

How your mind heals itself

The key to natural stress control
and peace of mind

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Introduction

Since 1990 I have had the privilege of doing emotional development work with adults by using a body and mind therapy that I call StressAce. This approach combines psychotherapy with sensory and movement therapy, and is based on child development therapies. I developed StressAce in my psychology practice as an effective way of helping my clients release emotional stress and learn important life skills.

By using the body and mind approach to help adults deal more effectively with stress, I have learnt many interesting facts about stress. The most important is that stress release is absolutely essential for good emotional balance and mental fitness and that the more stress is released, the more sustainable emotional balance is and the more agile the mind becomes.

I discovered that my clients had accumulated astonishingly large amounts of stress throughout their lives. I found that some of this stress could be released very quickly, but that a lifetime of stress takes longer to clear up. The stress that is released almost instantly, even within minutes, is 'surface' stress, which we acquire just from daily living. The stress that is released more slowly, over months or years, is 'deep-seated' stress acquired over our whole lifespan. These observations seem to indicate that the nervous system has a memory system for recent stress and a separate memory system for old stress.

I also noticed that stress is released naturally and in stages, and I found that my clients achieved at their best after they had released all the stages of stress. I learnt that the first stage of this healing process was the release of stress caused by trauma. I was surprised at how systematic and orderly the nervous system is in releasing stress and at how this order never varied from person to person. I found that the orderliness of nervous system stress release made the therapeutic benefits of StressAce reliable and predictable. In other words, the same therapy consistently gave the same results.

My observations of the psychological changes in my clients during therapy showed that in addition to the nervous system's natural inclination to release its excess stress, it also has a system for helping us develop better controls over our stress reactions. I found that the nervous system prefers to first release excess stress – only then does it start to develop better stress control.

This improved control over our stress reactions helps us to become more mature, sophisticated and creative in how we cope with life's challenges. In normal development, our ability to control our stress levels is built up over twenty-five years. It seems that during therapy the nervous system brushes itself up with a virtual repeat of this entire sequence of the growth process over a relatively short period. I found that for some people this reconstruction could be completed within a few months. For others it could take up to three years or longer, depending on their individual circumstances.

***We have
three reactions
to stress - fight,
flight and
freeze.***

I discovered that stress was released most effectively when a body and mind therapy was employed. I found that this approach speeded up the automatic stress release process. Sometimes it was so fast that clients would even complain about their rapid improvement, as they would then have to adjust to their 'new self', the result of a highly efficient nervous system. I read the neuroscience research on stress, which proves that every stress experience starts as an automatic and unconscious body reaction and is then stored in body memory. This research explained why working with the body in psychotherapy delivers these fast and automatic results.

By observing my clients going through stress release, I also learnt that the type of stress causing the most problems for them was what is called the freeze-stress reaction. Clients spent most of their time in therapy clearing up a lifetime of freeze reactions.

Research shows that we have three typical reactions to stress: we either fight to survive with feelings of anger or aggression; flee from a threat in fear; or freeze and become immobilised when it looks like fighting and fleeing won't save us. Once we are in this frozen state we feel fatigued and it's difficult to be motivated and get things done. We become mentally dull and unfocused. The exact chemistry of the fight, flight and freeze reactions are well documented by neuroscience. Adrenaline activates our bodies with a lot of energy so we can fight or flee. But the freeze reaction is actually a complete metabolic shut down preparing us for the possibility we may not survive the threat.

The freeze reaction is usually thought of as a reaction only triggered by trauma. It's supposed to be the third and last stage of stress that we only experience under very extreme circumstances. However, I found that the freeze reaction was not only present in all my clients, even those without trauma, but also that it was the predominant stress reaction that needed to be cleared from the nervous system. It is known that many of the negative effects of stress – such as the mental fog, forgetfulness, disorganisation and the lack of motivation – are caused by the freeze response. So, predictably, after clearing up their freeze reactions, my clients would report improvements in mental clarity, energy and motivation.

The bottom line is that to be effective, any stress management programme must address the freeze stress reaction. Each and every person has a store of old freeze responses in their nervous system, just below conscious awareness. This stress state causes havoc in the nervous system by shutting down rational thinking and preventing us from achieving at our best. The problem is that positive thinking, positive self-talk and affirmations can temporarily override these latent freeze states, but won't clear them from the nervous system. The good news is that once the latent stress has been cleared with stress release, it's permanently eliminated and cannot 'come back'. After stress release, positive thinking comes more naturally and positive self-talk is more effective in helping one have a good attitude.

Apart from the specific problems caused by the freeze reaction, I also observed the many negative effects of stress on my clients' happiness, mental abilities, work performance, quality of life, health and relationships, but I found that these harmful effects could be reversed with stress release. Seeing the obvious and numerous benefits led me to believe that stress release is the cornerstone of self-improvement and personal development.

One example of the surprising benefits of stress release is the natural emergence of emotional intelligence skills. Clients report that they suddenly have self-reflection and reality-checking skills that help them control their stress reactions better. For example, they are quick to notice unnecessary feelings of anxiety or aggression and can nip these in the bud.

