

Gert Kaluza

# Calm and Confident Under Stress

The Stress Competence Book: Recognize,  
Understand, Manage Stress

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## Preface

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Dear Reader,

As the author of this book, I welcome you very warmly. I am pleased about your interest.

For more than 25 years now, I have been dealing with the topic of “stress and stress management” as a researcher and teacher as well as a trainer and coach. This book represents my attempt to summarize the knowledge and experience gained in an understandable language and practical for a wider audience. It tries to build a bridge between scientific-theoretical foundation on the one hand and practical application on the other. I hope that this balancing act between theory and practice has been successful.

Over the past three decades, interest in the topic of stress has steadily increased both among experts and the general public. The reasons for this are, on the one hand, serious changes in our living and working conditions, which lead to stress for more and more people. On the other hand, recent findings in neurobiological and health science research have deepened our understanding of stress and its significance for the health of the individual. Both developments will be discussed in this book.

My own continuing interest in the subject is based not only on its great significance for health, but also on the fact that in stress events, it can be seen particularly impressively how social conditions, individual experiences and behaviours, and biological processes are closely interconnected. In stress, we always react as a whole person with heart and muscles, with feelings and thoughts, and with typical actions. Stress requires a holistic approach from different perspectives. In this book, I would like to introduce you to such a comprehensive view of the stress phenomenon.

It is my conviction that understanding is a necessary prerequisite for effective action. In this respect, I have endeavoured in the first part of this book to present the social, psychological, and biological processes that determine the occurrence of stress in a comprehensive and at the same time comprehensible manner. The second part of the book then deals with possible courses of action for dealing with stress. It is not my intention to provide you with simple advice and patent remedies. Because these do not really exist. Instead, I would like to show you a wide variety of possible courses of action and encourage you to find your own individual way of dealing calmly and healthily with stress at work and in everyday life. I am deeply convinced that not only we are victims of stressful circumstances to which we are helplessly exposed, but also each individual has external and internal freedom, decision-making possibilities, and room for manoeuvre to take care of his or her own physical and mental well-being despite existing external stressors. It is my hope that such a conviction will grow in you as you read this book and that you will find the courage to recognize and use your freedom.

This is the 7th edition of the book. The 1st edition was published in 1991. After the text was completely revised and brought up to date for the previous 6th edition of this book, I have only made a few necessary error corrections in this 7th edition. This book is written first and foremost for all stress-ridden people: for people who already feel the first physical or mental signs of overload or incipient exhaustion, for people who suffer from illnesses in whose development or in whose course stress also

plays a role, and of course especially for all those who do not want it to get that far in the first place and want to develop their stress competence. Furthermore, the book addresses people who are entrusted with personnel responsibility in their profession: managers in business and administration, specialists from human resources and personnel developers, trainers, and generally teachers and educational professionals. This book is also written for professionals in healthcare, rehabilitation, social work, and social pedagogy and for therapists and counsellors who deal with stressed patients and clients in their daily work.

I wish you an informative, stimulating, and hopefully motivating read. I look forward to your suggestions, constructive feedback, and experience reports. Write to me at [info@gkm-institut.de](mailto:info@gkm-institut.de).

I would like to thank the staff of Springer Verlag for their professional support of the book over many years, especially Monika Radecki, Sigrid Janke, and Barbara Buchter (editing).

**Gert Kaluza**

Marburg, Germany

September 2022

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## About the Author

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is a psychological psychotherapist and works as a trainer, coach, and author in the field of individual and workplace health promotion. After working at various universities for over 20 years, he founded his own further education and training institute in 2002 (► [www.gkm-institut.de](http://www.gkm-institut.de)). He is married, father of three adult daughters, and grandfather of several grandchildren. He finds his own balance in running in the woods, on the golf course, and with the Tango Argentino.

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# Recognizing and Understanding Stress

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# Stress: What Is It Actually? An Introduction

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## 1

## Stress in science

Stress—hardly anyone knew this word 50 years ago. At most, a few material scientists used it to describe physical forces that act on solid bodies and deform them under certain circumstances. In the 1940s, the Austrian-Canadian physician and biochemist Hans Selye (1907–1982) introduced the concept of stress into medicine. He used it to refer in general terms to the effects of stress on living bodies. His research showed that a wide variety of physical and mental loads lead to characteristic physical and mental changes that, if prolonged, can pose a serious threat to health. Scientists from different disciplines such as biology and medicine, psychology, sociology, and occupational science have since intensively researched the development of stress and its consequences for physical and mental health.

