time to prioritise my workload.
- 9 The work I do is too far beyond or far below my capabilities.
- 10 People seem to take advantage of me.
- 11 I have no time for my hobbies and interests.
- 12 I have far too many tasks to do at work.
- 13 I get to work late and am late for meetings.
- 14 I'm in a hurry – even if there is no deadline.
- 15 I don't like the changes that seem to happen.
- 16 I don't say what I am really feeling.
- 17 I get angry with people who are important to me.
- 18 The bad things seem to outweigh the good things.
- 19 I struggle to cope under pressure.
- 20 Taking time to relax makes me feel guilty.

What is your total stress score? If it is less than 20, well done. You can put this book down now, unless you are reading it for

research, to help someone else, or ‘just in case’. If you scored over 40, then shut the door, turn off your phone, and read on now.

How *Brilliant Stress Management* is structured

The secret of managing stress is recognising that stress arises when we feel a lack of control in some area of our lives. *Brilliant Stress Management* will give you everything you need to start to manage your stress, from understanding what it is, to a whole heap of measures and tactics to help you regain control in specific stressful situations of work, change and conflict. It ends with tips on how to help others to control their stress. Here is a summary of each of the twelve chapters.

Chapter 1: What stress is and is not

This introductory chapter tells you about what stress is and is not. You will be able to recognise the signs of stress in yourself, and understand the basics of the physiology of stress. You will see why it isn’t the stress that does the damage. Managing stress is all about regaining control.

Chapter 2: Control your physical response to stress

The first point of control is in your physical response to stress. This chapter looks at a remedial physical response to stress and also a proactive physical regime that will reduce your stress levels through: good posture, good humour, good fuel (food and drink), good rest (sleep and relaxation) and good energy (exercise).

Chapter 3: Control your environment

You will learn how simple approaches to controlling your environment can have a big effect on your stress levels. We will look at the impact of people, organisation, space, light, colour and scent.

Chapter 4: Control your time

Any guide to stress management must include the fundamentals of time management. You will learn the basics of prioritisation, planning, how to say ‘no’ and, perhaps most important, how to handle a sense of ‘overwhelm’.

Chapter 5: Control your attitudes

We get our attitudes, values and beliefs about life from many sources, but we rarely sit down and choose them as adults. By reviewing your attitudes to a range of situations, you can reduce your stress levels by changing your response to common situations in your life.

Chapter 6: Control your mental response to stress

What goes on in your brain has a profound impact on how stressful you find a situation. This chapter looks at the ways you can control your mental response to stress, by controlling: how you visualise a situation in advance, the little voice in your head, and what you focus on when something happens.

Chapter 7: Manage stress at work

How you can recognise the signs of stress in colleagues and in your whole team. An introduction to workplace responsibilities around stress, and some of the solutions that will reduce the stress you place your colleagues and yourself under.

Chapter 8: Manage stress caused by change

Change is stressful. This chapter will help you to understand why, and will give you resources to manage your stress levels during times of change.

Chapter 9: Manage stress caused by conflict

An introduction to how you can deal with conflicts, to help reduce the stress of your relationships in the most challenging times.

Chapter 10: Help others to manage their stress

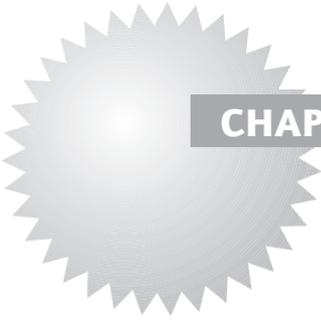
The final chapter is designed to give you some techniques to listen and to help guide and counsel others in managing their stress levels.

Medical warning

Throughout this book, you will find contact details for national organisations with deep expertise and professionalism. If the stress you suffer from is severe, then this book can only be an introduction and you must refer yourself to an expert.

Some apparent symptoms of stress can have medical causes and need professional attention. Some effects of stress can cause medical problems. This is not a medical text and neither is the author medically qualified, so if you are in any doubt whatsoever, please contact your general practitioner straight away.