Self-reflection allows us to think about ourselves in a rational way. 'Did I handle that well or I should have pushed my point home more?' Reality-checking is when you ask yourself, 'Is this really something I need to do, be responsible for, or be concerned about?'

I was fascinated to see that without any instruction from me as therapist, my clients would quite naturally and quickly use self-reflection to control their stress levels. They would

commonly report that they were doing instant reality checks on their day-to-day emotional reactions and they were matching their emotions more realistically to situations. With the speed of their reality check and fast adjustment of their emotions to match real situations, they found they were able to make an all-round better and faster adjustment to life.

In clinical practice an enormous amount of effort and time is often spent by therapists trying to teach their clients these skills, because it is a proven method for managing stress, anxiety and depression. The success rate is limited, not because this method doesn't work, but because people find it so hard to use the self-discipline to make it work. After only a few StressAce sessions, most people will naturally and successfully be able to use these basic stress management skills without any instruction. Therefore it's an effective method to use at the start of any therapy or programme that aims to improve emotional intelligence.

By using StressAce, which is a method that allows one to examine and clear stress, I have become convinced that each of us carries a large amount of stress that has enormous negative effects on us. I have observed that both this large memory store of stress and the scale of the negative effects of stress on us are generally underestimated. I find that my clients underestimate their total stress load, because stress and its effects on the body and mind are mainly unconscious or automatic processes. So they are literally not aware of many of their stress reactions. In fact, most of the time, clients cannot link the stress they release during therapy sessions to an actual event that they can recall. Although they can obviously remember many events in their lives, they cannot remember every stress experience.

As a stress release method, StressAce makes a valuable contribution to psychological therapies, because it offers health professionals tools to uncover hidden stress and treat it. Though standard practice psychology offers many methods to help us manage and minimise our stress, there is little available to help us actually release stress. The term 'stress release' or the concept of stress release is, in fact, rarely mentioned in psychology literature. Psychologists find that becoming familiar with StressAce expands their understanding of stress. Adding stress release to their therapy skill set can give them another useful method to help their clients.

Learning more about therapy

I have written this guide to share the many important and interesting facts about stress and stress release with StressAce clients and health professionals. The guide makes it easier for clients to share information about their therapy with their families and friends. It explains the principles of StressAce and gives an account of its many benefits and advantages. These results are based on my observations in clinical practice with hundreds of clients over a period of twenty years. Research by psychologists and psychiatrists confirms and explains these clinical observations and results.

To illustrate my clinical observations, I asked several of my clients to talk about how this therapy affected their lives. Their inspirational personal stories about emotional recovery and reaching their full potential illustrate this guide. The case studies are based on real examples, but names have been changed to protect privacy.

The Therapy Guide section gives a practical description of what to expect while therapy is in progress. It is based on my observations of my clients' experiences during therapy and it shows that the growth process of StressAce is repeatable and the results are reliable. StressAce tracks natural personality development that takes place in a certain order and sequence. The Therapy Guide outlines this map of personal development. This means that instead of diving into the unknown, the client understands the StressAce system from the start and knows what to expect from therapy.

Therapy can lower our stress levels

In my experience, people use psychotherapy for two common reasons: they want to be happy and they want to excel at their pursuits. When I ask clients why they seek help, common answers are:

- 'I haven't been happy for a long time.'
- 'Too many things stress me out.'
- 'I don't sleep well.'
- 'I tend to overreact.'

When I ask, 'So what would you like to get out of this therapy?' the answer is generally, 'I just want to be happy. I want peace of mind.'

When I ask whether there is anything else, the answer tends to be, 'Yes, I want loving relationships and to do well in my career.'

These comments illustrate the fact that it is impossible to be happy when we feel stressed. In fact, stress prevents happiness. The more stressed we feel, the more unhappy we become.

Ninety per cent of the time people manage their stress levels themselves and they know what works for them. For some of us, stress levels may stay too high no matter what we do. When people seek help to control stress, they have usually been feeling very stressed for a long time, often for many years.

There can be many reasons for this. When we experience ongoing stress that does not let up, such as in a very stressful career, job, or work environment, we can stay permanently on guard and recovery may not be complete after a weekend off or an annual holiday. On going back to work, the stressed state just comes back. Burnout from too many responsibilities and activities without the necessary relief, as when young parents work full time and also raise young children, is the most common cause of stress for most people. It is thought that every single person will have at least one experience of burnout in their lifetime.

Difficulties with social relationships are one of the most common causes of stress. These may be a problematic marriage relationship, raising a child with behaviour problems, or dealing with one's manager at work. Difficult social relationships are, in fact, the most frequent reason people give for seeking counselling.

When we have several major setbacks in a short period of time, we may remain stressed long after the events. This is true for people who have the misfortune of experiencing repeated serious stress, such as a combination of retrenchment, ill health and insolvency in quick succession.

A single traumatic experience can also trigger a stress reaction that sometimes does not clear up with time and this will lead to chronic feelings of stress. Unless the stress is cleared up with therapy, the person will live permanently in that state of elevated stress.