## Stress as a health risk factor

Today, there is no longer any doubt that stress is one of the most important health risk factors people face in modern Western societies. The issue is also receiving increased attention on the political stage. For example, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work stated as early as 2000 that work-related stress is one of the greatest threats to the well-being of employees. Europe-wide surveys have shown that almost one in three workers is affected. Studies suggest that 50–60% of all lost working days are related to stress problems. Trade unions are calling for legislators to introduce “anti-stress legislation”. Human resources managers in companies are increasingly confronted with the question of how they can maintain and promote the performance of employees in the long term in the face of an ageing workforce and increasing psychological pressure.

## Stress in politics and society

So it is not surprising that the concept of stress has now found such a pervasive entry into everyday language as probably few terms from science. There is talk not only of stress at work but also of stress at school and even in kindergarten. There is performance stress, relationship stress, and even leisure stress, right up to stress in hospital, in traffic, and even on holiday. There is hardly an area of everyday life that is not associated with this term. Stress—it seems—rules our lives. “I’m stressed!” or “I’m under stress!” are frequently voiced and heard responses to the question of personal well-being. Stress is also increasingly used as an explanation for a wide variety of impairments to physical and mental well-being (“It’s the stress”). And sometimes, the remark “I’m under stress!” is also used to excuse one’s own misconduct to oneself and others and to avoid a critical discussion with oneself and others.

## Stress in everyday life

Finally, it is not uncommon for an undertone of pride to be mixed into the complaint about too much stress. Here stress becomes a sign of the importance and significance of one’s own person, a status symbol that promises recognition from others.

### ■ But What Is Stress Anyway? What Triggers It and How Does It Manifest Itself?

In this introductory chapter, I would like to begin by clarifying the understanding of stress that underlies today's modern science and that will also form the basis for our later considerations of starting points and strategies for stress management. I will outline a simple framework model that will help to distinguish essential aspects of the stress event and to identify possible starting points for stress management.

## 1.1 The Stresstrias

Herbert M., in his mid-40s, works as a senior engineer in a large construction company. He is married and has three school-age children. He has been under constant professional strain for 2 years now. Internal restructuring, the introduction of new computer-aided design processes and, last but not least, the success of his company on the market have led to an ever-increasing workload and increasingly demanding requirements. His colleagues regard him as ambitious and enthusiastic. His boss appreciates his sense of responsibility and his eagerness to work, and this recognition is enormously important to him. He does not really know when to call it a day and prefers to take care of everything himself before relying on others. For some time now, family worries have also been weighing him down. His father, who is in need of care and who also lives in the household, is becoming increasingly difficult, and his wife demands more support and accuses him of not caring enough for the family. Herbert M. increasingly feels that everything is getting on top of him. Although he works longer and longer hours in the evenings and also takes work into the weekends, he manages less and less. He has trouble concentrating. At night, his thoughts circle and he finds it difficult to sleep. During the day, fatigue, headaches, nervousness, and irritability are already the norm. Sometimes, he feels pains in his chest that frighten him.

An example

In every stressful event—as in Herbert M.'s example—three aspects can always be distinguished from one another. Before you continue reading, please take a moment to reflect on your own personal experience of stress (► Box 1.1).

How do I experience stress?

### Box 1.1: Stimulating Self-reflection: Stress—What Is It Actually?

Please take a moment to reflect on your own personal experience of stress recently. The following three sentence starters should help you to organize your thoughts. Please complete

each of the three sentences as it corresponds to your personal stress experience.

- I get stressed when...
- When I'm stressed, then...
- I'm putting myself under stress by ...

Here are some common and typical expressions of other people:

*I get stressed when...*

- several things have to be done at the same time.
- different people want different things from me, and preferably at the same time.
- I get criticized.
- disruptions and interruptions throw off my schedule.
- my e-mail box is overflowing.
- the day begins with a rush in the morning.
- I can't resolve an argument with others.

*When I'm stressed, then ...*

- I get clammy hands, dry mouth, heart palpitations, a lump in my throat, stomach aches, and neck tension.
- I have trouble sleeping.
- I get all hectic and nervous inside.
- I have trouble concentrating and lose track of things.
- I fly off the handle and raise my voice.
- I smoke more than normal.