Only follow the advice in this book in so far as you are completely comfortable. It has been written with great care, but your health and your wellbeing are your responsibility.



CHAPTER 3

Control your environment

*Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
The courage to change the things I can.*

‘The Serenity Prayer’ by Reinhold Niebuhr

In Figure 1.4, we saw the importance of a focus on the things we can control. For example, you can sometimes completely avoid stressful situations: you can travel the congested section of the M25, M42, M62 or your nearest equivalent between 7.30 and 9.00 a.m., and get caught in the inevitable delays caused by hundreds of other people doing the same. Or you can get up a little earlier, breeze through at 7.00 a.m., and get a coffee and sandwich at a café near your destination, and either relax or get some useful work or reading done.

Richard Logan, at the University of Wisconsin, studied people who had survived extremely adverse circumstances, to find out what they had in common. One feature that was particularly prevalent was the fact that each of them had a belief that they were responsible for their future, despite situations that many of us would see as beyond their control, like harsh natural environments or concentration camps.

The lesson from this is clear: there is always something you can do to affect your situation. When you do take action, you will feel a sense of control that will lift some of the feelings of stress.

This chapter is about how to take control of your environment: not a polar wilderness or the worst of mankind's horrors, but the everyday environment that most *Brilliant Stress Management* readers will enjoy.

We will first see a process for taking control and then examine four aspects of your environment that you can control:

- 1 Your social connections.
- 2 How you organise yourself.
- 3 Your living and work space.
- 4 Your sensory environment.

We will close the chapter by returning to the need to take action and, if that proves impossible, the importance of looking for escape routes that will take you out of your stressful environment.

Process

The process for taking control of your environment is simple – although carrying it out will not always be easy. There are four steps.

- 1 Believe in your power to control your life.
- 2 Commit to controlling your life.
- 3 Act on your decision.
- 4 Be persistent.

Let's look at these steps one at a time.

Believe

The hardest part is the first part; after this, the rest is easy. In the face of stress and adversity, you must believe in your power to control your life. This is what characterised the people that Richard Logan studied.

When you feel uncomfortable, it is a sign that something is wrong. Deep inside you, you feel that things must change. Look

around at your environment and see the things that you must change. Listen to what your heart tells you about the things that you need to change.

You can get control when you make choices, so start to recognise that not only must things change, but that *you* must change them. To be in control means not waiting for events to change, or for somebody else to rescue you, which are forms of helplessness, but fundamentally to believe that *'if it is to be: it is up to me'*.

Believe that you can make choices that will control your environment. Learn to prioritise, learn to say no, learn to manage your time, learn to arrange your life in ways that suit you. Change your physical environment so that it helps you to relax, or to get things done, or to share your burden.

learn to prioritise, learn to say no, learn to manage your time

A lot of people say they get stuck. They say they have tried – and not succeeded. Well, if you have tried, then you have made a start, but there is an old saying:

'If at first you don't succeed ...'

One very simple yet powerful way to take control of your environment is to look at the space you inhabit – your office, your workstation and your home. What can you do to make it more relaxing, more efficient or more inviting? Make a great start by removing clutter and rubbish. Now think about how you could personalise it in a way that suits you and yet still meets the constraints of your organisation at work, or your family at home.

Commit

We feel under stress when we feel we have no control over what's going on around us. Believing you can take control is a start; the next step is to commit to controlling your life. The word

‘decision’ comes from the Latin, meaning ‘to cut off from’, so decisions can be scary because they reduce our options. But when you make a decision, it is also very liberating. You are cutting yourself off from a powerless state and have really started to take control.

Make a 100 per cent commitment now

Find one change that you commit to making that will exert your control over an aspect of your external environment within the next 24 hours. Make it real: find a pen or pencil and a piece of paper (the margin of this book will do) and write it down. I will wait.

Act

‘Without action, there is no change.’