Anyone who has had an especially difficult childhood is particularly sensitive to stress. The causes of a difficult childhood may vary – for example, ill health, too much change, or problematic family relationships. In dysfunctional families, one or both parents may have serious problems, such as depression or a personality disorder. The troubled parent may struggle to provide consistency, love and acceptance, healthy discipline, practical guidance, healthcare and education. As a result, the child may become permanently stressed with the condition persisting into adulthood.

Adult children from dysfunctional families are virtually always highly stressed individuals who may spend years in psychotherapy with varying degrees of recovery. They need a therapy that can eliminate the stress from childhood and repair the damage to their development. StressAce is a suitable therapy for this purpose, as it can both eliminate old stress and develop the personality.

High stress levels are often also a persistent problem for those who experience chronic depression, anxiety, ADHD, learning difficulties, Asperger's Syndrome and other mind health issues.

Practice shows that irrespective of the reason for stress, StressAce can lower stress levels and improve the quality of life. When our stress is lowered, we can experience happiness. Sometimes my clients report that they feel happy for the first time ever. They often say that the feeling of happiness is also more intense and more constant than ever before. The reason for this is that once stress has been released, we are naturally happy and content. At that point it's common for clients to realise that all along the problem had been large stores of old stress, and that they are not angry or sad due to their nature or character.

How stress affects us

The problem with stress, apart from the fact that it strips away our enjoyment of life and harms our performance, is that once we have experienced a significant amount of it, stress remains trapped in our nervous system and then continues to affect us.

Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux says that our fear experiences are 'indelibly burnt into the brain'. As a therapist working with children I often observe how even one traumatic incident can keep a child trapped in a chronic state of high stress for years, until therapy literally releases the child from this 'prison of stress'. At this point the child's problems clear up like mist before the sun. The point here is that it's essential to have a method like StressAce that can help delete 'burnt in' stress. Without this kind of help it certainly can be very difficult to escape the permanent negative effects of stress.

Another problem with stress is that we are not consciously aware of the many negative effects on our whole personality. We simply learn to live with the impairments caused by stress, such as the fatigue, poor concentration, irritability and negativity. It's only once a method like StressAce releases us from the 'prison of stress' that we realise how well we can actually function.

Staying trapped in stress means never fully achieving one's absolute best. It can hamper us from achieving precious goals in life. It means not getting the rewards one wants and not living life to the full. It also means that instead of life being an absolute pleasure it's a quagmire of problems and pressures. This point is borne out by the fact that my clients never only present with stress – they always have a list of life goals that they are busy pursuing. StressAce simply ensures that they achieve their goals more quickly.

The value of StressAce

StressAce can be used as a therapy and also as a self-help technique to keep stress levels in check and the nervous system in balance. StressAce clients typically attend sessions facilitated by a therapist, but they also use the StressAce stress release methods to lower their stress on a daily basis and maintain their emotional balance, mental clarity and focus. StressAce can be taught as a self- help technique to all age groups and even pre-school children can use StressAce to lower their stress levels.

StressAce offers a unique opportunity to develop the whole personality

Apart from stress release, I also found that the body and mind approach of StressAce improves a very large range of personality skills all at once. Clients commonly report many simultaneous improvements in emotional maturity, as well as in their thinking skills and social relationships. As a therapist, I always find this outcome very rewarding and thrilling. These results are made possible, because StressAce includes exercises for improving thinking, physical, emotional and social skills that are similar to those used in child development therapies. It seems that this approach can also deliver many benefits to adults as mature-aged learners.

With its base in developmental psychology, StressAce offers adults a unique opportunity to develop the whole personality. This also makes StressAce particularly helpful for adults who have learning difficulties and related problems, like Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), that can affect their work performance. StressAce includes activities that are used for treating children with learning difficulties and ADD, but that are not usually offered to adults.

Research into the causes of learning problems, and the tests to identify and treat them have only been developed extensively in the last few decades. This means that anyone with a learning difficulty born before 1960 may not have been identified as having a problem. As a result, there are many adults who have never been treated for their learning

difficulties who fall in this category. Having a learning difficulty can affect their daily functioning in many ways. Typical signs include sensitivity to stress, being prone to fatigue, having low self-confidence and problems with emotional control, learning, organisation and productivity. To date, there are no specific treatment programmes available for adults who have learning difficulties. StressAce is a valuable aid for these adults.

In a nutshell, StressAce is a body and mind therapy that gives very comprehensive personality growth by jumpstarting the nervous system both to release stress and to grow better stress controls. It is a complete system for personal development. It offers a model of personal growth based on child and adult development psychology, has standard methods and gives reliable and repeatable results that can be tested. StressAce is also a Positive Psychology approach with a focus on guiding clients to achieve their goals in life, rather than concentrating solely on solving problems. In the spirit of Positive Psychology, StressAce encourages and teaches practical self-help.

For anyone pursuing their own personal development for the fulfilment and success it brings them, StressAce offers new ideas and methods and very rewarding results.