*I'm putting myself under stress by ...*

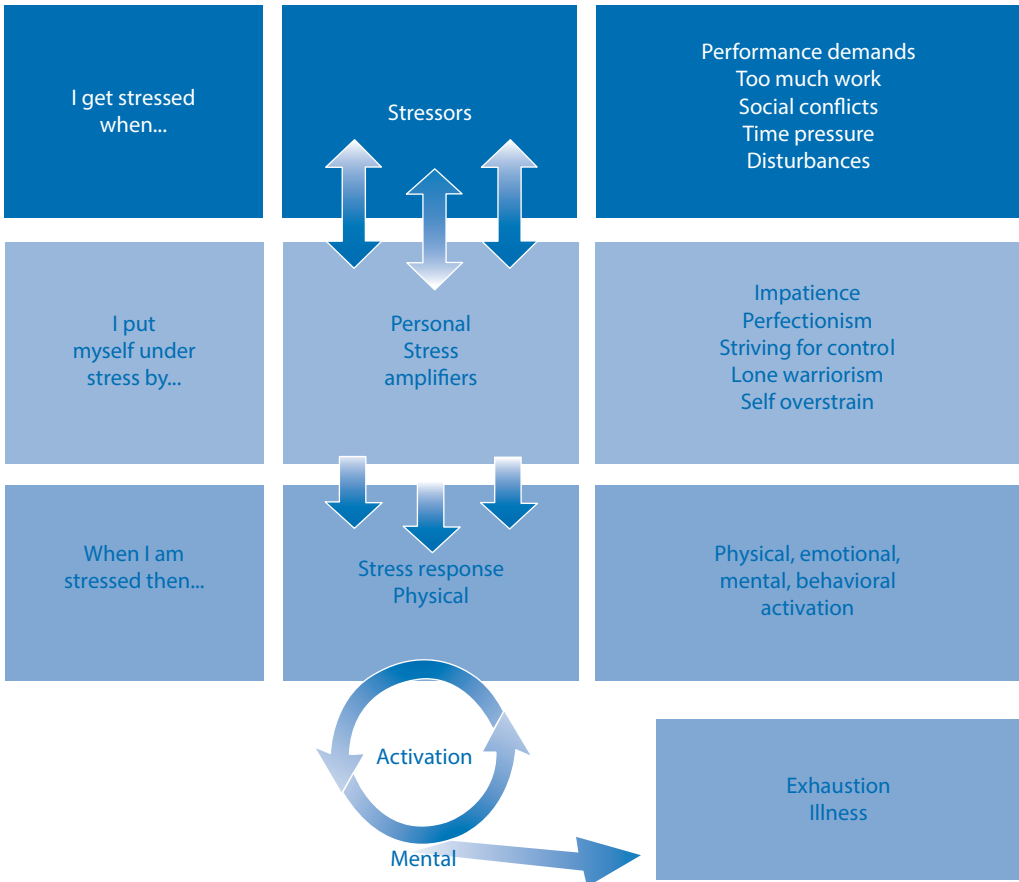
- I want to do everything 150%.
- I'm taking on too much.
- I make daily schedules that are impossible to manage at all.
- I always want to please everybody.
- I don't give myself a break.
- I care too much what other people think about me.
- I want to take care of everything myself.

Stress consists of three parts

Stressors

You will have noticed that the three sentence beginnings each highlight different aspects of the stress event. These are the three components of stress, which must always be distinguished when we talk about stress (■ Fig. 1.1).

The first sentence beginning “*I get stressed when ...*” is aimed at the triggers of stress in the form of external stressful conditions and demands. We also call these **stressors**. In the case of Herbert M., these are above all the increased demands at work as well as his father's increasing need for care and the conflict with his wife that is developing over this.



■ Fig. 1.1 The three components of the stress event

The second sentence beginning “*When I am stressed, then ...*” is aimed at what happens in us and with us when we are confronted with stressors. We are therefore concerned here with the physical and psychological responses to stress. We refer to these accordingly as **stress reactions**. Herbert M. shows typical stress reactions such as increasing nervousness, irritability, and lack of concentration as well as headaches, sleep disorders, and heart complaints.

Stress response

Finally, the third sentence, “*I put myself under stress by ...*”, addresses personal motives and inner attitudes with which we approach stressful situations and which are often decisive in determining whether stress reactions occur at all and how strongly they turn out in these situations. These personal motives and attitudes shape personal stress processing and, to a certain extent, represent the links between the external stressful situations (the stressors) and the stress reactions. We refer to them as **personal stress amplifiers**. Personal stress

Personal attitudes as stress amplifiers

intensifiers that play a role in Herbert M.'s case are, above all, his strong need for recognition, especially at work, and his desire to do everything himself if possible. Other frequent personal stress intensifiers are perfectionist demands for performance and the desire to please everyone as much as possible.

Now let us take a closer look at these three aspects of stress.

## 1.2 Stressors: What Stresses Us Out

As already mentioned, we generally refer to stressors as all the conditions in our environment that trigger a stress reaction. These can be completely different situations such as a natural disaster, a car accident, a perceived unfair assessment by a superior, an overflowing e-mail inbox, a difficult customer meeting, a dispute in the neighbourhood, or a misplaced front door key.