If you have written down a commitment, and if you are a person of integrity (or you would like to be from now on), you might also write down: *‘What I commit to, I do.’*

Having made a commitment, the third step is to act on your decision. To feel in control, any positive action will do, so if you feel daunted by the task, feel free to start small: take one baby-step towards making the change you committed to. Another great way to spur action is to put together a simple plan, so you know what the first step is, and you can see clearly how it leads to the next and the next, and eventually to a real change. Once you take your first physical action, you will feel a huge sense of control.

Persist

So there is only one thing more you need to do: be persistent.

Remember that old saying:

‘If at first you don’t succeed ...’

Most people would complete it with the words *'try, try again'*. But that is foolish. What makes you think that, when you do what you did before, you will not get what you got before? A far more resourceful approach, and the one to remember, is:

'If at first you don't succeed, try something else.'

And if that doesn't succeed, try something else again... In response to someone who says *'I tried everything,'* my response would be: *'Really, everything?'* As soon as you believe you cannot make a change, you are back to helplessness.

If what you are doing is working, acknowledge your success, pat yourself on the back, and do more. If it is not working, do something different. Have the courage to change the things you can – and you always can. There are always changes you can make.

Social connections

One of the biggest stress factors can be not having people around us who care about us and support us. Making, protecting and using relationships with other people is a fundamental part of coping and thriving in stressful situations.

Establish healthy relationships

In the workplace, having a social network so that you can access informal support from colleagues will give you a quick outlet to minor frustrations before they become major stressors. Research in the UK Civil Service showed that staff who had social connections with colleagues felt less stressed, less anxious and suffered less absence due to psychiatric illness.

So, chats at the coffee machine, sharing a trip to the shops at lunchtime, and joining workmates for a drink after work are all good investments in your wellbeing – as well as pleasures.

Protect valuable relationships

Don't overdo the chat

If you find colleagues are wasting too much of your time in gossiping at the water fountain, it's time to politely return to work. The danger is that the gossip itself will become stressful, as your desire to be sociable conflicts with your need to meet your responsibilities at work. And if you find your work falling behind, there will be a second stressor. So a little honesty: *'I really do need to get back to my work now'* can prevent the relationship going sour, as you start to resent its intrusion on your responsibilities.

Don't take advantage

When we are under stress, we often take advantage of the generosity of the people who love us. This can mean treating them inconsiderately. But because they care for us, they will accept it as a product of our stress and be prepared to help where they can, and wait it out.

But there is only so much misuse a person can take, before their love for you starts to go sour. So it is vital, even in times of stress, to be mindful of the way you treat the people you value most in your life. It is because you sometimes can treat them badly that you must find a way to put them first.

Use relationships to help you de-stress

Releasing stress doesn't get much simpler than talking. Sadly, many of us do not find it easy, so it is essential that you find someone whom you feel you can trust, totally. Whilst some people's unwillingness to help you may be shocking, you will be surprised how many people will want to help, and will be keen to do so in a wholly supportive and non-judgemental way. So, consider each of the people around you; the 'right' person for you to choose may not be who you expect.

If you are under a lot of stress, listening is not the only thing that other people can do for you. Letting you take time to scream, rant or cry will help defuse your emotions, so that you can move into a more rational state of mind.



brilliant tip

If you really do not have someone, then finding a private space to express yourself, and writing down your feelings and frustrations are the next best thing.

Get organised

Being organised may seem like a small step that will have little effect on your stress levels, but don't underestimate it. It will be when you are at your most stressed that the inability to find that essential component or letter or tool will seem like an iceberg heading towards the bow of your ship.

Also, starting to get organised is easy, so it is an ideal way to start to seize control. The danger is that, in a time of pressure, organising yourself could become a displacement activity that does nothing more than distract you from your stress. So, follow these three simple rules for organising yourself or your work when you are feeling under stress.