Different types of stressors

Stressors can arise in the physical environment, for example, in the form of noise, intense heat or cold. Our own body can also become a source of stressors. Prime examples of this are pain, especially chronic pain conditions. Hunger and thirst, restricted movement, or itching can also trigger stress reactions. For many of us, mental stressors related to performance demands are at the forefront of the stress experience. Exams are just as much a part of this as constant time pressure, too many or too difficult tasks, or a high level of responsibility. In addition to performance stressors, social stressors, i.e. demands that arise in interpersonal contact, play a prominent role. Unresolved, smouldering conflicts with other people, competitive situations, but also isolation and especially experiences of separation and loss are examples of such interpersonal stressors.

Not every demand is a stressor

However, not every demand represents a stressor, that is not every demand automatically leads to physical and mental stress reactions. This is only the case with those demands where we are uncertain whether we will be able to cope with the demand. As long as we are certain that we can cope with a given challenge, we may have to make a great effort, but we will not experience stress.

This is particularly obvious and easy to understand in the example of an exam that we have to or want to take. This often becomes a stressful experience precisely because we are not sure whether we will be able to meet the requirements set. Without this subjective uncertainty about whether our own abilities will be sufficient, we are unlikely to experience stress in an examination situation, but may even regard it as a welcome opportunity to demonstrate our knowledge and skills.



Stress, therefore, always arises when there is a discrepancy between the demands and our coping skills. The experience of stress is all the more intense the higher the demands are assessed in relation to our own ability to cope. The decisive factor for a correct understanding of the stress experience is that it is based on the subjective assessment of the demands and one's own abilities and resources. It does not matter whether the situation in which we currently find ourselves is "objectively" seen or viewed from the outside as an excessive demand. The only decisive factor is that we experience and interpret this situation in this way. For the strength of our own stress experience, it ultimately does not matter whether our assessments correspond to reality or whether we overestimate the demands and underestimate our own abilities, for example, due to false expectations, too high demands on ourselves, or a lack of previous experiences of success.

The subjective assessment of requirements is decisive

The example of the exam also makes it clear that the more significant it is for us to successfully master the respective requirement, the more intense the stress experience. It makes a considerable difference to the degree of stress whether it is the all-important final exam or the monthly test for learning control. Significant means that successfully coping with it is important for us in terms of pursuing our own motives and goals. In the case of the exam, for example, it is about achieving educational and professional goals, but often also about maintaining and strengthening our own self-esteem or gaining emotional recognition from third parties. Stress arises when we see important goals and motives threatened. Here, too, it is ultimately not a question of the "objective" significance of the situation in question. The only thing that determines how intense stress is experienced is the importance we attach to the situation against the background of our own goals and motives and how threatening we subjectively assess a possible failure in this situation.

Stressors threaten personal goals and motives

Can you still remember your driving test? Did you also "sweat blood and water" back then? What is the source of the strong stress reactions that many young people experience in this situation? It is probably not so much the objective difficulty of the test requirement as the great subjective significance that obtaining a driving licence has for them. It is, in a sense, a symbol of entry into adulthood, promises new freedoms, and is of enormous importance to adolescent self-esteem. And how great would be the embarrassment in front of their peers, in front of their parents, and also in front of themselves if they were to stumble at this important developmental step!

Example "Driving test"

The example of the driving test points us to further characteristics of stressors that influence the strength of the stress

Transparency and control

reactions they trigger. As in the case of the driving test, it is in particular new, unfamiliar situations as well as situations that we ourselves cannot or can hardly influence or control, and situations that are poorly predictable or difficult to see through, that lead to stress reactions. Conversely, this also means that stress reactions can be reduced if, for example, there is a high level of transparency for employees at workplaces by means of clear specifications and information, and if employees are given their own opportunities for control and scope for action wherever possible.

Exams are only one example of stressors from the performance area. The explanations can easily be transferred to other performance-related and social demands, such as conducting a difficult customer meeting, preparing a project report, a balance sheet, or other work with a deadline, an unpleasant argument with a neighbour or the time-consuming care of a sick relative. Any of these demanding situations can trigger stress reactions, and they do so whenever we see personally significant goals and motives threatened and are uncertain whether our abilities will be sufficient to successfully cope with the demands at hand. In ► Chap. 3, we will look in more detail at the various forms of stressors in the world of work and in everyday life that are at the forefront of many people's experiences of stress today. At this point, we first note:

### Conclusion

Stressors are demands whose successful management we assess as subjectively significant but uncertain.

## 1.3 Stress Response: Responses at All Levels

In stress the whole person reacts

The term stress reaction is used to describe all the processes that are set in motion on the part of the affected person in response to a stressor, that is everything that happens within us and to us when we are confronted with a stressor. Stress reactions show themselves in many ways on the physical level. They manifest themselves in observable behaviours by which outsiders can tell that someone is under stress, and they also affect the way we think and feel. We always react, so to speak, as a whole person with heart and muscles, with words and actions as well as with feelings and with thoughts to the confrontation with a stressor.

Stress mobilizes physical energy

On the **physical level**, stress leads to a multitude of changes that cause an overall physical activation and mobilization of energy. This can be felt, for example, in a faster heartbeat,

increased muscle tension, or faster breathing. The physical stress reaction puts us in a state of readiness to act within a very short time. However, if this activation reaction is maintained over a longer period of time because stressors persist or recur, this gradually leads to states of exhaustion and to long-term negative consequences for health. What happens in detail and how the physical stress reaction can become a danger to health will be explained in detail in ► Chap. 2.

The second level of the stress response includes the so-called **overt behaviour**, what outsiders can observe. In other words, everything the person does or says in a stressful situation. Common stress behaviours include:

- Hasty and impatient behaviour, for example, gulping down food quickly, cutting breaks short or skipping them altogether, speaking quickly and choppily, interrupting others;
- Narcotic behaviours, for example, smoking more and uncontrollably, eating or drinking alcohol or coffee, taking pain medications, sedatives, or stimulants;
- Uncoordinated work behaviour, for example, doing several things at once, “throwing oneself into work”, lack of planning, overview and order, misplacing, losing or forgetting things;
- Motor restlessness, for example, drumming with fingers, scratching, nibbling at clothes, scuffing feet;
- Conflicting interactions with others, for example, aggressive, irritable behaviour towards family members, frequent disagreements over trivial matters, blaming others, rapid “going off the deep end”.

Typical behaviour under stress

The **cognitive-emotional level** of the stress reaction comprises the so-called hidden behaviour, inner psychological processes that are not directly visible to outsiders. In other words, all thoughts and feelings are triggered in the affected person in a stressful situation. Common cognitive-emotional stress reactions are, for example:

- Feelings of inner turmoil, nervousness, and being rushed,
- Feelings and thoughts of discontent, anger, rage,
- Fear of failing, embarrassment, for example,
- Feelings and thoughts of helplessness,
- Self-blame and guilt,
- Circling, “brooding” thoughts,
- Emptiness in the head (“blackout”),
- Blocks to thinking, lack of concentration, “fluttering” thoughts,
- “Tunnel vision”.

Typical feelings and thoughts under stress

Often the physical, behavioural, emotional, and mental stress reactions build up on each other, so that the stress reactions

are reinforced or prolonged. A vicious circle can develop, for example, by uncontrolled acting out of the anger (“anger about the anger”), by fear of the physical stress symptoms (“fear of the fear”) or struggling with the situation, one gets further and further into the stress-related excitement. However, it is also possible to have a beneficial mutual influence in the sense of dampening stress reactions. For example, we can reduce physical stress reactions through a relaxation exercise or through sport, and often cognitive and emotional calming can be initiated as a result. Just as, conversely, physical agitation can also be reduced, for example, through an emotionally relieving conversation.

We will deal in detail with the processes underlying physical stress reactions and their longer-term effects on health in ► Chap. 2. Let us note up to this point:

### Conclusion

Stress reactions cause a general activation, which shows itself in characteristic changes of physical functions, of thoughts and feelings and in behaviour.

## 1.4 Personal Stress Amplifiers: Home-Made Stress

Stress is individual

Personal stress amplifiers in the form of individual motives, attitudes, and evaluations contribute to the fact that stress reactions are triggered or intensified. To a certain extent, they represent our “own share” in the stress event. Even everyday observation teaches us that different people respond to one and the same situation (e.g. an exam, an argument, a traffic jam, or a misplaced house key) with stress reactions of varying intensity. What drives one person up the wall, leaves another cold. Where one suffers from fear of failure, the other senses his chance. What one person feels particularly challenged by, another may withdraw from in resignation. Agreement on what is danger and what is not will only arise from person to person where there are extremely dangerous or even life-threatening circumstances. In the reality of everyday life, however, most assessments of how threatening a performance-related, interpersonal, or other everyday situation is vary widely from person to person. The reason for these differences is that the evaluation of a new situation depends on our respective personal previous experiences, which shape our expectations and fears, our motives and goals, our demands on ourselves, and on others.