Rule 1: Tidy frenzy

You don't have much time, so set yourself a strict time limit, like four minutes, to tidy your space and clear it of clutter. If you can, a good way to do this is to play a piece of fast-rhythm music that lasts three to five minutes and do as much as you can before it ends. You will be amazed at how much tidying and organising you can do under this constraint, and how good you will feel when it is done.

Rule 2: Backlog file

Organising takes time and there are lots of systems available (see, for example, Chapter 3 of *Brilliant Time Management*), but to make a lot of progress quickly you need to focus hard. Work on only what needs to be organised for you to make progress on the things that are stressing you. Put everything else into a backlog file, ready to be organised when the pressure is off, but safely stored so it is not lost.

Rule 3: Little bits

Keeping on top of your organisation can be satisfying, but don't make a big thing of it, or it will become a stressor itself. So, when the opportunity presents itself, just do one bit of organising and then go back to what you were doing. If you need to leave a workshop and will be going past the storage racks, pick up one or two things from your bench to put away. When you need to go to the filing cupboard, take a couple of papers from your desk that need to be filed. When you are putting away the pots and pans, take a moment to sort out a part of the jumble in the cupboard. Every time you do a little bit, think to yourself '*Good, that's progress*' and then move on. Now your brain will feel more in control.

Your space

It seems that the more you express yourself in your surroundings, the more relaxed you will become; so, every day do something to make your environment nicer for yourself. It does not matter how small. You might want to tidy up, pick a bunch of flowers, display a new photo or postcard, replace your old coffee or tea mug, use a nice notebook and pen, or change the desktop and colour settings on your computer.

It is easy to say that the solution is to de-clutter, and a hundred self-help books focus on just this. For most people, this is sound

advice. Tidy, sort, simplify and discard your belongings according to how and if you intend to use them, to give you a less cluttered space to live or work in. There are some, however, who find that their clutter is comforting and convenient, and if that sounds like you, then the most stressful aspect of your clutter will be some well-meaning author telling you to clear it up. So I shan't.

Ergonomics

Ergonomics is not about de-cluttering or even organising your workplace. It is a whole science of ensuring that your workplace and all of its equipment and technology are designed to fit comfortably with the way your mind and body work, naturally. Here are some examples of the things that an ergonomist (see Brilliant Resources at the end of this chapter for where to find advice) could help you with, that could help reduce your workplace stress. Many of them can also be susceptible to an objective re-evaluation and some common sense.

- Improved layout of your desk, workbench or office can resolve eye strain and headaches, back and neck ache, and repetitive strain discomfort and injuries.
- Better choice and adjustments of furniture can prevent hip, back, shoulder and neck problems.
- Adjustment of environmental controls can reduce eye strain (lighting), muscle tension (cold), headaches (cold, heat, humidity, noise).
- Changing the location and design of switches and indicators can reduce accident rates.
- Provision of appropriate equipment can address the risks (and fears) of muscle strain, trips and falls, or accidental damage.

Stimulus

However pleasant your working environment is, you will need a break. Getting out and about to take you away from your normal

environment will help stimulate and refresh your senses and your mind, on top of the obvious benefit to your brain of the fresh air and exercise.



‘Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.’

William Morris

What William Morris is saying, simply, is fill your life with nice stuff. You may or may not be able to do this at work, but even in the most austere workplaces there is a tiny scope for some personalisation. If possible, create some sort of stimulus to prompt your best thinking and create the most conducive environment for yourself that you can.

When you can’t, you need to create somewhere lovely and comforting and stimulating for yourself somewhere where you do have control: your home. For some people this is family photos, hand-me-down ornaments and comfy slippers. For others, it is natural objects, beautiful artwork and treasured books, or maybe a music system and some favourite recordings, or a cupboard full of cookery ingredients and measuring jugs. Whatever it is, make this your escape hatch to your own private world where you can do your own thing and gradually discharge your stress.

Your sensory environment: smells, noise, light and colour

Other aspects of your environment are equally important. In fact, one could argue that, as smell is our most primitive sense, plugged into the most fundamental part of our brains, this is more important to our wellbeing than almost anything. Yet how many of us give it more than a passing thought?

Smells

It is unlikely that you will be able to do much to control the smells in your workplace, but your home is yours to manage. There is a vast array of fragrance products on the market, but for real mastery of how scent affects mood, wellbeing and stress, we need to turn to the art of aromatherapy. Aromatherapists use essential oils derived from plant extracts to treat a range of ailments, using massage, baths or simply letting the scent infuse a room.

The last of these approaches is safe with most oils, but it is worth seeking expert advice, as many of the oils have potent effects and can be dangerous to some medical conditions. An example is clary sage which can cause problems for pregnant women and people with epilepsy.

brilliant list

Some essential oils widely recommended to help with aspects of stress

- Clary sage
- Geranium
- Lavender
- Mandarin
- Neroli
- Rose
- Sandalwood
- Ylang Ylang

Do consult an expert source for advice on which to use and how to use them.

Noise

The levels and types of noises in your environment can be either a stressor, or can help relieve your stress, so, once again, consider

what you can do to adjust your sound environment. Here are three suggestions.

Do as you would be done by

Set the tone by adjusting your phone so that you don't have to shout to be heard, and keep desk or workstation conversations at a subdued level.

Block it out

In an industrial, construction or workshop setting, ear defenders may be a mandatory feature of health and safety precautions, but you may be able to request them (or buy your own) if they are not – as long as an inability to hear does not cause a safety risk. In an office environment, earplugs are a cheap and unobtrusive option – as long as you don't need to be able to hear a ringing phone. If you do, a visual cue extension, as used by people with hearing difficulties, is an option.

Many workplaces may frown on music headsets, but, if it is appropriate, you can design your sound-scape to meet your own preferences.

Cover it up

Some people have trouble sleeping or concentrating because of unwanted ambient noise, and radio or music will not help them. A solution is white noise – the hiss you get from a de-tuned FM radio. You can buy white noise generators, but why bother when you can just de-tune an FM radio! With the switch-over to digital radio in many countries, old FM radios will be easy to find and come ready de-tuned!

Classical music

Researchers from the University of California and Mount Sinai Medical Centre have shown that music can improve heart-rate recovery from stress. However, not all music selections are effective: it was classical music that caused blood pressure to drop faster in their research subjects. Of course, they only tried a

limited number of selections (Pachelbel's 'Canon', and 'Spring' from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*), and some classical music is unlikely to be relaxing, like large chunks of Wagner, but it does point you towards another resource.

Light

The brightness and quality (mixture of colours) of light can affect our moods, but there is one type of light that seems to have the greatest positive effect on our mood: natural daylight. There is even a mental health syndrome linked to wintertime, when there is less of it: seasonal affective disorder, sometimes known as SAD, or the winter blues. You cannot always get more daylight into your work space or home, but you can pop out at breaks to get some fresh air and daylight.

Colour

There is limited research on the effects of colour on our emotions, and most of it focuses on trying to understand how colour affects buying decisions. So we have to be careful about interpreting how colour in your environment will affect your stress levels and acknowledge that the one person who knows best is you.

That said, there is some interesting research by Naz Kaya and Helen Epps at the University of Georgia, where they asked people to rate the extent to which 13 different colours evoke each of 23 emotions (including 'no emotion'). Whilst these self-ratings did not measure actual emotions, the results are consistent with a lot of un-researched assertions and fragmentary research results on the effects of colour on mood. For us, the particularly relevant findings are:

- Green was most strongly associated with the emotions of 'confident' and 'peaceful'.

- Yellow was most strongly associated with the emotions of ‘energetic’ and ‘happy’.
- Blue was most strongly associated with the emotion of ‘calm’.
- Purple-blue was most strongly associated with the emotion of ‘calm’.
- Blue-green was most strongly associated with the emotion of ‘happy’.

A lot of other research seems to suggest that blues, greens and blue-greens may reduce stress and irritability, and induce relaxation. Studies have found that consumers feel more at ease in blue and green retail environments, which retailers want, as they are inclined to stay longer and spend more money.

Kaya and Epps were among many researchers who found one association to avoid:

- Green-yellow was most strongly associated with the emotions of ‘sick’ and ‘disgusted’.

Action

Stress often comes from a mismatch of what you think about and what you do. So take control of your agenda, and focus your action on the things that are going on in your head. Put together a plan and set aside specific time to carry it out. The need to put it off because you don’t have the time now will just reintroduce the stress unless you know that you have a specific slot in your diary to tackle it.

Unmade decisions are another source of stress. Make time to review the evidence and reflect carefully on important decisions, so that you can resolve the situation and move forward.

unmade decisions are
another source of stress

**brilliant tip****Making a decision that you have been putting off**

If there is a decision that you have mentally put into your 'too difficult' box, it is probably competing with other things that are easier to do.

Step 1: Schedule a time when the decision is the only thing on your agenda.

Step 2: Write out clearly:

- The situation
- What is most important for you to achieve
- The options.

Step 3: Against each option, make a note of two things:

- The extent to which it addresses what is most important to you
- Your most serious reservations about it, including concerns about what could go wrong.

Step 4: Now you are ready to consider your decision with a clear head.

Escape

In Figure 1.4, we saw that there are two areas of worry that can cause us stress: the things you can control and the things you cannot. By focusing on the things that you can control, you will reduce your stress, but sometimes that zone feels too small: there is little or nothing that you are able to control.

You always have options. If your situation is putting your well-being or even, long term, your life at risk, then if you cannot control your situation, you must get away from it. Some of the people in Richard Logan's research gave themselves a sense of control in the most demanding of circumstances, not by controlling those circumstances but by plotting their escape.

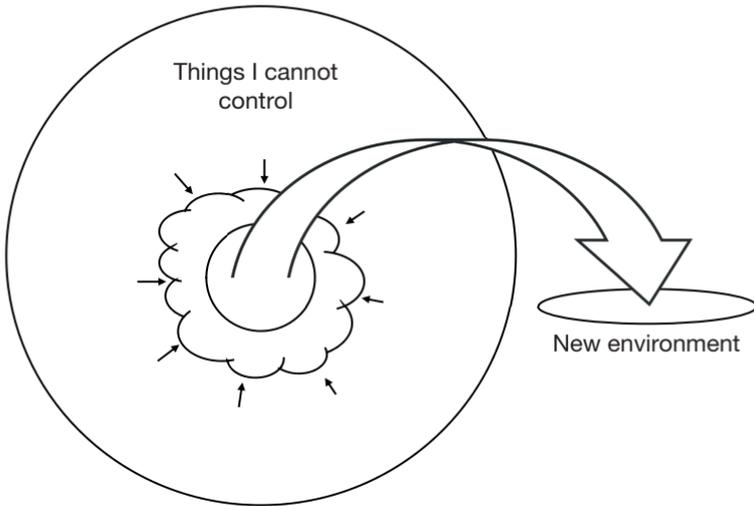


Figure 3.1 Escape from a situation you cannot control

 **brilliant resources**

- In the UK, The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is responsible for ensuring that work spaces are safe, and therefore can give some guidance on ergonomics: www.hse.gov.uk
- The Institute of Ergonomics and Human Factors can offer a wealth of advice and a list of registered experts and consultancies: www.ergonomics.org.uk

 **brilliant recap**

- Taking control of your environment starts with believing that you can do it, and then making a commitment.

- People are an essential part of your environment, so select and protect your relationships.
- Being organised is one of the simplest ways to reduce your stress – and organising is a simple way to seize control.
- The physical space and environment you occupy can have a profound effect on your sense of wellbeing. Take some trouble to modify them to meet your personality and preferences.
- When you make a decision, you feel a sense of relief. If you cannot modify a stressful environment, then make the decision to get out.

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